

2 Kuwaiti women submit applications to join army



8 Top banker says Lebanon needs \$12-15bn to kickstart recovery



13 Biden introduces new first pup, 'Commander'



15 Unfancied Trabzonspor take Turkish football by storm



Jahra Nature Reserve opens, public visits start from today

First ecotourism project in Kuwait seeks to boost environmental awareness

Kuwait SC lift Amir Cup for 15th time



KUWAIT: Kuwait Sports Club won the 59th edition of HH the Amir Cup for the 15th time by beating Qadsia Sports Club 1-0 at Jaber Stadium yesterday. HH the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah attended the match on behalf of HH the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. — KUNA

KUWAIT: The Environment Public Authority (EPA) celebrated yesterday the official opening of Jahra Nature Reserve to the public, with visits to start from today, as reservations can be made through EPA's official website. Chairman and Director General of EPA Sheikh Abdullah Ahmad Al-Humoud Al-Sabah said in a press statement that this is the first ecotourism project in Kuwait to be opened to receive visitors with the aim of increasing environmental awareness and appreciating the natural landscape.

Each visit will be for an hour and a half, during which the public relations team from EPA will guide visitors and take them on a tour inside the reserve, he added. The reserve took several years to be ready by EPA and the ministry of public works, which supplied the reserve with water, Sheikh Abdullah explained.

The EPA released a statement later yesterday that admission fees to the Jahra Nature Reserve start at KD 10 for a group of five persons or fewer. The fee increases by KD 2 for every additional person, up to a maximum of 10 people for KD 20. The fees are the same for visitors of any nationality, it explained.



KUWAIT: Chairman and Director General of Environment Public Authority Sheikh Abdullah Al-Sabah opens the Jahra Nature Reserve yesterday. — KUNA (See Page 3)

Meanwhile, Deputy Director General of Technical Affairs at EPA Dr Abdullah Al-Zaidan noted in a press statement that the opening of the reserve coincides with the global COVID-19 pandemic.

Continued on Page 2

News in brief

Iran Yemen envoy dies of COVID

TEHRAN: Iran's envoy to Yemen died of COVID yesterday despite his evacuation from the rebel-held capital Sanaa in a rare exemption from a Saudi-led air blockade, the foreign ministry said. Foreign ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh blamed the "slow cooperation of certain countries" in facilitating the Saturday evacuation for the death of envoy Hassan Eyrlou. — AFP

Qatar seizes 'un-Islamic' toys

DOHA: Authorities in Qatar have confiscated a line of children's toys from stores, deeming them "contrary to Islamic values". The ministry of commerce and industry said on Twitter the inspection campaigns "resulted in the seizure and release of several violations, including the confiscation of children's toys bearing slogans that go against Islamic values". The tweet was accompanied by a pictures of rubber stress balls and other toys in rainbow colors. — AFP

EU to limit vaccine validity

BRUSSELS: The European Union is poised to limit the validity of vaccine recognition in its EU COVID certificate to nine months, its executive said yesterday, in a bid to encourage boosters. The European Commission said in a statement it has adopted "a binding acceptance period of nine months (precisely 270 days) of vaccination certificates for the purposes of intra-EU travel", to come into force from Feb 1. — AFP

Iran holds military exercises

TEHRAN: Iran fired missiles from land and sea yesterday as part of five days of military exercises in three provinces, including near its only nuclear power plant, the Revolutionary Guards said. The military drills began on Monday in Bushehr, Hormozgan and Khuzestan provinces, each of which touch the Gulf. They included biological warfare exercises. The maneuvers also saw the deployment of Iranian-made boats that are capable of launching high-precision missiles. — AFP

Commercial visa transfers to stop next week: PAM

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: The Public Authority for Manpower yesterday said a window to transfer business visas into regular residencies in the private sector will expire at the end of December. The authority suspended the transfer of business visas to regular residencies on Nov 24, but gave those who already held such visas until the end of December to avail of the transfer window. If holders of commercial visas do not transfer them to regular residencies by the end of the month, they will be considered as canceled, a statement by PAM said.

Meanwhile, the National Assembly's public funds defense committee decided yesterday to send a recommendation to the Assembly to form an investigation committee to probe alleged financial and administrative violations by the state-owned Touristic Enterprises Co.

Shock moves by Erdogan revive lira

Economists and many Turks were still trying to decipher how this new exchange mechanism will work or where the government will get the money to pay for it. But the impact on the lira - which had lost 45 percent against the greenback from the start of November to late Monday afternoon - was monumental.

It was trading down 10 percent on the day by the time Erdogan appeared on national television to announce his new economic proposals. It was trading up 20 percent a few hours after Erdogan had finished. "We finally understood that the Erdogan administration cares about the exchange rate, and has avoided

Continued on Page 2

ISTANBUL: A man walks past shops in the Eminonu bazaar district after the beleaguered lira strengthened yesterday. — AFP



WHO approves 10th authorized COVID vaccine

GENEVA: The World Health Organization yesterday approved a COVID vaccine made by US pharma giant Novavax for emergency use, after the European Union medicines regulator gave it the green light. The European Medicines Agency had assessed and approved Nuvaxovid on Monday. It is made from a more conventional technology than others already approved, which has led officials in Brussels to express hope that this will help persuade those hesitant about vaccination to come forward.

The jab uses a traditional technology involving proteins found on coronavirus spike proteins that trigger an immune response. It is a tried and tested

approach, used for decades to vaccinate people against diseases including hepatitis B and whooping cough. A so-called emergency use listing (EUL) by the WHO paves the way for countries worldwide to quickly approve and import a vaccine for distribution.


It also opens the door for them to enter the Covax global vaccine-sharing scheme, set up to provide equitable access to doses around the world and particularly in poorer countries. The two-shot Nuvaxovid jab is the 10th COVID vaccine issued an EUL by the UN health agency.

WHO said Nuvaxovid was around 90-percent effective at reducing symptomatic cases of COVID-19 in two major clinical studies, one in Britain and the other in the United States and Mexico, involving more than 45,000 people. In a separate document, WHO's Strategic Advisory Group of Experts on Immunization recommended the new vaccine for use in people over the age of 18, with an interval of three to four weeks between the two doses.

"The vaccine should not be administered with an

interval of less than three weeks," it warned. It can be kept at refrigerated temperatures between 2 and 8 degrees Celsius, giving it a logistical advantage in difficult-to-access regions over the mRNA vaccines, which must be stored at ultra-low temperatures. Among the COVID vaccines already handed a WHO EUL is the Covovax shot, a version of Novavax's vaccine made by the Serum Institute of India under license from the US-based company. It was authorized on Dec 17.

Continued on Page 2



Local

Defense Minister discusses bilateral ties with Iraq, Egypt ambassadors

Foreign Minister receives credentials of new Indonesian ambassador



KUWAIT: Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah meets Ambassador of Iraq to Kuwait Al-Menhel Al-Safi. — KUNA photos



Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah meets Ambassador of Egypt to Kuwait Osama Shaltout.



Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah meets the new Ambassador of Indonesia to Kuwait Leena Marianna.

KUWAIT: Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah discussed with Ambassadors of Iraq and Egypt ways to bolster bilateral ties between their countries and Kuwait. In a statement, Kuwait Army's General Staff mentioned that Sheikh Hamad received in his office yesterday Ambassador of Iraq to Kuwait Al-Menhel Al-Safi, and discussed issues of common interest.

Attending the meeting was also diplomatic attache Ahmad Al-Daikhan.

Furthermore, the Kuwaiti minister met with Egyptian Ambassador to Kuwait Osama Shaltout and discussed means of collaboration and joint work, as well as latest updates in regional and international fronts. Attending the meeting were head of military office in Egyptian embassy Hassan Al-

Shatheli and Foreign Ministry official Abdullah Al-Asfour Al-Hajeri. The Iraqi and Egyptian ambassadors handed invitations to the Defense Minister to visit Baghdad and Cairo, respectively. The Defense Minister meanwhile expressed appreciation for having received such invitations as they reflect the brotherly bonds between their respective nations and Kuwait.

Separately, Foreign Minister and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah received yesterday credentials of the new Ambassador of Indonesia to Kuwait Leena Marianna. The Minister wished the new appointed ambassador all success in her mission, and further prosperity to the bilateral ties between both countries. — KUNA

Ministry starts receiving women's applications to join Kuwait Army

By Nawara Fattahova

KUWAIT: The ministry of defense yesterday started receiving applications for the first batch of female non-commissioned officers and personnel from women who want to join the Kuwaiti army. Around 50 women who met the conditions went to register at the Mubarakia Camps on the Fourth Ring Road on the first day. They came in person after registering online at: <https://vc.kuwaitarmy.gov.kw>.

The administration and manpower authority of the ministry of defense has earlier announced accepting reg-

istrations from Kuwaiti women holding university degrees, diplomas and certificates of 12th grade, 11th grade and lower.

The available specializations for holders of university degrees and diplomas include communication, administration, networks, electronics, typing, data entry, computer network security, electrical engineering, mechanical engineering, electronic engineering, mechatronics engineering, cold welding, law, security inspection and physical education. Registration is open online till Jan 2, 2022.



WHO approves 10th authorized...

Continued from Page 1

Also figuring on the list are the mRNA vaccines produced by BioNTech/Pfizer and Moderna, Johnson & Johnson, AstraZeneca (which is counted twice for the versions made in Europe and in India), the Indian-made Covaxin and Chinese-made Sinopharm and Sinovac. The WHO also recently resumed evaluating the Russian-made Sputnik V vaccine against COVID-19, after several months in limbo, as it waited for additional data.

Rogério Gaspar, head of WHO's regulation and pre-

qualification department, said Monday that the UN health agency would begin assessing the quality of the data received next month and aimed to carry out inspections on-site in February. He told reporters he could provide "no date on approval because the approval will depend really ... on the quality of the information."

Neither US nor EU medicines watchdogs have so far granted authorization for Sputnik V, which has been used in Russia and some other countries since late 2020.

Europe's medicines watchdog chief said yesterday there is "no answer yet" on whether vaccine makers will have to adapt their COVID shots to counter the rapidly-spreading Omicron variant. Scientists are also examining whether it is more resistant to vaccines than previous strains. But the head of the European Medicines Agency (EMA) said it was too soon to say whether an Omicron-specific vaccine was needed. —AFP

Jahra Nature Reserve opens...

Continued from Page 1

The reserve is one of the most important sites for migratory birds, as it contains around 400 species, in addition to the greater spotted eagle, which visits the reserve annually and spends four to 10 months there, he pointed out.

EPA conducts many studies and projects with volunteer teams, including Kuwait Foundation for the Advancement of Sciences, where tracking devices have recently encountered eagles, including the greater spotted eagle, as Kuwait currently has the largest number of them, Zaidan said. This eagle is endangered and is tracked by EPA to implement international agreements regarding endangered birds, he pointed out. He confirmed an increase of protected areas to reach 15 percent of the total area of the country, indicating that the reserve is spread over 3.4 sq km, while expansion to the south and north of the reserve reaches 18 sq km. — KUNA

Shock moves by Erdogan...

Continued from Page 1

capital controls," economist Timothy Ash of BlueBay Asset Management said in a note to clients. "Erdogan affirmed that he believes in markets, albeit not interest rates."

Erdogan has cited Islamic rules against usury to defend his unconventional belief that high interest rates cause inflation. Economists almost universally agree that high lending costs actually lower prices by encouraging consumers to save and curbing business spending.

Erdogan has pushed the central bank to slash its policy rate to far below the annual pace of consumer price increases - now at 21 percent and expected climb substantially higher. This meant that Turks who put liras in their bank accounts were effectively losing money. Economists feared that Turkey could see a potentially paralyzing run on the banks unless something was done quickly.

Erdogan's new policy - dubbed an "indirect interest rate hike" by former treasury adviser Mahfi Egitmez - is meant to defend the value of lira holdings against fluctuations in the exchange rate. It guarantees that the government will cover any depreciation of new lira deposits against the dollar when the investments mature.

The finance ministry said individual Turks had to

hold their liras in the bank for at least three months for the policy to take effect. "In case the money is withdrawn from the account before the maturity date ... the right of (guaranteed) interest will be eliminated," the finance ministry said in a statement.

The policy is designed to manage inflation expectations and make Turks feel safer about their lira assets. "If the exchange rate increases by 40 percent, and the interest rate increases by 14 percent, 26 percentage points will be paid in compensation," Egitmez explained on Twitter.

The lira shot up by a further 22 percent early yesterday. It then erased all those gains before climbing back a few percentage points in the evening. A dollar was worth around 13.0 liras late yesterday. It has clawed back nearly 40 percent from its historic low but is still down 40 percent against the dollar since the year started.

Many analysts question whether Erdogan - struggling to rebuild his sagging approval ratings before an election due by mid-2023 - has settled on a sustainable economic model. "The treasury will pay for it with taxes," former Turkish economy minister Ali Babacan told reporters. "This is the dollarization of the country's economy."

Economists also expressed doubt about whether the move could truly protect Turks from rapid cost of living increases. "This scheme likely has bought time and avoided an immediate crash in the banking sector but it has done nothing to fight inflation," Analyst Jason Tuvey of Capital Economics interpreted the moves as "a sign that policymakers are trying to find ways to live with a weaker lira and won't shift back to orthodoxy." — AFP

Local

EPA promotes ecotourism with opening of Jahra Nature Reserve



KUWAIT: Ecotourism is a concept promoted with the opening of Jahra Nature Reserve, after years of fervent efforts by Kuwait's Environment Public Authority (EPA) and other concerned authorities to raise environmental awareness. The nature reserve houses several living creatures, including endangered migratory birds and others. The reserve is now open for visitors to enjoy and learn more about nature and ways to preserve it. — KUNA Photos



Proposal to scrap article 20; raise minimum wage

KUWAIT: The International Labor Organization (ILO) and the Public Authority for Manpower (PAM) discussed a proposal to cancel the domestic help law and abolish article 20 of the residency law. Instead, domestic workers can be integrated into the private sector labor section under article 18 of the law; a move that could help resolve the escalating problems related to this category of residents. Al-Qabas reported yesterday. Informed sources said this move would help protect domestic helpers, limit their working hours to eight and close the loopholes in the current law that some sponsors abuse by forcing helpers to work for 12 hours without a break.

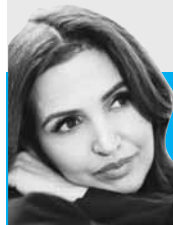
Sources said among the positives that will contribute to including domestic helpers under the private sector is committing the sponsor to open a bank account in which monthly salaries will be deposited, in addition to other legal requirements for holidays and leaves.

They said the domestic help department was expanded to protect helpers, receive complaints and follow them up or refer them to courts, in addition to coordinating with embassies of various countries with regards to the laborers' status in order to find solutions for them and make it easier to leave the country. They added that 300 Filipinos left the country recently after settling their affairs under the supervision of their embassy, while efforts are being made to resolve the problems of Sri Lankan workers.

The sources said ILO and PAM officials discussed during the meeting the use of technology to present innovative solutions, improve the work environment and utilize the Internet for inspections, which assures a wider reach of workplaces. Meanwhile, official sources said concerned authorities are contemplating an amendment to the labor law to increase the minimum wage from KD 75 to KD 100, according to a study to be ready soon.

In my view

Christmas and all that jazz



Nejouad Al-Yagout

There was talk of a Christmas tree that was removed from a shop at Avenues Mall because of sharia law; but then it was reported (fortunately enough) that the removal had absolutely nothing to do with religious reasons but was a result of a violation of regulations. Someone even stated that the tree was removed to another part of the same mall. Whatever the actual reason, and whatever the truth is, the rumor opened a can of worms. Locals were interviewed about their opinion regarding the incident, and there were a few people who stated that having a Christmas tree in public goes against Islamic principles. Thankfully, other locals did not see it as a threat at all, and some locals even liked the idea of a Christmas tree. To even think that this should be a question that is posed, or a matter of debate, in the first place is offensive since it exposes our prejudices. (One local who was interviewed stated clearly that we only have two holidays in this country—a reference, to the two Eids in the Islamic calendar). Fair enough, one might argue. But the question is, why is it when a non-Muslim country dissuades Islamic customs, it is considered Islamophobia, but in this region (or country, for that matter), there is no mention of the phobias we have of others nor an addressal of the blatant denial we have regarding our phobias?

This is 2021. In less than two weeks, it will be 2022. Today, to identify a country based on its religion is inaccurate since we are in an era of globalization, and we can see how an "us vs them" mentality has adversely affected the globe. In addition, this model does not work unless we revel in discrimination.

Yes, it is a predominantly Muslim country, just as there are predominately non-Muslim countries in this world. But all these countries allow temples and festivals of other religions. What about us, Kuwait? Why are we so hell-bent (pardon the pun) on remaining stuck in the realm of separation? Are most other Muslim countries (including most of our neighbors) "less Muslim" than us? And, if they are, what message are we sending: that Muslim countries should pride themselves on exclusivity?

In case we didn't get the memo, divisiveness is no longer du jour. The new earth is all about inclusivity. And if we are not ready for that, let's try tolerance (a euphemism for "We don't like you but okay, we'll coexist with you"). Even a dash of tolerance would do here. Even a dash.

Merry Christmas, Kuwait!

Health Minister urges abidance by Cabinet decisions on coronavirus

KUWAIT: Minister of Health Sheikh Dr Basel Al-Hmoud Al-Sabah stressed the importance of sticking to the Cabinet's decisions on health guidelines to maintain epidemiological stability in the country. Speaking to KUNA and Kuwait TV on Monday following the Cabinet's exceptional meeting, Dr Basel said the health situation is stable, thanks to Allah, but we need to maintain it. The Omicron variant has spread rapidly in many countries all over the world, and it is expected to prevail within two months, he said. Therefore, the decisions made by the Cabinet must be implemented and backed to preserve the good results achieved by the state, he noted.

The minister said that the decisions are in the public interest and maintain the stability of the epidemiological situation in Kuwait. He advised people not to travel at present, unless necessary, stressing the importance of abiding by health guidelines, mainly wearing face-masks in gathering places and closed-door areas. The minister urged all people to take a third booster shot of the anti-virus vaccine, as results have proved its efficacy against the variant or severe symptoms in case of infection. He thanked the ministry's staff and teams at all medical facilities who have been working over the past two years since the outbreak of the pandemic.

Earlier in the day, the Cabinet studied the ministerial coronavirus committee's recommendations and took some relevant decisions. Due to the tangible increase in the coronavirus cases in many countries around the world, the Cabinet advised both citizens and expats not to travel, unless necessary, and to follow all health guidelines and precautions to overcome this phase. The Cabinet tasked the field teams and committees with implementing accurately the health requirements to stem the outbreak of coronavirus.

