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Domestic iqamas to be canceled after six months outside Kuwait

Masks a must at Kuwait airport • Egypt reports first Omicron cases

KUWAIT: The interior ministry announced domestic helpers will lose their residencies if they stay outside Kuwait for more than six months. Residencies will automatically be canceled if a resident on article 20 visa fails to return to Kuwait six months after the date of departure. The rule, which had been suspended during the pandemic, went into effect from Dec 1, 2021 (the six-month count starts from this date).

According to recent reports, Kuwait's domestic sector is in dire need of housemaids and helpers after hundreds of thousands of expat workers left the country amid the pandemic. The Public Authority for Manpower is reported to have begun exploring new markets to

recruit domestic workers with a view to resolve the problem of shortage in the local market. The shortage of domestic labor became acute after many countries that traditionally export domestic helpers to Gulf countries have begun to introduce restrictions on recruitments to these countries.

Meanwhile, the Directorate General of Civil Aviation yesterday renewed its call to the public to follow health measures and wear facemasks at all times at all terminals of Kuwait International Airport. The health ministry said late Friday that 81 people tested positive for COVID-19 in the past 24 hours, taking total cases to 413,972. Recoveries rose by 30 to 411,030, while the death toll

from the pandemic remained unchanged at 2,466, the ministry's spokesman Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad said. Three cases are in the ICU, while 12 patients at in COVID-19 wards, in addition to 476 others being treated.

Egypt yesterday said it had detected its first three cases of the Omicron coronavirus variant, at the height of the economically vital tourist season. Three Egyptians tested positive on their return from overseas, the health ministry said without specifying where they had travelled from. One of them had mild symptoms and the other two had none, it added.

The country's air and tourism sectors, which suffered under global lockdowns

for the past two years, had just started to recover and were counting on end-of-year holiday visits. Omicron is the biggest threat to global public health, the G7 group of economically developed democracies said last week. Scientists remain uncertain how dangerous the highly mutated Omicron variant is, but early data suggests it can be more resistant to vaccines and is more transmissible than the Delta variant.

From Dec 1, Egypt stepped up measures to control the spread of the virus. It barred officials and students not vaccinated against COVID-19 from government offices and universities unless they show a negative PCR test. The country has officially recorded 373,509 coron-

avirus cases, including 21,277 deaths. Egypt's vaccination campaign, after initially lagging, has considerably accelerated in recent months with mobile units deployed.

Around 40 percent of the more than 102 million Egyptians have now received at least one dose of a vaccine, according to the government, but only 14 million of those have had two doses. Mask-wearing - which health experts consider a vital measure against coronavirus spread - is poorly respected in Cairo, a city of more than 20 million tightly-packed inhabitants. Tourism represents about a tenth of the GDP of Egypt, where a third of the population lives below the poverty line. — Agencies

News in brief

Pfizer to test shot for under-5s

WASHINGTON: Pfizer announced Friday that it wants to test a third dose of the COVID-19 vaccine in the under-fives, as the low dosage such small children can handle may not offer the same protection that older children enjoy from just two shots. The pharmaceutical giant has selected a dosage of three micrograms per injection for children aged six months to less than five years. In children in the two-to-five-year age group, a dosage of 10 micrograms caused more fever than in the older groups, pushing the company to select a lower dosage. — AFP

12 killed in Pakistan gas blast

KARACHI: At least 12 people were killed and several more injured yesterday by a gas blast in Pakistan's port city of Karachi, police said. The explosion went off in a bank building in the Sher Shah area and social media and TV footage showed the two-floor structure's windows and doors blown out, with documents scattered across a wide area. Cars and motorcycles parked nearby were also damaged. Provincial police told AFP a bomb disposal squad was investigating, but "apparently the leakage of gas was the cause". — AFP

IS plot in Morocco foiled

RABAT: Moroccan security forces with US support have foiled a suspected bomb plot by the so-called Islamic State group and arrested an alleged supporter of the outlawed organization. "This arrest is the culmination of close collaboration between (Moroccan security forces) and US law-enforcement," Morocco's Central Bureau of Judicial Investigation (BCIJ) said in a statement. The arrested suspect was "an extremist belonging to the so-called Islamic State", 24, from the Sala Al-Jadida region. — AFP

Falling crane kills 3 in Italy

ROME: Three workers died in Turin yesterday after a crane they were mounting toppled over and into a street, injuring passersby, Italian media reports said. Photographs on the official firefighters service Twitter account showed a large blue crane toppled across a road between two six-storey buildings. Two people - one in the street and one in a car - were injured in the accident. "Yesterday there was a queue at the bus stop. It could have been a massacre," one worker at the construction site said. — AFP

Record cases in UK; Paris scraps show

LONDON: London mayor Sadiq Khan yesterday declared a "major incident" in the British capital due to the spread of the Omicron variant. More than 65,000 new cases were confirmed in London over the past seven days, and 26,418 cases reported in the last 24 hours - the highest number since the start of the pandemic.

A major incident is defined as an event with a range of serious consequences which requires special arrangements to be implemented, and is aimed at helping authorities sup-

port each other to reduce service disruption in the city. Khan previously declared a major incident on Jan 8 during a previous wave of the virus, but stood down the order a month later as case numbers fell.

"The surge in cases of the Omicron variant across our capital is hugely concerning, so we are once again declaring a major incident because of the threat of COVID-19 to our city," said Khan. "It's right that London's key agencies work closely together to minimize the impact on our city, including helping to protect the vital vaccination program," he added. Britain has recorded record case numbers for three days in a row, prompting the introduction of new regulations and reports of another lockdown on the way.

Continued on Page 2

Erdogan vows 15m COVID jabs for Africa

ISTANBUL: Turkey will send 15 million COVID-19 vaccine doses to Africa, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced yesterday at a major summit of the continent's leaders, adding that the low vaccination rates there were a blot on humanity. Ankara has invested heavily in developing trade and diplomatic ties with the world's poorest continent during Erdogan's rule as prime minister and then president since 2003.

Speaking to dozens of attending leaders and ministers, Erdogan said Turkey would ship 15 million COVID-19 vaccine doses to Africa, where cases are rapidly rising and vaccination rates are low. "We are aware of the global injustice in accessing the COVID-19 vaccine and Africa's unjust treatment," Erdogan said. "It is disgraceful for humanity that only six percent of Africa's population has been vaccinated."

Turkey is developing its own vaccine, known as Turkovac, which is in the process of receiving emergency use approval. Following any authorization, it will be shared with Africa, Erdogan said. It was not immediately clear from his remarks whether

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Philippines typhoon toll passes 30

SURIGAO CITY, Philippines: More than 30 people were killed in the strongest typhoon to hit the Philippines this year, official figures showed yesterday, with a charity reporting "alarming" destruction on islands that bore the brunt of the storm. Hundreds of thousands fled their homes and beachfront resorts as Typhoon Rai ravaged the southern and central regions of the archipelago, knocking out communica-

tions and electricity in many areas, ripping off roofs and toppling concrete power poles.

Rai was a super typhoon when it smashed into the popular tourist island of Siargao on Thursday, packing maximum sustained winds of 195 km per hour. Aerial photos shared by the military showed widespread damage in the town of General Luna, where many surfers and holidaymakers had flocked ahead of Christmas, with buildings stripped of roofs and debris littering the ground.

"Everything was flying, it was as if it was the end of the world," Rapy Repdos, a tour operator visiting the island when the storm hit, told AFP.

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LONDON: Shoppers walk past stores on the final Saturday before Christmas on Oxford Street. — AFP



ISTANBUL: Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan gives a speech as he attends the official opening session of the 3rd Turkey-Africa Partnership Summit yesterday. — AFP



SURIGAO CITY, Philippines: This aerial photo taken on Friday shows destroyed houses caused by Super Typhoon Rai. — AFP

Local

Kuwait's Amir congratulates Qatar on National Day

KUWAIT: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah Friday sent a cable to Qatar's Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, expressing utmost congratulations on the occasion of Qatar's National Day and anniversary of its Founder Sheikh Jassem bin Mohammed Al Thani's assumption of power. In the cable, His Highness the Amir commended Qatar's distinctive accomplishments over the years, including major development growth in various vital fields, wishing Sheikh Tamim perpetual good health and wellness, and further progress and prosperity for Qatar. His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah sent similar cables to the Qatari Amir.

Meanwhile, Kuwaiti Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah addressed a congratulatory cable to his Qatari counterpart Khalid bin Mohammad Al-Attiyah, on the occasion of his country's National Day. In the cable, Sheikh Hamad expressed his sincere wishes and prosperity for Qatar under the wise leadership of Sheikh Tamim.

Kuwaiti Ambassador to Qatar Hafeez Mohammad Al-Ajmi commended the deep-rooted ties between both countries at various Gulf, Arab and international levels. On the occasion of Qatar's National Day, he said that Kuwaiti-Qatari relations are full of luminous signs throughout their ancient and modern history. He added that it is strengthened day after day due to the care and attention of the two countries' wise leaderships. He congratulated Qatar's Amir Sheikh Tamim on his country's national day, wishing the country and people further progress and prosperity.

He praised the achievements of the State of Qatar when facing the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic, saying that with the world facing economic crises and the COVID-19 pandemic, Qatar has been able to withstand this pandemic and address its health and economic repercussions. — KUNA

Photo of the day



KUWAIT: This photo taken by Kuwaiti astrophotographer Mohammad Al-Obaidi shows the Geminids meteor shower as pictured from Kuwait's sky.

KIB meets Capital Governor on developing community programs

KUWAIT: Continuing to solidify its long-term partnership with key government entities to better serve and develop its community, General Manager of the Retail Banking Department at Kuwait International Bank (KIB), Othman Tawfeq, recently visited Sheikh Talal Al-Khaled Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, Kuwait's Capital City Governor. Representing KIB, Tawfeq discussed some of the different ways it can contribute and take part in the Governorate's social program, reaching different segments of society with the aim of elevating and improving the quality of life for its people, in line with the state's development plans.

Sheikh Talal Al-Khaled and Tawfeq exchanged talks and views on the strategic plans related to community work developed by each of side, clarifying the desired set of goals set for the benefit of the local community. Both parties also consulted on the possibilities of joint collaborations involving various campaigns and initiatives taking place across the

Capital governorate - whether environmental, social, humanitarian, or others.

As part of their conversation, Tawfeq stressed on the importance of cementing relations between government agencies and financial institutions to address social issues. He also affirmed KIB's integral role as a "Bank for Life" in fostering sustainable growth for its community, noting the bank's active contribution within the economic sector as a leading full-service Islamic bank in the region. He also referred to KIB's pioneering and multi-faceted social responsibility and community engagement program, which seeks to establish the Bank's role in building a thriving local community.

Meanwhile, Sheikh Talal Al-Khaled lauded the innovative and diverse initiatives that have been organized and launched by KIB over the past years in collaboration with various government bodies, highlighting those formed with the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Interior to aid their efforts during the pandemic. He also commended KIB's immediate response to government calls and its readiness to focus and combine all efforts to positively impact society at all times.

Concluding his meeting, Tawfeq wished Sheikh Talal Al-Khaled great success in his duties as Capital Governor to drive further developments in the country. He also reaffirmed KIB's ongoing com-



mitment to supporting the Kuwaiti government in its social endeavors, taking pride in being a national

entity and a collaborative member within the financial and banking sector in the State of Kuwait.

Record cases in UK; Paris...

Continued from Page 1

Meanwhile, Paris said yesterday it was cancelling its traditional New Year fireworks as Europe braced for tighter curbs to rein in the spread of the Omicron strain fueling a resurgence in COVID-19 cases worldwide. EU chief Ursula von der Leyen has warned the Omicron coronavirus variant could be dominant in Europe by mid-January. Many countries have decided to reintroduce travel restrictions and other containment measures since it was first detected in South Africa last month.

"With regard to the acceleration of the pandemic, and the risks related to the end-of-year festivities, authorities should impose significant restrictions," France's scientific panel said. And Paris municipal authorities announced "with regret that we will have to cancel all the festivities planned on the Champs Elysees on December 31". "The fireworks will not take place, nor unfortunately will there be any DJ sets," the mayor's office told AFP.

On Friday, Germany designated France and Denmark as high risk zones, and said it would impose quarantine on unvaccinated travelers from its two neighbors, starting from today. In Ireland, bars and restaurants will have to close from 8:00 pm from today until January 30, prime minister Micheal Martin announced. Denmark, which this week had the highest per capita new COVID

infection rate, said it would close cinemas, theatres and concert halls and restrict restaurant opening hours.

And Switzerland is also stepping up anti-COVID measures from tomorrow as the country battles an intense fifth wave of the virus, which has killed at least 5,335,968 people since the outbreak emerged in China in Dec 2019. The Dutch government is scheduled to hold an emergency meeting on Saturday afternoon after its team of expert scientific advisers recommended new restrictions to rein in Omicron, media reports said.

A number of countries are opening up their immunization drives to younger children, even though the EU's health agency has warned that jabs alone will not be sufficient to stop the variant's rise. In Portugal, where 88.9 percent of the population is vaccinated, more than 60,000 children aged between five and 11 were set to receive their first jab of the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine this weekend.

And in France, Health Minister Olivier Veran said that jabs will start to be administered to children in the same age group from Wednesday. "If all goes well, we will start vaccination of children on the afternoon of December 22 in specially adapted centers," he told France Inter radio.

Nevertheless, the EU health agency ECDC has said measures like mask-wearing, distance working and the prevention of crowds were essential to reduce the burden on healthcare systems in the time available, with vaccines alone taking too long. The EU's medicines watchdog last month approved the lower-dosage Pfizer-BioNTech shot for five to 11-year-olds, an age group experiencing high coronavirus infection rates across the continent. — AFP

Erdogan vows 15m COVID...

Continued from Page 1

Turkey would first send some doses of the internationally approved vaccines it was currently using, including those developed by Pfizer-BioNTech. "In order to contribute to the resolution of this issue, within our means, we plan to share 15 million vaccine doses in the period ahead," he said.

The number of new infections in Africa has shot up by 57 percent in the past week, according to AFP calculations based on official figures. South Africa is the hardest-hit country, becoming one of the first in the world affected by the new Omicron variant, which is believed to be even more contagious than past coronavirus strains. Erdogan said Turkey wanted to strengthen relations with Africa in a wide range of areas including health, defense, energy, agriculture and technology. "The real potential between us goes

far beyond the targets we have," he said.

In a final declaration, Turkey and African countries agreed to strengthen cooperation in several fields, including health "through further health sector investments". "With the declaration we have accepted at this summit and the joint action plan, we agreed on a road map to deepen our relations," Erdogan told a closing media event. Trade between Turkey and Africa has grown in the past 20 years from \$5.4 billion to \$25.3 billion last year. And in the first 11 months of 2021, it had reached \$30 billion, Erdogan said. Turkey has set an even higher target of trade volume for the future: \$75 billion.

Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said the third Turkish-African summit - by far the largest to date - was being attended by 16 African heads of state and 102 ministers, including 26 top diplomats. Erdogan also held one-on-one meetings with African heads of state, including Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari, who have both expressed an interest in Turkey's defense industry. The next Turkey-Africa summit will be held in 2026 in an unspecified African country. — AFP

Philippines typhoon toll...

Continued from Page 1

"The wind sounded angry and roaring, as if it wanted to demolish the building." The neighboring island of Dinagat had been "levelled to the ground" by the storm, Governor Arlene Bag-ao wrote on Facebook, saying houses, boats and fields were destroyed. "Walls and roofs were torn and blown off by Odette like paper," Bag-ao said, using the local name for the typhoon. "We have a dwindling supply of food and water. Electricity and telecommunications are down."

Rai's wind speeds eased to 150 kph as it barreled across the country, dumping torrential rain that flooded villages, uprooting trees and shattering wooden structures. It emerged over the South China Sea yesterday and was headed towards Vietnam, the state weather forecaster said.

"This is indeed one of the most powerful storms that has hit the Philippines in the month of December in the last decade," Alberto Bocanegra, head of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in the Philippines, told AFP. "The information we are receiving and the pictures we are

receiving are very alarming."

At least 33 people have been reported killed in the storm, according to official tallies. A disaster official in the central province of Negros Occidental told AFP 13 people had died, most by drowning, and that another 50 were missing in a flood-hit area. "We started urging people to evacuate as early as Wednesday but many were reluctant to leave," Salvador Mesa said.

More than 18,000 military, police, coast guard and fire personnel will join search and rescue efforts in the worst-affected regions, Mark Timbal, spokesman for the national disaster agency, told AFP. "There has been severe damage" on Siargao island and the northern tip of the southern island of Mindanao, Timbal said, referring to areas that took the full force of the typhoon as it slammed into the country. There are around 100,000 residents on Siargao, but the population swells with tourists drawn to its beaches and big waves.

The Philippine Coast Guard has shared photos on social media showing widespread destruction around Surigao City on Mindanao. Shattered glass from smashed windows, sheets of corrugated iron roofing, power lines and other debris were scattered in the streets. The vice governor of Dinagat said residents on the island of around 128,000 people were "trying to repair their houses because even our evacuation centers were torn down". "They can't seek refuge anywhere else... everything was destroyed," Nilo Demerey told ABS-CBN. — AFP



LISBON: A child receives a dose of a COVID-19 vaccine at the vaccination center of Parque das Nacoes yesterday. — AFP

Local

Kuwait culture council congratulates Kuwaiti film producer for winning award

NCCAL commends Babtain on winning UN Arabic Language Day award

KUWAIT: The National Council for Culture, Arts and Letters has congratulated the Kuwaiti movie producer and director Abdullah Boushehri for his movie "Europe" that won the top awards for direction and acting at the International Red Sea Film Festival, recently hosted by Saudi Arabia. The NCCAL's official spokesperson Dr Issa Al-Ansari conveyed greetings to Boushehri from the Minister of Information, Culture, Minister of State for Youth Affairs and the council Chairman, Abdulrahman Al-Mutairi, and its Secretary General Kamel Al-Abduljalil.

Ansari said he was elated that the movie was honored with the high esteem awards noting that it had also been premiered at the prestigious international Cannes festival. This work that materialized as a result of Kuwaiti-Iraqi-Italian cooperation constituted a new boost for the Kuwaiti movie making industry that first saw the light in the 60s of the past century. The movie narrates a tragic story of an Iraqi, named Kamal, who tries to reach Europe on foot however he falls prey to manipulation by border guards and anti-immigration activists.

Boushehri, a graduate from Florida Atlantic University, had produced the movies, "A Kuwaiti Hero,"

and "Loss of Ahmad," that won the top award as the best Gulf documentary in 2007. Meanwhile, the council congratulated the State of Kuwait Representative at the Arab Music Academy Dr Mohammad Al-Daihan for his appointment as the deputy president of the Arab body. The council spokesman, Dr Ansari, in a statement, relayed congratulations from minister Mutairi and Abduljalil to Dr Daihan.

UN Arabic Language Day

Meanwhile, NCCAL congratulated Abdulaziz Al-Babtain, an eminent Kuwaiti poet and writer, on the occasion of being awarded the UN Arabic Language Day. Ansari stated, in a press statement yesterday, that Minister Mutairi and NCCAL Secretary General Abduljalil have congratulated Babtain. Babtain obtained this award in a ceremony celebrating UN Arabic Language Day,

which falls on December 18, at the UN headquarters in New York and the UN International School at the Arabic Language department, Ansari explained. Babtain's efforts of in the cultural field, especially in supporting the Arabic language, are well-known and pioneering, Ansari indicated.

Since its founding in 1989, Al-Babtain Cultural Foundation has encouraged teaching the Arabic lan-



Kuwaiti director Abdullah Boushehri



Kuwaiti poet Abdulaziz Al-Babtain

guage, translating from it to other languages, as well as launching training and educational courses. Babtain explained the great role of the Arabic language in communication between civilizations and people at all times and how the UN General Assembly (UNGA) adopted Arabic as the official language in 1973. Permanent Representative of Kuwait to the UN Mansour Al-Otaibi received the award on behalf of Babtain, in the presence of the President of UN Abdullah Shahid and several representatives of Arab countries.

