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Booster necessary for Kuwaitis to travel as COVID cases rise

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Local

Photo of the Day



KUWAIT: An aerial view showing Kuwait City's skyline. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

Slovak ambassador highlights strong ties with Kuwait on his country's national day

KUWAIT: Ambassador of the Slovak Republic to the State of Kuwait Igor Hajdusek delivered a speech during a virtual event he hosted recently to celebrate Slovakia's national day. In the speech, the envoy highlighted his country's exceptional ties with Kuwait, noting that the Gulf state was among the first countries in the world to recognize Slovakia's independence in 1993. He also pointed out the various aspects of cooperation between the two countries in different fields throughout the years. The following are excerpts from the ambassador's speech:

"It is my pleasure, as well as a great honor, to welcome you virtually at a reception to commemorate the 29th Anniversary of the National Day of the Slovak Republic on January 1 at the premises of the Embassy of the Slovak Republic to the State of Kuwait.

"Today we are celebrating the most important date in the modern Slovak history, day of establishment of the Slovak Republic, this is the day which determined our fate, we commemorate the beginning of the uprising that led to the rebirth of the Slovak Republic statehood as well as to the enactment of our



Slovak Ambassador
Igor Hajdusek

first constitution on September 1. In November 1989, the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia resulted in essential political changes, depriving the communists of the power, and opening the way to democracy and pluralism. The Velvet Revolution also brought many changes in the political life of the people of Slovakia.

"After the general elections in Czechoslovakia in June 1992, the decision was made to constitute two fully independent republics. In July, Slovakia declared itself a sovereign state, meaning that its laws took precedence over those passed in the federal system. The Constitution of the Slovak Republic was adopted on 1st September 1992, the Czechoslovak Federal Parliament voted for splitting- up the country officially on December 31. The Slovak Republic and the Czech Republic went their separate ways after January 1, 1993, the event sometimes called the Velvet Divorce, and thus 75 years of the common road of the Slovaks and Czechs in one state - Czechoslovakia, was terminated.

"In the past 29 years the Slovak people, acting in concerted and determined efforts of

the whole Slovak nation, reached a tremendous transformation, withstanding and becoming strong and vigorous. During this time Slovakia became a member of international organizations, member of the European Union, the Transatlantic Alliance, a member of the euro area and the Schengen Area.

"In previous years we successfully accomplished the presidency in OECD, chairmanship in the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, rotating presidency in the Visegrad Group, thus putting our hands together in an effort to build a secure and prosperous world. We welcomed the opening of the EU Delegation in Kuwait in 2019 as an outstanding opportunity for closer cooperation between the EU Member States and Kuwait.

"Kuwait has always been a close friend of and good partner for Slovakia, recognizing the country's independence from the very first day of its existence and establishing the Embassy in Slovakia. The development of bilateral relationship has been blessed with prosperity and advantages in all fields of cooperation - political, economic, trade, investment, education, archeology, culture, sports, tourism, health care - here I wish to mention the well-known Piestany, thermal spa visited by many Kuwaitis for quite a long time.

"Despite of the recent outbreak of the

pandemic of COVID-19 which block the entire world to contact in direct talks or visits but always Slovakia is ready to work with Kuwait to expand useful cooperation in different fields, and further enhance cooperation in such areas as - new energy programs, e-commerce, innovations, AI sector, people-to-people and cultural exchange, education and training programs and others, expecting to generate more benefits for the people of the two countries. We do firmly believe that with our concerted efforts, the bilateral cooperation will continue and will make further progress, as well. We do get support and assistance from our Kuwaiti partners and we are very grateful.

"I would like to take the opportunity to extend my sincere thanks to all the friends who have shown a lot of understanding for Slovakia in her endeavor to encourage and develop the Slovakia-Kuwait friendship, and I also wish to extend the cordial greetings and best wishes to the Slovaks living overseas who have always provided support for the development in their motherland.

"I wish health and wellbeing for President Zuzana Caputova of the Slovak Republic, His Highness Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, Amir of the State of Kuwait and the peace and prosperity of the two countries and a happy and prosperous year 2022 to you."

Local

News in brief

Low temperatures during weekend

KUWAIT: Low temperatures coming from the Northwest is expected to stabilize the weather in Kuwait City during the weekend, said Kuwait Control and Meteorological Center (KCMC) yesterday. In a statement, KCMC Naval Forecast Supervisor Yasir Al-Bloushi said that the weather during sunrise will be leaning to cold, cloudy and northwestern winds, with wind speed averaging 8-20 kilometer per hour, noting that the highs will be 20, and lows will be 18. Sea waves will be moderate, from 1 to 4 meters, Bloushi added.



Kuwait condoles with Philippines

KUWAIT: The Foreign Ministry of Kuwait has expressed sympathy with the Republic of the Philippines over the deadly typhoon Rai which struck the southern regions of the friendly country, killing and injuring dozens of people and leaving a trail of destruction. In a press statement on Wednesday, the ministry also extended sincere condolences to the Philippine government and people, particularly families of the victims, and wished the wounded people quick recovery.