The Cabinet said that all incoming passengers must have a negative PCR test 48 hours ahead of arrival in Kuwait. After arriving in Kuwait, the passengers are subject to a 10-day home quarantine, but they can end the quarantine before this period if they have a negative PCR test 72 hours after their arrival. This decision will come into effect as of December 26. Meanwhile, the Cabinet was briefed on Health Minister's decision that those who have been vaccinated against the COVID-19 nine months earlier must obtain a booster dose as of January 2.

Later Monday, Kuwait's Health Ministry announced that 80 people tested positive for COVID-19 in the past 24 hours, taking the total to 414,178. The recoveries rose by 25 to 411,118, while death toll from the pandemic remained unchanged at 2,466, the Ministry's Spokesman Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad said. There were three ICU cases as of Monday, while 594 others were being treated, in addition to 17 patients at COVID-19 wards, he noted. Medical swabs conducted over the same period hit 22,400, raising the total to 5,738,643, Sanad made clear. — KUNA



Health Minister Sheikh Dr Basel Al-Sabah

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Colors abound as Kuwait free art exhibit starts



KUWAIT: NCCAL's assistant secretary-general Dr Bader Al-Duweish tours the exhibition. — KUNA photos



Artworks displayed at the three-day free art exhibit.



KUWAIT: Ambassador of Romania to Kuwait Mugurel-Ioan Stanescu (center) with Chairman and CEO of AAW Faisal Ali Al-Mutawa and AAW Deputy CEO Ali Faisal Al-Mutawa.

AAW receives Romanian Ambassador to Kuwait

KUWAIT: Chairman and CEO of Ali Abdulwahab Al-Mutawa Commercial Co (AAW), Faisal Ali Al-Mutawa, and AAW Deputy CEO, Ali Faisal Al-Mutawa, welcomed at their offices the Ambassador of the Republic of Romania to Kuwait, Mugurel-Ioan Stanescu, on his first visit to the company's headquarters. Mutawa and Stanescu discussed the importance of growing trade between both countries and introducing leading Romanian products to the Kuwaiti market.

Hosting the Ambassador is part of AAW's initiative to develop business relationships with the private sectors of different countries with the goal of providing the Kuwaiti market with high-quality brands from across the world.

AAW Chairman and CEO, Faisal Ali Al-Mutawa, said: "We are very honored by the visit of the Ambassador of the Republic of Romania. The five decades of bilateral relations between our two countries have been built on mutual respect, friendship, and continuous collaboration. Kuwait was the first Gulf country to establish diplomatic relations with Romania, and today, through this meeting, we emphasize the importance of business partnerships to introduce high-quality Romanian products to different sectors of the Kuwaiti market. I thank the ambassador for taking time from his busy schedule to visit AAW. We look forward to welcoming the ambassador again and hope to continue exploring opportunities between the private sectors of our two countries."

AAW is one of the largest retail and distribution companies in Kuwait, with world-class operations in seven diverse retail divisions, representing over 100 global brands in the growing consumer market of Kuwait.



Colorful portraits on display.



Formative publications by Kuwaiti researcher Saleh Al-Mesbah.

KUWAIT: A three-day free art exhibit, including a musical segment, opened in Kuwait yesterday with a myriad of colorful portraits on display, bringing together a bevy of local artists. The works displayed cover vast subjects ranging from Kuwait's rich civilization to women's empowerment, creating for a visual spectacle for those in attendance. — KUNA

Indian Embassy hosts 'Evening of Carols'

KUWAIT: To celebrate the festivities of Christmas and the New Year, Indian Embassy, Kuwait on Monday hosted an 'Evening of Carols', a musical ensemble of Indians in Kuwait presented beautifully by Kuwait Chamber Chorale. The embassy team, led by Ambassador Sibi George and his spouse Joice Sibi, was joined by ambassadors in Kuwait, diplomatic spouses and family and the Indian community for the unique and joyful celebration of India's eclectic diversity of cultural traditions and festivals. The synchronous notes of much-loved Christmas carols from around the world and Indian patriotic songs filled the air with joy and cheer, emblematic of the festive time.

In his opening remarks, the ambassador said, "In Kuwait, like every other part of the world, one comes across a large number of Indians from all over India. They are symbols of India's unity in diversity. We come from different parts of India, we speak several hundred languages, we follow different faiths, we celebrate different festivals, we eat different foods, we wear different clothes, but there is a feeling of oneness and common consciousness, a civilizational bond, that keeps us together, make us all proud as Indians," he said.

In India, we celebrate all festivals,



KUWAIT: A group photo taken during the event.

whether it is Onam or Bishakhi, Holi or Dusserah, Diwali or Rakshabandan, Christmas or Easter, Eid ul-Fitr or Eid ul-Adha. These are all celebrated as festivals of India, celebrated by one and all," he said.

"This unity in diversity is something very few countries in the world can be proud of. When I welcome you today to this carol evening, I proudly bring to you greetings from that ancient land of India, an ancient but continuous civilization where all major religions and cultures thrive and flourish," the ambassador said. The ambassador recalled the words of greetings from President of India who in his Christmas message last year had said, "Merry Christmas to everyone! I hope this festive nurtures peace and prosperity, and helps strengthen harmony in society. Let us follow Christ's teachings of love, compassion, and charity, commit-



Indian Ambassador to Kuwait Sibi George is joined in cutting the cake during the ceremony.

ting ourselves to the welfare of our society and nation."

He also quoted Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi who in his Christmas message said "Merry Christmas! We remember, with immense joy, the noble thoughts of

Jesus Christ. He epitomized spirit of service and compassion, devoting his life towards alleviating human suffering. His teachings inspire millions across the world," he added. The event was also live streamed on social media and watched by a large number of viewers.

Ooredoo announces strategic partnership with Al-Najat Charity

KUWAIT: Ooredoo Telecom, the first to launch innovated digital services in Kuwait, announced its strategic partnership with the Al-Najat Charity, a well reputed and recognized Kuwaiti Charity, to provide a set of state-of-the-art Data Center, Cloud, Cyber security and ICT solutions to host Al-Najat Charity servers' network infrastructures and main websites. Doing so positions Ooredoo Kuwait as the primary driver of leading Al-Najat Charity's digital transformation journey.

On Tuesday, December 21, 2021, Ooredoo Kuwait held a high profile signing ceremony at Ooredoo Tower to announce its partnership with Al-Najat Charity. The signing ceremony was attended by Abdulaziz Yaqoub Al-Babtain - Chief Executive Officer; Essa AlMoosa, Executive Director of Business and Consumer Sales; Mijbil Alayoub - Senior Director, Corporate Communications; Mohammed Yousef - ICT and Technical Account Management; and Nazem Al-Ghabra - Manager, Corporate Communications, Ooredoo Kuwait.

Appearing alongside them were Abdullah Al-Shehab - Head of the Programs and Projects Sector and commissioned general manager; Omar Al-Thuwaini - Deputy General Manager of Resources and Media; Faisal Al-Sharrah - Director of the Investment department and commissioned legal director; in addition to Hazem Sulaiman - Director



Ooredoo Kuwait CEO Abdulaziz Yaqoub Al-Babtain (left) and Acting General Manager of Al-Najat Charity Abdullah Al-Shehab sign the agreement.

of information technology, Al-Najat Charity.

Together they announced of main objectives of the partnership agreement, that is Ooredoo Kuwait will be offering innovative Cloud solutions utilizing the latest technologies, skills, capabilities and expertise it possesses at this field to enhance the digital infrastructure of Al-Najat Charity. Ooredoo will also provide a comprehensive disaster recovery solution which are increasing becoming mandatory for companies as part of compliance and data protection regulations around the world.

By providing Al-Najat Charity with an instant link to three top-tier Data Centers, the service means they can be sure they will have seamlessly access to their systems and the capacity to recover all data - even if their own data center is damaged



KUWAIT: Officials stand for a group photo during the ceremony to sign the agreement.

by fire, flood or natural disaster. By hosting critical IT infrastructure at the Data Centers, Al-Najat Charity will have total protection in an emergency.

Further, Ooredoo will offer Managed Storage and backup Service which provides highly available, highly scaled data storage with data protection for customer systems located in the Kuwait Data Center. Ooredoo's service is a dynamic solution designed for businesses that need to store multiple applications and various workloads, with a minimal investment.

In his address to the partnership, Abdulaziz Yaqoub Al-Babtain, CEO of Ooredoo Kuwait, said: "In today's fast evolving digital world, Ooredoo's strategy aims to lay the foundations for digital transformation to be the leading company in digitization and innovation in the country, enriching people's digital lives, enhancing the economy and creating an inclusive digital society. Thus, our partnership with Al-Najat Charity comes to be a tangible

reflection of our capabilities and skills in digital future, robust Cyber Security services and resilient technology infrastructure."

At the signing ceremony announcing the new partnership between Ooredoo Kuwait and Al-Najat Charity, Abdullah Al-Shehab, Head of Programs and Projects Sector and Acting General Manager of Al-Najat Charity, thanked Ooredoo for its continuous support and said: "The plan is to build out a map to lead the digital transformation journey of Al-Najat Charity and create a safer and smoother customer experience. Utilizing Ooredoo Kuwait's innovative technologies allow early cyber-attacks detection and intervention which are key to our sensitive data security."

"We are beyond proud of our partnership with the country's leading telecom operator, Ooredoo Kuwait, as our shared vision will inevitably contribute to tackling the digital gap getting the most from going digital, responsibly and safely," Shehab added.



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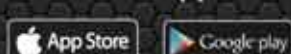
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International

14 dead, 70,000 displaced in worst Malaysian flooding

Volunteers step in to provide food and boats for rescue effort

SHAH ALAM, Malaysia: The Malaysian military used boats yesterday to distribute food to desperate people trapped in their homes after massive floods, as the death toll rose to 14 with over 70,000 displaced. Days of torrential rain triggered some of the worst flooding in years across the country at the weekend, swamping cities and villages and cutting off major roads.

Selangor-the country's wealthiest and most densely populated state, encircling the capital Kuala Lumpur-is one of the worst-hit areas. Some parts of state capital Shah Alam were still under water yesterday, and military personnel in boats distributed food to people stuck in their homes and government shelters. Kartik Subramany fled his house as floodwaters rose, and took refuge in a school for 48 hours before being evacuated with his family to a shelter.

"My house is totally damaged, my two cars are wrecked," the 29-year-old told AFP. "These are the worst floods of my entire life. The federal government has failed the people miserably-it has failed in its primary function to protect and safeguard lives." He is among a growing number attacking what they say is a slow and inadequate official response.

Thousands of emergency service and military personnel have been mobilised, but critics say it is not enough and volunteers have stepped in to provide food and boats for the rescue effort. An AFP

journalist in one hard-hit Shah Alam neighbourhood saw people desperate for food snatching items from a devastated supermarket.

'Hopeless' official response

Opposition MP Fuziah Salleh described the official response as "hopeless" and "incompetent". "No early warning of the torrential rain was given," she told AFP. "It is so sad lives have been lost." Opposition politicians have accused the government of ignoring their calls to better prepare for the monsoon season, from November to February, particularly by improving drainage in densely populated urban areas.

Yesterday, the death toll from the floods rose to 14, including eight in Selangor and six in the eastern state of Pahang, official news agency Bernama reported. But with reports of people still missing, it is expected to increase. More than 71,000 people have been forced from their homes due to the floods, including 41,000 in Pahang and 27,000 in Selangor, according to official data.

Evacuees are being housed in government relief centres but officials have warned to expect a rise in coronavirus cases linked to the crowded shelters. The rain has stopped and in many areas floodwaters have receded, leaving residents to count the cost.

"I've been doing business for more than 24 years... this has never happened before," said



SHAH ALAM, Malaysia: People walk past cars partially submerged in floodwaters in Shah Alam, Selangor yesterday, as Malaysia faces massive floods that have left at least 14 dead and more than 70,000 displaced. —AFP

Mohammad Awal, whose cosmetic shop outside Kuala Lumpur was flooded. The Southeast Asian nation is hit by floods annually during the monsoon season, but those at the weekend were the worst since 2014 when over 100,000 people were forced

from their homes.

Global warming has been linked to worsening floods. Because a warmer atmosphere holds more water, climate change increases the risk and intensity of flooding from extreme rainfall. —AFP

News in brief

Suspect denies Amess murder

LONDON: A 25-year-old man yesterday denied murdering British MP David Amess, who was stabbed to death while meeting constituents earlier this year. At a hearing at the Old Bailey court in central London, Ali Harbi Ali pleaded not guilty to murder and preparing acts of terrorism. Ali, from north London, was arrested at the scene of the stabbing at a Methodist church in Leigh-on-Sea in southeast England, on October 15. Amess, a 69-year-old father of five, was a long-serving member of parliament for Prime Minister Boris Johnson's Conservative party. His killing was the second of a British MP in the past five years, and has led to calls for better safety for elected representatives. Ali, wearing a blue sweatshirt and grey jogging bottoms, spoke only to confirm his identity and enter his pleas at the brief hearing. The separate charge of preparing acts of terrorism is alleged to have taken place between May 1, 2019 and September this year. —AFP

Zuma can appeal return to jail

JOHANNESBURG: South Africa's former president Jacob Zuma can appeal a court ruling last week that he should not enjoy medical parole and should return to jail. High Court Judge Elias Matojane ruled last Wednesday that the September decision to place the 79-year-old on medical parole was "unlawful". The same judge yesterday decided to allow an appeal. "In my view, this matter merits the Supreme Court of Appeal's attention," he said at the end of a virtual hearing. He said another court may find that Zuma should be treated with "compassion, empathy and humanity" because of his ill health and advanced age. The former president was handed a 15-month jail sentence in July for contempt of court after he refused to give testimony to corruption investigators. —AFP

Two drug dealers arrested

MADRID: Spanish police have arrested two suspected drug dealers who were raffling off a Christmas basket containing cocaine, hashish, alcohol-and a leg of cured ham, they said yesterday. Officers discovered the unusual lottery when they raided a drug den allegedly operated by the two men, a Spaniard and an Argentinian, in the eastern city of Murcia, the police said in a statement, without adding when the arrests took place. On the wall they found a list of clients taking part in two raffles to win a "narco-basket", one on Christmas Day and the other on Epiphany on January 6, a major holiday in Spain, it added. "The basket... included cocaine, hashish, tobacco, cash and even an eight-kilo cured ham," police said. Tickets cost five euros (\$5) for the Christmas lottery and 10 euros (\$11) for the second draw, according to pictures released by police of hand-written signs found on the walls of the drug den. —AFP

Madagascar minister swims 12 hours

ANTANANARIVO: A Madagascan minister was one of two survivors to have swum some 12 hours to shore yesterday after their helicopter crashed off the island's northeastern coast, authorities said. A search was still ongoing for two other passengers after the crash Monday, whose cause was not immediately clear, police and port authorities said. Serge Gelle, the country's secretary of state for police, and a fellow policeman reached land in the seaside town of Mahambo separately yesterday morning, apparently after ejecting themselves from the aircraft, port authority chief Jean-Edmond Randrianantenaina said. In a video shared on social media, 57-year-old Gelle appears lying exhausted on a deck chair, still in his camouflage uniform. "My time to die hasn't come yet," says the general, adding he is cold but not injured. Gella became minister as part of a cabinet reshuffle in August after serving in the police for three decades. —AFP

Iran, unlike West, upbeat about nuclear talks, say experts

TEHRAN: Iran believes it has scored points in the Vienna talks meant to revive its tattered 2015 nuclear deal by managing to include sanctions relief in discussion documents for the next round, experts say. The lifting of the punishing sanctions regime then-US president Donald Trump imposed when he pulled Washington out of the agreement in 2018 has been Tehran's top priority.

European powers have voiced frustration at a lack of progress so far in the Vienna talks, which their diplomats warned Friday are "rapidly reaching the end of the road". But from Tehran's perspective, there has been progress, say Iranian officials and political analysts from the Islamic republic and abroad.

"The parties have agreed on two new texts, the result of intense discussions in recent days in Vienna," Iranian foreign ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh said Monday. "These are documents in which Iran's position has been taken

en into account... and on the basis of which we can continue future discussions."

Bernard Hourcade, a French expert on Iran, said Tehran had "succeeded in this session in convincing their interlocutors that the sanctions must be settled as a priority, because this will pave the way for technical settlement of the nuclear component".

He said Iran regularly stresses that it has "always respected" the original 2015 deal, called the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), and "that it is up to the United States, which has flouted its honour, to repair the damage".

Iran, Hourcade added, "knows the balance of power is to its advantage because it is now at the threshold, that it is able in the short term, like about 30 other countries in the world, to manufacture an atomic bomb if it wishes. It can enrich uranium whenever it wants."

Preparing 'alternatives'

The parties to the 2015 deal with Iran-Britain, China, France, Germany, Russia and the United States-saw it as the best way to stop it developing a nuclear weapons capability, a goal Tehran has always denied pursuing. Iran pledged to reduce its nuclear activities, which are monitored by the International Atomic Energy

Biden focuses on testing, vaccines to fight Omicron

WASHINGTON: Faced with a surging Omicron variant, US authorities will distribute 500 million free COVID-19 tests, mobilize military medical personnel if needed and increase vaccination capacity, a senior White House official said yesterday. "We have the tools to get through this wave," the official said, noting there are no plans to impose new restrictions.

If Americans "are vaccinated and follow the precautions that we all know well, especially masking when traveling, they should feel comfortable celebrating Christmas and the holidays." "There is no need to lock down our schools, nor our economy," the official said.