'Al-Arabi' goes digital

In other news, NCCAL announced yesterday that the website of the monthly Kuwaiti magazine 'Al-Arabi' would go on a beta run later this month.

NCCAL official spokesperson Dr Issa Al-Ansari said in a statement that the website would feature items from the archive since 1991, exclusive features and interviews between 2001 and 2005. He indicated that the website (alarabi.nccal.gov.kw) would be launched on testing basis for examining remarks by readers and followers of the magazine.

Kuwait's cultural quarters have been quite boastful of 'Al-Arabi' magazine that hit the stands for the first time on December 1, 1958. Many literati view it as synonymous to Kuwait's top cultural contributions, locally and in Arab countries. The magazine, read by thousands of people throughout the Arab world, has been distinguished with exclusive features, interviews and articles. —KUNA



Al-Arabi magazine goes digital

ACK healthy living committee delivers lecture at KU

KUWAIT: In alignment with the Australian College of Kuwait's (ACK) corporate social responsibility strategy, and in coordination with Dr Khaled Al-Khaldi from the College of Engineering and Petroleum at Kuwait University (KU), the ACK Healthy Living Committee visited KU to share their experiences in promoting safe and healthy habits with their students.

Through this initiative, the ACK Healthy Living Committee was able to illustrate to KU students that health and safety are not merely about policies, protocols and procedures, but also about enhancing positive lifestyle decision making by expanding their

understanding of their physiological needs of maintaining good health and motivation.

Mariam Al-Maraghi, Health and Safety Manager at ACK, said that "Safety, especially behavioral safety, is a way of life. It's important for us to understand how to take care of our body and mind. With your health, always be proactive."

The ACK Healthy Living Committee was established as a coordinating team inclusive to ACK students and staff for the purposes of organizing and promoting health and safety initiatives in a positive and engaging way. The Committee is currently involved in major ongoing activities such as hosting 'Health Days', events on campus during each semester with a variable theme, as well as annual blood donation drives, in addition to Smoking Awareness campaigns involving visits to local schools. ACK commits to similar wellness programs, endorsing to the community its beliefs in the importance of health and safety as a core quality of lifestyle improvement.



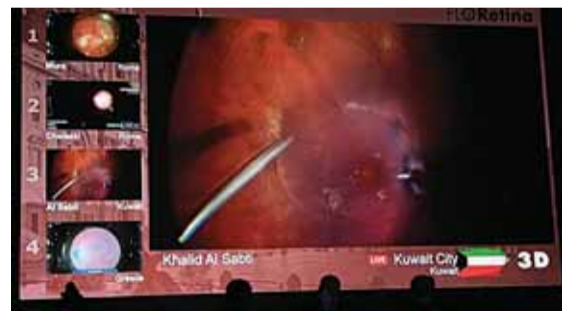
Kuwaiti doctor performs surgeries at Int'l convention

ROME: Prominent Kuwaiti ophthalmologist Dr Khaled Al-Sabti yesterday performed two critical surgeries via live video in front of internationally renowned eye specialists in Italy. The Kuwaiti eye surgeon conducted the operations, applying state-of-the-art devices for retinal treatment and the doctor explained to the audience that he had personally engineered making some of the tools he used in the displayed surgeries. The surgeries were conducted within the framework of the Florentina 2021 medical congress in Rome. The international gathering, held in its fourth edition, was attended by 1,800 surgeons from various countries. In remarks to the press, Dr Sabti said he was pleased



ROME: Kuwaiti ophthalmologist Dr Khaled Al-Sabti explains his retinal treatment technique during the Florentina 2021 medical congress. —KUNA photos

for being chosen as he first surgeon from Kuwait to conduct the delicate surgeries at the international congress. —KUNA



Kuwait, UK discuss cementing strategic ties

LONDON: Kuwait's Deputy Foreign Minister Ambassador Majdi Al-Dhifari and Minister for Middle East and North Africa at the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office James Cleverly have discussed means to upgrade strategic and friendly relations between the two countries. In a press statement following their meeting at the UK Foreign Office recently, the two officials expressed satisfaction with the level of cooperation between Kuwait and the UK in a variety of domains. They highlighted the significant role played by the UK-Kuwait Joint Steering Group, since its inception 10 years ago, in strengthening joint action. They also stressed the need to stick to this successful mechanism to take bilateral relations to new high levels. They also touched upon regional and international developments. Dean of Diplomatic Corps and Kuwait's Ambassador to UK Khalid Al-Duwaisan and Assistant Foreign Minister Ambassador Ayham Al-Omar attended the meeting. —KUNA



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Worshippers pray for rain in Kuwait



News in brief

Kuwait Moto surfing
tourney concludes

KUWAIT: Competitions of the third and final rounds of 2021 Kuwait Moto surfing Championship wrapped up on Friday at the beach of Khairan resort. Winners in the professionals' category were Shahin Ramadhan, who came first, followed by Ahmad Al-Baghli and Mohammad Bou-Abbas. In the Amateurs division, the top winner was Fares Ramadhan, followed by Hamad Al-Haddad and Mubarak Al-Fadhel. In the women's competition, Fiddah Al-Duwaisan was crowned as the top winner, followed by Jemma of Spain and Kuwait's Joud Al-Sabah, respectively.

Kuwaiti Brigadier
picked for Arab post

ALGIERS: The General Assembly of the Arab Police Sports Federation elected Kuwait's Brigadier Jurist Walid Al-Shihab to the membership of the Federation's Executive Office for a four-year term (2021-2025). He got 17 votes of the 18 members of the General Assembly, which met in Algiers on Friday with 11 candidates contesting the elections. Shihab said the Federation's Executive Office is looking forward to using sports leverage to cement the fraternity and cooperation among the members of the Federation and foster the skills of the members of the Arab police sports associations.

Kuwait oil price
drops six cents

KUWAIT: The price of Kuwaiti crude oil declined by six cents during Friday's trading sessions to reach \$75.44 pb, compared with \$75.50 pb the day before, Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) said yesterday. Globally, Brent crude dropped by \$1.50 to \$73.52 pb and West Texas Intermediate also went down by \$1.52 to \$70.86 pb.

KUWAIT: Several mosques in Kuwait witnessed yesterday morning the Istisqaa Prayers (rain-seeking prayers). The prayers, held in supplication to His Almighty Allah for rain, are in line with the Prophetic Sunnah. The two-

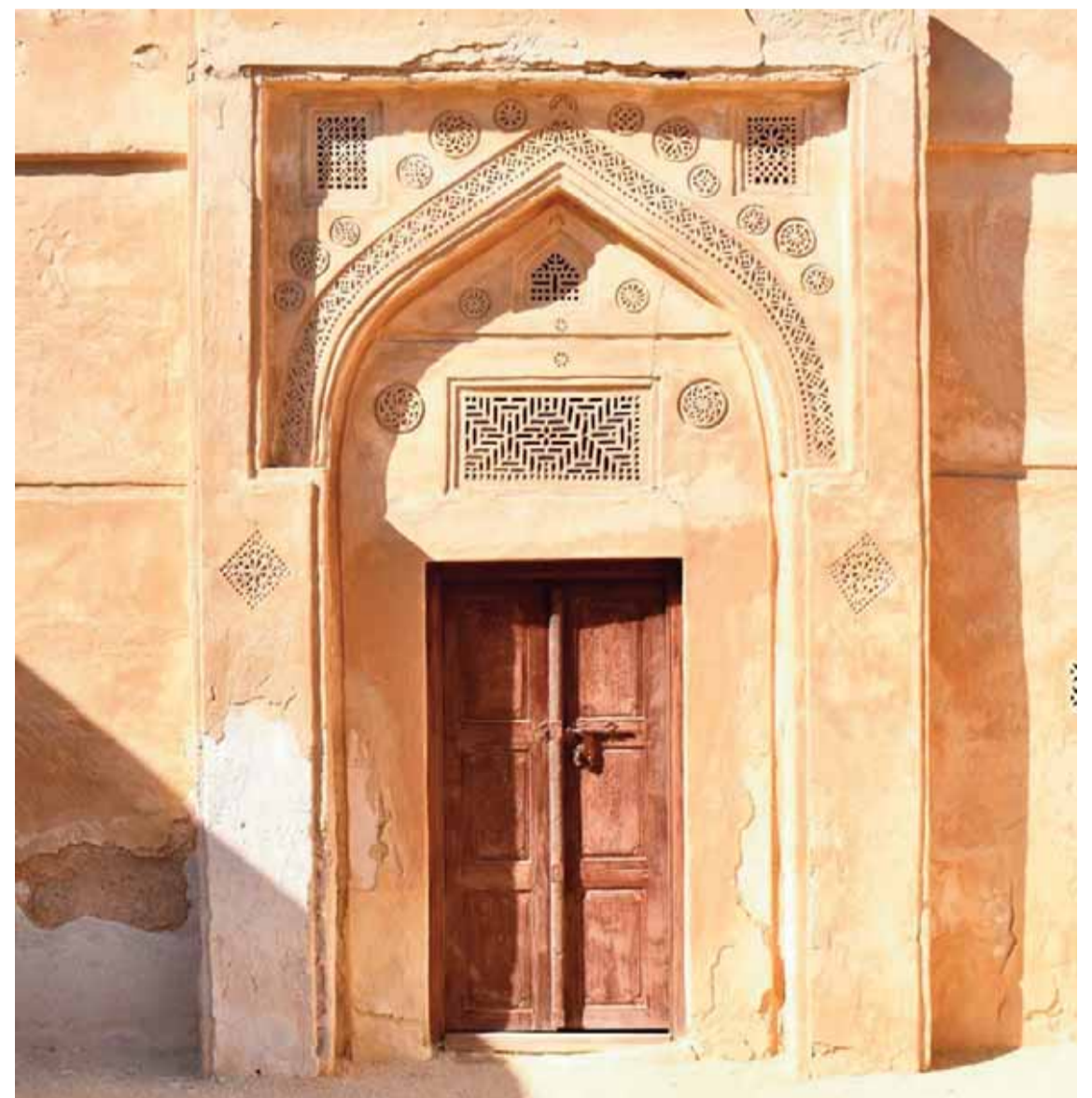
rakaa prayer is led by an imam. The first rakaa begins with reciting Allahu Akbar seven times and the second starts with five. The worshippers after the prayers are addressed with a sermon, then the imam and the atten-

dees pray to Allah Almighty to bless the country with rain. Kuwait has not witnessed heavy rain this winter as of yesterday; however, there have been sporadic light rainfalls. —Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat

Riffa Fort stands
witness to striking
transition in Bahrain

MANAMA: Based on its strategic location, Sheikh Salman bin Ahmad Al-Fateh Fort, also

known as Riffa Fort, historically reflects one of the most significant transitions of Bahrain's history. Laying in the eastern part of the city of Riffa, the fort was built by Sheikh Salman Al-Fateh in 1795 on a cliff overlooking the low desert valley between the old town of East Riffa and the new town of West Riffa. The exterior design of the facility is a splendid architectural structure that carries the memory of the kingdom's royal family. —KUNA





Taliban govt resumes issuing Afghan passports in Kabul

Ex policewoman weeps on stand describing how she shot black driver

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SHREWSBURY, England, United Kingdom: Liberal Democrat candidate Helen Morgan speaks after being elected as Member of Parliament for North Shropshire at the by-election count centre in Shrewsbury, in the west of England. —AFP

Johnson suffers by-election disaster

'In all humility, I've got to accept that verdict'

LONDON: British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said on Friday he took "personal responsibility" for a crushing by-election defeat in a constituency never previously lost by his Conservative party, which has prompted questions about his leadership after weeks of scandals. The historic loss in a seat Johnson's ruling Tories held with a massive majority just two years ago came as the government reported more than 93,000 new COVID-19 infections.

The figure was the third consecutive record daily tally as fears mount over the potential impact on the health system of the soaring case numbers. "I take personal responsibility," the embattled Johnson said in a clip for television news, calling the vote in the North Shropshire constituency in central England that handed victory to the Liberal Democrats "very disappointing". The electoral drubbing is likely to intensify the mutinous mood among Conservative MPs. "In all humility, I've got to accept that verdict," Johnson said, insisting he understood "people's frustrations" and "what the voters are saying in North Shropshire".

The 57-year-old was already reeling from a series of scandals and setbacks, including around 100 of his lawmakers rebelling in parliament on Tuesday against the government's introduction of vaccine passes for large events. His authority has also been hit repeatedly in recent weeks by claims

of corruption and reports that his staff broke coronavirus restrictions last Christmas.

'Kicking'

The Tories lost the safe rural seat, where they had a 23,000-strong majority since 2019, by almost 6,000 votes as the Lib Dems enjoyed a swing of 34 percentage points. "The people of North



Johnson takes 'responsibility' for defeat

Shropshire have spoken on behalf of the British people," winning candidate Helen Morgan said in her victory speech.

"They have said loudly and clearly 'Boris Johnson, the party is over'. The shattering defeat drew an immediate backlash from some Tory MPs and predictions that letters of no-confidence in their leader could be dispatched to trigger an inter-

nal party vote to remove him. The same process saw his predecessor Theresa May ousted in mid-2019 after MPs, including Johnson, voted against her Brexit deal in parliament.

"The Conservative Party has a reputation for not taking prisoners. If the prime minister fails, the prime minister goes," long-serving lawmaker Roger Gale told BBC Radio. "Johnson has to prove that he's capable of being a good prime minister and at the moment it's quite clear that the public don't think that that's the case."

However, others cautioned that surging COVID infections could buy the prime minister time to turn around his fortunes. "It doesn't mean the end, and it certainly doesn't mean leadership challenges," said Charles Walker, the vice-chairman of the party's 1922 Committee, which collates no-confidence letters and manages any leadership contest.

"The Conservative Party is not going to have a leadership challenge as we are heading into potential further restrictions around COVID," Walker added. Party chairman Oliver Dowden, also a government minister without portfolio, said North Shropshire's voters were "fed up and they gave us a kicking" but that "we've heard that loud and clear". "The prime minister is an electoral asset for the Conservative Party," he insisted to Sky News. "On the big calls, (he) has the vision and the direction to

get us through this difficult period."

Dogged by controversies

However, Britain is also suffering spiralling inflation as a result of big borrowing during lockdowns, high energy prices and bottlenecked supply chains. Tax rises also loom from next April, which could further irritate the electorate. Johnson—who won voters' overwhelming backing in 2019 on his promise to "Get Brexit Done"—has been dogged by controversies for weeks. It began with his unsuccessful attempt to change parliament's disciplinary rules to spare MP Owen Paterson a suspension after he was found to have breached lobbying rules.

Paterson, who had held the North Shropshire seat since 1997, then quit, forcing Thursday's vote. That crisis, though, was soon eclipsed by reports that Downing Street staff broke COVID rules last year by holding several parties around Christmas—just as the public were told to cancel their festive plans.

In a further episode in the saga, the senior civil servant tasked with investigating the party claims recused himself on Friday following reports of gatherings in his own department. "To ensure the ongoing investigation retains public confidence the Cabinet Secretary has recused himself for the remainder of the process," said a statement from Johnson's Downing Street office. —AFP

European powers warn Iran nuclear talks nearing 'end of road'

VIENNA: Western powers on Friday reported some progress in talks to save the landmark Iran nuclear deal, but European diplomats warned that they were "rapidly reaching the end of the road". In a blow to European mediators, Iran requested a new pause in the talks in Vienna, which aim to bring the United States back into the 2015 agreement and roll back nuclear activities. The Islamic republic stepped up its nuclear projects after the US withdrawal.

The talks had just resumed in late November after a five-month break following the election of a new hardline government in Iran. "There has been some technical progress in the last 24 hours, but this only takes us back nearer to where the talks stood in June," Britain, France and Germany, known as E3, said in a statement. "We are

rapidly reaching the end of the road for this negotiation."

Underlying Western concerns are fears that Iran will soon have made enough progress that the 2015 accord—under which it was promised economic relief in return for drastic curbs on its nuclear work—will be obsolete. Enrique Mora, the EU official chairing the talks, called for a "sense of urgency" and for talks to resume before the end of the year. "We are not talking anymore about months, we are talking about weeks," Mora said.

Limited progress

Former US president Donald Trump pulled out of the deal in 2018 and imposed sweeping sanctions including a unilateral US ban on Iran's oil sales, vowing to bring the

US adversary to its knees. President Joe Biden supports a return to the agreement negotiated by predecessor Barack Obama, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, but has been frustrated by the pace of resurrection efforts.

"It's not going well in the sense that we do not yet have a pathway back into the JCPOA," Biden's national security advisor, Jake Sullivan, said of the talks. "We are paying the wages of the disastrous decision to leave the deal back in 2018," he said.

But Sullivan, speaking at the Council on Foreign Relations in Washington, said recent days "have brought some progress at the bargaining table". Another US official said the latest round was "better than it might have been" and "worse than it should have been". The official called for a "very significant acceleration" and said the United States was ready to return before New Year's.

"If it takes this much time to agree on a common agenda, imagine how much time it will take to resolve the issues on that agenda," he said. Russia, which along with China is also in the talks, said negotiators agreed to start from where they left off in June before Iran requested a break for its elections.

The latest round was "successful in a sense that it prepared sound basis for more intensive negotiations," envoy Mikhail Ulyanov wrote on Twitter. Tehran's chief negotiator Ali Bagheri said there were "hard and intense negotiations" to agree on the "bases" for further talks which will take place "in the near future". The Biden administration has said it is willing to lift sanctions but only if Iran returns to compliance. Amid the deadlock, the United States has increasingly spoken of a "Plan B" of pressure if talks fail. A group of former officials including Obama's defense secretary Leon Panetta and retired general David Petraeus in a joint statement urged Biden to arrange high-profile military exercises or other actions to strike fear into Iran. —AFP



VIENNA: Iran's chief nuclear negotiator Ali Bagheri Kani arrives at the Coburg Palais, venue of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) meeting aimed at reviving the Iran nuclear deal, in Vienna. — AFP

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International

'Fear of communism:' why Chile's rich vote right

One percent of the population of Chile holds a quarter of the wealth

SANTIAGO: In Santiago's upper-class neighborhood of Lo Barnechea with its Ferraris, mansions and luxury retailers, 51.68 percent of people voted for far-right, neoliberal candidate Jose Antonio Kast in Chile's first presidential election round in November. It is one of two neighborhoods out of dozens in greater Santiago where Kast, an apologist for Chile's brutal dictator Augusto Pinochet, amassed more than half the votes out of the seven candidates then in the race.

His rival in today's runoff, leftist lawmaker Gabriel Boric, won the most neighborhoods, mainly in middle-class areas, but did not break the 50-percent ceiling in any of them. Kast's defenders are vociferous in Lo Barnechea. The neighborhood is notable for also having gone against the stream last year to vote "No" in a referendum on whether Chile should approve a new constitution to replace the one enacted under Pinochet.

"One of the most serious issues is that it (the left) endorses violence," said entrepreneur Sergio Aday, 52, referring to anti-inequality protests and clashes with the police in 2019 that caused dozens of deaths. The resulting "uncertainty and fear" risks causing an outflow of capital, he said. According to the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, the top one percent of the population of Chile holds a quarter of the wealth.

More money, more fear

Kast is against marriage for same-sex couples and is anti-abortion. He is also a defender of Pinochet and the neoliberal economic system he

left behind. The candidate wants to cut taxes and social spending, contrary to Boric who wants to increase them and represents a leftist alliance that includes Chile's Communist Party.

For 53-year-old teacher Maria-Luisa Galleguillos, another resident of Lo Barnechea—an area with golf and equestrian clubs some 20 kilometers (12 miles) northwest of central Santiago—Kast will "give us security." "I have children who recently started working. I want that they can live in their country, that they don't need to go to other countries to work," she told AFP at an up-market mall.