Kuwait oil price up to \$74.69 pb

KUWAIT: Price of Kuwaiti crude oil was up two Dollars Wednesday to reach \$74.69 pb, compared with \$72.69 pb the day before, Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) said yesterday. Globally, Brent crude was also up by \$1.31 to \$75.29 pb and West Texas Intermediate also went up by \$1.64 to \$72.76 pb.

US Dollar traded at KD 0.302

KUWAIT: The US dollar was traded at KD 0.302 and the Euro at KD 0.343 yesterday. The Central Bank of Kuwait (CBK) said in its daily bulletin the British sterling pound was up to KD 0.403, the Swiss franc was also up traded at KD 0.329. Moreover, the Japanese Yen remained at KD 0.0026. The CBK publishes daily average exchange rates that do not necessarily reflect actual prices of the currencies' trade for the day.

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Local

ASCC open-air exhibits

complement museums



Exploring **ASCC**

Photos by Shakir Reshamwala

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



Apart from the magnificent museums, which we have covered on these pages over the past weeks, the center has other facilities like a theatre, fine arts center and a guest services building. Various outdoor activities are held in the courtyard.

The open spaces around the museums are home to a flamingo flock sculpture, science garden, dinosaur dig, kinetic sculptures, an amphitheater, a giant rocket, an exhibit of ancient stories and stars and shadow globes. The center hosts exhibitions, lectures, workshops, festivals, camps and many other events throughout the year.



Local



Massive potential in Kuwait's textile market

By Ben Garcia

Shakeel Ahmed Malik, a Pakistani national, owns 18 textile shops in Kuwait. Before the coronavirus pandemic, he ran 22 textile shops, besides a host of other businesses. Malik shared his story with Kuwait Times on how he became a textile entrepreneur and the challenges he faced during the trying times of the pandemic.

Malik joined his brother in Kuwait in search of greener pastures in 1994. He started as a helper at the woodworking business owned by his brother. After four years, he got exhausted and decided to open a pool parlor. At that time, before the advent of the Internet and mobile phones and gadgets, billiards was a popular pastime for many young Kuwaitis and residents and a lucrative business opportunity. His brother lent him KD 13,000 to open the parlor, and there was no looking back. From one snooker hall, he opened 13 similar halls all over Kuwait. After competition heated up, he changed his line of business. "I had saved enough to start an even bigger business," Malik recalled.

Malik wanted to open a gold shop, but his heart was telling him to do something else. "I then met an Iranian looking for a business partner in 2004. This guy was an expert in the textile business, but I did not know anything about it. I was hesitant at first and

consulted some people. When I learned there was a high demand for textiles, I immediately jumped into it," he said. He initially invested KD 6,000.

When the textile company was set up and everything went as planned, he opened several tailoring shops to complement his fabric business. Most of his fabrics are imported from China, India, Japan and South Korea. Malik's company became famous, and he operated up to 22 stores at the height of the business. His products include cotton yarns, polyester and cotton blended yarns, silk, cotton, soy protein, polyester and nylon.

"We select only the best fabrics - that is why people trust us. My marketing in-charge is paid a handsome salary to buy products from various countries. He also earns commission and goes around the world, mostly China, to buy new and modern textile products for the business," Malik added.

After his business became well established, he started getting orders from India and the UAE. The upward trend continued until the end of 2015. "By 2016, the overall business climate gradually declined because of unstable oil prices and other financial troubles around the world. So even before the pandemic, we experienced a slump in business. It was already going down, but the massive impact was felt of course from 2020 till now. Hopefully by next year, we will recover, as I think we've reached the lowest

point already," Malik told Kuwait Times.

The textile sector in Kuwait is small compared to other countries in the Middle East, but it has massive potential for growth, according to Malik. Before the pandemic, Malik had around 60 people working in his six companies, but now he only has 20 employees. "During the pandemic I let go of many employees as part of cost-cutting measures. For more than six months I had no income. My savings were depleted as I continued paying my workers. I also had to pay the rent for my shops - during the lockdown, the owners of real estate companies waived the rent for only three months. The remaining months I paid in full," he said.

Malik is still picking up the pieces. "The shops are getting customers, but not as much as those prior to the pandemic. We are slowly recovering. I think the market will only accelerate in 2023," he said.



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Local

Indian embassy promotes trade, technology, tourism in meeting with Kuwaiti media

KUWAIT: Ambassador of India to Kuwait Sibi George interacted with Kuwaiti media-persons on promotion of trade, technology and tourism, as part of the realization of the vision for 'Aatm-Nirbhar Bharat' or 'Self-Reliant India', as envisaged by Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi.

The interaction included a detailed presentation on India's focus on trade, technology and tourism highlighting the concerted policy push in each area as well as the recent reforms and trends indicating the scale of potential opportunities in India in these areas.

Ambassador Sibi George, in his remarks, referred to the excellent bilateral engagement in the year 2021 between India and Kuwait, marking the 60th anniversary of establishment of diplomatic relations between India and Kuwait. Noting the strides India has been making in economic recovery after the pandemic induced scenario, he spoke of the emphasis the Government of India has placed on increasing trade, attracting tourism and technological development, along with a planned push for skill development and R&D. He stated that the Indian economy is set for a strong recovery with an estimated 9.5 percent growth in the current fiscal year, almost surpassing pre-covid levels.