The Joe Biden administration's response is based on three principles: more hospital resources, more testing and more vaccines. The federal government will mobilize 1,000 doctors, nurses and military medical personnel to be deployed across the country as needed

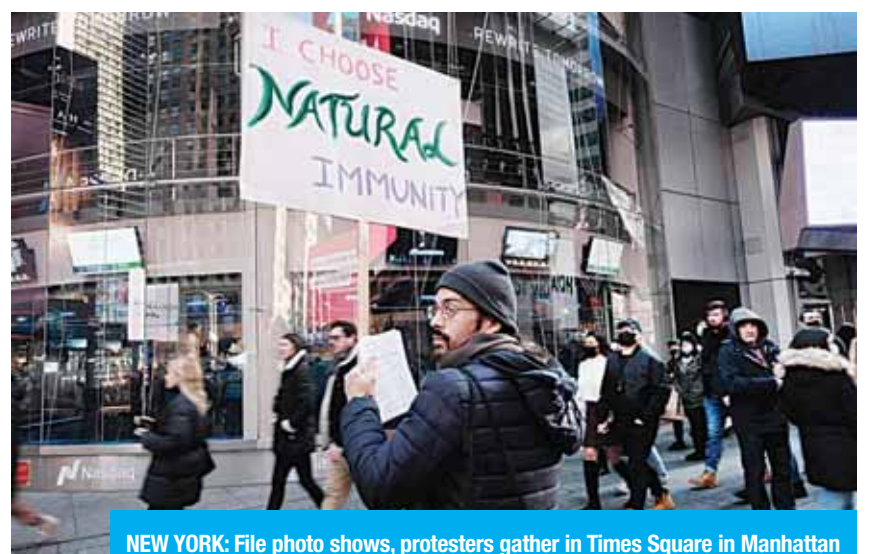
in January and February.

Washington is already sending additional emergency teams to the states of Michigan, Indiana, Wisconsin, Arizona, New Hampshire and Vermont. The government is also preparing emergency transport and equipment, including protective gear and respirators, for hospitals that may need them.

"We're prepared for what we think will be an increase in unvaccinated hospitalizations in the coming months," the official said. Biden's administration will also take action in an area where it has been heavily criticized-COVID screening-by purchasing 500 million at-home rapid tests.

The COVID tests will be delivered free of charge to Americans who request them via a dedicated website, starting in January. The government is also promising to open new vaccination centers. "We should take Omicron seriously, but this is a cause for concern, not a cause for panic," the official said, echoing a sentiment often stressed by Biden.

The president was elected on promises to defeat the virus and protect Americans after the mixed messages of Donald Trump. But getting the virus under control has proved difficult in a country where vaccination and mask-



NEW YORK: File photo shows, protesters gather in Times Square in Manhattan to show their opposition to COVID-19 vaccines in New York City. —AFP

wearing have become divisive political issues, and federal mandates end up in protracted legal battles.

Biden has attempted to impose vaccine mandates on private businesses and federal employees but has resorted in recent weeks to little more than publicly beseeching people to get their shots. He has also decided not to impose further restrictions for the time

being, such as by imposing regulations on domestic flights.

Shows and sporting events are increasingly getting canceled in the United States, while some cities such as Boston are implementing beefed up health protocols. In some areas, schools have decided to temporarily switch to virtual learning after the winter vacation. —AFP

China's Xi'an tests millions as COVID cases rise

BEIJING: The Chinese city of Xi'an began testing millions of residents for the coronavirus yesterday after the detection of more than 40 new cases raised concerns of wider transmission ahead of a busy travel season. China, where the virus was first detected, has slowed new cases to a trickle since the middle of last year through border restrictions, targeted lockdowns and lengthy quarantines as it pursues a zero-COVID strategy.

But the world's second-largest economy is now fighting local outbreaks in several cities, including key industrial hubs in the east and south. Authorities are keen to extinguish the flare-ups ahead of a crucial period that will see the capital Beijing host the Winter

Olympics in February as well as a surge in cross-country travel during the Lunar New Year.

Xi'an-a historic northwestern city of around 13 million people-recorded 42 new cases yesterday, bringing the total number detected since December 9 to 91, according to figures from the provincial health commission. The city has also shut schools and large indoor recreation venues while encouraging residents to avoid going out and congregating in large groups, according to local government notices.

The museum housing the world-famous Terracotta Army-the 2,000-year-old mausoleum of China's first emperor-said in an online statement that it had closed from Sunday "according to the needs of epidemic prevention work", without giving a reopening date. COVID-19 is not the only scourge to hit Xi'an in recent weeks, with the city also logging several cases of potentially deadly haemorrhagic fever since the beginning of winter. Local authorities have urged calm about the rodent-borne disease, saying it is common across northern China and easily preventable through vaccination. —AFP



XIAN, SHAANXI, China: A medical worker takes a sample from a resident to be tested for the COVID-19 coronavirus in Xi'an, in China's northern Shaanxi province yesterday, after the detection of more than 40 new cases raised concerns of wider transmission ahead of a busy travel season. —AFP

International

Troops race to deliver aid to Philippine typhoon survivors

Another storm could be on the way

LOBOC, Philippines: Troops raced yesterday to deliver food and water to typhoon-ravaged islands of the Philippines as charities appealed for aid to help hundreds of thousands left homeless by the deadly storm.

At least 375 people were killed and hundreds injured when Typhoon Rai pummelled the southern and central regions of the archipelago on Thursday, wiping out wooden houses, uprooting trees and knocking out power across entire islands.

"Our food is about to run out, probably in a few days or tomorrow," Simplicia Pedrablanca, a town mayor in the Dinagat Islands, told local radio station DZBB. More than 400,000 people were sheltering in evacuation centres or with relatives, the national disaster agency said, after their homes were damaged or destroyed by the strongest typhoon to hit the country this year.

One of the hardest-hit islands was Bohol — known for its beaches and dive spots — where at least 96 people have died, provincial Governor Arthur Yap said on Facebook.

A state of calamity has been declared on the island where people sat under umbrellas next to their empty water drums. Yap said the province had run out of money and pleaded for President Rodrigo Duterte's government to send funds to buy food and drinking water for desperate families.

"If you won't send money to buy food, send soldiers and police because there will be looting here," Yap warned during an interview with DZBB. While other parts of the Philippines celebrated Christmas, Bohol was "undergoing a Yolanda-like situation", he added, using the local name for Typhoon Haiyan in 2013.

On nearby Negros island, Carl Arapoc, 23, told

AFP there was no electricity in his city and his family was using "driftwood" to cook. There has also been widespread destruction on Siargao, Dinagat and Mindanao islands, which bore the brunt of the storm, packing winds of 195 kilometres (120 miles) per hour.

"It was really, really bad, the strongest storm I ever witnessed in my life," said Tal Oran, an Israeli living in the Siargao tourist town General Luna.



Families are using 'driftwood' to cook

'All available assets'

Defence Secretary Delfin Lorenzana has ordered the military to deploy ships, boats, aircraft and trucks to deliver food, drinking water and medical supplies to survivors, who have been struggling for basic necessities.

The Red Cross is also flying relief to popular holiday destinations Siargao and Bohol islands.

"The emergency appeal by IFRC helps us to act swiftly and do all we can to help people and families get back on their feet," said Alberto Bocanegra, head of the International Federation of Red Cross



SURIGAO CITY, Philippines: In this handout photo taken on December 20, 2021 and received from Greenpeace yesterday, residents queue up to receive relief goods at a village in Surigao city, surigao del norte province, days after super Typhoon Rai devastated the city. —AFP

and Red Crescent Societies in the Philippines.

The organisation has appealed for \$22 million to fund urgent relief and recovery efforts. The UK has pledged around \$1 million to the IFRC effort, while Canada promised about \$2.3 million in assistance. Hundreds of residents in Surigao City, on the northern tip of Mindanao, packed out an undercover basketball court on Monday to receive food handouts.

"Never in my entire life have I encountered such a

typhoon," said Catholic Bishop Antonieto Cabajog in Surigao. "To say 'super' is an understatement," he told a Catholic church-run news agency. Rai hit the Philippines late in the typhoon season: most cyclones develop between July and October. Another storm could be on the way. The state weather agency warned a low pressure area was moving towards Mindanao and had a "30-40% chance to develop into a tropical depression". —AFP

Indian fined for wanting PM's face cut from vaccine drive

NEW DELHI: An Indian man went to court to complain about Prime Minister Narendra Modi promoting himself as the face of the nation's COVID vaccination drive—but walked away yesterday with a fine for wasting the judge's time.

The Hindu nationalist leader has been the focus of a massive advertising blitz touting his government's triumphs in fighting the pandemic despite nearly 500,000 Indians dying of COVID-19. His visage has been plastered on billboards and even the side of passenger planes alongside a triumphant message celebrating India's recent milestone of one billion administered vaccination doses.

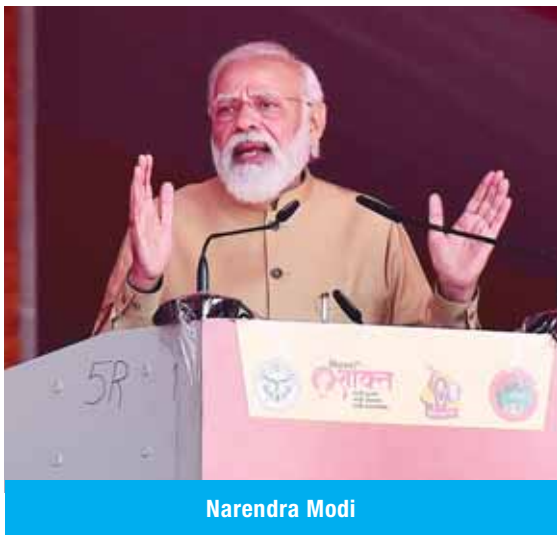
The campaign is at odds with the fierce criticism levelled at his government since the pandemic

began, with political opponents dryly suggesting his face should also be printed on the death certificates of COVID victims. Peter Myaliparampil of southern Kerala state had objected to Modi's face being printed on his vaccine certificate with a message exhorting the public to fight the coronavirus.

He told a court that India's inoculation rollout risked becoming "a media campaign" for Modi's benefit. In his petition, Myaliparampil said he had paid for his own vaccine and the image of Modi on his certificate "served no utility or relevance". But the Kerala High Court threw out the case, saying it appeared to be politically motivated and fined him 100,000 rupees (\$1,322) for wasting its time.

"If the petitioner... is ashamed to see the picture of his Prime Minister, he can avert his eyes to the bottom side of the vaccine certificate," the court's judgement said. Myaliparampil's lawyer told AFP that they would appeal the decision. India has recorded more than 477,000 confirmed COVID deaths, more than any other country except the United States and Brazil.

The government has justified using Modi as the



Narendra Modi

face of the media campaign, with the junior health minister telling parliament in August that it created awareness about coronavirus prevention. —AFP

NGOs decry uphill battle for legitimacy in Greece

ATHENS: Raging seas, pitiless hours and now red tape. Refugee aid groups in Greece, some with years of experience in the field, say trying to get onto the government's mandatory NGO registry is nothing short of an uphill struggle. "You bring one (document), they ask for something else," said a source involved in the process, who asked not to be identified.

"It's like Sisyphus pushing up the rock," the source added, referring to the mythical ancient king condemned for eternity to roll a boulder up a hill. A number of organisations with a years-long record of helping asylum seekers now face a "hostile" environment in Greece, while several newcomer groups are essentially waved through, the source told AFP.

The conservative government of Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis—which is seeking to discourage migra-



LESBOS ISLAND, Greece: File photo taken on March 28, 2020 members of NGO "Team Humanity" shares handmade protective face masks to migrants and refugees in the camp of Moria in the island of Lesbos as the country is under lockdown to stop the spread of COVID-19 disease caused by the novel coronavirus. —AFP

tion-set new registry requirements in February 2020 after an initial database was established by the previous leftist administration.

It says it has a duty to vet all organisations and staff coming into close daily contact with vulnerable people for possible crimes, including

sexual abuse and drug trafficking. But the rejection of veteran aid groups and the impact for those they seek to help has raised concerns including beyond Greece's borders.

'Taking back control'

With Greece a key gateway for

migrants into Europe, the government has bolstered border patrols, tightened asylum laws and curtailed refugee benefits. Athens also assumed responsibility for EU-funded programmes previously run by the UN refugee agency.

"We have taken back control," Migration Minister Notis Mitarachi said last week. In September, a new law also made it illegal for charities to undertake rescues at sea, unless they work in close conjunction with the coastguard or the coastguard is absent from the area and approves the operation. Failure to comply carries a fine of at least 500 euros (\$565) per participant, at least 3,000 euros for the organisation and a minimum prison sentence of up to a year.

The Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights Dunja Mijatovic warned that the law "would seriously hinder the life-saving work carried out at sea by NGOs, and their human rights monitoring capacities in the Aegean." In November, some two dozen humanitarian activists went on trial on the Greek island of Lesbos for helping migrants reach the island three years ago. Greece has faced persistent accusations that it illegally repels migrants at sea, which it has steadfastly denied. —AFP

ties have told death row inmates just hours before an execution is carried out. Two prisoners are suing the government over the system, which they argue is illegal and causes psychological distress.

The pair are also seeking compensation of 22 million yen (\$194,000) for the distress caused by living with uncertainty about their execution date. In December 2020, Japan's top court overturned a ruling blocking the retrial of a man described as the world's longest-serving death row prisoner, raising new hope for the now 85-year-old.

Iwao Hakamada has lived under a death sentence for more than half a century after being convicted in 1968 of robbing and murdering his boss, the man's wife, and their two teenage children. But he and his supporters say he confessed to the crime only after an allegedly brutal police interrogation that included beatings, and that evidence in the case was planted.

Worldwide, at least 483 people were executed last year in 18 countries, according to rights watchdog Amnesty International. That represents a drop of around a quarter from the year before, and fits a downward trend since 2015. —AFP

News in brief

Putin warns over Ukraine threats

MOSCOW: President Vladimir Putin warned yesterday that Russia is prepared to take "military-technical measures" in response to "unfriendly" Western actions over the Ukraine conflict, in a sharp escalation of rhetoric. The Russian president has for weeks accused the United States and the Washington-led NATO military alliance of stoking tensions near Moscow's borders, but these were his first comments hinting at potential conflict. "In the event of the continuation of the obviously aggressive stance by our Western colleagues, we will take appropriate retaliatory military-technical measures," he told a defence ministry meeting. Russia "will react toughly to unfriendly steps," Putin said, adding that he wants "to emphasise that we have every right to do so."

Thailand reimposes quarantine

BANGKOK: Thailand reimposed mandatory coronavirus quarantine measures for foreign tourists yesterday, nixing a quarantine-free travel scheme as the kingdom seeks to stifle the spread of the Omicron variant. The pandemic has clobbered the country's tourism-dominated economy, which last year experienced its worst performance since the 1997 Asian financial crisis. In early November Thailand reopened to fully vaccinated travellers—who had to isolate for a night until they received a negative PCR test—from more than 60 countries. But the government announced yesterday the so-called "Test and Go" scheme will be suspended for at least two weeks. Visitors will have to undergo hotel quarantine for 10 days, or 14 days if they are unvaccinated.

8 killed in Nigeria clashes

KANO: Eight people were killed at the weekend in ethnic clashes between herders and farmers in central Nigeria's Nasarawa state, police said yesterday, although locals put the toll at over 20. Violence erupted on Friday and continued through Sunday when armed Fulani herders attacked villages of the Tiv ethnic group over the killing of a kinsman which they blamed on Tiv farmers, said Ramhan Nansel, Nasarawa state police spokesman. "We received a complaint on the killing of a Fulani herdsman but while the investigation was ongoing, a reprisal attack was carried out in Hangara village and neighbouring Kwayero village", Nansel said. "Eight people were killed in the attacks and their bodies were recovered by the police and taken to hospital," he said.

Ex-priest jailed for child sex abuse

OECUSSE: A defrocked American priest was jailed for 12 years yesterday for sexually abusing children at an East Timor shelter, in a case that caused sharp divisions in the deeply Catholic nation. At least 15 women had accused Richard Daschbach, 84, of sexually abusing them when they were children at his shelter in the enclave of Oecusse, with fears that there may be many more victims. A panel of judges found the ex-priest guilty of several sex crimes at the shelter, which was founded in the early 1990s and housed hundreds of orphans and impoverished children. —AFP

Japan executes three prisoners in first hangings since 2019

TOKYO: Japan hanged three prisoners yesterday, its first executions in two years, with the government saying it was necessary to maintain capital punishment in the face of continued "atrocious crimes". Japan is one of the few developed countries to keep the death penalty, and public support for capital punishment remains high despite international criticism, especially from rights groups.

More than 100 people are currently on death row in Japan, most of them for mass murder. Executions are carried out by hanging, usually long after sentencing. One of the three executed yesterday was Yasutaka Fujishiro, 65, who used a hammer and knife to kill his 80-year-old aunt, two cousins and four others in 2004, a justice ministry spokeswoman told AFP.

The other two were 54-year-old Tomoaki Takanezawa, who killed two clerks at an arcade game parlour in 2003, and his accomplice Mitsunori Onogawa, 44. The executions were the first under Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, who took office in October. Whether to keep the death sentence or not is an important issue that concerns the foundation of Japan's criminal justice system," deputy chief cabinet secretary Seiji Kihara said.

"Given that atrocious crimes keep occurring one after another, it is necessary to execute those whose guilt is extremely grave so it is inappropriate to abolish capital punishment." Members of the Japan Federation of Bar Associations "strongly protest" yesterday's executions, the body's president Tadashi Ara said in a statement. Ara urged the government to "abolish capital punishment and stop all executions until it is abolished".

Half a century on death row

Japan executed three death row inmates in 2019 and 15 in 2018 — including 13 from the Aum Shinrikyo cult that carried out a fatal 1995 sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway. For decades, authori-

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 22, 2021

Business

Foreign shoppers swarm Turkey after lira crash

‘For us, the crisis is good, but it is very bad for the Turkish people’

EDIRNE, Turkey: The sea of Bulgarian buses parked outside a market in Turkey’s historic city of Edirne betrays the scale of the currency crisis impeding President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s path to a third decade of rule. The mosque-filled city on Turkey’s western edge was an early capital of the Ottoman Empire when it was expanding across the Middle East and Europe in the 14th and 15th centuries.

It is now the place where shoppers from Bulgaria and the Balkans—themselves some of Europe’s poorest countries—go to stock up on everything from underwear to walnuts at a fraction of their cost back home. “For us, the crisis is good, but it is very bad for the Turkish people,” said tour guide Daniela Mircheva before boarding a bus back to her Bulgarian hometown of Yambol.

“We were in a similar situation maybe 10, 11, 12 years ago,” the 49-year-old said, in reference to the 2008 global financial crisis. “It is very difficult.”

‘Half the price’

Turkey’s beleaguered lira has crashed under the weight of an unusual economic experiment Erdogan is conducting in a bid to boost support before elections due by mid-2023. Erdogan has pushed the central bank to slash interest rates in fervently-held belief that this will finally cure Turkey’s chronic inflation problem. It has-as economists had universally predicted—done the exact opposite.

Consumer prices are climbing at an annual rate of more than 20 percent. Some economists think this pace could accelerate in the coming months. The lira has shed a third of its value since the start of November alone. It was beginning to lose five percent a day until Erdogan announced new currency support measures Monday that managed to suspend the slide.