She said Kast's image has suffered due to "misunderstandings" spread by a "leftist" media, and explained she was grateful to Pinochet for making Chile a relatively rich country in Latin America. "If it wasn't for Pinochet... we would have been like Venezuela today," Galleguillos said.

There is "much, much, much fear of communism here," said Francisca Olivares, 48, a lawyer who told AFP she was "an exception" in Lo Barnechea for not supporting Kast. In the neighborhood there is "more money, therefore there is more fear of losing it," she said. "We are an extremely divided country in terms of class. And that generates a lot of fear of the other, a lot of hatred of the other."

Class divide

In the neighborhood of Nunoa in Santiago's voting district 10, where Boric had his highest first-round turnout with 39.4 percent, voters say they are driven by civil rights and social equality.



Kast will 'give us security'



SANTIAGO: People run away from a water cannon used by riot police during a demonstration against Chilean presidential candidate Jose Antonio Kast and his proposals at Plaza Italia square yesterday. —AFP

Chile's social uprising was sparked in late 2018 by a rise in the price of metro tickets, but soon transformed into a revolt against the country's status as one of the most unequal countries in the world.

Nunoa resident Karla, 25, who did not wish to give her full name, said she supports Boric because of "what he stands for in terms of rights, social equality." The student said she is particularly concerned about Chile's private pensions system, which costs workers an arm and a leg, yet leaves them with little to retire on.

But for Aday, the entrepreneur, more accessible healthcare, education and fairer pensions, amount to handouts and are harmful to the economy. He referred to the hardship Chileans suffered—partly due to US economic blockades—under the rule of Salvador Allende, Latin America's first elected Marxist president who was ousted by Pinochet in a coup d'etat. "I think it is better to have a debit card than a ration card, which is what we had under the government of Allende," he said. —AFP

Ex policewoman weeps on stand describing how she shot black driver

WASHINGTON: A US former police officer on trial for the death of a young African-American man wept in court Friday as she described how a routine traffic stop descended swiftly into chaos. Kim Potter, 49, is charged with first degree manslaughter over the fatal shooting of Daunte Wright, 20, in Brooklyn Center, a suburb of Minneapolis, Minnesota, in April this year. She claims the shooting was an accident, saying she mistakenly grabbed her gun instead of her Taser.

"We were struggling, we were trying to keep them from driving away. And then it just went chaotic, I remember yelling 'Taser Taser Taser.' And nothing happens, then he told me I shot him," Potter said, bursting into tears. She said the moments that followed were largely a blank. "They have an ambulance for me and I don't know why. And then I went, then I was at the station. I don't remember a lot of things afterwards," she said.

On Sunday, April 11, 2021, the white policewoman was patrolling with a colleague who decided to look up the driver of a white Buick that had committed a minor traffic violation. After realizing that the driver was the subject of an arrest warrant, the police officers decided to arrest him. Potter described that as a potentially dangerous situation. "Sometimes there's guns in the car. Sometimes there's uncooperative people, you don't know who you're stopping," she told the court.

Wright, who was unarmed, resisted being handcuffed and restarted his car to try to flee. Potter then drew what she said she thought was her Taser. On a recording of the scene, Potter can be heard shouting "Taser" several times, before shooting with her gun and fatally wounding Wright. The incident came during the trial of white policeman Derek Chauvin who had asphyxiated George Floyd in Minneapolis in May 2020 by kneeling on his neck for some nine minutes.

Floyd's death sparked nationwide protests against racism and police brutality. Wright's death also triggered several nights of protests and unrest in Brooklyn Center before Potter's own arrest calmed tensions. Potter's lawyer, Paul Engh, argued that Wright's death was a result of human error and the stress that his client was under, maintaining that she was attempting to protect a fellow officer as Wright tried to drive off. But for prosecutor Erin Eldridge, Wright died because of Potter's reckless handling of her weapon and the negligence of an officer with 26 years on the force.

Ben Crump, the lawyer for Wright's family, said in a statement that Potter's testimony showed that "Daunte Wright's killing at Potter's hands was absolutely preventable." —AFP

PM says Omicron to be 'dominant' in France

PARIS: French Prime Minister Jean Castex on Friday likened the spread of the Omicron variant in Europe to "lightning", adding it would be the dominant strain in France from the start of 2022. Castex added that while much remains unknown about the variant "it does not seem to be more dangerous than the Delta variant and the data available to us indicate that complete vaccination coverage with the booster dose protects well against severe forms of the disease".

Nearly 3,000 people are in intensive care with COVID-19 in France according to latest figures. Meanwhile people will become eligible for booster jabs four months from the date of their second vaccination down from five, Castex added. And he said the government would

Maxwell says sex crimes charges 'not proven' as defense rests

NEW YORK: A defiant Ghislaine Maxwell said Friday that prosecutors had failed to prove her guilty of sex crimes, as her defense wound up in a trial that heard lurid claims she groomed minors for abuse by the late financier Jeffrey Epstein. Speaking for the first time since her sensational trial opened late last month, the 59-year-old British socialite addressed the New York court only to say she would not be testifying.

"Your honor, the government has not proven its case beyond reasonable doubt so there is no need for me to testify," Maxwell, wearing a black turtle neck and matching face mask, told judge Alison Nathan. The defense rested its case at 4:00 pm (2100 GMT) after less than two days of testimony after it struggled to put witnesses on the stand.

The daughter of former newspaper baron Robert Maxwell faces an effective life sentence if convicted by the jury of six counts of enticing and transporting minors for sex with her long-time companion Epstein. Closing arguments and rebuttal are scheduled for Monday. The judge will then instruct the jury how to consider the charges before it retires to consider its verdict.

The trial, which began on November 29, had been scheduled to last six weeks but Maxwell may well learn her fate before Christmas Day, her 60th birthday. The prosecution wound up on Friday last week, after taking just 10 days to question its witnesses. They sought to portray Maxwell as Epstein's partner-in-crime, recruiting young girls to be sexually

exploited by the American money-manager, who killed himself in jail two years ago while awaiting his own trial.

Two women said they were as young as 14 when Maxwell allegedly began grooming them and arranging for them to give massages to Epstein that ended in sexual activity. One, identified only as "Jane," detailed how Maxwell recruited her at summer camp and made her feel "special." She said sexual encounters with Epstein became routine, with Maxwell sometimes present.

Another, going by "Carolyn," said she was usually paid \$300 after sexual encounters with Epstein, often by Maxwell herself. The alleged crimes occurred between 1994 and 2004.

'False memories'

Maxwell's defense, which began its case on Thursday, questioned the women's ability to remember quarter-century-old events. They also brought up past drug use by two of them. But after indicating they planned to call 35 witnesses, the defense called just nine to the stand, taking a day and a half to do so—with others dropped, delayed, unavailable and even their whereabouts unknown.

An increasingly exasperated judge instructed them earlier Friday to produce the promised witnesses or rest their case. "We're not delaying the trial," said Nathan. After the lunch break, prosecutor Maureen Comey said the parties had reached a consensus to rest the case after the defense withdrew requests to enforce the subpoena of a witness identified as "Kelly," and put a London pub landlord on the stand.

Among the defense witnesses brought forward was the psychologist Elizabeth Loftus, an expert on "false memories," whose testimony was intended to challenge the recollections of the case's four accus-

He said it was "impossible to remain silent about what is happening on Polish territory". The Belarusian border guards said he was opposed to Poland's hard line against migration. National television in Belarus is tightly controlled by the state. Earlier this year, it aired an interview with Belarusian anti-government activist Roman Protasevich after his plane was forced to land in Minsk. His family and campaigners said it was conducted under duress.

The Polish military later issued a statement confirming there had been "a shameful, one-time case of desertion". "He crossed the Belarus border and insulted the Polish military," it said. Polish Defence



PARIS: France's Prime Minister Jean Castex gives a press conference on the latest COVID-19 update yesterday. —AFP

between clubs from the UK and France postponed, organisers said on Friday. Castex called on local authorities to cancel fireworks and concerts on New Year's Eve to limit the spread of coronavirus, and said the consumption of alcohol on public roads will be outlawed during the celebrations. —AFP



NEW YORK: Laura A Menninger and Jeffrey S Pagliuca, defense attorneys for Ghislaine Maxwell, arrive at the Thurgood Marshall United States Courthouse on Friday. —AFP

ers. Another witness heard Friday was a former Miss Sweden who dated Epstein between 1983 and 1991. Eva Andersson-Dubin said she never saw any inappropriate conduct between Epstein and teenage women.

But she also admitted under cross-examination that she has memory problems. "It's very hard for me to remember anything far back and sometimes I can't even remember things from last month. My family notices it. I notice it. It's been an issue," the 60-year-old told prosecutor Allison Moe. Nathan had earlier rejected a request that three other witnesses be allowed to testify anonymously. She also dismissed the defense's attempts to call two lawyers as accusers of Epstein.

Comy said the government's summation would last two to three hours, with 45 minutes for rebuttal. Defense attorney Bobbi Sternheim said their closing arguments would "hopefully" be shorter. —AFP

Minister Mariusz Blaszczak said the soldier "had serious problems with the law and had submitted his resignation from the army".

"He should never have been assigned to the border service. I requested an explanation for who was responsible for this," he said on Twitter. The army later said three of his superiors had been dismissed. Since the summer, Poland has sent thousands of soldiers to the border to help prevent large numbers of migrants from crossing over from Belarus.

International rights organisations have criticised Poland for its treatment of migrants and creation of a controversial emergency zone along its border. —AFP

'Naked' Polish soldier defects to Belarus

WARSAW: A Polish soldier patrolling the European Union's eastern border with authoritarian Belarus has deserted and asked for political asylum there, Polish and Belarusian officials said on Friday. Tensions on the Poland-Belarus border have been high for months as thousands of

migrants have tried to cross into EU member Poland in a crisis the West and the Belarusian regime blame on each other.

Belarus's border guard service said a Polish soldier was stopped by its guards and that he "asked for political asylum in the country". It said the soldier—who it named as Emil Czeko—was stopped on Thursday near the Tushemlya border checkpoint. Regime-controlled media then aired an interview with the soldier, who said he "deserted from the army through barbed wire". "I took off my uniform and without my clothes, naked, ran towards Belarus," he said, according to a Russian translation.

International

Taleban govt resumes issuing Afghan passports in Kabul

New applications will be accepted from January 10

KABUL: Afghanistan's Taleban authorities said yesterday they will resume issuing passports in Kabul, giving hope to citizens who feel threatened living under the Islamists' rule. Thousands of Afghans have applied for new travel documents to escape a growing economic and humanitarian crisis described by the United Nations as an "avalanche of hunger".

Authorities will start issuing the documents from today at Kabul's passport office, Alam Gul Haqqani, the head of the passport department in the interior ministry, told reporters. The Taleban stopped issuing passports shortly after their August 15 return to power, as tens of thousands of people scrambled to Kabul's only airport in a bid to catch any international flight that could evacuate them.

In October authorities reopened the passport office in Kabul only to suspend work days later as a flood of applications caused the biometric equipment used there to break down. "All the technical issues have now been resolved," Haqqani said, adding that initially travel documents will be given to those who had already applied before the office suspended work.

New applications will be accepted from January 10, he said. Many Afghans who wanted to visit neighbouring Pakistan for medical treatment have been blocked for months in the absence of valid passports. "My mother has some health issues and we needed to go to Pakistan a long time ago, but we

could not because the passport department was closed," said Jamshid, who like many Afghans goes by only one name.

"We are happy now that... we can get our passports and go to Pakistan." Issuing passports is also seen as a test of the Taleban's commitment to the international community to allow eligible people to leave amid the growing humanitarian crisis. The

“All the technical issues have now been resolved”

Taleban are pressing donors to restore billions of dollars in aid that was suspended when the previous Western-backed regime imploded in the final stages of a US military withdrawal.

The abrupt withholding of aid has amounted to an "unprecedented" fiscal shock for an economy already battered by drought and decades of war, according to the United Nations Development Programme. The crisis has forced many in the capi-



KABUL: A Taleban fighter (R) inspects documents of people queuing to enter the passport office in Kabul yesterday. — AFP

tal to sell household possessions to buy food for their families.

International flights, mainly to Dubai and Abu

Dhabi, have slowly resumed at Kabul airport after the facility was trashed in August when crowds of people scrambled to evacuate. — AFP

Potential suspect critical after Japan clinic fire kills 24

TOKYO: A man seen by police as a potential suspect in a deadly fire at a Japanese mental health clinic was in a critical condition yesterday, reports said, a day after the blaze claimed 24 lives. The 61-year-old former patient of the clinic in Osaka was being treated in hospital, public broadcaster NHK reported, citing police sources.

The fire raged for half an hour on Friday morning, gutting the fourth floor of the narrow commercial building where the clinic, which also provided general medical care, was located. Police were investigating a link with a small fire that had occurred at the man's home 30 minutes earlier, NHK and the Asahi Shimbun daily said.

An official at the city's fire department confirmed the death toll of the clinic fire, which police are reportedly treating as possible arson. "A total of 24 people died and four were injured. Whether their condition is critical or not is unclear," the official told AFP.

Japanese media said most of the

victims were believed to have suffered from carbon monoxide poisoning, and may have been trapped inside the unit with the exit blocked. Some patients saw a man placing a paper bag containing a flammable liquid next to a heater, which he then kicked over to ignite, the reports said.

The father of the doctor who runs the clinic said he did not yet know if his son was among the dead. "I hope (my son) is safe and alive. That's all I want," he said in comments reported by several major newspapers.

The doctor had been having a hard time with many patients wanting certificates to apply for unemployment insurance, his father added. Osaka in western Japan is a major economic hub and the country's second-biggest metropolis after the greater Tokyo region. Deadly fires are unusual in Japan, which has strict building standards, and violent crime is rare.

One year ago, a man was charged with murder over a 2019 arson attack on a Kyoto animation studio that



OSAKA, Japan: A woman offers flowers for victims in front of an office building, where a fire broke out the previous day, in Osaka yesterday. — AFP

killed 36 people, the country's deadliest violent crime in decades. The attack sent shockwaves through the anime industry and its fans in Japan and around the world.

And in recent months there has been a string of assaults involving fire and knives on and around the country's train network. A 24-year-old man was arrested in Tokyo on Halloween

for attempted murder after he allegedly stabbed a passenger and started a fire inside a moving train, wearing an outfit reminiscent of infamous comic villain the Joker.

That incident reportedly inspired a 69-year-old man to try to start a fire inside a running Shinkansen bullet train in the southwestern Kyushu region. No injuries were reported. — AFP

Donations pour in after Australian castle tragedy

SYDNEY: A memorial to victims of a bouncy castle tragedy that killed five children in Australia continued to grow yesterday, as an outpouring of support drove donations over a million dollars. Three 12-year-old boys and two girls, aged 11 and 12, were killed when the large inflatable castle lifted off the ground on Thursday in Devonport, northern Tasmania, police said.

Three more children were in critical condition in hospital in the state capital Hobart, and one was recovering at home. Yesterday, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison visited the growing memorial of soft toys, flowers and emotional messages laid outside the school. An online fundraiser—initially aiming to raise Aus\$1,000 (\$712) for the victims' families—climbed to over Aus\$1.1 million yesterday morning.

"It's just beyond anything we could have thought possible," Zoe Smith, who organised the fundraiser, told media in Devonport. "I think it just proves how shaken up everyone is and how tight-knit of a community we are."

Morrison also announced the government would fund support to the families, first responders and community affected by the tragedy. "We grieve with them, and we mourn with them, and we want to do everything we possibly can to help them through this terrible, terrible, unthinkable and imaginable tragedy," he told reporters in Hobart.

Earlier, authorities said the children were thrown from a height of about 10 metres (33 feet), citing initial witness reports. Police said the probe into the incident is expected to take "quite some time" and would need to interview people at the outdoor party, which some 40 primary school children attended. — AFP

Mali agrees to 1,000 extra UN peacekeepers

BAMAKO: Mali has agreed to accept 1,000 UN peacekeepers from nearby Chad, following France's move to reduce troops in its conflict-torn former colony. In a letter seen by AFP on Friday, Mali's UN ambassador told the Security Council that the government had agreed to "1,000 supplementary soldiers" from Chad, for the UN peacekeeping mission in Mali, known as MINUSMA.

The agreement comes as France is reducing its deployment in the vast nation of 19 million people, after it first intervened in 2013 to beat back a jihadist insurgency. French President Emmanuel Macron announced a major troop drawdown in June, after a military takeover in Mali in August 2020 that ousted the elected president Ibrahim Boubacar Keita.

Paris has already closed three bases in northern Mali this year. By next year it is set to have about 3,000 soldiers in the Sahel, down from 5,100 at the height of its deployment. Mali's army-dominated government said Friday it had agreed to additional Chadian soldiers joining MINUSMA after the "reconfiguration" of French forces, "in order to address threats".

Mali is the epicentre of a jihadist insurgency



MENAKA, Mali: French Marine Special Operation Forces officers attend during a training with Mali's FAMA soldiers as new Task Force Taruba multinational military mission in sub-Saharan Africa's troubled region, in the Mali's Menaka army base. — AFP

that began in the north of the country in 2012 and spread three years later to neighbouring Niger and Burkina Faso. Thousands of people across the region have died, and around two million have been displaced. Despite the presence of French and UN troops, the conflict spread to neighbouring Burkina Faso and Niger.

MINUSMA—the United Nations

journalists, on an army-led trip to the frontline in the world-famous Virunga National Park. All around him, the forest is a haven for rare species, including elephants, hippopotamuses, lions and okapis.

Mountain gorillas live in the south of the park. But in its north, ADF rebels are believed to be hiding between the trees. The ADF was historically a Ugandan rebel coalition largely comprised of Muslims opposed to Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni. But the group established itself in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo in 1995, later becoming the deadliest of scores of outlawed forces in the troubled region.

Hostages freed

At a former base for UN peacekeepers inside the forest, two generals—one Congolese and the other Ugandan—have set their temporary headquarters. A thermos of warm coffee sits on a camping table, as they discuss their next moves and keep track of Congolese foot soldiers and Ugandan mountain

troops marching forward under the green canopy.

It was at this very same base in Semuliki that ADF rebels killed 15 Tanzanian peacekeepers in 2017. The Congolese and Ugandan armies launched their joint operation with air and artillery strikes on the DRC's North Kivu and Ituri provinces in late November. Ugandan troops then entered the DRC via the Nabili border crossing, setting up a temporary base a dozen of kilometres away while the road was repaired to allow heavy vehicles through.

Three weeks into the operation, the army has not announced any death casualties. On December 11, an initial round-up reported just 34 "terrorists" captured, four temporary camps destroyed and "31 Congolese hostages freed". Earlier this week, the Ugandan army said their artillery and warplanes had targeted "three additional enemy positions". A DRC commander and an activist in Ituri on Friday said at least eight civilians had been killed in villages there by ADF fighters fleeing the military operations against them. — AFP

Moscow bans 7 Britons from Russia over Navalny sanctions

MOSCOW: Moscow said it will ban seven British "representatives" from entering its territory in retaliation over UK sanctions sparked by the near fatal poisoning of jailed Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny. In August, Britain sanctioned seven Russian officials on the first anniversary of the poisoning of President Vladimir Putin's most vocal domestic critic.

The individuals—all members of Russia's domestic security service the FSB, successor to the KGB—were accused of planning or carrying out the August 20, 2020 nerve agent attack. They face asset freezes and travel bans under the sanctions. "In response to London's unfriendly actions and on the basis of the principle of reciprocity, it was decided to impose personal sanctions against a proportionate number of British representatives who are closely involved in anti-Russian activities," the Russian foreign ministry said.