This means Mircheva can afford to pile a few extra jugs of sunflower oil on her bus packed with Bulgarian shoppers. “It is half the price it is in

Bulgaria. It is much cheaper for us, much cheaper,” she said. But the mood among the market’s Turkish traders is grim.

‘Humiliating’

“It is humiliating,” said Gulsen Kaya from behind her counter filled with sweaters and winter clothes. “Look at what he has done to Turkey!” Erdogan is betting that a cheap lira will create exports-driven growth that puts Turkey on a path followed by China during an economic transformation that pulled millions out of poverty and created a new middle class. He championed the poor when bringing his Islamic-rooted party to power against all odds in 2002.

Erdogan then surprised many by opening Turkey up to foreign investment and marshaling nearly a decade of vigorous growth. Economists and diplomats—as well as some Bulgarians—struggle to understand why Erdogan has decided to reverse course so dramatically in the past few years.

“I think that the people who rule Turkey, if they do the things that I think they should do, then the lira will come back to the levels it was in the summer very, very quickly,” Bulgarian shopper Tinko Garev said. “I am very unhappy for the Turkish people because I realise what these cheaper prices mean for them.”

One senior Western official said the drop in Erdogan’s approval ratings in most polls to as low as 30 percent had put the veteran Turkish leader “in political survival mode”. “You can choose not to believe (individual polls) but the trajectory is clear,” the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said. “He is down to the very bottom of his base of support.”

‘We are in shock’

Bulent Reisoglu has been running the Edirne market since it opened after moving from its original location in Istanbul 15 years ago. He said the



EDIRNE, Turkey: Tourists shop in a bazaar in Edirne, near Bulgaria border in Turkey. —AFP

number of weekly shoppers filling his hangar-like trading center has ballooned from 50,000 to nearly 150,000 since the full effects of the crisis set in.

“The number of foreign shoppers have gone up four- or five-fold,” he said. Yet the merchants are making less money because the extra sales are more than offset by the depth of the lira’s collapse.

“Our suppliers are sending us new price lists every week,” market trader Utku Bitmez complained. “All the raw materials come from abroad, from Europe, China and Italy,” he said. “The

price of these products has doubled since last year.” Reisoglu said he watches merchants nervously eyeing the latest lira exchange rates on their phones.

“We are in shock,” the market manager said. “No one expected this big of a devaluation.” The Bulgarian shoppers also seemed to have mixed feelings about getting such great deals. “Local people cannot buy all these things,” said Ilyana Todorova while shopping for clothes with her teenage daughter. “For ordinary people, it is no good.” —AFP

CB: Lebanon needs \$12-15 billion to kickstart recovery

BEIRUT: Lebanon needs to receive 12 to 15 billion dollars from its partners to kickstart its economic recovery and shore up fast-diminishing foreign currency reserves, Central Bank Governor Riad Salameh said yesterday. Lebanon is grappling with an unprecedented economic crisis branded by the World Bank as one of the planet’s worst in modern times.

More than 80 percent of the population lives in poverty and the currency has lost more than 90 percent of its black market value amid political squabbling that has delayed an agreement with the International Monetary Fund. “Our quota in the International Monetary Fund is 4 billion,” Salameh said in an AFP interview.

“If countries add to it, we could reach 12 to 15 billion, an amount that could help start Lebanon’s recovery and restore confidence,” he said. Lebanon defaulted on its debt for the first time last year but political leaders have continued to resist key reforms

demanding by donors to unlock necessary funds.

Meanwhile, the central bank’s mandatory dollar reserves have been slashed by more than half, according to Salameh, who is widely viewed as a key culprit behind an economic crash many blame on central bank policies.

“The mandatory reserves are around 12.5 billion dollars,” that the central bank can’t spend, Salameh said, explaining that an additional \$1.5 billion in reserves had been freed up for central bank spending. The mandatory reserves stood at \$32 billion before the start of the economic crisis in 2019.

Obsolete exchange rate

Salameh dismissed criticism blaming him for the crisis, saying that “had it not been for the central bank and its reserves, Lebanon would not have been able to carry on”. “The central bank deals with the outcome of the crisis, it is not the side causing it.” The fast-diminishing reserves are threatening a subsidy program that had initially covered fuel, medicine, flour and other key imports before it petered out.

The central bank can afford to finance partial subsidies on a few remaining key imports for “around six to nine months,” if no additional measures are taken to combat the depreciation of the Lebanese pound, Salameh said. Officially pegged at 1,507 to the green-



BEIRUT, Lebanon: Lebanon’s Central Bank Governor Riad Salameh gestures during an interview with AFP at his office in the capital Beirut Monday. —AFP

back since 1997, the Lebanese pound sold for nearly 30,000 to the dollar on the black market earlier this month, a record low.

The official fixed rate is “no longer realistic”, Salameh said, while explaining that a unified exchange rate would be unlikely in the absence of an IMF agreement and political stability. —AFP

Residents revolt against UK sewage dumping

BRIGHTON: Brighton, on England’s south coast, has been described as Britain’s hippest city, and is a haven for tourists, especially Londoners keen to escape the capital. But surfer Stu Davies says the waters off Brighton and along the Channel coast are less attractive, describing them as an “open sewer”.

Human faeces, wipes and tampons are regularly discharged into seas and rivers, angering local residents who are now taking action. “First hand I have surfed in raw sewage in this coast and city, and it’s disgusting,” Davies, a member of Surfers Against Sewage (SAS), told AFP on a seawall in the seaside resort. A short distance away, a storm overflow pipe stretches out across the beach towards the popular pier, before being slowly submerged by the rising tide.

Similar structures dot the British coastline. “Suddenly you become aware of the smell, you can smell sewage, you can smell faeces and you can see faeces, and see bits of tissue and paper and other things that folk put down their toilets and enter into the sewage network,” Davies said of encountering waste while surfing. The water also takes on a “brownish” hue, he added. In very heavy rainfall, water companies are permitted to dump such waste to prevent sewers, many of which date back to the 19th century, from becoming clogged and flowing back into buildings.



BRIGHTON: Stuart Davies, a member of Surfers against Sewage, poses for a picture near the Brighton Palace Pier near a CSO (combined sewer overflow) on Dec 6, 2021. — AFP

According to SAS, which campaigns for clean water, water companies reported more than 5,500 discharges in the year to the end of September—an 87.6-percent increase in one year. The association, which has developed an app to alert swimmers and surfers, points out that more and more discharges occur during “normal rainfall events”, not exceptional precipitation. It also believes that the figure largely underestimates the problem because it only refers to coastal waters. “This is clearly being used as a means of regular sewage disposal,” said SAS director Hugo Tagholm. —AFP

Electric truck maker Nikola to pay \$125m US fine for fraud

NEW YORK: Electric truck maker Nikola said yesterday it will pay \$125 million to end a legal dispute with securities regulators over charges the company made misleading claims and defrauded investors.

The Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) said the company misled investors “about its products, technical advancements and commercial prospects.” The settlement follows legal action against company founder and former CEO Trevor Milton, who tried to inflate the company’s stock price, the SEC said. “Nikola Corporation is responsible both for Milton’s allegedly misleading statements and for other alleged deceptions, all of which falsely portrayed the true state of the company’s business and technology,” said Gurbir S Grewal, head of the SEC’s Enforcement Division.

The actions included “misrepresenting or omitting material facts” about refueling time, the status of its hydrogen station and the cost and sources of electricity, the SEC said. “This misconduct — and the harm it inflicted on retail investors — merits the strong remedies today’s settlement provides,” Grewal said. The company, which neither admitted nor denied any wrongdoing, said it will pay the fine in five semi-annual installments over a period of two years, with the first by the end of this year.

“We are pleased to bring this chapter to a close as the company has now resolved all government investigations,” Nikola said in a statement, which said it is seeking reimbursement from Milton. —AFP

Monsanto must pay 10 years’ waived taxes to Swiss region

GENEVA: Switzerland’s highest court has ordered Monsanto to pay back 10 years’ worth of waived taxes after it left the Vaud region early following its takeover by Bayer, according to a ruling published yesterday. The US agrochemical giant was ordered to hand over 34 million Swiss francs (\$36.9 million, 32.7 million euros) to the western Vaud canton where its European headquarters used to be based, the Swiss supreme court ruling dated December 3 said.

The verdict, first reported by the RTS broadcaster, showed that Monsanto had received a generous tax break when it established its headquarters in the Vaud town of Morges in 2004. The maker of the controversial weedkiller Roundup saw all of its taxes to the canton waived for the first five years, while its tax bill was cut in two for the following five. That agreement was based on the understanding that the company would remain in Morges for at least 10 years after the exemption ended, providing the region with significant tax income.

But two years after German chemicals giant Bayer bought Monsanto in 2018, it decided to move the headquarters from Morges to Basel, in northern Switzerland. That was four years earlier than Monsanto’s agreement with Vaud stipulated. A lower court had partially sided with the agrochemical company’s argument it had a right to move, but the supreme court did not agree, ordering Monsanto to pay its tax bill for 2005-2014 in full.

Vaud parliamentarian with the Green Party, Raphael Mahaim, who in 2019 had pushed the canton to demand back the exempt tax money, hailed the ruling.

The supreme court had signaled the end “of these little tax arrangements where predators ... like Monsanto shamelessly use tax rules to optimize their situation, and then fight with a team of lawyers to get the biggest rebate possible,” he told RTS. — AFP

Business

stc shareholders approve amendments in Extraordinary General Assembly

Resolution to amend two articles in AoA and add a new article in MoA

KUWAIT: Kuwait Telecommunications Company - stc, a world-class digital leader providing innovative services and platforms to customers, enabling the digital transformation in Kuwait, held an Extraordinary General Assembly (EGM) to discuss items on the agenda in the presence of a quorum of 78.669 percent shareholders. All items presented on the agenda were approved during the EGM which was held at stc's headquarters in Olympia Mall, which included amendments to Article (6) of the Memorandum of Association, Article (4) of the Articles of Association, and Article (46) of the Articles of Association, as well as adding a new article to the Articles of Association.

Dr Mahmoud Ahmad Abdulrahman, Chairman of stc, stated "The amendment to Article (6) of the Memorandum of Association and Article (4) of the Articles of Association included: Provide wireless data transfer service; provide international telecommunication services through private cards; Marketing, leasing and purchasing telecommunications and electronic equipment and local area networks (LAN), development of computer systems softwares, applications and Arabization of the systems and its accessories; selling, purchasing, leasing and installation of systems and programs of computer systems, telecommunication and electronic systems and local area networks including marketing and provide its managed services and maintenance; building and operating cloud telecommunication networks connected to databases; designing and equipping computer centers and information systems for the company. Additionally, Smart cards manufacturing, produc-

tion and operating to cover the communications and prepaid demand; provide and execute all work kinds and networks for wireless communications fields; provide technical consultations, designing, supervision, operating and maintenance for transportation and wireless communications and representing the companies executing these works; supplying, importing, selling and leasing telecommunication equipment and tools and spare parts; purchasing and selling stocks, securities and financial instruments as company restricted; administer, operate and provide public telecommunications on:

- Terrestrial Broadcasting Facility through fixed lines
- Radio broadcasting Terrestrial facilities.
- Mobile main stations facilities.
- Submarine cables facilities.
- International gateway services facilities.
- Satellite/Vsat Earth station facility
- Other space/ Satellite facilities existing in the State of Kuwaiti providing general communication broadcasting Capabilities.

He added, "In addition to that: install, manage and rent passive infrastructures for communication networks; operate and rent data centers and information and cloud centers; provide and develop digital E-payment systems, and E-payment and Electronic Money Remittances; The company has also the right to partner or associate locally or internationally with other parties/entities of a same or similar business nature after obtaining the needed approvals from the concerned authority parties.

The amendment to Article (46) of the Articles of

Greens and far-left Linke party, who together have set themselves the task of building 200,000 homes by 2030 in a city that attracts more and more residents each year. The roadmap for policy the parties signed yesterday calls for a public-private "partnership for new construction and affordable housing".

The new government has also decided to establish a commission to assess the possibility of "expropriating" corporate landlords, a proposition which gained a majority in a non-binding referendum on the same day as the election.

Around 56 percent voted in favor of the move against real estate companies with more than 3,000 properties after a successful petition to hold a ballot. The commission, to be established within 100 days, will have a year to "review the possibilities, means and conditions for implementing the referendum", the coalition pact said. The new mayor has said seizing property is "not the right way", particularly because of the high cost of indemnities that would have to be paid.

Supporters of the proposal say they would be

Across the country, all sectors of British industry have been hit as staff contract the virus and are forced to self-isolate at home. As the Christmas getaway begins, train companies apologised for employee absences and warned they could affect scheduled services and even lead to cancellations.

Edinburgh Castle and the National History Museum in London-two of the country's most visited attractions-were forced to close their doors because of staff illnesses. That came after several theatres in London's West End entertainment district cancelled performances to protect performers and the public. Meanwhile, the hotel and restaurant industry has seen closures because of a lack of staff. And in the public sector, the government has called for retired teachers to help out, as the virus forces staff out of the classroom.

In London, unions have warned that firefighters face "unprecedented" manpower shortages, although its response to emergencies has not yet been affected. Johnson has come under pressure from business owners and industry bodies to reintroduce support packages for COVID-hit sectors, who were already struggling after curbs in the last year. He is, however, facing intense pressure from within his own ruling Conservative party not to bring in tougher restrictions on public freedoms.

Last week, nearly 100 of his own MPs voted against the roll-out of vaccine passports to allow access to some venues, including sports grounds. Twelve months ago, Johnson was forced to impose restrictions on indoor mixing and social distancing as the Alpha variant of the virus spread rapidly, putting hospitals under pressure. But it has since been claimed that he and his

Festive volatility

"Traders may be in holiday mode but this is having no dampening effect on the markets, which are continuing to see plenty of volatility as we near the end of the year," OANDA analyst Craig Erlam told AFP.

"Naturally Omicron and all of the headlines that come with it is playing a huge role, not to mention last week's plethora of interest rate decisions and the political circus in Washington. "The lack of liquidity in the market at this time of year is undoubtedly contributing to the volatility."

Sentiment was jarred by news that Europe's reference Dutch TTF gas price hit 162.775 euros per megawatt hour in late morning deals, while UK prices leapt to 408.30 pence per therm.

Markets have been lashed since the emergence of Omicron as it spreads quickly through populations, forcing governments to impose anti-virus measures that are economically damaging. The Netherlands imposed a lockdown over the holiday period and Germany has tightened restrictions notably affecting the unvaccinated, and media speculation persists over tougher UK curbs.

The latest wave of COVID cases comes just as



Dr. Mahmoud Ahmad Abdulrahman addresses the EGM

Association included "Every resolution issued by the Extraordinary General Assembly shall not be effective unless after the notarization procedures. The Ministry approval should be secured if the resolution is related to the Company name, purposes or capital except the increase of the capital through the issue of shares for profits achieve by the Company or as a result of addition of the usable reserves to the capital."

The new article added, Article (60) of the

Articles of Association stated that upon the suggestion of the Board of Directors and subject to the General Assembly approval, the Company may pay out interim quarterly or semiannual dividends according to the general acceptable accounting principles (GAAP) and without prejudice to the paid-up capital. The Ordinary General Assembly may authorize the board to pay out the interim dividends as indicated above without prejudice to the paid-up capital.

Newly-elected Berlin mayor targets rental crisis

BERLIN: Former German family minister Franziska Giffey was elected mayor of Berlin yesterday with a plan to boost house building amid soaring rental costs in the capital. Social Democrat Giffey, who served in Angela Merkel's coalition government between 2018 and 2021, is the first woman to lead Berlin, in SPD control for the last two decades.

Deputies in Berlin's legislature cast ballots for mayor and Giffey won 84 votes, with 52 against her and two abstentions. Her party had finished first in local elections on September 26 on a good night for the Social Democrats, who also topped the polls in the general election, setting Olaf Scholz up to become the new chancellor.

Giffey, 43, cobbled together a coalition with the

UK launches \$1.3bn support for virus-hit businesses

LONDON: Britain yesterday launched a £1.0 billion support package for COVID-hit businesses, as staff absences from rising cases began to bite in the run-up to Christmas. Finance minister Rishi Sunak said some 200,000 firms would be eligible for one-off grants to offset losses from what is normally the busiest time of year.

Pubs and restaurants have seen Christmas parties and bookings cancelled because of the spread of the Omicron variant of the virus, hitting December trade by as much as 60 percent. Sunak said the government recognized that businesses in the hospitality and leisure sectors were facing "huge uncertainty at a crucial time". The government is banking on an ambitious campaign to get all adults in England to have a booster jab of a COVID vaccine by the end of December to try to stop the spread of the mutation.

The director of the Wellcome charitable foundation, Jeremy Farrar, told BBC radio transmission was "eye-wateringly high", as daily infection rates nudged towards 100,000. But unlike governments in some of Britain's nearest neighbors on the European mainland, Prime Minister Boris Johnson has ruled out immediate curbs in the run-up to Christmas. Tighter public health measures could yet be introduced after this weekend, according to media reports.

Equities recover from fierce sell-off; gas hits record peaks

LONDON: World stock markets rebounded yesterday from a fierce Omicron-fuelled selloff, but natural gas prices spiked to record peaks and fanned global inflation worries. Both Asia and Europe stocks were on the front foot, as investors clawed back Monday's losses that were sparked by concerns over the fast-spreading Omicron coronavirus variant.

Stocks and oil prices trod higher as bargain-buyers moved in, though investors remain fixated on Omicron strain and moves to contain it over Christmas and New Year. Gas prices however jumped to all-time highs on winter demand concerns and simmering geopolitical tensions between key supplier Russia and consumer nations, ringing inflation alarm bells for investors.



Franziska Giffey, the new Berlin mayor

more able to control rental prices if the properties were transferred to public ownership. While Berlin remains cheaper than Paris or London, rents in the hip capital have increased 85 percent between 2007 and 2019. Rising costs for housing have weighed heavily on inhabitants, 80 percent of whom are renters. —AFP



LONDON: A hospitality worker works around empty tables outside a restaurant yesterday. —AFP

own staff broke the rules by holding parties at Downing Street and across government departments. Retailers have felt the chill from Omicron in December, as shoppers stayed at home to prevent catching the virus before Christmas, employers' association the CBI said. The Confederation of British Industry's lead economist Ben Jones said retail sales had slowed and expectations for January had been downgraded. "The concern now is the potential for rapidly rising sickness and staff absences to cause renewed disruption to supply chains in the New Year," he added. The hospitality and retail sectors were already feeling the pinch of staff shortages, as foreign staff left due to the pandemic and new post-Brexit immigration rules. Last year, the government offered sales tax holidays and cuts, plus emergency loans to keep businesses afloat as trade plummeted due to stay-at-home restrictions. —AFP

central banks around the world begin to remove the ultra-loose monetary policies put in place at the start of the pandemic to protect economies from the ravages of lockdowns.

Reports that moderate Democratic Senator Joe Manchin could still be willing to discuss US President Joe Biden's \$1.75 trillion social spending bill — having delivered a blow to the White House Sunday by rejecting it — provided a little support, with talks likely to drag. Elsewhere yesterday, the Turkish lira extended dollar gains after surging in response to measures announced by the nation's government to bolster the beleaguered currency.

Oil tumbled as traders fretted over how the latest COVID-19 strain might hit the world's appetite for energy, which has already suffered a heavy blow since the pandemic erupted early last year.

In New York, sentiment was jarred by a crucial moderate Democratic senator's announcement that he would not support President Joe Biden's social spending bill, imperiling the measure that some analysts view as a positive for US growth.

"It does not feel like the most wonderful time of the year for Wall Street," Oanda's Edward Moya said in a note. —AFP

Airbus, Boeing 'concerned' over US 5G interference

PARIS: Aerospace giants Airbus and Boeing yesterday warned the US aviation industry had "concerns" about the potential interference of 5G networks with vital flight safety equipment.

The intervention increases pressure on US regulators in an ongoing dispute between airlines and mobile operators over the rollout of the high-speed mobile broadband technology in the United States. Airbus Americas chief executive Jeff Knittel and Boeing boss David Calhoun co-signed a letter to US Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg "detailing the US aviation industry's shared concerns over 5G implementation in the United States," an Airbus spokesman told AFP. "Airbus and Boeing have been working with other aviation industry stakeholders in the US to understand potential 5G interference with radio altimeters," which measure a plane's height above the ground, the statement said.

Major telecom operators Verizon and AT&T were due to start using 3.7-3.8 GHz frequency bands on December 5, after obtaining licenses worth billions of dollars in February. But they postponed the launch in November after the US aviation regulator expressed concerns over 5G signals' possible interference with the altimeters. The Federal Aviation Administration requested further information about the instruments, which can use the same frequency bands as 5G.

The FAA also produced directives limiting the use of radio altimeters in certain situations, sparking US airline fears over the potential costs.

In November, Verizon and AT&T wrote to the Federal Communications Commission confirming their intention to start deploying 5G in January 2022. But they said they would take extra precautionary measures beyond what is required by US law until July 2022 while the FAA completes its investigation. —AFP



FRANKFURT: Traders work on Frankfurt Stock Exchange. Equities recovered from a fierce sell-off sparked by concerns over Omicron yesterday.

Business

Biden raises mileage standards for cars, trucks to fight climate change

Spending bill to fund the fight against climate change appears to be on life support

WASHINGTON: President Joe Biden is raising mileage standards for cars and trucks sold in the United States in a bid to limit emissions, as the spending bill he counted on to fund the fight against climate change appears to be on life support.

The new regulations announced by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) on Monday reverse more lax standards passed under former president Donald Trump governing how far an automaker's cars must be able to travel on a gallon of gasoline, and show how Biden's White House is using regulatory power to curb emissions.

The announcement comes as the president's Build Back Better (BBB) social spending plan may have suffered a mortal blow after a crucial Democratic senator said he would not support the \$1.75 trillion proposal. "We followed the science, we listened to stakeholders and we are setting robust and rigorous standards that will aggressively reduce the pollution that is harming people and our planet—and save families money at the same time," EPA Administrator Michael Regan said when announcing the standards.

Under the new EPA rules, the average fleetwide fuel consumption standards would be phased in over three years from 2023 and rise to 55 miles per gallon by 2026. That is up from 43 miles per gallon under regulations enacted under Trump last year, and the EPA estimates the new standards will save Americans between \$210 and \$420 billion on fuel costs by 2050.

US automakers have already announced major investments in electric vehicles and more fuel-efficient cars, but industry group the Alliance for Automotive Innovation warned the new standards will be hard to meet without help from the government. The "EPA's final rule for greenhouse gas emissions is even more aggressive than originally pro-

posed, requiring a substantial increase in electric vehicle sales, well above the four percent of all light-duty sales today," its president John Bozzella said.

"Achieving the goals of this final rule will undoubtedly require enactment of supportive governmental policies—including consumer incentives, substantial infrastructure growth, fleet requirements and support for US manufacturing and supply chain development."

Shifting standards

In contrast with Trump, Biden has made fighting climate change a priority for his administration, and was counting on BBB's passage to pay for expansive programs aimed at doing that.

But Democratic Senator Joe Manchin announced Sunday he would not vote for the bill, imperiling its passage in a Senate where Biden needs the vote of every Democrat to get legislation past Republican objections. Emissions standards are one of Washington's most direct ways to act against pollution.

The transportation sector is the biggest source of carbon emissions in the country, and the EPA said the new regulations would remove more than three billion tons of greenhouse gas by 2050. The EPA also predicted that compared to cost increases to meet the standard, consumers will save about \$1,000 through lower fuel prices over the lifetime of the average 2026 year vehicle. The Detroit automakers have stepped up plans for electric vehicle production in recent months, and in a statement, Ford, which is investing billions in a bid to lead the shift to electric vehicles from fossil fuel-burning cars, hailed the White House's move.

"We applaud EPA's efforts to strengthen greenhouse gas emissions standards and create a consistent national plan that sets the United States on a



LOS ANGELES, US: Vehicles drive on the 101 freeway in Los Angeles, California. The US announced, it will increase standards for emissions from cars and trucks and implement the new rules over three years from 2023. —AFP

path to a zero-emissions transportation future in alignment with the Paris Climate Agreement," the company said in a statement. However, the Union of Concerned Scientists urged tougher action, with its president Johanna Chao Krelick saying, "The new standards go a long way to undoing the damage done by the previous administration, but to stem climate catastrophe we must set our ambitions higher and demand more."

The new rule sets targets similar to regulations promulgated under former president Barack Obama, but the Trump administration reversed those, arguing they would drive up car prices and encourage people to drive older vehicles for longer.

That sparked a fight with most populous US state California, where its Democratic leadership tried to implement its own, stricter standards on car emissions. —AFP

Gulf Bank announces concierge services for SMEs

KUWAIT: In its latest move to streamline business and improve day-to-day operations for its SME clientbase, Gulf Bank's Business Banking segment has announced that all SMEs will now have access to exclusive concierge services with Peacock Concierge. The announcement is part of Gulf Bank's latest string of initiatives designed to streamline day-to-day operations and enhance the customer experience for local small and medium-sized businesses, and support them in completing their government paperwork easily.

Peacock Concierge offers premium lifestyle management and concierge services. Through Gulf Bank's latest collaboration with Peacock Concierge, SMEs now have access to valuable services designed to streamline day-to-day operations including: general information searches for the best local offers, restaurant reservations, occasion reminders, taxi booking, booking ministry appointments, car registration, car servicing, payment of traffic fines, and roadside assistance. Other services also include flower orders, ticket booking and ticket delivery and event venue booking. Peacock Concierge also offers visa assistance, airport pickup and dropoff, a courier service, a limo service, meet & assist, and hospitality management. Gulf Bank greatly values its partnerships with its SME clients, which is why it has taken the time to understand the ins and outs of the SME experience. While there is no one-size-fits-all solution for SMEs, most small businesses do share something crucial in common: the need for support in daily operations. That is why the bank is proud to offer its clients a service designed to make all aspects of running a business that much easier so that they can have even more time to focus on what really matters. The bank's latest collaboration with Peacock Concierge is designed to help the small businesses find the resources they need and navigate tasks that require time that the clients could be devoting elsewhere. With simplified and more streamlined operations on a day-to-day basis, the bank can't wait to see what successes lay in store for the SMEs.

As part of its 2025 strategy, Gulf Bank has been steadily expanding its portfolio of products and transaction banking services, in addition to providing an unparalleled customer experience for corporate clients, and support for the SME sector.

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.

Huawei Watch GT 3 Moon Phase Collection II is here

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

Moon Phase Collection II and updated design

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

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

KFH announces gold winners in Al-Rabeh draw

KUWAIT: Kuwait Finance House (KFH) has announced the winners of the monthly draw of Al-Rabeh account for the month of November. The winners of 1KG of gold were Hanem Hassan, Mohammed Al-Dosari and Ahmed Al-Tohari.

Through monthly, quarterly and annual draws, KFH gives 45 Al-Rabeh account holders the opportunity to win up to 77kg of gold in prizes ranging from 1 to 3kg of gold over a full year, in addition to the annual draw of a grand prize of 12kg of gold. The prizes are targeted to existing and new customers of Al-Rabeh account, with salaries not less than KD 500. When their salaries are transferred to the Al-Rabeh account, they will be eligible to win unprecedented prizes by being entered into the draws, which are: a monthly draw, except the month of December, with three individuals winning 1kg of gold each, and a quarterly draw with 3 winners per draw winning 3kg of gold each

(except the fourth quarter draw, which has only one winner). At the end of the campaign, an annual draw is made to pick three winners, the first-place winner receives a grand prize of 12kg of gold. The second-place winner receives 3kg of gold and the third-place winner receives 2kg of gold. The total number of winners is 45 customers, and the total prizes at the end of the campaign is 77kg of gold.

Al-Rabeh account is available in Kuwaiti Dinar for individuals, with a salary transfer required for customers to enter the draw. Regarding the terms and conditions of the prizes and draws, a customer should deposit three salaries during the three months prior to the draw, and the minimum balance of the account should not be less than KD 50 at the end of each month during the three months prior to the draw. Every additional KD 50 in the account increases the customer's chances to win, thus with these benefits and rewards, Al-Rabeh account, is suitable for customers wishing to transfer their salaries and manage their personal accounts, with the possibility of saving and investing.

Al-Rabeh account confirms KFH's continued keenness to deliver premium products that meet customers' aspirations and enhance the bank's leadership in the market.



Extended battery life

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

All-day health management

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

Disciplined and scientific training

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

The dual-frequency GPS enables precise tracking of your running and walking sessions. Furthermore, you can synchronize training plans, and the watch will provide training guidance in different stages. During the training, the watch provides real-time voice reminders of the training goals and training



status. This improves your training efficiency. To check how well you are doing, you can use the Huawei Health App to view the workout data. It will show you the historical running plans and other fitness-related metrics. You can use the app to view your training results. Also, you get updated training plans every week, depending on your past performance. Huawei Watch GT 3 offers an upgraded workout monitoring feature, providing over 100 workout modes. These include 18 professional workout modes, 12 outdoor workouts and 7 indoor workouts. So, there is something for everyone.

Convenient life assistant features

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

Burgan rewards dining carnival

KUWAIT: Burgan Bank launched a new promotional campaign for all credit card holders, giving them the opportunity to triple their Burgan Rewards points upon using their card at any restaurant in Kuwait including cafes, lounges, and fast-food restaurants, whether via takeout or delivery. This campaign comes as part of the bank's strategy to enhance and enrich its customers' banking experience with a range of exclusive and valuable benefits.

Throughout this campaign, running for the period of December 15 to 31, Burgan Bank will give customers the opportunity to triple their reward points or Qmiles on the Burgan Rewards program. Customers can benefit from this offer by using any Burgan credit card upon paying their bill at any restaurant in Kuwait, including both in restau-

rant and through online orders.

Commenting on this new campaign, Saket Jajoo, Head of Cards at Burgan Bank said: "This campaign reinforces the Bank's efforts to encourage a culture of cashless and digital payments as a more elevated form of financial transaction. To accomplish this, we are keen to design innovative promotional campaigns for our credit card users that provide them with an enhanced banking experience in which their financial transactions add value to their lifestyle."

It is important to note that this campaign is open for all Burgan Bank credit cards, whereby all credit card holders can enjoy a rich package of premium services with great benefits, as well as exclusive offers and discounts at local and international outlets and brands. In addition to exclusive rewards, credit card holders also benefit from having the highest standards of safety and security, which safeguards their data and information while using their cards anywhere and at any time.

Business

Portuguese lithium, fuel of electric vehicle revolution?

Europe in frenetic race to decarbonize the auto industry

LISBON: Portugal next year could approve lithium mining that will reduce Europe's dependence on outside sources for a key ingredient in the frenetic global race to decarbonize the auto industry. The southern European nation is thought to have the continent's largest lithium reserves. Alongside nickel and cobalt, lithium has become a prized raw material as it is a vital element in the production of electric vehicle batteries.

Demand is soaring as manufacturers scramble to produce low-emission fleets and governments seek to phase out fossil fuel-powered vehicles in the battle against climate change. Portugal's environment regulator will deliver its verdict on the approval of a major new lithium mine in the north of the country in early 2022. With lithium mostly mined in Australia and South America while China dominates the supply chain, the regulator's decision could bolster Europe's independent supplies of the coveted resource.

'White gold rush'

China-simultaneously viewed as an economic rival and partner in many Western capitals-controls more than 40 percent of world lithium production and almost 60 percent of global lithium refining capacity. That could change if a deal between Portuguese oil firm Galp Energia and Swedish electric battery maker Northvolt bears fruit.

The two companies earlier this month sealed a deal to set up one of Europe's largest lithium refineries in northern Portugal. Costing an estimated 700 million euros (\$787 million), the facility would process enough ore to produce batteries for around 700,000 electric vehicles per year by 2026.

But Galp and Northvolt intend to secure lithium supplies from British mining firm Savannah, which

says it holds one of Western Europe's largest lithium deposits in northeastern Portugal but must await the regulator's decision next year. Savannah says the deposit could provide enough lithium for up to 600,000 electric vehicles per year for ten years.

Portuguese company Lusorecursos this year also submitted an environmental impact study to open a second mine in a neighboring municipality that would have its own refining facility.

A "white gold rush" for lithium in Portugal follows Canadian group Rock Tech Lithium's decision to invest 470 million euros in a German lithium plant from 2024. Environment Minister Joao Pedro Matos Fernandes welcomed the mining sector's buoyancy and said the government founded its industrial strategy on Portugal's natural resources. But a much-delayed tender for prospecting rights for eight other potential deposits will only begin after legislative elections on January 30, he added.

Soaring demand

Europe's dependence on outside sources for lithium comes amid growing demand partly fuelled by an auto industry scrambling to decarbonize. According to the World Economic Forum, the global auto industry produces more greenhouse gas emissions than the entire European Union.

The International Energy Agency estimates that global demand for lithium will increase by 42 percent between 2020 and 2040. This demand is driving technological innovation to increase extraction capacity. Chemicals company Bondalti—a subsidiary of Portugal's historic corporate giant Mello—this month announced it had teamed up with Australian firms to test a new refining technology which would treat lithium extracted from South American brine.



Europe could have a domestic lithium industry to provide the batteries needed for electric vehicles — if Portuguese regulators approve mines and refineries. —AFP

Future developments could even see lithium extracted from Portugal's granite-rich northeast and add to a European lithium bonanza.

'Enormous slag heaps'

While lithium may help decarbonize the automotive industry, its extraction and refining are not without an environmental impact, and the projects have generated plenty of concern.

"The exploitation of lithium cannot become a national enterprise that would allow us to extract in

any way or at any price," said Nuno Forner of environmental NGO Zero. Forner did not rule out the environment regulator reaching a "surprise" verdict but expected it to approve Savannah's project under certain conditions.

In Covas do Barroso, a remote northern municipality famed for its beef where Savannah's mine is to be sunk, the project has caused consternation. "We already know that it's the political and economic powers who decide," Nelson Gomes, president of a local pressure group, said. —AFP



LuLu Exchange ends year with 27th branch opening in Kuwait

KUWAIT: LuLu Exchange - Kuwait's leading payments provider offering cross-border remittances and currency exchange services, yesterday opened its 27th branch inside the LuLu Hypermarket at Qurain. The branch was inaugurated by Adeeb Ahamed, Managing Director of LuLu Financial Group, in the presence of senior company management.

Addressing the gathering on the sidelines of the opening, Adeeb Ahamed, Managing Director of LuLu Financial Group, said, "We are excited to expand our network in Kuwait, which has been among the strongest remittance markets globally, thanks to the enhanced and consumer-friendly regulations that have helped strengthen its payments ecosystem over the past few years. Kuwait's economy provides a livelihood for millions of expats, and we remain deeply invested in furthering our responsibility as a trustworthy partner to the country's people."

The branch marks the 241st Global Branch of LuLu Financial Group, and with the Group recently embarking on a mission to repurpose all its branches into consumer engagement centers, Ahamed added, "All our branches, including the one opened today, have been positioned to bridge the gap between technology and our offerings. By providing a human



connect in this digital age, we seek to assist our consumers in their transition to newer technologies without ever feeling overwhelmed. As a global financial services provider, we are optimistic about the value that digital payments brings to the ecosystem and are investing into resources that can help strengthen our digital solution, LuLu Money, into an easy, reliable and safe solution for millions of our consumers."

Having commenced operations in 2012, LuLu Exchange is among the leading and most trustworthy financial service providers in Kuwait. The ISO:9001 certified company has a reputation for providing the highest quality service to consumers looking to conduct their daily cross-border transactions.

The company's mobile app, LuLu Money, is among the most highly rated payments app in the country, enjoying a double-digit growth month-on-month.



Sri Lanka hikes fuel prices as crisis worsens

COLOMBO: Sri Lanka raised fuel prices yesterday and warned of possible petrol rationing with importers struggling to pay for oil, in a worsening economic crisis that has also sparked food shortages.

The move comes just days after international ratings agency Fitch downgrad-

ed the country over fears of a sovereign default on its \$26 billion foreign debt. Foreign exchange reserves are almost depleted and authorities shuttered the island's only refinery last month.

"The latest price increase is aimed at discouraging consumption," an official from the state-run Ceylon Petroleum Corporation told AFP. "Given the dollar crisis, we may have to introduce fuel rationing unless consumption is brought down."

The CPC and Lanka IOC, the island's sole fuel retailers, hiked petrol prices more than 10 percent to 210 rupees (\$1.05) per litre, with smaller raises for

kerosene and diesel.

Traders in Sri Lanka have struggled to get dollars to finance imports of food, medicine and raw materials after the island's tourism-dependent economy was hammered by the pandemic.