"They have been barred from entering the territory of the Russian Federation," the ministry added, without giving any further details of the seven being targeted. Moscow accused London of intending to continue to pursue a "destructive course" in bilateral ties. Western intelligence agencies have assessed with "high confidence" that FSB officers poisoned Navalny with the Novichok nerve agent last year. The dissident was flown to Germany for treatment but defiantly returned in January, only to be arrested and then sent to prison. London's relations with Moscow have been dire since the 2006 radiation poisoning death in the British capital of former spy Alexander Litvinenko. — AFP

Deep in DR Congo forest, soldiers track rebels

BENI, DR Congo: Bags on their backs and guns slung across their chests, soldiers trudge into the forest in northeastern Democratic Republic of Congo towards alleged hideouts of the ADF rebel group. Just instants earlier, rocket launchers fired a salvo in the direction of purported camps of the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) near the border with Uganda.

It is the third week of a joint Congolese-Ugandan military operation against the group, who are accused of massacres in eastern DR Congo and bomb blasts in Uganda. "We will fight to the ultimate sacrifice," one young Congolese soldier tells

Business

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 19, 2021

UK hospitality businesses reel from Omicron surge

Anxious customers curtail socializing and cancel travel bookings

LONDON: Britain's pandemic-weary hospitality businesses have taken a fresh hit from soaring coronavirus cases fueled by the Omicron variant, as anxious customers curtail socializing and cancel bookings over the Christmas period.

Pubs, restaurants and bars—already struggling after nearly two years of reduced revenues due to the pandemic—now face lost income at typically the busiest and most valuable time of the year. “Normally this is the biggest week of the year (and) it's completely crushed,” Pascal Aussignac, chef and owner of five French restaurants in Britain, told AFP.

The UK government last week switched to its so-called “plan B” to deal with coronavirus, advising people to work from home if they can since Monday and mandating they wear masks in most indoor settings. MPs also backed proposals Tuesday to introduce a COVID pass for people to access large-scale events.

It comes as cases double roughly every two days and health officials reported more than 93,000 new infections Friday, the third consecutive record daily tally. “It looks like we have less people,” said James Ross, co-founder of Badger Badger, a pub, eatery and daytime workspace in southeast London.

He added the business had seen a “significant” drop in income, with revenue down by 10 percent over the last week and 35 percent below his expectations for the pre-Christmas period.

Trade body UKHospitality's boss Kate Nicholls said hospitality sales have already plunged by more than a third over the past 10 days with 2 billion pounds (\$2.7 billion, 2.4 billion euros) of trade already lost in December.

‘What can we do?’

Meanwhile, at the White Hart pub in east

London, owner Patrick Mullighan revealed he had been forced to shutter his kitchen after his chef contracted COVID-19. “It represents a lot of money,” he said of the losses from the closure.

“I'm always worried but what can we do? You've got to carry on,” said Mullighan. Hospitality outlets have been left with little choice but to stay open in order for most to pay their rents.

Ross, who only opened Badger Badger in October 2020, said he felt “fortunate” to have agreed a “COVID clause” in its lease. “We don't pay the rent if we have to close” due to the virus, he noted. Aussignac is also in regular contact with the owners of his restaurants to discuss various issues, including the rents. But without a return to greater government financial aid, “the problem will be the staff,” he warned. The government ended its costly scheme to support businesses with furloughed workers in September.

Critics argue that following numerous ominous warnings about Omicron and its dangers, this has created a lockdown by stealth without the necessary assistance from the finance ministry. Aussignac said it felt like being “caught in a vice” between disappearing customers, post-Brexit recruitment problems and wage inflation as well as increasingly expensive European products.

He expects many bankruptcies in the absence of some form of renewed government support. The chef would consider relocating at least one of his restaurants from central London to more residential areas better suited to the flexible working arrangements that have become more common. But after 18 months of difficulties, he noted “we have no cash flow”.

‘Chaos of inaction’

Ross fears that further restrictions, which could



LONDON: Members of the public queue to receive a dose of a COVID-19 vaccine, at a temporary vaccination center set up at Walthamstow library in north east London on Friday. —AFP

be introduced after Christmas, will further squeeze the sector. Wales, for example, has just announced the closure of nightclubs from December 27.

Retailers are also suffering, with the owner of toy chain The Entertainer, Gary Grant, telling The Guardian the business had seen footfall drop by a fifth. That followed a rise in UK retail sales in November, thanks to Black Friday and early Christmas shopping.

Meanwhile, aviation is another sector hit hard by the pandemic, with airlines and related operators

suffering from a drop in short-term bookings following the reintroduction of some travel curbs and renewed uncertainty. Finance Minister Rishi Sunak cut short a trip to Silicon Valley in California, meeting virtually with representatives of struggling industries on Thursday ahead of returning to London on Friday. But there has been no announcement of renewed UK government aid of the kind seen earlier in the pandemic. Welsh First Minister Mark Drakeford on Friday announced £60 million in support for affected businesses. —AFP

Trauma of Argentine ‘great crisis’ lives on 20 years later

BUENOS AIRES: An illusion of prosperity, a headlong rush into debt and years of austerity collided 20 years ago to provoke one of the biggest crises in Argentina's history. The subsequent social unrest left scars that can still be felt today.

The scenes were dramatic: people pounding on bank shutters, looting shops and falling under a hail of police bullets, and a president escaping by helicopter. In 2001, Argentines still believed in the “one for one” conversion rate between the peso and US dollar instigated under conservative Peronist president Carlos Menem (1989-99) initially to control inflation.

The experiment lasted a decade before the roof fell in. It was a time when Latin American countries surfed a wave of neo-liberal open markets, privatizations and heavy debt.

The middle classes were purchasing imported goods with an over-valued peso. But local industry collapsed, the budget deficit grew, austerity plans followed one after another and investors lost confidence. It sparked a capital flight and a cash crisis. The state was forced to react in December 2001 to prevent the collapse of the banking system.

The government ordered a bank deposit freeze and limited cash withdrawals to 250 pesos a week.

In what became known as the “corralito”—playpen—many Argentines were enraged, while others went hungry.

‘They must all go!’

Protests and looting abounded, with president Fernando De La Rúa declaring a state of siege—a move that reminded citizens of the dictatorship years and poured fuel on the fire. On the night of December 19, thousands of people descended on the Plaza de Mayo square where parliament sits to bang pots and pans in protest.

The finance minister's resignation did nothing to calm the mood. “They must all go!” cried the crowd.

The outbreak provided the spark for a heavy-handed police attempt to disperse protesters, with almost 40 people killed and hundreds injured throughout the country. On the evening of December 20, De La Rúa resigned and fled the presidential palace by helicopter.

His successor Adolfo Rodríguez Saa lasted just one week but still had time to decree the largest default in history: \$100 billion. Many Argentines saw their savings go up in smoke.

Recently, actor Ricardo Darin recalled tearfully how his late mother “right up until her last days, asked me if there would be a chance of recover-



BUENOS AIRES, Argentina: Maria Laura Verdu, lawyer of the human rights group National Coordinator Against Police and Institutional Repression (CORREPI), poses during an interview next to a plaque remembering the place where protester Carlos Almiron was killed by policemen on December 20, 2001. —AFP

ing the money she lost at the bank.” Eventually, he decided to lie, telling her “it's in the hands of lawyers, and they say it should be possible. You should have seen the way her eyes lit up.”

‘Orphans, abandoned by the state’

A pioneer cardiology study found that in the period from April 1999 to December 2002, there were 20,000 more fatal cardiac arrests in Argentina than would normally have been expected, partly due to stress but also because of the degradation of the health system. Twenty years on, there

is “a painful, bloody memory,” historian Felipe Pigna said.

“The fear of a social convulsion, the loss of savings. It's a phantom that reappears in times of crisis, in critical situations. Not necessarily in rational terms but in emotional ones.” In 2001, Argentines felt like “orphans, abandoned by the state, the parties, the banks.” But it was also a time in which the people took matters into their own hands, organizing “mutual aid cooperatives, neighborhood soup kitchens, public meetings to find solutions to daily problems.” —AFP

Fitch downgrades Sri Lanka as debt default fears mount

COLOMBO: International ratings agency Fitch downgraded cash-strapped Sri Lanka yesterday due to mounting fears of a sovereign default on its \$26 billion foreign debt, but Colombo insisted it will meet its obligations.

The downgrade by one notch from “CCC” to “CC” came a day after Sri Lanka reported a 1.5 percent contraction in the third quarter of this year as a foreign exchange crisis wrecked its recovery from the coronavirus pandemic. Fitch said the downgrade reflected its view of an “increased probability of a default event in coming months” as Sri Lanka's foreign reserves slumped to \$1.58 billion at the end of November.

“We believe it will be difficult for the government to meet its external debt obligations in 2022 and 2023 in the absence of new external financing sources,” the agency said in a statement.

However, the Central Bank of Sri Lanka accused



Fitch of making a “reckless” downgrade ignoring “positive developments” in the economy. “It must also be noted that the government has given a clear assurance that Sri Lanka will honor all debt obligations in the period ahead,” the bank said in a statement.

Fitch noted Sri Lanka has to repay two international sovereign bonds of \$500 million in January 2022 and \$1.0 billion in July 2022 with little improvement in capital inflows into the nation of 21 million people. It added foreign-currency debt service payments, including principal and interest, total \$6.9 billion for next year, the equivalent of nearly 430 percent of the island's official gross

international reserves as of November 2021.

The island's tourism-dependent economy was hammered by the pandemic and authorities responded to falling foreign exchange reserves with a broad import ban, triggering shortages including food, fuel and medicines. The crisis has spread to manufacturing and services, and agriculture has also suffered badly due to a ban on agro-chemical imports.

Sri Lanka's economy had grown 12.3 percent in the second quarter but a third wave of COVID-19 infections that forced a 41-day curfew saw services and industries heavily affected, the statistics office said on Friday. Its foreign reserves of \$1.58 billion at the end of November have decreased from \$7.5 billion when the government of Gotabaya Rajapaksa took over two years ago.

Supermarkets have rationed staples such as milk powder, sugar, lentils, tinned fish and rice as commercial banks run out of dollars to finance imports. The central bank has been appealing for foreign currency—even loose change that people may have after returning from overseas trips—as the government desperately looks for dollars. The banking regulator has also warned it will freeze accounts of informal money changers who offer higher prices for hard currency than official exchange rates. —AFP

COVID rules hurting HK aviation industry: Qatar Airways boss

DOHA: Hong Kong's strict adherence to a zero-COVID strategy is damaging the hub's aviation industry and “killing” Cathay Pacific, a major shareholder in the city's home carrier told local media.

Following Beijing's lead, Hong Kong has maintained some of the world's strictest quarantine measures and travel curbs, which has kept the city coronavirus-free but internationally isolated.

Qatar Airways CEO Akbar Al-Baker took issue with a border-control rule that temporarily bans airlines that have brought in infected passengers. “You can't just shut the aviation industry (down) because somebody got infected coming in (on) someone's aeroplane,” he told the South China Morning Post.

Al-Baker added that he was “a little disappointed” that Hong Kong has remained closed, and he had expected a major part of Cathay's fleet to be flying again.

Qatar Airways is Cathay's third-largest shareholder, with a 9.6 percent stake purchased for HK\$5.16 billion (\$661 million) in 2017. Under Hong Kong's rules, if an airline brings in too many infected passengers on a particular route, it is banned from flying that route for two weeks.

Those rules have been tightened over fears of the Omicron variant, which Hong Kong has recorded 14 cases of as of Friday. Qatar Airways has been banned five times since November 2020, according to the SCMP. Last month, British Airways announced it was suspending Hong Kong flights after crew members were required to quarantine following a positive COVID test among the staff.

Earlier this month, AFP reported that Cathay has been hit by a wave of pilot resignations, with employees citing exhaustion and growing resentment. Some Cathay flights operate on a closed-loop system, requiring pilots to spend weeks shuttling within plane-to-hotel bubbles to avoid triggering quarantine when they return. Global delivery giant FedEx said last month that it would relocate its pilots overseas and shut down its crew base in Hong Kong, citing the city's anti-coronavirus policies. —AFP



Qatar Airways CEO Akbar Al-Baker

Business

Sticky situation: Canada taps maple syrup reserves to meet high demand

Experts warn climate change could further compound shortages

LAURIERVILLE, Canada: Pancake lovers, fear not. Strong demand for maple syrup after a poor Canadian harvest has created supply-side woes, but Quebec province is tapping its strategic reserves to keep the world awash in the sweet, sticky stuff.

Experts are warning the shortages could be further compounded by climate change, which is already being blamed for last spring's shorter and warmer sugaring season. To avoid shortages, the Quebec Maple Syrup Producers said it has released more than half of its stockpile of syrup.

"It's normal, that's what we want: The reserves must be the buffer between temperature, demand and production," explained the organization's president Serge Beaulieu. Quebec makes almost three-quarters of the world's supply, and the organization—sometimes called the OPEC of maple syrup—represents more than 11,000 producers.

The group's massive reserves in the town of Laurierville, near Quebec City, are emblematic of Canada's hugely lucrative maple syrup industry. Housed in a warehouse the size of five football fields, tens of thousands of barrels, each containing 45 gallons (205 liters), are stacked row upon row, up to the ceiling.

In Canada, maple syrup is serious business. Often called "Quebec gold" in the region, it sometimes has been treated more like gold itself. During the "Great Canadian Maple Syrup Heist" a decade ago, thieves stole Can\$18.7 million worth of maple syrup from the facility.

At present, however, the only siphoning is to

relieve market shortages: At the start of the year, some 105 million pounds were stored here. The stockpile has since been whittled down to only 37 million pounds.

Warm spring woes

The sap harvest usually starts in March, when temperatures are above freezing during the day but below zero degrees Celsius (32 degrees Fahrenheit) overnight. Harvesters traditionally hammered spiles into tree trunks and let the sap drip into buckets, but now collect it from multiple trees at once through a system of tubing, for refining.

Producer Laurie Larouche, 23, lamented to AFP that "last spring was cut short because it got hotter faster than usual so instead of having a good month of harvest we had perhaps only two weeks plus a few days here and there." "We produced 50 percent less syrup" this year, said Maryse Nault, as she trudged through the snow to inspect spiles in trees on her farm in Saint-Marc-sur-Richelieu, 50 kilometers (31 miles) east of Montreal.

The province's total yield fell to 133 million pounds of maple syrup, about 20-40 pounds less than in four of the previous five years, according to the producer cartel's data, and far short of the 175 million pounds sold in 2020. Researchers at the Quebec Ministry of Forests have concluded that the yield per maple tree could fall by as much as 15 percent by 2050, due mostly to increasingly warm weather in the month of April.

Meanwhile, sales have doubled over the past



LAURIERVILLE, Canada: An employee helps to identify and sort empty barrels returned by producers at one of two maple syrup reserves at the Quebec Maple Syrup Producers storage facility in Laurierville, Quebec. —AFP

decade, including a 20 percent jump in just the first six months of 2021 compared to the same period the previous year. Due to this rising demand, which has occurred both domestically and in key export markets such as the United States, Germany and Japan, producers have been authorized by the province's maple syrup federation to tap seven million additional trees over the next three years,

bringing the total to 57 million.

The pandemic is partly to blame for the recent surge in demand, Beaulieu said. "Due to COVID restrictions, consumers spent much more time at home, trying out new food products," he explained. And, he added, syrup is increasingly replacing white sugar because it "is better for your health than refined sugar." —AFP

COVID, bottlenecks shroud German economic outlook

FRANKFURT: The German central bank on Friday lowered its outlook for growth in Germany next year and upped its inflation forecast, as supply chain bottlenecks and the pandemic put Europe's biggest economy under pressure. The Bundesbank expected Germany to grow by 4.2 percent in 2022 on a seasonally adjusted basis, down from a previous forecast of 5.2 percent, made in June this year.

"The recovery has been somewhat pushed back," outgoing Bundesbank President Jens Weidmann said in a statement. In June, the Frankfurt-based institution had predicted that the economy could reach its pre-crisis level from the end of 2019 "this summer".

But the anticipated recovery failed to materialize, with the economy still lagging behind the pre-pandemic marker by one percent in the third quarter of 2021, according to the Bundesbank.

Germany suffered a "pandemic-related setback" in the second half of 2021, the bank said, revising down its estimate for growth in 2021 to 2.5 percent from 3.7 percent. The country has imposed new health restrictions as it contends with a punishing fourth wave of the coronavirus, barring unvaccinated individuals from non-essential commerce and many public venues.

Growth would "gather pace again in early 2022", as the restrictions fell away and the supply situation improved, the bank foresaw. As such, it raised its prognosis for 2023 to 3.2 percent from 1.7 percent, and forecast 0.9 percent growth in 2024.

Difficult climate

The Bundesbank's predictions were nonetheless more optimistic than those of Ifo, a leading economic think-tank. The Munich-based institute on Tuesday downgraded its forecast in Germany in 2022 to 3.7 percent from an earlier estimate of 5.1 percent.

The new release of its closely watched business climate tracker added to a difficult picture for the economy as a whole. The indicator fell to 94.7 points in December, having sat at 96.6 the previous month. The German economy was "not getting any presents" for Christmas, Ifo president Clemens Fuest said in a statement, as pessimism about the outlook for next year increased.

"The deteriorating pandemic situation is hitting consumer-related service providers and retailers hard." While the mood amongst manufacturing



FRANKFURT: The Bundesbank expected Germany to grow by 4.2 percent in 2022 on a seasonally adjusted basis, down from a previous forecast of 5.2 percent, made in June this year, said Bundesbank President Jens Weidmann said.

companies improved for the first time in five months, despite a perceived aggravation of supply issues, sentiment in the services sector "nosedived".

"The German economy ends the year with another disappointment," said Carsten Brzeski, head of macroeconomics at ING. "The fourth wave of the pandemic could now actually push the economy to the brink of stagnation, or even into a technical recession," despite the economy's greater resilience to coronavirus-related restrictions, he said.

Government boost

In its forecast, the Bundesbank was not able to take into account the new government's plans to ramp up investment in projects related to the climate and digitalization. The planned investment could lead to "noticeably stronger real GDP growth" from 2023, the Bundesbank said.

On inflation, recent figures had pushed the rate "significantly higher than expected in June", the bank said. The acceleration was "not just down to one-off effects" like a temporary VAT reduction by the government last year to boost the economy in response to the pandemic.

Rather it was pushed by a "surprisingly strong" increase in energy prices and the impact of shortages in supply. Consumer prices would rise by 3.2 percent on an annual basis this year, it estimated, followed by a rise of 3.6 percent in 2022.

Previously, it had been pencilling in inflation rates of 2.6 and 1.8 percent respectively.

Weidmann, who will step down at the end of the year, handing over his seat on the European Central Bank's governing council, said that "monetary policy should not ignore these risks and remain alert".

On Thursday, the ECB signalled a "step-by-step" reduction in its bond-buying stimulus program, putting interest rate hikes that other central banks have decided on to fight inflation some way off. —AFP

2021, and a relative controlling of inflation at 33 percent, well below this year's 50 percent.

But it was defeated by 132 to votes to 121 in the lower house Chamber of Deputies, where the governing center-left alliance is in the minority. It is the first example of the problems that face Fernandez during the final two years of his mandate following last month's midterm legislative elections defeat. Having already been in the minority in the Chamber of Deputies, Fernandez's Frente de Todos (Everyone's Front) coalition also lost control of the upper house Senate.

Guzman said the rebuttal "signifies rejecting the macro-economic program that is the basis for the negotiations with the IMF to refinance the absurd and damaging \$44 billion debt." Fernandez's government has been attempting to renegotiate the terms of the IMF debt-acquired under his liberal predecessor Mauricio Macri—almost since the moment he took office. At the beginning of the week, Guzman said Argentina can "in no way amortize the repayments of around \$18 billion in 2022 and \$19 billion in 2023." Even so, Georgieva wrote on Twitter that she had a "very good meeting with President @alferdez (Fernandez) on advancing our work to sustain #Argentina's recovery and address its economic challenges." —AFP

Seeds of crisis: Climate change, price hikes hit Dijon mustard

FLEUREY-SUR-OUICHE, France: Climate change and soaring prices are the seeds of a crisis for France's famous Dijon mustard makers, leaving their prospects looking far more tepid than their product. The industry's woes are a prime example of the difficulties faced by the food industry as a whole. Production of mustard grains in 2021-2022 is estimated to have fallen by 28 percent in Canada, the world's biggest producer, according to a Canadian agriculture ministry report.

As a result, the average price is expected to rise to almost double that of 2020-2021, to "a record \$1,700 (1,510 euros) per ton", the ministry said.

"There was a disastrous drought in Western Canada" last summer, commodity markets analyst Ramzy Yelda told AFP. "Those who want the high-end mustard will have to pay more," he warned.

And when Canada coughs, it's Burgundy, 7,000 kilometers (4,350 miles) away in central France, that catches a cold. The French region hosts the vast majority of mustard manufacturers but depends heavily on Canadian farmers in order to produce the strong, tangy condiment consumed the world over. "We're in a crisis we haven't seen for 25 years," said Christophe Planes, French sales director at Reine de Dijon, the third-largest French mustard producer and a subsidiary of the German group Develey. "The price of seeds has gone up three or four times, and maybe five times soon," Planes added. "And, on top of that, there is no supply. The scarcity is such that we have a potential 50 percent decrease in seeds... so our production is down 50 percent."

Costs spiraling

To exacerbate the situation the prices of all packaging materials are spiraling. "Every day, I am told of an increase. The impact on overall prices is more than 60 percent," Planes said. Marika Zimmermann, industrial director of the company based near Dijon, underlined the problem.

"Normally, our production lines work 120 hours a week. We are currently at 60 hours on average".

Marc Desarmenien, director of the Fallot mustard factory, the last independent Dijon mustard mill in

Burgundy, can list the individual increases his company has faced. "The metal lids have risen by 42 percent, glass by 12 percent, cardboard 12 percent..." Burgundy white wine, another key ingredient has doubled in price due to a late frost which severely cut last year's harvest.

The mustard maker, which exports half of its production to Japan, also points to the hugely increased cost of sea freight, which he said had "multiplied by 4.5 or even 6 times" and represents 10-15 percent of the selling price. Fallot has already decided to increase the price of its mustards by between 7-16 percent next year. Reine de Dijon is also planning an increase: "we need it, otherwise the company cannot survive", said Planes.

To ease the company's problems, Planes would like to limit its dependence on Canadian suppliers and "push mustard seed production in Burgundy".

'Increase in insect populations'

But Fabrice Genin, mustard seed producer at Marsannay-le-Bois in Burgundy and president of the Association of Burgundy Mustard Seed Producers (APGMB) has a concise response to that idea: "It's impossible." Local production of the seeds for the French mustard industry used to be widespread, gaining Dijon its strong reputation since the Middle Ages.

But more recent history has seen a sharp decline in production, due to the globalization of the trade and competition from countries with higher yields. After efforts to revive mustard seed production in France, local farmers are now suffering from global warming which, "for the last 3-4 years, has caused an increase in insect populations", Genin explained. —AFP



FLEUREY-SUR-OUICHE, France: Experts are warning the shortages could be further compounded by climate change. —AFP

Argentina says budget defeat will 'affect' debt negotiation

BUENOS AIRES: Argentina's government suffered an embarrassing defeat on Friday as its 2022 budget was rejected by parliament, with Economy Minister Martin Guzman insisting this would "affect" its debt negotiations with the International Monetary Fund.

Guzman said the defeat "weakens us as a nation-state within Argentina and before the world. And that hurts us." The defeat came just hours before President Alberto Fernandez held a virtual meeting with IMF chief Kristalina Georgieva.

"I spoke with the head of the IMF @KGeorgieva," said Fernandez on Twitter. "We both recognized the unexpected problem of the budget rejection but promised to continue working fully focused on bringing about an agreement that does not compromise the continuity of the inclusive economic recovery."

The proposed budget envisaged 2022 growth of four percent, compared to around 10 percent in

Gulf Bank celebrates its employees at annual ceremony

KUWAIT: Towards the end of the year, Gulf Bank held its annual end of year bank-wide recognition ceremony as part of its performance reward and recognition program. The ceremony, which lasted for several pleasant hours, included staff from various Bank departments. It was also attended by some members of Gulf Bank executive management, who offered certificates of appreciation to the employees.

Throughout the course of the event, the Bank recognized various team accomplishments in the fields of job performance, outstanding customer service, distinct commitment to high standards, and job integrity. In this regard, General Manager of Human Resources at Gulf Bank, Salma Al-Hajjaj, commented: "Our employees are at the core of our success at Gulf Bank. In

2021, we launched several strategic initiatives that required extraordinary attention from the bank's various teams. It's been a year of great achievements and productivity across all the business groups. And for that, I would like to thank my dear colleagues for their dedication throughout the year, and I look forward to another successful year together".

Gulf Bank's vision is to be the leading Kuwaiti Bank of the Future. The bank is constantly engaging and empowering its employees as part of an inclusive and diversified workplace in recognition of every employee's role in delivering customer excellence and serving the community at large. With its extensive network of branches and innovative digital services, Gulf Bank is able to give its customers the choice of how and where to conduct their banking transactions, all while ensuring a simple and seamless banking experience. Gulf Bank is committed to maintaining a robust sustainability program at the community, economic, and environmental levels through sustainability initiatives that are strategically selected to benefit both the country and the Bank. Gulf Bank supports Kuwait Vision 2035 "New Kuwait" and works with the different relevant parties to achieve it.

NBK continues its contributions to social sustainability in 2021

Bank remains the largest contributor to Kuwait community in private sector



KUWAIT: National Bank of Kuwait (NBK) continued during 2021 its contributions to community-related projects to achieve sustainable growth. NBK continues its corporate social responsibility in 2021, maintaining its position as the largest contributor to the Kuwait community in the private sector and moving a significant step forward towards a more sustainable community.

NBK implemented community related programs

NBK's Children Hospital

"We are proud to see our project striving to the international standards regarding strategies, policies, processes and day-to-day practices. NBK will always be committed in supporting the Specialty Hospital and its new unit to move forward in progress at the level of services and care."

NBK Run

More than 6,000 participants were running for strength and health awareness in NBK's annual Run. The NBK Run culminated with a prize giving ceremony where NBK awarded the top 12 participants, for both male and female and gave away many valuable prizes from Ooredoo alongside the brand new X-Terra Nissan car from Al-Babtain Group, NBK's Run strategic partner.

It's worth mentioning that, for the past 25 years and in line with the bank's social responsibility, NBK encouraged people to walk step by step for their health and wellbeing in the NBK Walkathon. This year as the health crisis gradually abates, NBK Walkathon was transformed into NBK Run, to pave the way for both professional runners and a beginner to enjoy challenges and competitions.

Supporting youth and education

LOYAC's "KON" and Creative Confidence's "TAMAKAN"

As part of NBK's strategic partnership with LOYAC and continuous interest in the development of the youth, NBK sponsored LOYAC's KON program. 35 interns participated in KON 2021 program that consisted of three weeks online training sessions. NBK sponsored this program as part of its commitment to Corporate Social Responsibility as well as towards supporting students, youths and self-building initiatives in Kuwait.

In partnership with "Creative



Confidence", NBK launched "TAMAKAN" training program for fresh Kuwaiti graduates. NBK hosted the program that provided a real business challenge that participants worked on into the final stages of the training sessions. 40 trainees were selected from among hundreds of applications submitted.

NBK social program leverages innovative approaches this year

1- This year, NBK Ramadan Social Program included more than 3,000 "Ramadan Baskets" to low-income families. This initiative is a food solidarity initiative that is launched in partnership with ReFood to make a difference in the community. Through this initiative, rescuing food and saving the environment goes hand in hand. ReFood's initiative works to bridge the gap between excess food in the industry that would've gone to waste and instead give it to those in need across Kuwait.

2- Supporting Kuwait Vaccination Center: In addition, NBK presented a donation to the KRCS to support its efforts and help smoothing the vaccination process in Kuwait Vaccination Center in Kuwait International Fair Grounds in Mishref. The donation included providing golf carts to give elderly patients and people with disability free rides from and to the parking area.

3- Supporting National Vaccine Campaign: Throughout NBK social media channels, awareness videos from doctors were posted to highlight the

effectiveness and safety of vaccines and correcting misinformation being shared.

4- Promoting Health and Wellbeing: NBK Mobile ATM visited different parks in Kuwait during the outdoor exercise period allowed during the curfew. NBK challenged people who achieved or exceeded 10 thousand steps walking to win prizes. This initiative aims at promoting positive health effects and wellbeing.

Supporting employees

NBK has organized a group of health initiatives for staff that includes clinical visits to doctors for consultation. These events focus mainly on mental health and online education. In addition, NBK has a schedule full of fun and rewarding activities for staff including the traditional Graish celebration, which was, organized Live this year through the employees Instagram channel I Am NBK. It witnessed an array of entertaining activities and contests. These staff activities aim to bring NBK family closer and find a way to demonstrate the ties between NBK family members are stronger in all times.

NBK launched various awareness campaigns this year.

These campaigns included:

• Breast Cancer Awareness Month, World Diabetes Day, and International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women.

• NBK also launched a new TVC "We will forever be indebted", dedicated to

the health workers and the medical staff of the Ministry of Health as a solidarity gesture to salute their efforts to combat COVID-19.

• In collaboration with Kuwait Fire Force, NBK launched awareness safety campaign during the camping season. NBK volunteers along with the Kuwait Fire Force team will visit camping sites throughout the season, to provide campers with a safety camping that includes a fire extinguisher, fire alarm and first aid support ensuring that camps adhere to regulations for safety and waste removal.

Community- related

It also launched an awareness campaign among its employees about returning to work in light of the COVID pandemic.

In 2021, the bank continued its support to the Kuwait Association for the Care of Children in Hospital (KACCH) and Bayt Abdullah for the Care of Children in Hospice (BACCH).

In addition, NBK and Kuwait Red Crescent Society (KRCS) have distributed essential winter supplies to 5,000 cleaning workers in Kuwait this year. The campaign aims to offer a warm winter for low-income workers facing hard weather conditions.

In line with its belief in the importance of sports and to promote a healthy lifestyle for all members of society, NBK cooperated with Kuwait School Sports and Higher Education

Federation to sponsor the activities of 2021-2022 sports season. It's worth mentioning that NBK honored the Tokyo Paralympics winners.

In 2021, NBK in partnership with the Ministry of Interior (MoI) launched a campaign to raise awareness on social media for combating cybercrimes and protecting the society from the related challenges. As part of this campaign, NBK and MoI social media platforms will be posting awareness messages aiming to raise social awareness of the basics of cybersecurity, including videos by a group of experts and specialists from the Cybercrime Department of the MoI.

This sponsorship comes in support of anti-cybercrime efforts and the Central Bank of Kuwait's "Let's Be Aware" campaign. Awareness messages cover key topics in this area including protection from fraudulent banking messages, hacking of banking applications and other topics directly related to the security of customers and their accounts.

Also, NBK took part in "Safe Education" awareness campaign, to ensure a safe return of students to their schools and a safe educational environment of the highest levels of prevention. The campaign came as a result of collaboration of the Ministries of Education, Health, Interior and Information. It aims to raise awareness and encourage students and their families to support the governmental efforts for a safe return to the academic year 2021-2022.



Business

Drone technology becoming the way of the future for militaries

Reconnaissance Research Founder and CEO Al-Anjeri interviews Ret US Army Lt Col Crino

KUWAIT: During a recent visit to Kuwait as a guest for Reconnaissance Research, Retired US Army Lieutenant Colonel Scott Crino had a candid interview with Abdulaziz Al-Anjeri, the Founder and CEO of Reconnaissance Research, to discuss the threats of drones in the Middle East and Kuwait. Dr Crino has three decades of experience as an Army officer, pilot, operations research analyst, senior manager and trusted consultant to the Department of Defense. Specialties include Red Teaming, Vulnerability Analysis, Risk Mitigation Strategies, Modeling & Simulation, and Resource Management.

Question: What is the impact of the rapid spread of drones on conventional military conflicts?

Crino: Their impact in the Middle East and North Africa cannot be overstated. Drones are an important aspect of conventional militaries, as well as non-state actors, and played a decisive role in every recent conflict of the region. The impact can be compared to the domination of air power over conventional military ground and sea elements during World War II, leading to allied victory over axis forces despite their more advanced weaponry.

The Yemen Civil War is a case in point, were it not for drones, the fierce fighting between the Saudi-led Coalition and the Houthi Movement would likely have been resolved by now using conventional military doctrine. The Houthis through their militant arm, Ansar Allah, have consistently attracted international attention and bolstered their support through their highly publicized drone and missile strikes against the Yemeni government and civilian targets in the Saudi Kingdom.

Question: Where else have drones been effective, and what has surprised you most?

Crino: In Libya, drones were highly effective in the conflict between the armed forces of Field Marshall Khalifa Haftar against the Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli. For almost two years, Haftar's army was able to encircle the GNA and hold its militias at risk with a combination of local fighters and foreign contracted soldiers supported by Chinese-made Wing Loong drones. The tide of the fighting turned only after Turkey ignored the U.N. arms embargo placed on Libya and implemented the use of the Bayraktar TB2 drones to combat Haftar's use of the Wing Loong.

The most surprising development and overall impact concerning the use of drones occurred in last year's war between Azerbaijan and Armenia. In that war, the use of drones by Azerbaijan was arguably the key to their victory. The war was fought in two phases. In the summer, there was a brief, non-conclusive fight between the Azeris and the Armenians, in which the Azeris relied primarily on Israeli-made military drones to target the Armenians. The result was a standoff as the Armenians could defend themselves against the Azeris assault. After a few months of ceasefire, the fighting ensued again, but this time Azerbaijan added the Turkish TB2 drone to their fighting power, and as a result dominated the air and changed the course of the war. Azerbaijan was quickly able to neutralize Armenia's heavy armor, and regained control of Baku territory, which they had lost to Armenia thirty years earlier.



Dr Scott Crino and Abdulaziz Al-Anjeri

Question: How are drones affecting armament developments in the Middle East?

Crino: In military affairs, drone technology is a disruptive force. For the past twenty-five years, militaries were able to largely keep ground and air fighting separate. Oftentimes, a superior military force could simply dominate the air domain of its opponent. The new generation of drones has exposed a weakness in the old paradigm. The drones used in theater today can slip through the unguarded seam between the air and ground forces of modern militaries forces and wreak havoc. No longer are special forces and infantry soldiers able to move across battlefields without the fear of a drone attack.

The new drone threat has also caused a significant rethinking of priorities. Legacy technologies that were developed to defend against missile attacks are most often ineffective against drones. Countries around the world have invested heavily in R&D efforts to create systems specifically designed to detect, track, and defeat these new types of drones, but most technologies available on the market today are far behind the sophistication of the drone technology, constantly playing "catch up" to defend against this ever-growing threat.

Question: What are the most advanced countries in drone industry globally and in the Middle East? As both in manufacturing as well as in deterrent technologies?

Crino: I have already talked about the Turkish-made Bayraktar drones, but I will mention them again to further understand the current state of technology for drones. The Bayraktars were very successful in fighting in Syria, Libya, and the Caucasus, it was Turkey's own insight and understanding of their operational environment, as well as their manufacturing expertise that enabled them to design an effective and adaptable combat system. The Turkish experience is a solid template for other countries to follow.

Engineers in the United States design the world's best drones, but our country's responsibilities tend to be at the strategic level. As such, we build drones for objectives that might not be a good fit to accomplish a regional mission. The drone threat in the Middle East is best addressed by technologically advanced personnel who can also apply the insight and intimate knowledge of their own world and its priorities



Wing Loong UAV

to innovate in both the drone and counter-drone markets.

Question: Are countries ignoring the threat and risks of Drones? And how prepared must countries be regarding drone attacks?

Crino: Everywhere I look, I see countries developing or acquiring drone and counter-drone technology. What must come next are policies and programs which address the threat, the first step of which is education.

Some of the most critical developments in drone technology, particularly over the last ten years, has outpaced counter-measure development. There appears to be an acceptance of drone use, both for military and commercially, while not effectively addressing the corresponding threat from drones, particularly weaponization. Senior leaders and decision makers need to jointly embrace the benefits to be reaped from commercial and military use of drones while aggressively pursuing effective countermeasures to protect military assets and the civilian population alike.

Question: Is it right to say that Drones are under heavy use in the Middle East compared to other parts of the world?

Crino: Every developed nation in the world is racing to develop technology, for commercial and military use. What sets the Middle East apart from other regions is the urgency and the immediacy of the threat due to proliferation of weaponized drone and capacity for their use against civilian targets. Deadly drones are part of military operations in Iraq, Syria, Palestine, Egypt, Libya, and elsewhere in the Middle East, Central Asia, and North Africa. While many Western countries still have the luxury of considering drone threat hypothetically, in the Middle East and in Kuwait, the threat from weaponized drones is occurring now.

Question: Do you worry more now about the drone threats in Kuwait? Compared to September 2020 when we had the first interview with you?

Crino: A year ago, I felt Kuwait could be a likely target for a drone attack and I believe this even more so today. Iranian proxies are Tehran's messengers. The proxy's drone attacks are Tehran's way of shaping the Middle East's information environment. I am sure anytime the State of Kuwait's foreign policy objectives diverge significantly from Iran's, they need to consider the threat and chances of an Iranian military response. Those calculations should include the risk of a



Bayraktar TB2 UAV

drone attack from Iran or proxy militia groups in Iraq.

Question: How can Kuwait protect itself? What are the most venerable targets that need more protection?

Crino: Kuwait should decide for itself the types and levels of protection it needs to defend itself from weaponized drones. What are Kuwait's priorities? Which cultural centers, royal properties, sections of its energy infrastructure are they?

At a national level, Kuwait's military and security policy makers and planners should identify efficiencies gained through integrating the defense design across the country and to harmonize the plan with the initiatives and capabilities of partner nations.

Question: It seems that the United States' use of the Drones in the War on Terror did not achieve its goal. Why aren't drones being effectively used by conventional military?

Crino: Drones have been and will continue to be an instrumental part of the United States strategy in the fight against terrorism that started 20 years ago. Any student of the world's conflicts zones regularly sees examples of the United States eliminating terrorist threats with drones. American drones have unsurpassed surveillance capabilities, and they are lethal. As importantly, the United States had made great efforts to increase the accuracy and precision of drone weapons to reduce their dangerousness to innocent noncombatants.

It is my perception that drones are being effectively incorporated into conventional military use. Drones were decisive in the Azerbaijani victory over the Armenians, Ukraine recently used drones to strike Russian heavy artillery pieces, and there are countless examples of conventional armies using drones to conduct surveillance or guide munitions onto targets without risking lives of piloted aircraft or ground forces. As drone technology continues to advance, I envision this technology becoming the way of the future used by conventional and non-conventional militaries alike.



KFH announces winner of Jeep Wrangler Sport

KUWAIT: Kuwait Finance House (KFH) has announced Noura Faleh Al-Ajmi as the winner of the Jeep Wrangler Sport, under the campaign "Win with Hesabi" for youth. The car is the first of three cars offered in the campaign that includes cash prizes worth 250 dinars for 10 winners per month.

Noura Al-Ajmi expressed her happiness at winning the car which she received from KFH Auto Showroom in Shuwaikh.

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

KFH offers "Hesabi for Youth" with a variety of advantages as part of its continued endeavor to provide adequate customer care, innovate new products and services that fulfill the needs of all customers of various age categories and interests. Services and products are tailored to suit customers' needs and provide distinguished service as per global standards regarding quality, accuracy and speed.

"Hesabi" program has been designed to meet the needs of youth and aspire for their active lifestyle. This program presents the youth with many exclusive offers and a wide range of privileges including Hesabi ATM card with a unique design, eligibility to be issued Hesabi prepaid card (as per credit regulations of KFH), distinguished offers and discounts etc.