Supermarkets have rationed staples such as sugar, lentils, tinned fish and rice. The government had foreign reserves of just \$1.58 billion at the end of November, down from \$7.5 billion when President Gotabaya Rajapaksa took office in 2019. The central bank has appealed for foreign currency—even loose change that people may have after returning from overseas trips. —AFP

NBK runs biggest social media contest in Kuwait

KUWAIT: Marking the end of the year, National Bank of Kuwait (NBK) launched the largest contest on social media in Kuwait, which includes unique raffle draw on valuable prize of KD 2022. The competition gained great interaction and wide participation from top Instagram influencers.

The contest, which will run until December 28, is part of the innovative interactive competitions and offers that NBK launches through its pages on various social media channels.

"We are pleased with the massive turnout by Instagram influencers and their interest in the competition, which witnessed more than 100,000 shared posts and over 200,000 views within the first 48 hours of its launch, attesting to NBK's leadership on social media platforms and the followers passion to follow the bank's content", Farah Bastaki, Manager - Communications Department at National Bank of Kuwait commented.



Farah Bastaki

Bastaki added that for the tenth year in a row, NBK offers unique prizes every year through organizing various events and contests on social media sites. It offers a wide range of challenging events that include everyone in Kuwait, customers and non-customers alike. National Bank of Kuwait continu-

ously updates the content of its pages on social media sites, including educational and media awareness campaigns, in addition to entertainment content and challenging competitions that offers NBK followers the opportunity to enter draws for valuable prizes and exceptional rewards.

NBK pages span across a wide range of social media platforms including Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram, LinkedIn, and YouTube, underscoring its keenness to keep pace with all developments to meet its customers' needs and wishes, in addition to its constant endeavors to optimize its communication with followers on these platforms.

Natural gas prices hit fresh record peaks in EU, UK

LONDON: European and UK gas prices rocketed yesterday to all-time highs on strong winter demand and simmering geopolitical tensions between key supplier Russia and consumer nations.

Europe's reference Dutch TTF gas price hit 162.775 euros per megawatt hour in late morning deals, up more than ten percent from Monday, while UK prices leapt to 408.30 pence per therm.

Both markets beat previous records from October, also struck on demand worries for the northern hemisphere winter months. They are currently about seven times greater than at the start of 2021. Runaway spot gas prices, alongside other buoyant commodities including crude oil, have fuelled mounting concern about spiking inflation worldwide.

European gas "continued its inexorable rise... to another record," wrote Deutsche Bank analysts in a client note. "It comes as temperatures have continued to decline heading into the European winter, and we also got the news that (Russian energy giant) Gazprom had not booked any extra capacity in January for gas flowing through Ukraine."

"That's an important story heading through the winter with implications for European growth, and one that will have investors closely following the weather forecasts to work out what might happen."

Europe's gas stocks had already been depleted by a prolonged winter last year.

Added to the picture, calmer prevailing weather conditions have this year sharply reduced the supply of wind power. Some analysts blame the market spike on ongoing controversy surrounding Russia's planned Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline.

German Economic Affairs Minister Robert Habeck warned Saturday of "severe consequences" for the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline from Russia to Germany if Moscow attacked Ukraine.

The Baltic Sea pipeline is set to double supplies



of cheap natural gas from Russia to Germany, which the European Union's top economy says is needed to help it transition from coal and nuclear energy.

But the 10-billion-euro (\$12 billion) project has for years been dogged by delays and drawn fierce criticism from both Germany's eastern EU allies like Poland and the United States.

Critics say Nord Stream 2 will increase Europe's dependence on Russian gas and Ukraine has described it as a "geopolitical weapon". One third of Europe's total gas supplies come from Russia. —AFP



Lifestyle | Features

CENTURY-OLD GAME OF BUTTON FOOTBALL A CULT SPORT IN HUNGARY

Flicking a coin-shaped disc around a table-top, Hungarians still adore the simple sport of button football, a game they invented a century ago. "It's a traditional national sport, like petanque to the French or baseball to the Americans," Attila Becz, who runs a museum dedicated to the game, told AFP. The game is played on a large polished-smooth table depicting a soccer pitch with both players controlling a team of discs with a combination of strategy and dexterity.

Players are round and are moved by pressing a pick, finger, or comb on its edge, one turn at a time. In the 1960s and '70s before the spread of computer games 65-year-old Becz played the game as a child and began collecting the button players from the age of eight. "In summertime we played football on the streets and in empty lots, then in winter-time button football indoors, there wasn't much else to do for a football-mad kid," he said.

Decades later he opened what he calls "the world's only" button football museum in Szigetszentmiklos close to Budapest. Rows of cabinets in the small hall display memorabilia including antique buttons from the 1920s and sets of plastic ones bearing the images of



Button Football Museum's director Andras Becz holds the oldest button player of the collection in the 'Button Football Museum' in Szigetszentmiklos, Hungary. —AFP photos

modern-day stars. Photographs on the walls show legendary players like Pele and Ferenc Puskas crouched over button football tables, testament to the game's popularity through the decades.

"Foreign coaches introduced football to Hungary, then Hungarians took the wooden tactics board used for showing football tactics and made a game out of

it a century ago," said Becz. "Back then there were different rules and they used real coat buttons that could slide across a table," said Becz while handling an antique shiny button from the 1920s. Buttons were first mass-produced in the 1940s, with player photos stuck on from the 1950s. "It was a golden age for both button football and Hungary, led by

Puskas, were at the peak of world football then," said Becz.

Although typically played by pensioners, button football retains a cult status among younger generations with about a thousand players in Hungary registered in over 30 clubs according to the game's governing body. At a tournament last month in a Budapest commu-

nity hall a competitor Edvard Katona, 28, told AFP its appeal lies in its simplicity compared to rival video football games. "It's like an analogue version of the FIFA console game for us," he said. Button football is also popular in Brazil where it has a similarly long tradition although played there with different rules. —AFP

Nepal's biggest stupa turns to biodegradable prayer flags



Buddhist devotees climb to change prayer flags on Boudhanath stupa on the outskirts of Kathmandu.



A Buddhist devotee splashes colored water on Boudhanath stupa on the outskirts of Kathmandu.



A Buddhist devotee hangs biodegradable prayer flags on Boudhanath stupa on the outskirts of Kathmandu.



Pigeons fly over the Boudhanath stupa on the outskirts of Kathmandu. —AFP photos

Nepal's largest stupa, one of the holiest pilgrimage sites in Tibetan Buddhism, was festooned with biodegradable prayer flags after devotees replaced the more common synthetic version with a greener alternative. Colorful prayer flags - which have auspicious symbols and prayers inscribed on them - are an integral part of Buddhist rituals.

At the white-domed Boudhanath stupa, prayer flags stream down in four directions from the finial. On Saturday, workers swapped out the usual polyester banners and strung up new biodegradable ones. "It is the centre of Buddhist religious faith so I believe that it will send a good message and spread in other places too," Chandra Man Lama, chair of Boudhanath Area Development Committee, told AFP. Old prayer flags are usually burnt when discarded under the belief that the winds will carry the prayers to the gods.

Traditionally, prayer flags were made of natural fibres like cotton and silk but the current market is saturated with versions constructed of polyester

and other synthetic materials, which take decades to decompose and emit toxic gases when burnt. "The prayers might be answered but it is also causing pollution," said Ang Dolma Sherpa, founder of Utpala Crafts, which made the biodegradable prayer flags now adorning Boudhanath stupa. Sherpa uses cotton and prints prayers and symbols on her flags with water-based paint. The ropes are made of natural fibres instead of nylon.

"I am giving an alternative. I hope that people will use them wisely and turn them into compost," she said. Prayer flags and khadas - Buddhist scarves used as a greeting or offering - are also popular fixtures in mountaineering, with climbers carrying them for good fortune and offering them at the summit. Mountain guide Dawa Yangzum Sherpa took biodegradable flags on her recent expedition to the 5,630-metre (18,471-foot) Yalung Ri peak in eastern Nepal. "It is very important for them to be biodegradable," she said. "These prayers flags and khadas have an unseen impact." —AFP

Embracer adds Dark Horse to acquisition spree

Swedish video game publisher Embracer announced yesterday five separate acquisitions, including US comic book publisher and media producer Dark Horse and online games publisher Perfect World Entertainment (PWE). Dark Horse Comics has operated since the 1980s and created comic book versions of popular franchises including "Star Wars" and Netflix show "Stranger Things", while Dark Horse Entertainment has produced the "Hellboy" films and "The Umbrella Academy" series.

Meanwhile PWE-owned Cryptic Studios makes online multiplayer games based on "Star Trek" and "Dungeons and Dragons". In addition to PWE and Dark Horse, Embracer was acquiring Florida game developer Shiver Entertainment, Hungarian animation studio DIGIC and German ad-supported video-on-demand network Spotfilm Network, the company said in separate statements.

Embracer's latest acquisitions end a year of expansion, after the company announced last week it had

opened talks to acquire French board game giant Asmodee. It also snapped up Gearbox, the developer of popular video game series "Borderlands", in February. Embracer said the acquisition of PWE would comprise "a one-time payout" of \$125 million (111 million euros). \$60 million would be paid in cash and another \$65 million in Embracer shares, the company added. Financial details of the other acquisitions were not disclosed, with Embracer citing commercial interests.

The acquisitions of Shiver Entertainment and Spotfilm Network have already been closed, but the others are still subject to regulatory approval and are expected to close in the fourth quarter of Embracer's fiscal year or early next year, Embracer said. With its headquarters in the small Swedish city of Karlstad, Embracer, formerly known as THQ Nordic, boasted 86 internal game development studios and more than 9,000 employees in more than 40 countries prior to the announced acquisitions. —AFP

Big Ben dials in for 2022

All four of Big Ben's dials will be on display for the first time in four years as London rings in 2022, UK parliamentary authorities said yesterday. The Great Clock and the Elizabeth Tower have been shrouded in scaffolding since 2017 for extensive renovation work which has also largely silenced the trademark bongs and chimes of the famous bell inside it. But the restoration is nearly complete, and Big Ben will strike 12 for the last time using a temporary mechanism before the original is back in place early in the new year.

The 11.5-tonne Victorian-era mechanism was removed from the tower overlooking the River Thames at one end of the UK Parliament to protect it from the dust and debris created by works on the 96-metre-high tower. It was transported to a specialist company in northwest England, where all of its more than 1,000 working pieces were cleaned and repaired. Keith Scobie-Youngs, director and co-founder of the Cumbria

Clock Company, said it was a "once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to work on the best-known clock in the world" and "the heart of the UK".

"We were able to assemble the time side, the heart-beat, and put that on test in our workshop, so for two years we had that heartbeat ticking away in our test room, which was incredibly satisfying," he said. "We're working on the installation of the mechanism in the Tower at the moment, so it's a very exciting time." The Great Clock was designed by Edmund Beckett Denison and installed by Edward John Dent in 1859, with the aim of creating the most accurate public clock in the world.

Ian Westworth, one of parliament's team of clock mechanics, said it had been a "duty and privilege" for his team to work on it. "I think Edward John Dent would be pleased as punch that the clock that he made will still be doing the job that he designed it to do, over 160 years later," he added. London Mayor Sadiq Khan on Monday evening



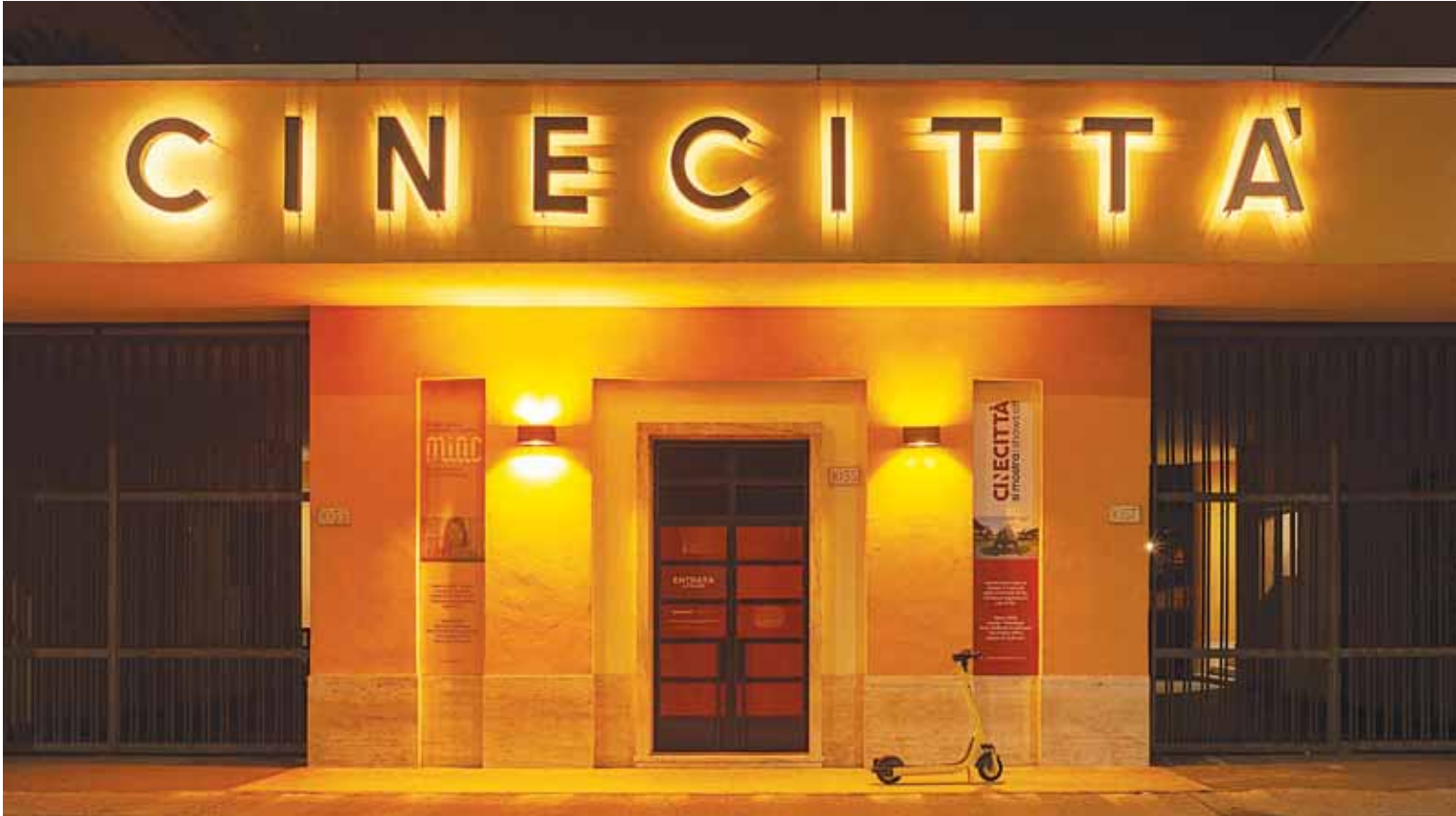
Workers remove the scaffolding from the restored west dial of the clock on Elizabeth Tower, commonly known by the name of the bell Big Ben, at the Palace of Westminster. —AFP

said the city would no longer be hosting a New Year's Eve event in Trafalgar Square because of rising cases of Covid-19.

The coronavirus pandemic has forced the British capital to cancel its annual fireworks display on the River Thames for two years in a row. Big Ben-the nickname for the 13.7-tonne

Great Bell-is often used as a catch-all for the Elizabeth Tower and the Great Clock. The temporary mechanism has been used for several landmark events during the renovation works, including Armistice Day, Remembrance Sunday, and as Britain left the European Union on January 1 last year. —AFP

Rome's legendary Cinecittà Studios eye new golden age



A view shows the main entrance of the Cinecittà cinema studios in Rome. Once the stomping grounds of Italy's greatest directors and actors, from Federico Fellini to Sophia Loren, Rome's legendary Cinecittà film studios are planning a much-needed facelift. —AFP photos

Once the stomping ground of Italy's greatest directors and actors, from Federico Fellini to Sophia Loren, Rome's renowned Cinecittà film studios are planning a much-needed makeover for a new era. Dubbed the "Hollywood on the Tiber", Cinecittà was at the heart of the golden age of Italian cinema and now hopes to regain some of its former lustre thanks to European Union post-pandemic funding. Italy is the main beneficiary of the bloc's recovery fund and the ageing studios are in line for a 260-million-euro (\$292-million) windfall to expand and modernize to capitalize on the different ways of now watching film and TV.

"We can give back to this place the light that has always characterized it, and that it deserves," Cinecittà CEO Nicola Maccanico told AFP, hopefully. Cinecittà—which means "the city of cinema" in Italian—has been the backdrop of more than 3,000 films, including 51 Oscar winners. In recent decades, although critically acclaimed films such as Bernardo Bertolucci's 1987 "The Last Emperor" and Anthony Minghella's "The English Patient" in 1996 were shot at Cinecittà, major productions have become more scarce.

The studios were inaugurated on the southern outskirts of the Italian capital in 1937 to churn out propaganda for the Fascist govern-

ment of Benito Mussolini. And they have since endured the upheavals of Italy's modern history: the Allied bombings in 1944, the repurposing of the studios as housing for people displaced by war, the economic "miracle" of the 1950s-60s and the subsequent decline.

In its heyday during the golden era of film, major Hollywood blockbusters such as "Ben-Hur" in 1959 and some of world cinema's most seminal works like Fellini's 1960 "La Dolce Vita" were filmed at Cinecittà. But since the end of the 1960s, it has been unable to recapture its former prestige, due to competition from television and major international productions opting for better-equipped studios elsewhere.

'Unique opportunity'

The studios' current inability to meet potential demand from TV series and films due to the too-small size of its stages and other deficiencies costs Cinecittà about 25 million euros per year, according to business daily Il Sole 24 Ore. "For Cinecittà, this is really a unique opportunity because it brings together two situations that are difficult to reproduce: the recovery plan and a booming market," Maccanico said. The lion's share of the money would help double the surface area of the studios, which currently cover about 99 acres (40 hectares), with the creation of five new sets and the renovation and expansion of five others.

Further improvements would include an indoor pool for underwater filming, a theatre with a 360-degree green screen and two sets for virtual reality with LED panels. Maccanico said that the increased number of platforms for content today had created unprecedented opportunity for film studios. "It's within this market context that the idea of re-launching Cinecittà was born... making it a new reference



A visitor takes a photo of the permanent set of the Temple of Jerusalem during a guided tour on a back lot of the Cinecittà cinema studios in Rome.



A view shows props stored in a corner of the permanent set of Ancient Rome on a back lot of the Cinecittà cinema studios in Rome.



Visitors walk across the permanent set of Ancient Rome during a guided tour on a back lot of the Cinecittà cinema studios in Rome.



A view taken at sunset shows 'La Venusia', a sculpture created by Giantito Burchiellaro for the 1976 film 'Il Casanova di Federico Fellini', which is permanently exhibited outdoors at the Cinecittà cinema studios in Rome.

hub for the new European audiovisual production market," he said.

Film buffs

To boost its income, Cinecittà has held tours for the public since 2011. Groups of tourists wander the imposing Teatro 5 - Fellini's favourite and the largest in Europe at 2,880 square metres (31,000 square feet) - or meander amid the white faux-marble, open-air sets of ancient Rome or 15th-century Florence. A museum with film clips, photographs and costumes is also open to visitors. A film-themed park associated with the stu-

dios also opened on the outskirts of Rome in 2014: Cinecittà World, designed by three-time Oscar-winning set designer Dante Ferretti.

With the likes of studios Pinewood and Shepperton near London, Babelsberg in Germany or Korda near Budapest as rivals, the timing might be right for a renovated Cinecittà. Italy in 2019 - before COVID shuttered productions worldwide—was the European country with the highest number of domestic productions, at 312 films, ahead of France with 240 and Germany at 237, according to the European Audiovisual Observatory. —AFP

BIDEN INTRODUCES NEW FIRST PUP, 'COMMANDER'

A welcome, furry distraction from political morass and flagging approval ratings has arrived at the White House, with Joe Biden introducing the residence's newest inhabitant Monday - a German shepherd puppy named "Commander." "Welcome to the White House, Commander," Biden tweeted along with a photo of the pup running with a tennis ball in his mouth. The Democrat then shared a video introducing the US public to "the newest Biden."

In the clip, the US commander-in-chief walks over to the four-legged Commander, saying, "Hey, pal." The clip also shows Biden throwing a ball for the new dog, who later enters the White House led on a leash by Biden, alongside his wife Jill. The new arrival is certainly a welcome distraction for the president, whose approval rating has dropped in recent weeks and is staring down a rejection of his signature social spending bill amid a surge in COVID-19 cases.

The White House has given no further details on Commander. He is the

third dog to join the Bidens at the White House. They had revived the long-standing tradition of White House pets that was broken under former president Donald Trump, when they arrived at the White House with German shepherds Champ and Major. The president and first lady announced in June on Twitter that Champ had died at age 13. Their other pooch, Major, has had some trouble adapting to life at the White House.

In March, he was briefly sent back to the Biden family home in Delaware after at least one biting incident, and in April the first lady's spokesman announced some "additional training" for the dog. Joe Biden attributed Major's unpresidential behavior to the way he gets surprised by Secret Service agents and others appearing around every corner in the busy White House complex. The dog-loving Bidens had also announced they were getting a cat, which press secretary Jen Psaki once warned would "break the internet," although the feline has yet to arrive at the White House. —AFP



This undated photo obtained from US President Joe Biden's Twitter account shows the Biden's new German Shepherd 'Commander.' —AFP



School cycle: Barcelona 'bike bus' lets kids ride to class

In a chic Barcelona neighborhood, a convoy of kid cyclists glides down a car-free street as part of the city's "bicibus" scheme to encourage green transport and physical exercise. The children take to the streets every Friday in the city's Eixample neighborhood, picking up other kids along the circuit and dropping them off at their schools, as a traditional bus route would work.

The roads are closed to traffic to make sure the young riders are safe, and parents often join in, sometimes carrying younger children in bike seats. The program, which was rolled out in September, has been so popular that other neighborhoods are hoping to replicate it - and

interest has been piqued internationally as well. "In several months, there will be other routes in other neighborhoods," said Genis Domínguez, 40, whose children go to school in Eixample, home to wide avenues and stylish shops.

Barcelona already boasts a network of bicycle lanes, but they are not necessarily safe for kids, Domínguez said. "They are very close to the streets where cars go too fast and motorcycles get too close," he told AFP. Municipal police are available to escort the children, with officers on bicycles or motorcycles travelling in the front, back or next to the group. Barcelona's city hall said the goal of the scheme is to "promote a change toward a more sustainable and

active mobility".

Around 140 children use the two "bicibus" routes that currently operate in Eixample, but parents from 35 schools across Barcelona took part in a recent meeting to learn how to set them up in their neighborhoods, said Domínguez. Similar projects already exist in other cities such as Dublin, but a viral video of Barcelona's "bicibus" has sparked interest in the scheme around the world, including from Buenos Aires and San Francisco. So far, it's proven popular among the pint-sized participants. "Parents tell us that Friday is the day when they have the least difficulty to wake up their children," said Domínguez. —AFP

Sports

Human cost of China's green energy rush ahead of the Winter Olympics

Farmers say they are paying a heavy price

BAODING: Beaten, forced off their land, cheated out of money, and even falsely imprisoned—farmers in China say they are paying a heavy price as authorities rush to deliver on ambitious pledges to ramp up national green energy output. China has vowed the upcoming Winter Olympics 2022 will be the first Games to be run entirely on wind and solar energy, and have built scores of facilities to increase capacity—but activists warn ordinary people are being exploited by “land grabs” in the process.

In a hamlet near Beijing, the Long family—who say they’ve lost more than half their agricultural land to a sprawling solar farm next door—now have so little income they are burning corn husks and plastic bags to stay warm in winter. “We were promised just 1,000 yuan per mu of land each year when the power company leased the land for 25 years,” farmer Long from Huangjiao village said, using a Chinese unit of land equal to approximately 667 square meters.

“We can make more than double the amount by growing corn in the same area. Now without land, I eke out a living as a day laborer.” China is the world’s biggest producer of wind turbines and solar panels, and the Winter Olympics is seen as an opportunity to showcase the country’s green technologies as they seek global markets. To ensure an uninterrupted power supply for the Games—and clear the winter smog choking the Chinese capital—Hebei province neighboring Beijing has built a giant plant that takes in power from renewable projects in the province.

That one plant creates 14 billion kilowatt hours of clean electricity every year, similar to the annual energy consumption of Slovenia. But for farmers like Long and his neighbor Pi, the green energy boom has made their lives more dangerous and difficult. Pi says villagers were forced to sign contracts—seen by AFP—leasing their land to the solar park built by State Power Investment Group (SPIC), one of the five biggest utility companies in the country. Those who didn’t agree were beaten by the

police, he said, adding “some were hospitalised, some were detained.”

‘Suppressed and imprisoned’

Pi was jailed for 40 days, while Long languished in prison for nine months for “illegally gathering and disturbing peace,” after a public protest. “The situation is similar to a mafia,” Pi said. “If you complain, then you’ll be suppressed, imprisoned and sentenced.” The average annual disposable rural income in Baoding is about 16,800 yuan (\$2,600), a figure both Long and Pi said they can no longer make.



Chinese authorities rush to deliver on ambitious pledges

AFP could not confirm that electricity from the SPIC project near Huangjiao would be used to power the Olympic venues directly, because that information is not publicly available. The company declined to confirm when asked by AFP. But the Zhangjiakou government—the city co-hosting the Games—has said that since winning the Olympic bid in 2015, the area has “transformed itself from scratch (into) the largest non-hydro renewable energy base in China.”

Government subsidies for wind and solar farms have also accelerated construction of such projects in other parts of Hebei, as China scrambles to cut air pollution before the Games. In a statement, Amnesty International said “forced evictions, illegal land seizures, and loss of livelihoods related to the



BAODING: A farmer takes care of the sheep near wind turbines at Caozhuangci village in Baoding in China's northern Hebei province. —AFP

loss of land” were among the most frequent human rights concerns associated with the wind and solar energy sectors.

China wants 25 percent of its electricity to come from non-fossil fuels by 2030. To achieve this, the country has to more than double its current wind and solar capacity—but environmentalists warn land seizures will become more widespread as energy companies rush to produce renewables. And although Beijing has set a series of ambitious targets around the Winter Olympics, green campaigners face heavy pressure in China if they challenge

the official line.

Several told AFP they were not comfortable discussing Beijing’s environmental targets for the Games for fear of reprisals. “We got nothing” - In September, China announced strict rules for compensation when land is taken over for ecological projects, including the development of green energy. “Our land zoning (rules) also clearly regulate what agricultural land can’t be occupied, especially farmland,” Li Dan, secretary general of the renewable energy professionals committee, which promotes green development. —AFP

News in brief

Championship leaders stumble

LONDON: Fulham missed the chance to go five points clear at the top of the Championship as they suffered a surprise 1-0 loss at home to Sheffield United on Monday. Iliman Ndiaye’s early goal at Craven Cottage meant the Blades remain unbeaten under new manager Paul Heckingbottom. They moved up to 11th place in the table, three points off the play-offs, with their fourth win in a row. Despite Fulham suffering their first defeat since October 2 to end a run of 11 unbeaten matches, the London club remained two points clear of Bournemouth at the top of the table. Only the top two teams at the end of the regular season are guaranteed promotion to the Premier League. The decisive moment of the game came in just the third minute when Ndiaye, receiving the ball in his own half, advanced as Tosin Adarabioyo and Tim Ream back-tracked before the forward struck an accurate shot into the bottom corner. —AFP

Gabon youth coach charged

LIBREVILLE: A former coach for Gabon’s under-17 soccer team accused of raping and sexually abusing young players has been arrested and charged with paedophilia, a judicial source said Monday. Patrick Assoumou Eyi “was arrested Monday in Ntoun” some 40 kilometers from the capital Libreville and “is now in police hands after being charged with paedophilia”, the source said. The source added Eyi would spend 48 hours in custody, extendable for a further 48 hours, pending investigation of “criminal acts.” On Friday, the country’s sports minister had announced an investigation a day after British newspaper The Guardian reported on accusations that Eyi raped, groomed and exploited underage athletes in his care. President Ali Bongo Ondimba described the case as “very serious and unacceptable” as the allegations emerged last week. —AFP

Ice skating hero Paping dies

THE HAGUE: Dutch ice skating hero Reinier Paping, who became a household name in the Netherlands after winning a legendary race in bitterly cold conditions more than half a century ago, has died aged 90, the national broadcaster reported. “He died after a short illness,” his family told NOS, which did not give further details. Paping achieved national fame after winning the near-mythical Eleven Cities Race, called the Elfstedentocht in Dutch, along frozen canals on January 18, 1963. The 1963 event is widely seen as the one held in the most extreme conditions, with temperatures on that day plunging to minus 18 degrees Celsius. Paping completed the ultra-endurance marathon, which has since been dubbed “The hell of ‘63” in 10 hours, 59 minutes and 22 seconds. “With his victory, Paping got two season tickets at the skating rink in Deventer and a silver cigarette holder,” the NOS said. “But he mainly won eternal fame,” the broadcaster said. —AFP

Peng denies making sex assault claim but WTA not convinced

BEIJING: Chinese tennis star Peng Shuai has denied alleging that a senior Communist Party leader sexually assaulted her and insisted she is living freely, in her first media interview since her accusations triggered concerns for her safety. However, the comments did not ease worries at the Women’s Tennis Association, which said Monday that it still had “significant concerns about her well-being and ability to communicate without censorship or coercion”.

In a post last month on China’s Twitter-like Weibo platform, Peng had alleged that former vice-premier Zhang Gaoli—who is in his 70s—coerced her into sex during an on-off relationship spanning several years. In comments to Lianhe Zaobao, a Singaporean Chinese-language newspaper, Peng denied making the allegation. “I would like to stress a very important point: I have never said nor written anything accusing anyone of sexually assaulting me,” the 35-year-



Peng Shuai of China

old said in footage apparently filmed on a phone at a sports event in Shanghai on Sunday. “I would like to emphasise this point very clearly.”

The post was quickly scrubbed from the Chinese web, but not before screenshots were posted on Twitter, setting off a global outcry. The former Wimbledon and French Open doubles champion then disappeared from public appearances for around three weeks. The incident sparked international con-

cern about her safety, including from the United Nations, the White House and fellow tennis stars.

In the Zaobao video, when asked about the Weibo statement, Peng did not deny the post but described it as a “private matter” that people had “many misunderstandings” about. She did not elaborate. In the video, a person is heard asking if she is able to move around freely and if she has been under surveillance since making the accusations. Peng responded that she has “always been very free”.

The WTA said it was still not convinced of Peng’s wellbeing. “We remain steadfast in our call for a full, fair and transparent investigation, without censorship, into her allegation of sexual assault,” the organization said in a statement emailed to AFP. The WTA has suspended all tournaments in China, including Hong Kong, over concerns about Peng.

The latest video follows images of Peng published by Chinese state media, including some of her at a tennis tournament. They also published a screenshot of an email Peng purportedly wrote to the Women’s Tennis Association saying “everything is fine”. But that did little to ease worries. WTA chief Steve Simon said at the time he had “a hard time believing” Peng’s email and questioned whether she was really free to speak openly. —AFP



JOHANNESBURG: India’s National Cricket team members arrive at the OR Tambo International Airport in Johannesburg at the start of their 2021-2022 Tour of South Africa. —AFP

lent of the Indian Premier League and Australia’s Big Bash League, was also cancelled because of Covid last season after only two editions. —AFP

Spectators barred from S Africa-India matches

JOHANNESBURG: No tickets will be sold to the general public for the forthcoming Test and one-day international series between South Africa and India because of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, Cricket South Africa (CSA) announced on Monday. CSA said in a statement that a joint decision had been taken with the Board of Control for Cricket in India to bar spectators from the grounds in order to prevent any possible breaches of the bio-secure environment in which the matches will be played. The first of three Tests starts in Centurion on Sunday. They will be followed by three one-day internationals.

The statement cited the increasing number of COVID-19 cases around the world and the current fourth wave of infections in South Africa for the decision. “This decision was taken in order to avoid any

breaches that could compromise the tour from a COVID-risk perspective and to also maintain a hazard-free bubble environment.” The statement did not mention whether there had been consultations with the South African government. Current regulations allow outdoor gatherings of 2000 people.

South Africa, where the highly mutated Omicron variant was first detected last month, is Africa’s worst-hit country according to official tallies of virus cases, with more than 3.3 million infections logged and more than 90,000 deaths. CSA Acting chief executive Pholetsi Moseki said: “This decision was not taken lightly but was instead taken in the best interest of the game and in the interest of the health and safety of all patrons.” CSA informed media outlets last week that limited access to the grounds will be granted to fully-vaccinated journalists.

The matches will be broadcast on both subscription and free-to-air television channels. Earlier on Monday, CSA announced that a Mzansi Super League Twenty20 tournament, planned for February, had been cancelled due to increased travel restrictions caused by the coronavirus pandemic. The tournament, originally planned as South Africa’s equiva-

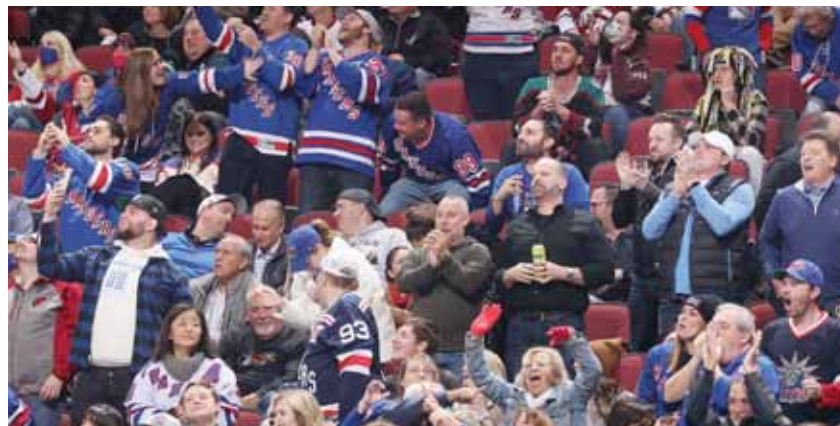
Latest shutdown casts doubt on NHL’s Beijing Olympic participation

LOS ANGELES: The National Hockey League has suspended all games involving cross border travel between Canada and the United States, putting in doubt the players’ ability to participate in the 2022 Beijing Olympics. The league was scheduled to take a three-week break in February so the NHL could take part in the Winter Games for the first time since 2014 in Sochi, but with close to 40 games postponed due to COVID-19 outbreaks, the league might now have to use that time to get the regular season schedule back on track.

The league said on Sunday it is expected to make a decision on the Olympics in the coming days. “Given

the disruption to the NHL’s regular-season schedule caused by recent COVID-related events and the continued uncertainty caused by the ongoing COVID pandemic, the NHL and NHLPA are actively discussing the matter of NHL Player participation in the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing, China, and expect to be in a position to announce a final determination in the coming days,” a spokesman for the league said Sunday.

Officials postponed about a dozen cross border games between December 20-23 on Sunday on top of two dozen contests already shelved due to COVID-19 concerns. “Due to the concern about cross-border travel and, given the fluid



ARIZONA: Fans of the New York Rangers cheer after a goal against the Arizona Coyotes during the third period of the NHL game at Gila River Arena in Glendale, Arizona. —AFP

nature of federal travel restrictions, effective on Monday, all games involving a Canadian-based team playing a US-based team from

Monday, Dec 20 through the start of the Holiday break on Dec. 23, will be postponed and rescheduled,” the NHL said in a news release. —AFP

Sports

Unfancied Trabzonspor take Turkish football by storm

‘We are the first club to have broken Istanbul’s reign’

TRABZON: Trabzonspor supporter Samet Kordali is “100 percent sure” that his unfancied club from Turkey’s Black Sea coast will finally lift the first title of his lifetime. And when that day comes at the end of the season in May, the northeastern city of Trabzon “will be on fire”, Kordali says with a dreamy glint in his eye. Trabzonspor are the uncontested leaders of the Super Lig after 17 matches, on course to lift their first championship trophy since 1984.

Although they suffered their first loss earlier this month, they rebounded with a 2-0 win against third-place Hatayspor in front of a feverish crowd last weekend. Boosted by the arrival of Slovakian midfielder Marek Hamsik, they are nine points clear of second-place Konyaspor and the bookies’ favorites to win the league. “Here, every child supports the club,” Hamdi Caliskan, 57, says outside the team’s official store, where the club’s burgundy-and-blue shirts are flying off the shelf. “We are the first club to have broken Istanbul’s reign.”