KFH continues to launch marketing campaigns to reward youth customers. Hesabi for Youth represents the ambitions and expectations the youth category and serves KFH aspirations to attract the largest portion of youth who represent a major part of Kuwaiti society. The account is also part of KFH initiative to diversify banking services and products.

ABK congratulates 'Experience the Change' winners

KUWAIT: Al-Ahli Bank of Kuwait (ABK) announced the four winners of the last salary transfer campaign draw "Experience the Change" for Al-Raed, Prestige and Elite Salary account holders. The draw took place on 14th December 2021, under the supervision of the Ministry of Commerce and Industry.

The winners are:

- * Eman Nuqaimesh Abdulaziz Alenezi
- * Bassam Mohammad Abdullah Aldahash
- * Fahad Manwer Laqosh Askar
- * Meena Noshi Zaki Mikhael

With this final draw ABK concludes its Salary Transfer campaign "Experience the Change".

stc concludes its participation in Battle of East fitness festival

KUWAIT: Kuwait Telecommunications Company - stc, a world-class digital leader providing innovative services and platforms to customers, enabling the digital transformation in Kuwait, concluded its participation and role as a main sponsor in this year's 'Battle of the East' fitness festival. The Company successfully organized various initiatives and fitness competitions that attracted attendees and contestants.

During the tournament's closing ceremony, stc was honored for its effort, active participation, and engaging initiatives, as well as its main sponsorship role in the festival. The Company organized several activities at the stc village located on the fitness festival's grounds, including the 'Dead Hang' challenge and a 'Tug-of-War' contest.

stc released a statement indicating that as part of its sponsorship role, under the supervision of Ahmed Al-Nowaibet, Manager of Public Relations and Social Media at stc, the Company honored the final winners in each competition. Prizes were also distributed to attendees of all ages who participated in the different engaging activities, both children and adults, as well as to participants who cheered on the contestants during the tournaments.

The Battle of the East fitness festival, held at the Green Island from December 10th to the 11th, consisted of several attractions including CrossFit, Powerlifting, Teqball, and Calisthenics competitions. The festival also featured a Saracen Race for adults and children, a 5k obstacle race designed to test endurance and push the boundaries of competitors.

stc's sponsorship comes as a continuation of the various local initiatives it participated in throughout the year under its corporate social responsibility framework, which focuses on the key areas of health, education, entrepreneurship, and the environment. The company was keen to play a role in a festival of this kind due to the positive impact it spreads in the community while



promoting a healthier lifestyle and instilling the spirit of competition amongst contestants.

Commenting on the sponsorship, Danah Al-Jasem, General Manager of Corporate Communications at stc, said, "We are thrilled to have witnessed the exceptional turnout at this wonderful fitness festival alongside a large crowd of attendees cheering on contestants as they competed for the winning titles. In this regard, I would like to extend my sincere appreciation to the organizers for all their effort in ensuring the successful outcome of this festival and concluding the initiative in the best way possible."

Al-Jasem added, "stc will continue to participate in initiatives that support the Kuwaiti athletic community, empower local talented individuals and Kuwaiti entrepreneurs, as well as back the initiatives organized by SMEs. These actions, in addition to others, are in line with stc's extensive CSR program that we aim to broaden and expand year over year. At stc, our focus is to encourage and inspire the younger generation to

adopt healthier lifestyle habits that can pave the way for a brighter and more rewarding future."

The GIG Battle Fitness Festival is an all-encompassing fitness festival held in Kuwait that was created in 2013 by Circuit+ Fitness. The initiative began with the objective of creating an annual competition that would unite the excitement of a healthy competitive environment with the thriving athletic communities in the Middle East to foster a unique adrenaline driven experience.

The fitness festival consists of several attractions including CrossFit, Powerlifting, and Calisthenics competitions, as well as a Saracen Race for adults and children. The festival will also feature an activity corner where guests can participate in numerous engaging fitness activities throughout the festival's duration. Over the years, the annual festival has attracted over 2,500 athletes from all over the globe who are eager to participate in the different competitions for a chance to win one of the festival's titles.

Fed official sees first US rate hike in spring 2022

WASHINGTON: With inflation expected to remain high for some time, the US central bank is likely to raise interest rates soon after it ends its bond-buying program in March, a Federal Reserve board member said Friday. The Fed earlier this week announced it will accelerate the end to its stimulus program after inflation last month saw its biggest jump in nearly four decades, with price increases on a wide array of goods hitting US consumers and businesses.

Fed Governor Christopher Waller said the decision announced Wednesday gives policymakers the ability to respond quickly with an increase in the benchmark lending rate, which he expects "will be warranted shortly after our asset purchases end" in the spring.

Asked to be more precise about the timing, Waller said, "We'd like to put March on the table as a possible date to start lifting (interest rates) if we need to." Quarterly forecasts from Fed policymakers also released this week signaled the likelihood of three interest rate hikes next year, and most economists expect the first one in May as officials try to keep inflation under wraps.

But opening the door to a more rapid move in March-at what would be the Fed's second policy meeting of the year-was the "whole point" of the decision announced this week, Waller told the Forecasters Club of New York. Inflation "is alarmingly high, persistent and has broadened to affect more categories of goods and services, compared with earlier this year."

He said he expects the economy to grow strongly in coming months and rapidly return to full employment-a key criteria for the Fed before it will lift rates off zero, where they have been since March 2020 at the start of the pandemic. However, "One big uncertainty about this outlook, of course, is the Omicron variant," he cautioned.

The new variant could force new restrictions that might slow the economy, but also "exacerbate labor and goods supply shortages and add inflation pressure."

It will take some months to see if inflation is moderating as expected, he said.

Waller noted that the Fed adapted quickly to the unprecedented nature of the global pandemic and its impact on the economy and financial system. However, the crisis posed huge challenges for forecasters trying to predict the severity of the downturn and the speed of the recovery, including the supply chain bottlenecks that have frustrated businesses and added to the price pressures.

"Like others, I expected that markets would adjust quickly and that these problems would be fixed," he said. "We are learning that the long and complex supply chains that have facilitated trade and driven down production costs in recent years are quite fragile and are taking longer to repair than I would have expected." —AFP

Deforestation, climate change making outdoor work unsafe



Maryste Nault stands in the road where she will eventually be taps maple trees at the Belfontaine Holstein farm Saint-Marc-sur-Richelieu, Quebec, Canada. Pancake lovers fear not. Strong demand for maple syrup after a poor Canadian harvest has created supply-side woes, but Quebec province is tapping its strategic reserves to keep the world awash in the sweet, sticky stuff. —AFP



Tubes travel across a creek at the Belfontaine Holstein farm in Saint-Marc-sur-Richelieu, Quebec, Canada. —AFP

A double-blow of forest destruction and climate change has caused temperatures to soar in many tropical locations, making outdoor work unsafe for millions of workers, according to a study published Friday. Between 2003-2018, the study found, about 4.9 million people lost at least half an hour per day of working conditions at a temperature recognized as safe. "Tropical locations are already on the edge of being too hot and humid to safely work because of climate change," said Luke Parsons, lead author on the paper published in the journal *One Earth*. "Deforestation may push these places over the edge into even more unsafe work environments."

Parsons' research further found that 91,000 people lost more than two hours of safe working temperatures per day - the overwhelming majority of them in Asia. Deforestation is already known to be associated with an increase in local temperature, due to the fact trees block out the sun's radiation, provide shade, and cool the air via evapotranspiration - transporting water from the soil and evaporating it from their leaf surface.

But as Parsons explained in an email to AFP, "so far, many arguments for conserving tropical forests have been based on biodiversity or global climate mitigation." "We hope that this study provides additional information about the relationship

between local forest health and human health that will be considered as the costs and benefits of deforestation are compared," he said. Over the study period, the researchers found that the temperature increase linked to deforestation was much larger than that from recent climate change.

To reach their conclusions, they examined a combination of temperature readings, population estimates, and satellite imagery of global deforestation between 2003 and 2018. And they focused in on a case-study: the Brazilian states of Mato Grosso and Para which border the Amazon rainforest and have seen large-scale deforestation over the past two decades. In nearly 60 percent of recently

deforested areas, the temperature increased by more than 2.0 degrees Celsius (3.6 degrees Fahrenheit). In areas that were not cleared of their forest cover, the figure was less than eight percent.

Similarly, 47 percent of the deforested area lost more than a half-hour per day of safe work temperatures, compared to only four percent of the forested area. Parsons' team calculated that 1.22 million square kilometers (301 million acres) of tropical forest were destroyed or degraded during the study period. "If local communities can prevent some tropical deforestation, there could be a tangible benefit for the people living in areas with tropical forest," he said. —AFP

Melting Arctic ice draws killer whales further north

In the pale winter darkness of northern Norway, a huge flock of seagulls circles above an Arctic fjord, signifying the presence of a group of unusual predators in the water below. With Arctic sea ice shrinking at record levels due to global warming, killer whales are expanding their hunting grounds further north and spending more time in polar waters, US scientists say. But the giant mammals, also known as orcas and which are at the top of the food chain, risk creating an "ecological imbalance" in the Arctic by preying on endangered species, warned a University of Washington study this month.

When AFP visited the vast Skjervoy fjord in the Arctic Ocean, 70 to 80 killer whales could be seen gathering in family clans of about 10, including calves under a year old. Increasingly frequent and northerly sightings suggest that the iconic black and white member of the dolphin family, whose males can grow up to eight meters long and weigh six tons, is learning to adapt to the newly melted waters of the Arctic Ocean.

"Through acoustic surveys, we have detected orcas in the Barents Sea in November between Svalbard and Franz Josef Land, so they are clearly following the edge of the ice," Marie-Anne Blanchet of the Norwegian Polar Institute told AFP. The killer whale, which with a global population estimated at 50,000 is found in almost all of the world's seas, feeds on Arctic prey such as the beluga whale and, most likely, some species of seal, the specialist said.

Conflict with humans

The whales' changing migration patterns are also linked to the fact that their food of choice, herring, is also moving further north, for reasons that are still unclear. "They are predators with a great capacity to adapt, so they are opportunistic," Blanchet said. The new hunting grounds are also leading to unprecedented conflict with humans.

In the waters off Greenland's capital Nuuk, four orcas, considered an unwelcome competitor by local fishermen and hunters, were killed at the end of November, an act permissible under Greenlandic law.



A male killer whale (orca) is pictured in the fjord of Skjervoy, northern Norway. Between October and February, Orcas and Humpback whales hunt atlantic herrings to build their stock of protein. The water Temperature is +5C, air temperature is -10C. —AFP photos



A killer whale (orca) is pictured in the fjord of Skjervoy, northern Norway.

A University of Washington study presented at the beginning of December found that the increased migration of super predators is a consequence of the increasingly long season when the Arctic Ocean is free of ice. "It's not necessarily that killer whales haven't been reported in these areas before, but that they appear to be remaining in the area for longer periods of time," co-author Brynn Kimber wrote.

The Arctic is warming three times faster than the rest of the planet, impacting the extent of the ice pack and the ecosystems that depend on it. Arctic sea ice, which is also getting thinner, has shrunk on average by more than 13 percent per decade over the past 40 years. By the end of the summer of 2012, it had

reached its lowest level on record, at 3.4 million square kilometers, almost half the size it was during the 1980s.

Analysing eight years of acoustic readings, Kimber's team also detected killer whales in the Chukchi Sea between Alaska and Russia during the months when it used to be frozen, as well as with greater frequency during the summer. The study warned that the hunter, which also chases after prey in packs, is increasingly attacking the endangered bowhead whale, a species left exposed by the retreating ice pack. These attacks are "likely to increase due to longer open water seasons," the researchers said. —AFP

THE GOOD AND BAD OF FRENCH CULTURE IN 2021

For French culture, still a beacon for much of the world, it was a year of stutter-steps back to freedom amid fears that the old normal may never fully return. There were bright spots as a backlog of great art from the harsher lockdowns of 2020 poured forth, but there were some darker moments as well.

Feast for art-lovers

It was a feast for art-lovers in Paris in 2021, as museums crammed in shows postponed the year before, from Banksy and Georgia O'Keefe to Botticelli and Salvador Dali, as well as two shows at once for David Hockney. A battle of fashion industry billionaires added to the embarrassment of riches. Kering owner Francois Pinault finally opened his \$194 million modern art museum (Bourse de Commerce), while its cross-town rival, the Louis Vuitton Foundation, countered with the Morozov Collection, a treasure trove of masterpieces brought over from Russia, including little-seen works by Van Gogh, Monet, Cezanne and many more.

#MeToo hits theatre world

France has sometimes felt like less than fertile ground for the #MeToo movement, and its storied theatre world has been no exception. That started to change in 2021 after a theatre blogger accused an actor with the famed Comedie-Francaise of rape, triggering an avalanche of similar stories from women in the industry and protests in October. Much anger was directed at the Colline Theatre, one of France's six national theatres, after it commissioned two controversial figures: Jean-Pierre Baro, who was accused of rape (though the complaint was dismissed for lack of evidence), and rock star Bertrand Cantat, who beat his girlfriend to death in 2003.

Cannes gets back its glitz

The pandemic almost forced a second year without the world's top film festival, but despite a three-month delay, the Cannes Film Festival returned in (almost) full glitzy form in July. There were fewer cheek-kisses at the top of the red carpet and pointed reminders for celebrities to keep their masks on during premieres. But it was a vintage year, with a bevy of A-list stars and arthouse genius that seemed to mark the official return of cinema just as theatres re-opened around the world. It was a strong year for women, too, with Julia Ducournau becoming only the second female to take the Palme d'Or for her riotous bloodfest "Titane".

Plummeting wine production

Already hard-hit by the pandemic, the French food sector faced additional problems in 2021. Adverse weather, including spring frosts, hail storms and deluges of summer rain, led to "extremely low" wine production not seen since the 1950s. And while the cheese sector did well as a lockdown comfort food, there was horror at the news that Italian mozzarella is rapidly catching up on camembert as France's favorite fromage.

African novelists win plaudits

Senegalese writer Mohamed Mbougar Sarr became the first from sub-Saharan Africa to win France's top literary prize, the

Goncourt, while two of his compatriots won the International Booker (David Diop) and Prix Neustadt (Boubacar Boris Diop). That mirrored successes elsewhere as Tanzania's Abdulrazak Gurnah became a Nobel laureate and South Africa's Damon Galgut won the English-language Booker. These were not token gestures: as one critic told AFP, it showed the Western industry finally recognizing a booming literary scene in Africa that "no longer really needs recognition". But the best news for French publishing came in the sales figures - up a whopping 19 percent on 2019 as many took solace in a good book during lockdowns. —AFP



Brands from Ferrari to Nike rush toward 'metaverse' future

The metaverse vision for the internet is far from reality, but brands from Ferrari to Nike are already rushing in to experiment and build an audience, in part for fear of missing out. The clamor over virtual goods comes amid feverish predictions that the metaverse—a virtual reality version of the internet—will eventually replace the web of today.

But some virtual worlds, for example the Fortnite and Minecraft games or the Roblox platform, are already open for business. "I think a lot of it is experimentation," said Ryan Mullins, founder of virtual sneaker app Aglet. "If it turns out that we make a couple of grand or something like that... great, but I think a lot of (companies) are thinking 'innovate, disrupt or die,'" he added, echoing a Silicon Valley ethos of sometimes brutal evolution.

Fashion has been at the forefront, with a line of digital clothing from Uniqlo on Minecraft or Balenciaga outfits and sneakers available in Fortnite. Designers are also entering the new field of NFTs—non-fungible tokens that are unique digital objects such as drawings or animations. "This represents a massive opportunity for brands, who will get in early and will be able to build persistent presence... on a truly global scale," said Christina Woolton, vice president of partnerships at Roblox.

Welcome to 'Nikeland'

During the Halloween holiday, Mexican fast-food chain Chipotle opened a virtual and ephemeral restaurant on Roblox, the first of its kind. The brand offered coupons to get a free burrito in a real-life restaurant, but also virtual costumes to dress up one's avatar and a treasure hunt. In July, Ferrari launched a replica of its new 296 GTB model with Fortnite, which will not be available in the real world until 2022 but could be driven in the game.

Nike had already opened "Nikeland," a virtual showroom on Roblox, and announced Monday it has bought digital sneaker company RTFKT—pronounced "artifact." For companies that exist primarily in the physical world, the metaverse concept is first and foremost a giant laboratory with direct avenues to the young demographic prized by advertisers. "Revenues will come if this thing sticks around, but we want to make sure that our brand is in these early environments," said Mullins from Aglet.

As the first restaurant in Roblox, Chipotle said it sees future "opportunities to directly drive sales." The metaverse is also a wealth of data, offering valuable insights into the perception of a product, even if it doesn't yet exist in the real world. To fully control the environment in which the brand is introduced, some companies like Louis Vuitton have created their own version of the metaverse. To celebrate its 200th anniversary, the brand launched in August "Louis the Game," which includes a hunt for NFTs by digital art pioneer Beeple.

'Authentic' in metaverse

However, since there is still no unified platform yet, users cannot carry a Gucci bag bought on Roblox over to other games like Sandbox or Animal Crossing. This is one of the priorities for Mark Zuckerberg, who leads Facebook's parent company that was re-baptized "Meta" in October to signal the platform's metaverse shift.

Since the world's leading social network unveiled its ambitions, "things have accelerated even further," said consultant Cathy Hackl, who has been contacted by many brands seeking metaverse advice. "Not every brand needs to jump in to the metaverse," she said, noting though that firms have to be at least familiar with it. Unless companies build their own virtual world, they will need to follow the codes of each platform on which they appear. "It's about showing up and trying to be authentic in the space," said Mullins. —AFP

Lifestyle | Features

DICAPRIO AND LAWRENCE BIG UP SCIENCE IN DOOMSDAY COMEDY



Jennifer Lawrence



Leonardo DiCaprio

For Hollywood A-listers Leonardo DiCaprio and Jennifer Lawrence, their new end-of-the-world comedy was a chance to send a little respect back to scientists. In "Don't Look Up", released on December 24 on Netflix, they play two astronomers who discover a comet will wipe out life on Earth within six months, but then try in vain to get politicians and the media to take the threat seriously. The parallels with the climate crisis were deliberate, and filming during the pandemic gave the film another level of relevance.

"We are so immensely distracted from the truth nowadays and then COVID hit and a whole new scientific argument happened there," DiCaprio said in a recent press conference. The film marks Lawrence's return to the big

screen after a couple of years away from the spotlight. The "Hunger Games" star recently told Vanity Fair she felt people had "gotten sick of me" following a string of box office disappointments, and wanted to build a real life, not least after a near-death experience when her private plane crashed.

She was lured back by her love for "Don't Look Up" director Adam McKay and the message of the film. "It's so sad and frustrating to watch people who have dedicated their lives to learning the truth be turned away because people don't like what the truth has to say," said Lawrence. In the movie, the astronomers face a particularly tough time trying to convince the power-obsessed US president, played with narcissistic glee by Meryl Streep,

Streep was coy about the real-life inspiration for her role.

"There were so many places to take things from, because there are so many preposterous people who put themselves in public life, shamelessly," she said. The press conference was hosted by Dr Amy Mainzer, the real-life astronomer who provided the basis for Lawrence's character. She said it was "very cathartic" watching DiCaprio's impassioned rant in the film against the stupidity of ignoring scientific warnings. "We had a screening with other scientists in LA and they were cheering. It was really something to behold," Mainzer said.

'I would be tweeting'
Jonah Hill, who plays the obnoxious

son and chief-of-staff to Streep's president, struck a light note at the press conference. Asked what he would do if the world was coming to an end, Hill dead-panned: "I think I would be tweeting. Letting people know the cool thoughts that I had to say, and opinions about different stuff like movies and how stars live their lives and who they're dating. "And I think people in their last moments would want to read that."

Lawrence, laughing, agreed: "I would die commenting on TikTok." McKay has pivoted from out-and-out comedies like "Anchorman" and "Step Brothers" to more political fare with films about the financial crisis ("The Big Short") and former vice-president Dick Cheney ("Vice"). "We wanted to deal with this

subject — the climate crisis — that is arguably the greatest threat to life in the history of mankind, and that can be almost like an animal attacking you, it can be overwhelming," McKay said.

"But if you're able to laugh, that means you have some distance, that's important. You can feel urgency and sadness and loss while also having a sense of humor." That approach helped hook in DiCaprio, who has been a passionate campaigner on climate issues for years. "I'd been looking for a movie about this subject for decades. This is an issue where everyone is looking for what kind of difference they can make. Adam really cracked the code," DiCaprio said. "It's the most important issue that any of us could be talking about on a regular basis." —AFP



Director Guillermo del Toro speaks in front of the audience during the early access screening of 'Nightmare Alley' at TCL Chinese Theatre in Hollywood, California. —AFP

DIRECTOR DEL TORO SPINS MACABRE CARNIVAL FABLE IN 'NIGHTMARE ALLEY'

Guillermo del Toro's new film "Nightmare Alley," set in a macabre 1940s carnival world of "geek shows" and grifters, is a modern parable about illusion, lies and greed, its director and cast said. The pitch-black noir movie, out Friday, is del Toro's first since his Oscar-winning "The Shape of Water," and stars Bradley Cooper as a traveling "mind reader," who develops a lucrative side hustle in defrauding rich clients with sham seances. Del Toro's crew constructed a full-scale World War II-era carnival set, capturing in eerie detail infamous sideshow practices like "geek shows," in which vagrants were trapped into performing gruesome acts by carnival bosses who preyed on their addictions to alcohol and opium. "It's an indictment of a certain kind of ambition, or a certain kind of capitalism, or a certain kind of exploitation of other people for your happiness," said co-star Willem Dafoe, who plays carnival pitchman Clem Hootely. "It was a beautiful world to enter, even though it's a little dark," he told a press conference.

The story, based on William Lindsay Gresham's novel and previously adapted into a 1947 film, finds Cooper's mysterious Stan Carlisle joining a carnival troupe and quickly learning the art of mentalism. After tiring of tricking ordinary customers through coded messages to his assistant Molly (Rooney Mara), Stan teams up with Cate Blanchett's femme fatale psychiatrist Lilith to ensnare millionaire clients with promises he can contact their departed loved ones. "There is an emptiness in him and a need for more and more and more that I find pertinent" today, said del Toro, who cast Cooper in part "because he looks like a movie star from the '30s and the '40s." Del Toro's "Shape of Water," which won best picture and best director at the 2018 Oscars, depicts a metaphor for modern racism through an inter-species romance in a Cold War military laboratory. Similarly, the Mexican horror master wanted to "imbue" his latest movie "with the anxiety of this time." "We wanted not to make a movie about the period. We wanted to make it about now," del Toro said. "That essential moment we're in-in which we have to distinguish narrative truth and narrative lie with reality-is so important."

'Misfits'

The film, seen as the final Oscar-contending heavyweight of the year to screen to critics earlier this month, has drawn praise for Cooper and Blanchett's performances, as well as its extravagant set design. "We constructed 100 percent of the carnival," explained production designer Tamara Deverell. "And when we were halfway through and COVID hit, we literally came back and saw half of the tents had just blown away." Dafoe, who recalled visiting carnivals as a child and being drawn to their "darkly romantic" world, said his performance was inspired by "the production design, beautifully, of this very complete, almost truly functional" carnival. Dafoe was drawn to the project by del Toro, whose work frequently spotlights "creatures and misfits and monsters and people that are outside of our society." —AFP

POLITICAL ROW IN BRAZIL OVER DYSTOPIAN FILM 'EXECUTIVE ORDER'

In the Brazil of the near future, the government has found what it calls the answer to righting the wrongs of slavery: send its black citizens to Africa. That dystopian premise is the point of departure for the new film "Executive Order," which is generating controversy in the Brazil of the present over allegations it is being censored by far-right President Jair Bolsonaro's government. The film, the directorial debut from acclaimed actor Lazaro Ramos ("Madame Sata"), has won praise at a series of international festivals, from Moscow to Memphis.

But it does not yet have a release date in Brazil, where there are mounting accusations against the National Cinema Agency (Ancine) of dragging its feet on green-lighting films deemed uncomfortable for the Bolsonaro administration. "I can't say whether it's bureaucracy or censorship, but both are barriers to culture," Ramos said when the picture screened at the Rio de Janeiro International Film Festival, which wraps up Sunday-for now, the only time the movie is scheduled to play in Brazil.

"Executive Order" stars Ramos's wife, Tais Araujo, renowned actor and singer Seu Jorge ("City of God," "The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou"), and Anglo-Brazilian star Alred Enoch (the "Harry Potter" franchise, "How to Get Away with Murder"). Araujo and Enoch play Capitu and Antonio, a doctor and

lawyer with the trappings of professional success. Capitu "is a black woman who doesn't really want to talk about racism at first - she just wants to live," said Araujo. "But then life comes calling, and she has to dive deep" into the issue.

'Accentuated melanin'

The "executive order" of the film's title requires all black people - or

ences to structural racism in present-day Brazil, the last country in the Americas to abolish slavery, in 1888.

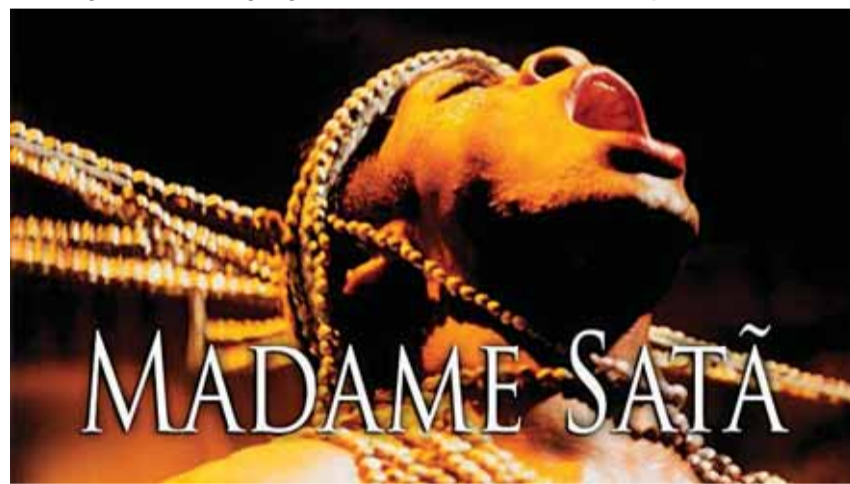
"The idea of the film is to make people aware," Ramos told AFP. "I want the viewer, in watching it, to cry and to say to themselves that they are capable of leading an anti-racist fight," he said. "It was very moving," said Araujo. Some authorities in its fictional government also

by saying slavery was "beneficial for Afro-descendants." It is unclear when Ancine will clear the film for release in Brazil. The production team says it completed its application for funds to distribute the film in November 2020 and has yet to receive the official response. Ancine says the application is "under review" and that it is following the "standard procedure."

'Marighella precedent'

It is not the first such case to cause controversy. Another Brazilian film that won applause on the international festival circuit, "Marighella," faced a similar delay. Directed by "Narcos" star Wagner Moura, the film is a biopic on a leftist guerrilla leader who fought Brazil's military dictatorship (1964-1985). Bolsonaro, a former army captain, is a fervent admirer of the former military regime, despite its large-scale human-rights abuses.

"Marighella" had its application to Ancine rejected twice in 2019, before finally being cleared for its Brazilian premiere last month. Shortly after taking office in 2019, Bolsonaro said he wanted to "filter" Brazilian film productions. "If there's no filter, we're going to get rid of Ancine," he said. Ramos is undeterred. "We're not going to stop debating this issue, or thinking about how this country was built," he said. "Art is powerful, we can't give that up." —AFP



people with "accentuated melanin," in the script's Orwellian language - to hand themselves in to the authorities to be removed to Africa. Through Capitu, Antonio and his cousin Andre (Seu Jorge), viewers see how Afro-Brazilians organize a resistance to this mass deportation as the security forces begin arresting people in the streets. The film is flush with refer-

bear strong resemblance to real members of the Bolsonaro administration. In April, Bolsonaro ally Sergio Camargo, head of the Palmares Cultural Foundation, called for a boycott of the film.

"It's pure victim mentality and a defamatory attack on our president," said Camargo, a black Brazilian who has sparked controversy in the past

The powerful effects of the Matrix

Bullets that defy gravity and time, code falling like rain down the screen - the visual effects of the original "Matrix" movie quickly became iconic upon its release in 1999. As the fourth installment "The Matrix Resurrections" hits cinemas next week, millions are eager to return to the story of Keanu Reeves' Neo as he tries to unpick what is real and what is a computer-generated simulation.

Coming 19 years after the last film, it has been a reminder of the dramatic impact the original trilogy had on Hollywood. Its most visual influence was "bullet time" - the super slow-motion effect which saw Neo duck and dance around bullets as they sliced past him -

which became a staple of video games and action films. Its roots are partly French - a simpler version was deployed by Paris-based effects company Buf and director Michel Gondry on a music video for "Like a Rolling Stone" by the Rolling Stones in 1995.

Buf ended up working on three of the four Matrix movies, after the directors, the Wachowskis, had the idea of applying the fledgling technique to fight scenes. In essence it takes still photographs from dozens of individual cameras and splices them together to create the impression of "a moving camera in a frozen world," explained Buf's Dominique Vidala. The other memorable motif from the first films was the rain of green code against a black screen.

Obsessive fans argued for years about secret messages hidden in the code, but Vidala reveals all: "It was basically a ramen (Japanese noodles) menu mixed up with a load of inverted numbers." The perfectionist Wachowskis commissioned 20 different ideas for how to create a visual representation of

the Matrix. "We did an enormous amount of research to decide how to show people created out of digital code," said Vidala. "We had plans that went up to version 150!"

Augmented reality

"The Matrix" marked a significant break in Hollywood, after which blockbusters entered the era of "green screen" filmmaking in which special effects became omnipresent. But its mash-up of pop culture tropes and millennial worries was also hugely influential. "The Matrix said a lot about what was going to happen. Reality caught up with science fiction with the arrival of 3D, augmented reality and virtual reality," said Lloyd Chery, host of a podcast about sci-fi. It remains topical: references to "The Matrix" are never far from discussions of Facebook's plans to create a virtual world, the Metaverse.

And last year Lilly Wachowski, who like her sister has changed her gender since the first film, said she saw the series as a "trans" metaphor, ahead of

its time in raising questions about the fluid nature of identity. The famous scene in which Neo must decide whether to take the blue or red pill - one returning him to happy ignorance and the other showing him the hard reality of the Matrix - has entered the lexicon and not always in positive ways. "Redpill" became an alt-right meme online in the 2010s, used by men who claimed their eyes had been opened to the dangers of feminism.

But at heart, the original films were a hit because they crystallized geek culture with their blend of martial arts, Hong Kong cinema, new-age spiritualism and cyberpunk. They were never much of a hit with critics, however, and the new installment is also getting mixed reactions from early screenings. One Variety critic described it as "a terrific, awe-inducing, meta mind-bender" while another felt it was "too self-aware... with not a lot of show-stopping action". In any case, many film-goers are likely to take the red pill and see how deep the rabbit hole goes. —AFP

Sports

Warriors overpower Celtics as Timberwolves sink Lakers

Curry stars again in nery win over Celtics

LOS ANGELES: Stephen Curry followed up his record-setting night earlier in the week with 30 points in Boston as the Golden State Warriors held on to beat the Celtics 111-107 on Friday.

Curry's Warriors survived to win a tight game down the stretch after Golden State blew a 20-point lead against the undermanned Celtics. One game after breaking Ray Allen's all-time record for three-pointers, Curry was facing Allen's former team at the Boston Garden arena. Curry nailed consecutive threes on his first two shots of the game, giving the Warriors an 11-point lead just four minutes in.

"We're coming off the emotional roller-coaster ... a lot going on around the league," said Curry, who made five threes, referring to his record-breaking Tuesday night and the growing number of COVID cases in the NBA. "You try not to get distracted by all the things that are outside the locker room." Andrew Wiggins added 27 points, Andre Iguodala chipped in 12 points and Draymond Green tallied a team-high eight assists for the Warriors, who have won five of their last six games. Jayson Tatum had 27 points, eight rebounds and six assists to lead Boston, who have dropped five of their last seven.

Boston was missing starting center Al Horford and forwards Grant Williams, Jabari Parker, Juancho Hernangomez and Sam Hauser, all because of the league's COVID-19 measures. Celtics guard

Dennis Schroder also missed the game with a non-COVID illness. Boston guard Romeo Langford left the game with neck pain in the second quarter and did not return. It was Warriors coach Steve Kerr's 400th coaching victory over eight seasons. "It means I'm incredibly lucky to coach a bunch of talented guys," said Kerr.

COVID bites

Karl-Anthony Towns finished with 28 points and 10 rebounds as the Minnesota Timberwolves won their third straight game with a 110-92 victory over the Los Angeles Lakers in Minneapolis. D'Angelo Russell and Malik Beasley scored 17 apiece and Jaylen Nowell came off the bench to score 14 points for the Timberwolves. LeBron James struggled, scoring just 18 points, while Anthony Davis finished with only nine before limping off to the locker room in the third quarter with a sore knee. Davis got the injury shortly after taking a pass from James.

The Lakers said Davis had a left knee contusion and would undergo additional evaluation in Chicago. Isaiah Thomas scored a team-high 19 points for the Lakers in his season debut. In Florida, Max Strus and Gabe Vincent delivered career-high performances as the Miami Heat rolled over the short-handed Orlando Magic 115-105. Strus scored 23 of his 32 points in the opening half and Vincent finished with 27 as Miami sent the Magic to their



BOSTON: Stephen Curry #30 of the Golden State Warriors and Josh Richardson #8 of the Boston Celtics fight for possession of the ball during the second half at TD Garden on December 17, 2021. — AFP



Coach Kerr's 400th coaching victory

seventh straight loss. The Magic had just 12 players on their roster because of injuries and COVID-19.

Mo Bamba, Terrence Ross, Moe Wagner, RJ Hampton and Ignas Brazdeikis were placed into the league's health and safety protocols. Another six players were sidelined by injury, including leading scorer Cole Anthony (ankle). The Heat came into

Friday's game with six players out, including leading scorers Jimmy Butler (tailbone), Tyler Herro (quadriciceps) and Bam Adebayo (thumb). Damian Lillard scored a season-high 43 points and added eight assists as the Portland Trail Blazers snapped a seven-game losing streak with a 125-116 victory over the Charlotte Hornets. — AFP

NFL postpones games amid COVID-19 surge

PHILADELPHIA: The NFL has postponed three weekend games amid a COVID-19 surge that has "seen a substantial increase in cases across the league." The league announced Friday that Saturday's game between the Las Vegas Raiders and the Cleveland Browns has been moved to Monday, while Sunday's meeting between the Washington Football Team and Philadelphia Eagles, and the Seattle Seahawks v Los Angeles Rams game have been moved to Tuesday.

"We have made these schedule changes based on medical advice and after discussion with the NFL Players' Association as we are seeing a new, highly transmissible form of the virus this week resulting in a substantial increase in cases across the league," the NFL said in a statement. As of Friday, the Browns had 24 players—including a dozen starters—either testing positive for COVID this week or remained on the COVID reserve list from tests last week.

The sidelined players included not only starting quarterback Baker Mayfield but also backup Case Keenum, and the NFLPA had reportedly been urging postponement of the game since Thursday. The Rams had 25 players on the COVID list, including receiver Odell Beckham Jr. Twenty-one of those players had landed on the reserve list since Tuesday. Washington also had more than 20 players on the COVID-19 reserve list, including quarterback Taylor Heinicke and backup Kyle Allen.

On Wednesday, as the Browns cases mounted up, NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell said there "has not been any discussion" about postponing games. On Thursday, the league revealed enhanced safety protocols designed to slow the surge throughout the league, which follows a relatively trouble-free opening three months of the season. The spike in positive cases comes amid global concern over the spread of the Omicron variant, which has been blamed for a fresh wave of infections.

The NFL said Thursday that all players coaches and staff will be required to wear face coverings in team facilities regardless of vaccination status, and all team meetings must be conducted either outdoors or remotely. Players will be forbidden from dining together in groups. Meals will be "grab-and-go" and players must be seated 10 feet apart from each other. No outside visitors will be permitted during team travel. — AFP



CALIFORNIA: A football on a kicking tee during warm up, before the game at SoFi Stadium in Inglewood, California. The NFL has postponed three weekend games amid a COVID-19 surge that has "seen a substantial increase in cases across the league." — AFP

Qatar National Day Tournament



By Abdellatif Sharaa

KUWAIT: Kuwait players won the first place at the Qatar National Day Tournament amidst strong competition among participants from various countries. In the men's category, the

winner was Jasem Al-Saqer while Khalid Al-Deeban ended in the fourth place and Ibarahem Al-Jedi took fifth. In the Youth Category, Faisal Saleem took first; Hassan Qasem (second) and Abdallah Al-Deeban (fourth). In the Women's Category, Altaf

Karam grabbed the first position while Mariam Al-Qabandi took the second position and Sumayah Al-Abdallah (fourth). National team's director Nader Al-Mansour said he was happy with the players' performance and their determination.



First refresher Futsal Soccer tournament

By Abdellatif Sharaa

KUWAIT: The first refresher Futsal Soccer tournament for school girls in the intermediate and secondary stages concluded yesterday with the participation of more than 412 players. The tournament was held at Mariam Abdelmalek Al-Saleh in Khaldiya, under the patronage and organization of the Schools and High Education Sports Federation, Assistant Education Ministry Undersecretary for Educational Development Faisal Al-Maqseed and Member of Kuwait Olympic Committee Board Fatima Hayat.

The team of Mishref Intermediate Girls School won the first place while team 'Naseeba's Heros' from Naseeba Bint Kaab Intermediate Girls school took the second place during the tournament that was held on Wednesday and Thursday. 26

teams participated in the tournament. Sama Jasem won the best (goal keeper) prize while top scorer went to Aseel Musesad (from Naseeba School) who scored nine goals.

The team (Capital Heroes) that is formed from Capital Education Area schools won the first place for the secondary stage while second place went to SASI team from Shareefa Al-Awadhi Secondary School. Jana Mattar won best goal keeper prize and Ghalia Al-Fares won the top scorer award.

Faisal Maqseed said the tournament was a success with an active and positive participation from all educational zones and it was done in coordination with Kuwait Football Association - adding that there will be more tournaments in the six governorates when examinations are over. He thanked coaches, school administrations and parents for encouraging the girls. Meanwhile, Fatima Hayat said she was pleased with the large number of participants in both the intermediate and secondary stages. She said this is a promising start which is considered a sustainable foundation for Women's Futsal.

Sporting world battles surging COVID-19 cases

PARIS: The coronavirus is once again disrupting global sport, forcing the cancellation of English Premier League matches and the scrapping of a one-day cricket series. AFP Sport looks at the state of play around the world as authorities scramble to cope with the surging pandemic.

Football

Five of the 10 Premier League matches scheduled for this weekend are off. The clubs are due to meet on Monday to discuss the crisis, with differences emerging over whether to temporarily halt the season as a fire-breaker for infections or to carry on. Brentford manager Thomas Frank has called for a "circuit break" as positive tests multiply during the busiest time in the English football calendar. Liverpool boss Jurgen Klopp said it could soon become impossible to maintain the schedule as squads become over-stretched by Covid absences and injuries.

Morocco coach Wahid Halilhodzic has expressed his fear that the already-delayed Africa Cup of Nations, due to kick off in Cameroon next month, could be called off due to the renewed threat of Covid-19 and the possibility that European clubs might not release players for the tournament. Real Madrid have reported a number of positive tests, with Gareth Bale and Luka Modric among the players affected. Under Liga protocols, a club must have at least 13 players, at least five of them first-teamers and one a goalkeeper, available to

play a match. The club also reported cases in its basketball team.