Club eye first title of lifetime

‘Storm of Black Sea’

In 1976, Trabzon became the first city outside Istanbul to win the title, which until then was the preserve of the three Turkish giants: Galatasaray, Fenerbahce and Besiktas. The city of 300,000 is mainly known among Turks for its fishing port, nationalist fervor and the football club, which some affectionately call the “storm of the Black Sea”. In the old city’s cafes, the team dominate every conversation and their colors even decorate some locals’ Muslim prayer beads. “I went to Trabzon several times during my career as a referee,” retired match official Deniz Coban recalled in

2019. “People’s relationship to football is very different there. An 80-year-old grandmother would turn around on the street because she knows you.” This passion for the local club is rare in Turkey’s regions, where many still support the famous Istanbul side, says Can Kakisim, an associate professor and expert on football. “Trabzon is a city apart because the majority support Trabzonspor,” he said. Several anecdotes reveal the passion—some say hysteria—surrounding the club.

In 2015, the team’s president, angry at an unwarranted penalty, locked the referees in the locker room for four hours. The drama only ended after President Recep Tayyip Erdogan placed a soothing phone call to the fuming football boss. Earlier this month, a man threatened to commit suicide by jumping off the rooftop of an apartment building in the city centre. In a video that went viral, one person down below shouted: “Brother, don’t go until you see the championship victory!”

‘Respected opponents’

Among the older citizens, some still revel in the nostalgia of a bygone era when Trabzonspor grabbed six championships and six Turkish Super Cups between 1976 and 1984. Since then, Trabzonspor have gained a reputation for being “respected opponents” who can put up a decent fight against the Istanbul sides, says historian Mehmet Yuce.

But Galatasaray, Fenerbahce and Besiktas do not really treat Trabzonspor as an equal, focusing instead on their intense internal rivalry. “Galatasaray, Fenerbahce and Besiktas have existed for more than a century and so they



TRABZON: Trabzonspor’s players pose prior the Super league football match between Trabzonspor and Hatayspor at the Medical Park Stadium in Trabzon. —AFP

don’t see Trabzonspor (formed in 1967) as a team of their calibre,” Yuce says. The club, which has finished second on nine occasions, has the added advantage of not playing in the European leagues. For Kakisim, a new championship title is “necessary” for keeping alive the passion among younger fans. Gokhan Alparslan is one of them. Painting

houses during the week, the 25-year-old sells team scarves for 30 liras (\$1.70) on match days in the stadium’s parking lot. This year, he watches games on the television but if Trabzonspor clinches the title, he thinks selling team scarves could make him rich. “Maybe then I’ll be able to buy a season ticket to go inside the stadium,” he laughs. —AFP

Premier League to play on during COVID chaos

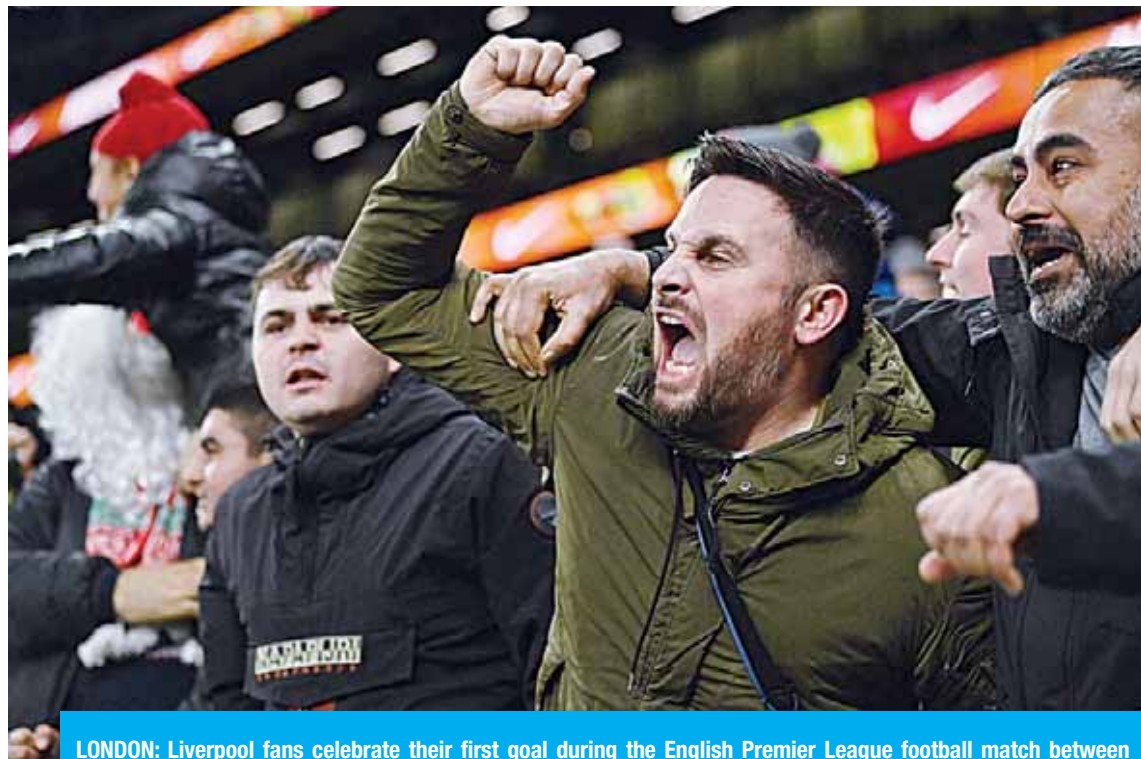
MANCHESTER: Premier League clubs have decided against a temporary halt to the season despite a surge in coronavirus cases that has forced mass postponements and threatened to derail the season. Just four of the weekend’s scheduled 10 games went ahead as Britain battles record numbers of positive COVID cases due to the new Omicron strain.

The Premier League board has been considering applications for postponements on a case-by-case basis but there has been criticism over the decision-making process, with fears it jeopardizes the sporting integrity of the competition. There had been talk of a potential “firebreaker”, with suggestions that the middle round of the festive fixtures from December 28-30 could be postponed.

But on Monday the English top flight, following a shareholders’ meeting involving representatives from the 20 clubs, said games would continue through the busy festive season. “It was confirmed at a Premier League club meeting today that while recognizing a number of clubs are experiencing COVID-19 outbreaks and challenges, it is the league’s collective intention to continue the current fixture schedule where safely possible,” the Premier League said in a statement.

“The health and wellbeing of all concerned remains our priority and the League will continue to monitor and reflect public health guidance, always proceeding with caution.” The statement also said 84 percent of players had had at least one dose of vaccination. “The league continues to work with clubs to encourage vaccination among players and club staff, as well as promoting the Government’s public-health vaccination messaging to clubs and the wider public,” it added.

The English Football League also confirmed on Monday that its competitions, including this week’s League Cup quarter-finals, would proceed as planned. “Throughout the pandemic our two priorities have been ensuring the welfare of those involved in EFL competitions and ensuring the fixture sched-



LONDON: Liverpool fans celebrate their first goal during the English Premier League football match between Tottenham Hotspur and Liverpool at Tottenham Hotspur Stadium in London. —AFP

ule can continue where it is safe to do so,” said EFL chief executive Trevor Birch. The Football Association said FA Cup replays for the third and fourth round have been scrapped to free up space in the calendar.

Tuchel fears

Chelsea, who have fallen six points behind leaders Manchester City at the top of the table, asked to have Sunday’s match at Wolves called off but their plea was rejected despite seven positive COVID cases. Title-chasing Liverpool also stumbled in a 2-2 draw at Tottenham, with a number of key players absent with coronavirus.

“We were put in a huge risk of health and safety to the players, not just because of COVID but also physically,” Chelsea boss Thomas Tuchel said on Sunday. “From a medical point of view, I’m very wor-

ried because we have had four consecutive days of positive tests in the squad. “How will this stop if we carry on and pretend it’s not happening? This is my opinion and it’s the medical opinion but it’s not the opinion of the Premier League, so we have to play.” Arsenal manager Mikel Arteta has called for more transparency over the decision-making process.

The Gunners were forced to play at Brentford on the opening weekend of the season despite four players testing positive and lost the game 2-0. “We want to play all under the same rules,” said Arteta after Arsenal thrashed a depleted Leeds 4-1 on Saturday. “That’s where I think they have to come forward. Whatever they decide is best for the competition has to be explained.” According to the Daily Mail, clubs were told that no postponements would be permitted if 13 outfield players and one goalkeeper from their 25-man squad list were available. —AFP

Welsh’s sport counts cost of new spectator ban due to Omicron

LONDON: Welsh clubs yesterday said the decision to ban crowds from sporting events in the country to help control the spread of the Omicron variant of coronavirus would have a “devastating” financial impact. All events - indoors and outdoors - must be held behind closed doors from December 26 under new Welsh government rules. Economy minister Vaughan Gething, who announced the measures, said a £3 million (\$4 million) fund would be available to support clubs and venues affected by the loss of revenue.

“Throughout the pandemic we have followed scientific and public health advice to keep people safe,” he said in a statement. “The advice is clear - we need to act now in response to the threat of Omicron. We are giving people as much notice of these decisions as we can. “Crowds will come back as soon as possible. We want everyone to be here to enjoy their favorite sports.”

Cardiff’s United Rugby Championship (URC) clash with Scarlets and Wrexham’s National League football match against Solihull - both scheduled for December 26 - will be the first fixtures affected by the ruling. The Welsh Grand National at Chepstow, which takes place the following day, will also have to be run behind closed doors despite advance ticket sales of more than 6,000. The first English Football League (EFL) match due to be affected is Swansea’s Championship clash with Luton, which is currently scheduled for December 29.

Cardiff City chief executive Mehmet Dalman, whose club also play in the second tier of the English game, said the move would hit them hard. “It’s a major blow from all aspects, but we have to put the safety of our fans, players and everyone first,” he told Talksport radio. Welsh rugby teams will also suffer financially. Scarlets executive chairman Simon Muderack said he was “bitterly disappointed” to lose the fans. “After the past few weeks we were all looking to bring some festive derby cheer into people’s lives,” he tweeted. —AFP

Classifieds

Hospitals & Clinics

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

Clinics

CHANGE OF NAME

I. PEDDEHAPU VENKATESWARLU (Old Name)
S/o Peddehapu Srinivas, D.No. 63-3-4,
Sanjeevanagar, Opp: Ravi Supply Company,
Rajahmundry-533105. Changing my name from
PEDDEHAPU VENKATESH, S/o Peddehapu
Srinivas (New Name). Henceforth I am being called as
PEDDEHAPU VENKATESH, S/o Peddehapu
Srinivas for all purposes. (C 0994) 21-12-2021

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it's dealing with others.

Raiders edge Browns, boost hopes

Vikings win to boost NFL playoff bids



CLEVELAND: Zay Jones #7 of the Las Vegas Raiders carries the ball as he is tackled by Greg Newsome II #20 of the Cleveland Browns in the fourth quarter of the game at FirstEnergy Stadium on December 20, 2021. — AFP

WASHINGTON: Daniel Carlson kicked a 48-yard field goal on the final play Monday to give Las Vegas a 16-14 victory at Cleveland and boost the Raiders' NFL playoff hopes. Raiders quarterback Derek Carr completed 25-of-38 passes for 236 yards and a touchdown, and drove Vegas 41 yards on eight plays in the dying seconds to set up Carlson's winning effort. The Raiders improved to 7-7 while the Browns fell to 7-7, leaving both clubs one game out of the last American Conference (AFC) playoff spot.

"We still have a chance. We're still in it," Carr said. "We're playing meaningful games in December and I'm thankful for that." In Monday's other game, Kirk Cousins threw two touchdown passes, and the Minnesota Vikings improved to 7-7 by defeating host Chicago 17-9, moving into the seventh and final National Conference (NFC) playoff spot based on tie-breakers.

"We'll take it and move on," Cousins said. "We understand we have to get right back to work. They

don't get any easier from here." The Raiders-Browns contest was postponed from Saturday due to a major Covid-19 outbreak in the Browns, who were forced to start third-stringer Nick Mullens at quarterback with starter Baker Mayfield and backup Case Keenum sidelined by Covid-19.

Cleveland was also without coach Kevin Stefanski after he tested positive for the virus. Assistant Mike Priefer served as acting head coach. Mullens directed a 14-play, 80-yard touchdown drive in the fourth quarter, capping the march by scrambling before flipping a 6-yard touchdown pass to Harrison Bryant on a fourth-down play. Chase McLaughlin's extra point put Cleveland ahead for the first time at 14-13. Cleveland's Greedy Williams intercepted a Carr pass on the next Raiders possession, but the Vegas defense forced a punt to give the visitors one final chance.

A Raiders holding penalty wiped out a 27-yard reception, but Carr marched Vegas in position for a last kick. Carlson booted the ball between the

uprights, but a Cleveland timeout just before the snap negated the play. Forced to kick again, Carlson again right-footed the ball down the middle, and the Raiders finally tasted victory. "Our defense did a great job getting me another chance," Carr said. "This team is defined off adversity. We've been through a lot so nothing really fazes us. As long as we had the ball we had a chance to win. "I'm just glad we got to play."

Cleveland's Nick Chubb, who ran 23 times for 91 yards, scored on a 4-yard touchdown run with 4:33 remaining in the third quarter to pull the Browns within 10-7, but Carlson answered with a 40-yard Vegas field goal on the second play of the fourth quarter. Carr threw a 5-yard touchdown pass to Bryan Edwards, and Carlson kicked a 29-yard field goal to give the Raiders a 10-0 halftime edge.

At Chicago, Cousins threw a 12-yard touchdown pass to Justin Jefferson, and Greg Joseph added a 37-yard field goal to give Minnesota a 10-0 lead, but Carlos Santos kicked a 34-yard field goal to

pull the Bears within 10-3 at halftime. Cousins tossed a 7-yard touchdown pass to Ihmir Smith-Marsette in the third quarter, and Chicago (4-10) couldn't reach the end zone until Jesper Horsted caught a 19-yard pass from Justin Fields on the game's last play. Yesterday featured two more NFL games postponed due to COVID-19 issues, with Seattle at the Los Angeles Rams and Washington at Philadelphia.

Bad news for KC, Bucs

The Kansas City Chiefs, atop the AFC at 10-4, became the latest NFL club to be hit by Covid-19, with tight end Travis Kelce, kicker Harrison Butker and defensive back Charvarius Ward placed on the virus list Monday. Reigning Super Bowl champion Tampa Bay suffered worse news Monday with wide receiver Chris Godwin ruled out for the remainder of the season with a knee injury. Godwin leads the Buccaneers with 98 catches for 1,103 and five touchdowns. — AFP

Embiid sparkles in Sixers win; Morant return spoiled

LOS ANGELES: Joel Embiid scored 41 points and sparked an undermanned Philadelphia squad to victory at Boston on Monday while Oklahoma City spoiled the NBA return of Memphis Grizzlies star Ja Morant. Cameroonian big man Embiid also delivered 10 rebounds, five assists, four blocked shots and his last of two steals in the dying seconds to deny the Celtics a chance at a tying 3-pointer in powering the 76ers over Boston 108-103.

The impressive all-around performance together with 26 points by Seth Curry and 25 by Tobias Harris enabled the Sixers (16-15) to snap a three-game losing skid despite being down Shake Milton due to Covid-19 protocols and Tyrese Maxey with a quad injury. "I thought we had a calm tonight," said 76ers coach Doc Rivers. "The guys were in a great mental place. They really wanted it. You could sense it." Jaylen Brown led Boston (15-16) with 30 points.

At Memphis, Oklahoma City guard Shai Gilgeous-Alexander seized command down the stretch and finished with 23 points, five rebounds, four assists and three steals to lead the Thunder over the host Grizzlies 102-99. It was a measure of revenge for Oklahoma City.



TENNESSEE: Ja Morant #12 of the Memphis Grizzlies shoots the ball against the Oklahoma City Thunder on December 20, 2021 at FedExForum in Memphis. — AFP

Memphis had beaten the Thunder by an NBA-record 73 points, 152-79, on the same court earlier this month. Morant, Memphis' scoring and assist leader, ended a 12-game layoff for a left knee sprain and had 16 points and eight assists but couldn't spark the Grizzlies late. "I was really trusting my knee," Morant said.

Morant's jumper put Memphis ahead 95-94 but Gilgeous-Alexander passed to Josh Giddey for an uncontested layup, then scored one of his own and followed with a steal and two free throws to give the Thunder a 100-95 edge and Memphis missed a desperation half-court 3-pointer at the buzzer. "We executed well on defense," said Giddey, who had 19 points and a career-high 11 rebounds. "We knew our coverages and we stuck with them

well." French center Rudy Gobert scored 23 points and grabbed 21 rebounds to spark the Utah Jazz over the visiting Charlotte Hornets 112-102.

Gobert made a career-high 15 free throws in 16 trips to the line and matched a career best with his sixth game in one season of 20 or more rebounds. Croatian Bojan Bogdanovic also scored 23 points while Donovan Mitchell had 21 for the Jazz, who also got 13 rebounds from Royce O'Neale. "We started the game well right away. We were hitting the shots," Bogdanovic said. "Rudy really dominated in the paint. He played great." LaMelo Ball and Miles Bridges each scored 21 to lead Charlotte, which fell behind 35-16 after the first quarter. — AFP

NHL pauses season over COVID issues

NEW YORK: The National Hockey League and its players union announced yesterday that the season will pause today, two days before a previously scheduled Christmas break, due to COVID-19 concerns. Five remaining games scheduled for Thursday were postponed, raising the total number of delayed contests to 49 as nine clubs had already decided to shut down until for the holiday.

Two remaining scheduled games will be played on Tuesday with Washington at Philadelphia and reigning Stanley Cup champion Tampa Bay at the Vegas Golden Knights. All games today had already been scrapped due to COVID-19 issues and tomorrow's schedule was delayed in order to start a Christmas break early, with all 32 teams taking a pause until Sunday.

Players report back to teams on Sunday for COVID-19 testing, practice or travel. No member of a team's travel group will be allowed to enter a team facility for more than testing until they produce a negative test result. The Columbus Blue Jackets and Montreal Canadiens had become the eighth and ninth league clubs to shut down after COVID-19 outbreaks. The NHL announced on Sunday that games involving teams to cross the US-Canada border were off until after the holiday break over concerns about changes in travel restrictions.

"The most important thing is the health and safety of the players and coaches and everyone involved with the organizations," Dallas Stars captain Jamie Benn said after his team's 7-4 triumph over Minnesota in Monday's only NHL contest. "Just taking it day by day. Hopefully the numbers go down and we can get back to hockey after Christmas." With COVID-19 uncertainty and the number of postponed contests, NHL and union officials are discussing whether or not players should participate as planned in February's Beijing Winter Olympics. — AFP