Cricket

COVID has forced the cancellation of the one-day series between Pakistan and the West Indies. Five members of the West Indies touring party—including three players—tested positive for Covid on Thursday, in addition to previous positive cases. Australia captain Pat Cummins was forced to sit out the second Ashes Test after being in close contact with somebody who tested positive for Covid-19. Under South Australia state's strict bio-security rules the fast bowler was required to isolate for seven days but has now been permitted to head home, where he must remain until the Boxing Day Test in Melbourne. The Indian cricket team arrived in Johannesburg on Thursday and headed straight for their bio-secure base at the start of a curtailed South Africa tour. India will play three Tests and three one-day internationals despite a surge in coronavirus cases in South Africa, but four planned T20 internationals have been dropped from the original schedule.

Rugby Union

European rugby chiefs have postponed seven matches in the Champions Cup and Challenge Cup competitions between UK and French sides due to strict coronavirus travel rules. Three matches had already been cancelled due to COVID outbreaks. The English Premiership announced on Friday that 47 players and seven members of staff, from nine different clubs, had tested positive for coronavirus in its latest round of weekly testing. That was sharply up from the previous week, when just five players and staff in total tested positive.

Sports

Lewandowski bags record as Bayern go nine points clear

Bayern rule out new transfers in January

BERLIN: Bayern Munich opened a nine-point lead at the top of the Bundesliga table Friday with a 4-0 home win over Wolfsburg as goal-scorers Robert Lewandowski, Thomas Mueller and Dayot Upamecano all celebrated milestones. Mueller marked his 400th Bundesliga appearance by opening the scoring with his 222nd league goal before defender Upamecano, signed from Leipzig for this season, headed in his first goal in the famous red Bayern shirt. Leroy Sane then planted a shot into the left corner on the hour mark.

Lewandowski, who on Tuesday equaled Gerd Mueller's record of 42 German league goals in a calendar year from 1972, capped a gala night with Bayern's fourth to claim the new record outright. This was Bayern's final match before the Bundesliga winter break and head coach Julian Nagelsmann was pleased with the performance. "We defended well, pressed them hard, won pretty much every ball in our own half and we deserved to win by that margin," said Nagelsmann. The Bayern boss also praised Lewandowski's latest record, "he really deserves it, especially as he scored with his weaker foot". Bayern's lead at the top of the Bundesliga table can be trimmed by second-placed Borussia Dortmund, who are away to Hertha Berlin. This was Wolfsburg's seventh straight loss, piling the pressure on new head coach Florian Kohfeldt who only took charge at the end of October after the sacking of predecessor Mark van Bommel. "That hurts - we defended badly, especially for the fourth goal, that wasn't on," fumed Kohfeldt who now has the two-week break to drill his team.

In contrast, this was Bayern's seventh straight victory in all competitions. Bayern were ahead after only seven minutes behind closed doors at the Allianz Arena when Serge Gnabry's thunderbolt shot from distance was parried into the path of Mueller, who tapped home. It stayed 1-0 at the break, but Mueller's deft chip gave him a 15th assist in the Bundesliga this season as Upamecano steered his header into the net. Just three minutes later, Sane grabbed Bayern's third when he unleashed a superb shot which gave Wolfsburg goalkeeper Koen Casteels no chance.



MUNICH: Wolfsburg's German midfielder Ridle Baku (left) and Bayern Munich's German midfielder Malik Tillman vie for the ball during the German first division Bundesliga football match Bayern Munich vs VfL Wolfsburg in Munich on December 17, 2021. —AFP

Lewandowski finally got the goal to break another of Gerd Mueller's records with some deadly finishing. Before kick-off, Bayern sports director Hasan Salihamidzic ruled out any new signings in the forthcoming January transfer window. "We are really well-staffed, that's a fact," he stressed, "we will continue as things are this season."

Meanwhile, Bayern Munich sports director Hasan

in the 77th minute and Roberto Gagliardini rounded out the scoring three minutes from time.

It was Inter's sixth straight victory in the league and fifth straight clean sheet. Inter, who have one match to play before the halfway point of the season, moved four points ahead of second-placed AC Milan, who on Sunday host fourth-place Napoli, and six ahead of third-placed Atalanta, who host Roma. Salernitana, with Franck Ribery in fine form, had chances.

They could have equalized had it not been for a good save from Samir Handanovic from Joel Obi after 30 minutes. But in the end they could not stop Inter setting a club record for goals in a calendar year: 103 before they face Torino in their last game of 2021. In Friday's other game, Lazio beat Genoa 3-1 at home to climb above Empoli into eighth, level on points with Juventus who face Bologna on Saturday. —AFP

Inter crush Salernitana, tighten grip on Serie A

ROME: Leaders Inter Milan thrashed last-place Salernitana 5-0 on Friday to close in on the honorary title of Serie A 'winter champion'. Ivan Perisic headed the champions ahead after 11 minutes in Salerno and Denzel Dumfries crashed a powerful shot in off the underside of the bar in the 33rd minute to give them a handy cushion at the break. In the second half, Alexis Sanchez finished off an impressive Inter move after 52 minutes, Lautaro Martinez scored an opportunist goal

Nadal loses to Murray but both are pleased

ABU DHABI: Rafael Nadal deemed his unofficial return to competition in Abu Dhabi as a "positive start" after he fell to Andy Murray in a high-quality exhibition match on Friday. In a battle of two former world number ones, the Scot won 6-3, 7-5 in the semi-final of the Mubadala World Tennis Championship. Nadal, who had played just two matches in six months after a foot injury that ruled him out of Wimbledon and the US Open, was back in action for the first time since August.

"I think I did a lot of things well and other things, of course after a long period of time, I need to recover again, some things that when you're under competition come automatically," Nadal said after facing Murray for the first time since 2016. "Now I have to think more, or you don't have this extra time to make the right decisions." "In general terms it has been a positive match, I even had my chances to win that second set." "It's just a positive start. I played even better than what I thought a few weeks ago." The 20-time Grand Slam champion says he only started playing practice sets two days ago. —AFP

Party-pooper Hamilton could face FIA sanctions

PARIS: Lewis Hamilton could be punished after they failed to show for the International Automobile Federation's year-ending gala in Paris. Mohammed Ben Sulayem said Friday shortly after he was elected the new FIA head. The 60-year-old Emirati was elected to replace Jean Todt as president at the end of a week in which the FIA held its general assembly and awards gala in Paris and immediately faced questions on whether Hamilton had broken FIA rules with his boycott. "It's easy to be nice to people. And it is cheap to be nice. And it's also to motivate people. But definitely, if there is any breach, there is no forgiveness in this," said Sulayem.

Hamilton and his Mercedes team were unhappy at the way FIA officials restarted the final race of the season in Abu Dhabi last weekend, giving Max Verstappen of Red Bull the chance to seize victory, and the driver title, in a one-lap sprint. Hamilton, who was in Windsor in England on Wednesday to receive his knighthood, and the

Salihamidzic on Friday ruled out any new signings in the forthcoming January transfer window. "It's not a topic for us at all," Salihamidzic told broadcaster DAZN before their Bundesliga home game against Wolfsburg, Bayern's last match of 2021. "We are really well-staffed, that's a fact," Salihamidzic added, stressing, "we will continue as things are this season." —AFP



SALERNO: Salernitana's Italian goalkeeper Vincenzo Fiorillo (3rd right) goes for the ball during the Italian Serie A football match between Salernitana and Inter Milan on December 17, 2021. —AFP

Mercedes team principal Toto Wolff then skipped the Thursday night gala, even though Formula One rules say: "The drivers finishing first, second and third in the Championship must be present at the annual FIA Prize Giving ceremony."

It is not clear what punishments the FIA could impose. "At the end of the day, rules are rules," said Sulayem. "They are there to be improved but we have to look if there is any breach. It doesn't stop us from making a champion feel good about the sport." "I have to look into it." He refused to comment on the details of the last-lap controversy with the safety car in his home Grand Prix. "I have promised we will look into the rules and make sure that any situation of this sort that occurs in the future, we will have an instant solution for it," Ben Sulayem said.

"We had a meeting with the drivers and I feel that what happened has been declared now. The FIA took a decision, we discussed it and there was a statement, and now we have to start the new season. "We have to be proactive and reactive. I feel it is a time where as a driver I would be so upset for a while, but time is a factor that will cool. After the holidays and Christmas, in the new year we will start afresh." Earlier in the week, outgoing president Jean Todt committed the FIA to a "detailed analysis and clarification exercise" in the wake of the Abu Dhabi controversy. —AFP

News in brief

Ulster edge Northampton

LONDON: Ulster survived a last-quarter fight-back by visiting Northampton to win 27-22 and start their Champions Cup campaign with two victories. Rob Herring, Ethan McLlroy and Craig Gilroy scored tries as the hosts built a 15-point lead by the 57th minute. Alex Mitchell and Courtall Skosan hit back with tries for Saints but Ulster halted their final drive. Ulster took the lead after two minutes as hooker Herring charged over from close range with scrum-half John Cooney adding the conversion. Saints replied with a George Furbank penalty. Ulster were awarded a penalty try on 16 minutes when Mitchell was adjudged to have deliberately knocked on trying to intercept a pass to McLlroy. The Saints scrum-half was also yellow-carded and seven points awarded. —AFP

Mbappe: New face of Dior

PARIS: France football star Kylian Mbappe is to be the new face of Dior's men's fashion and perfumes, he announced on Twitter on Friday. "I am delighted to announce that I am now officially part of Maison Dior. Can't wait to share our collaborations in men's fashion and Sauvage fragrance," he tweeted in English. The brand, a subsidiary of the LVMH group controlled by billionaire Bernard Arnault, entered into a two-year partnership with Mbappe's club Paris Saint-Germain in early September to kit out the team. "The French world champion will lend his image to the creations by Kim Jones, Artistic Director for Dior men's collections," said Dior on its Twitter account. Mbappe joins a long line of footballers who have lent their support to luxury brands including Zinedine Zidane, David Beckham and Lionel Messi. —AFP

Guardiola tests negative

LONDON: Manchester City manager Pep Guardiola will be able to lead his side for today's Premier League trip to Newcastle after testing negative for coronavirus. Guardiola was forced to cancel a pre-match press conference on Friday after returning an inconclusive test result earlier in the day. However, a follow-up PCR test has cleared the Catalan to take charge of the league leaders at St James' Park. That match is one of just five Premier League games still scheduled to go ahead this weekend due to a series of postponements as a result of rapidly rising case numbers of COVID-19 in Britain. Guardiola also confirmed that none of his players have so far tested positive in recent days. "Everyone is fit, it's just Ferran (Torres) missing (due to a long-term injury). Joao (Cancelo) is back after (his suspension against) Leeds and we will travel to Newcastle with everyone ready to play," Guardiola told the City website. —AFP

Lyon cup match abandoned

PARIS: For the second time this season a match involving Lyon was abandoned following crowd trouble when their French Cup match at Paris FC on Friday was called off after half time. The tie was interrupted by incidents in the stands at the Charlety Stadium in Paris as the second half was about to start. During the break, flares were thrown back and forth between home and visiting fans in one stand. Home-made fireworks also exploded loudly. As security staff and police streamed towards the stand, spectators fled onto the pitch, preventing the resumption of the match. The referee and players came out to kick off the second half but returned to the dressing room. Ten minutes later, the public had returned to the stand after the intervention of the police and stewards and the call for calm from the stadium announcer. —AFP

Classifieds

Hospitals & Clinics			
Sabah Hospital	24812000	Khaldiya	24848075
Amiri Hospital	22450005	Kaifan	24849807
Maternity Hospital	24843100	Shamiya	24848913
Mubarak Al-Kabir Hospital	25312700	Shuwaikh	24814507
Chest Hospital	24849400	Abdullah Salem	22549134
Farwaniya Hospital	24892010	Nuzha	22526804
Adan Hospital	23940620	Industrial Shuwaikh	24814764
Ibn Sina Hospital	24840300	Qadsiya	22515088
Al-Razi Hospital	24846000	Dasmah	22532265
Physiotherapy Hospital	24874330/9	Bneid Al-Gar	22531908
Clinics		Shaab	22518752
Kaizen center	25716707	Qibla	22459381
Rawda	22517733	Ayoun Al-Qibla	22451082
Adaliya	22517144	Mirqab	22456536
		Sharq	22465401

CHANGE OF NAME

I, RIZWAN AHMED (Old Name) H.No. 41-356, Kothapeta, Kurnool Dist. A.P. have changed my name as SHAIK RIZWAN AHMED. (C 0855) 19-12-2021

For labor-related inquiries and complaints: Call MSALHOTLINE 128

Automated enquiry about the Civil ID card is 1889988

EMERGENCY 112

ABSCONDING

We are **Al-Tahani Al Moatamada General Trading and Contracting Company**, the agent of **Kolin Construction, Tourism, Industry and Trading Company**, we announce the end of the working relationship between us and **Mr. Hakan Tirataci** and he doesn't represent our companies in it's dealing with others.

Algeria crowned Arab champions

Hosts Qatar beat Egypt to clinch third place at FIFA Arab Cup



AL KHOR: Algeria's players celebrate winning the FIFA Arab Cup 2021 final at the Al-Bayt stadium in the Qatari city of Al-Khor yesterday. — AFP

DOHA: Algeria scored two goals in extra-time to beat neighbors Tunisia 2-0 and win the 2021 FIFA Arab Cup. Amir Sayoud scored in the ninth minute of extra-time while Yacine Brahimi scored with the final kick of the game at the Al-Bayt stadium in Al Khor city to take Algeria to the title yesterday. It added the Arab crown to the Africa Cup of Nations title Algeria won in 2019, and will defend in

Cameroon next month.

The 31-year-old Sayoud made his international debut in Algeria's opening game of the tournament but did not play again until coming on just past the hour mark in the final. His thunderous 99th-minute shot turned Sayoud into an instant national hero. Brahimi scored on a breakaway with the last kick of the game as Tunisia pushed everyone up for a last-

gasp corner and Brahimi raced away unchecked after the ball was cleared by the Algeria defense.

Earlier, hosts Qatar beat Egypt 5-4 on penalties in the third-place playoff match. The heated game yesterday seemed like it could be heading in either direction as both teams managed near-equal possession of the ball, with Egypt slightly taking the upper hand in the final minutes. But the

match at Doha's Stadium 974 went to extra time after Egypt's several attempts on goal were stopped. With no goals in extra-time, Qatar's goalkeeper Meshaal Barsham rose to the occasion by blocking a penalty and helping his side end up with the bronze medal. The 2022 World Cup will take place in Qatar from November 21 to December 18. — Agencies

Lindstrom strikes again as Frankfurt continue rise

BERLIN: Eintracht Frankfurt continued their rise up the Bundesliga table yesterday with a sixth win in seven games as Danish forward Jesper Lindstrom scored for the third match in succession to seal a 1-0 victory over Mainz. Bundesliga leaders Bayern Munich started the weekend nine points clear after thrashing Wolfsburg 4-0 on Friday, but second-placed Borussia Dortmund can trim the gap when they face Hertha Berlin away later. Frankfurt broke into the top five, having started last weekend 12th, as Lindstrom added to goals he scored in wins over Moenchengladbach and Leverkusen last week.

Japan veteran Makoto Hasebe snapped up a loose Mainz pass in the first half which resulted in Rafael Borre getting in behind the defense. The Colombia striker chipped the on-rushing goalkeeper, straight into the path of Lindstrom who tapped in the winner on 35 minutes. The clubs passed each other in the table as Mainz drop to eighth. Union Berlin went sixth - and level with Frankfurt on 27 points - thanks to former Germany striker Max Kruse, who scored the

only goal in a 1-0 win at Bochum two days after getting married.

Fourth-placed Hoffenheim snatched a 1-1 draw at home to Borussia Moenchengladbach after defender Kevin Akpoguma tapped in a last-gasp equalizer. It was heart-breaking for Gladbach, who had lost their four previous league games and took a first-half lead when Swiss striker Breel Embolo scored from close range. Domenico Tedesco suffered his first defeat in three games as coach of RB Leipzig after his side lost 2-0 at home to 10-man Arminia Bielefeld.

After forward Janni Serra put the visitors 1-0 up, Bielefeld substitute Fabian Klos was shown a red card for fouling Leipzig defender Willi Orban soon after coming on. Despite being a man down, Bielefeld clinched the win when Japan midfielder Masaya Okugawa hit the bottom corner with 15 minutes left. Second-from-bottom Bielefeld have won their last two games after Tuesday's 2-0 victory over Bochum. Greuther Fuerth are now 11 points adrift at the foot of the table after their goalless draw at home to Augsburg. — AFP



LEIPZIG: Bielefeld's German forward Janni Serra (center) scores his team's first goal during the German first division Bundesliga football match RB Leipzig vs Arminia yesterday. — AFP

Roma thump Atalanta 4-1

BERGAMO: Tammy Abraham struck twice as Roma ran out 4-1 winners at fancied Atalanta yesterday, in the biggest win for Jose Mourinho since returning to Serie A. English striker Abraham opened the scoring with less than a minute on the clock at the Gewiss Stadium and rounded off the match late on as Roma closed the gap between them and the Champions League places to five points. "What a win, what else can I say? A lot of people doubted us today but this is by far one of the best wins we've had this season," said Abraham to DAZN. "We needed to win and what a win."

Nicolo Zaniolo and Abraham's countryman Chris Smalling also netted in an impressive win, their first against one of Italy's top teams this season, which took them fifth and dented third-place Atalanta's burgeoning title hopes. Gian Piero Gasperini's side sit third, six points behind champions and league leaders Inter Milan who crushed Salernitana 5-0 on Friday. They will drop to fourth if Napoli win at fellow title-chasers AC Milan on Sunday following a defeat in which they dominated proceedings for large

spells but were punished by Roma who were clinical in a classic Mourinho style.

Roma's goals came from five shots on target after having less than 30 percent possession and no corners. "There was a great spirit. It's clear that playing against Atalanta you can never be in control of the match for 90 minutes... the team was great in every department today," said Mourinho, who won the treble with Inter in 2010. "I think Inter are on another level to everyone else but to beat the top teams like Milan, Napoli and Atalanta you can't just have good organisation or tactics, you need a certain type of character which we had today."

Smash and grab

Roma took the lead in an odd fashion when, after charging into the box, Abraham poked a close-range finish which looped high off Marten de Roon and into the net. The away side were pinned back in their own area for long periods but, like Villarreal who performed their own smash-and-grab in Bergamo a few days ago, Roma struck on the break through the marauding Zaniolo to double their lead against the run of play in the 27th minute. It was the Italy forward's first Serie A goal since July last year. Atalanta continued to push and got back into the game in first half stoppage time when substi-

tute Luis Muriel's low drive took a wild deflection off Bryan Cristante and left Roma goalkeeper Rui Patrício with no chance.

And the home fans thought they were set to witness a grandstand finish in the 68th minute when Duvan Zapata's flick was touched home but Jose Luis Palomino was ruled offside by VAR after challenging for the ball with Cristante. The decision infuriated Gasperini who raged to DAZN that the referee told him a Palomino goal had been ruled out even though the Argentine had not, in fact, touched the ball. "If Palomino didn't touch the ball, then why is it offside? If Cristante got the ball, then what difference does it make?" he asked. "We would then have been level with 20 minutes to go, it's a very different game."

Four minutes later Smalling hit Atalanta with a sucker punch, meeting Jordan Veretout's superb free-kick to jab home the third from close range. Abraham made it six league goals for the season with eight minutes remaining, lashing home a powerful first time finish after Veretout's blocked shot fell to him perfectly in shooting range. Juventus aim to get their season back up and running again later on as they travel to Bologna, while Cagliari try to get out of the relegation zone when they host Udinese in the day's late match. — AFP



BERGAMO: Atalanta's Colombian forward Duvan Zapata (hidden 91) scores during their Italian Serie A football match Atalanta Bergamo versus Rome yesterday. — AFP