In terms of trade, for the first time, the government of India has set a target of over \$400 billion for merchandise exports for the current fiscal, over 50 percent of which has already been achieved in



KUWAIT: Ambassador of India to Kuwait poses for a group photo with Kuwaiti media-persons during the event.

the first half of the year. India's global merchandise exports have grown over 50 percent YOY in the period April to November 2021.

Despite the pandemic, India has been a top destination for Foreign Direct Investments (FDI) with \$82 billion received in FY 2020-21, while India is expected to attract investments worth \$120-160 billion annually by 2035. In financial year 2020, the top sectors with FDI inflows were services which included R&D, testing and analysis, financial, banking insurance etc. followed by, IT and computer software/hardware, trading and telecommunication sectors.

The presentation highlighted that India is one of the top countries exporting software and IT services, with an extensive network of R&D in all areas of science and technology, especially fields such as Biotechnology, Medical Research, and Space exploration. India has taken great strides in the field of space research and exploration. India's first interplanetary mission, Mangalyaan or Mars Orbiter Mission (MOM), was the first mission to reach Mars on its first attempt. Mangalyaan has since completed 8 successful years in orbit. Furthermore, India plans to launch its first manned spaceflight mission, Gaganyaan, in 2023.

The presentation also focused on India's tourism sector, highlighting the diversity of offerings for tourists interested in leisure, business or wellness, in highly affordable packages. India is the seventh largest and fast-growing tourism economy in the world. With a travel market of \$75 billion in FY 2020, India's tourism sector is expected to grow to \$125 billion in FY 2027, ranking amongst the top five business travel destinations by 2030. The event was attended and well received by a large number of Arabic and English print and audio visual media persons representing all major publications and channels in Kuwait.

Dr Suad Al-Sabah promotes Arabic language in conference

KUWAIT: Dr Suad Al-Sabah participated in a virtual international conference that organized by the Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ICESCO) on the occasion of the World Arabic Language Day. The conference was titled 'Women and Arabic Language: Reality and Future Horizons'.

Dr Suad was a guest of honor in the conference, in addition to four other women: Minister of Solidarity, Social Inclusion and Family in Morocco Awatif Hayyar, Egypt's Minister of Culture Enas Abdel-dayem, in addition to Deputy Foreign Minister of Ukraine and Former Foreign Affairs minister of Austria. Dr Suad Al-Sabah focused in her statements on her efforts to promote the Arabic language during her long cultural career, and that through poetry and writing, or through the Suad Al-Sabah Publishing House. "I fought hard for the Arabic language, and I wrote so much for its sake," she said. "I instilled its love in my children and I launched a publishing house to protect one of its gates. I fought with poems, narration and voice so that our beautiful language remains beautiful."



Registration for TAMAKAN program ends December 28

KUWAIT: For the third year in a row, National Bank of Kuwait (NBK) sponsors TAMAKAN training program for fresh Kuwaiti graduates, as part of its strategic partnership with 'Creative Confidence'. The online registration for TAMAKAN training program for fresh Kuwaiti graduates continues through <https://www.creativeconfidence.co/tamakan>, until December 28, 2021.

The program will start on January 18 until March 27, 2022. TAMAKAN is a full-time commitment program that extends for 10 weeks, five days a week, from 8:00 am - 4:00 pm. The program is a full-time commitment. NBK will be hosting the program and providing a real business challenge that



Asmaa Bin Hussain

participants will work on into the final stages of the training sessions.

NBK Public Relations Officer, Asmaa Bin Hussain, said: "The program helps participants gain real, relevant experience and develop their skills. Participants will get exposed to the latest methods and tools that helps them in designing solutions and shaping ideas in any field. After completing the program, participants can add this experience to their resume." Bin Hussain added: "The program stands as a good opportunity for Kuwaiti nationals who recently graduated from university and are currently unemployed." As to the process of joining the program, the applicants should fill an online form needs to be and accordingly if the candidate fits the required profile, they will be contacted via email and for an interview. Following all interviews, the candidates will be notified of the results.

NBK believes in the youth of Kuwait and is very keen and committed to support youth development. Its partnership in this program reflects the bank's beliefs and effort in offering unique opportunities for the Kuwaiti youth. TAMAKAN Program offers recent graduates a unique development opportunity before starting their first job. TAMAKAN is organized by Creative confidence in collaboration with NBK. 'Creative Confidence' is a Kuwaiti based consulting and training company that specializes in creativity, innovation and collaboration.

Shooting tournament concludes tomorrow

By Abdellatif Sharaa

KUWAIT: The closing ceremony of Sheikh Jaber Al-Abdullah Al-Jaber Al-Sabah shooting tournament will be held tomorrow at Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Olympic Shooting Complex. President of Kuwait and Arab Shooting Federa-

tions Duaj Al-Otaibi spoke about the importance of this annual tournament and lauded the support shooting receives from Sheikh Jaber Al-Abdullah, who is among those who are keen that shooters excel and keep making significant achievements. Otaibi was satisfied with the number of shooters who participated from the club and Kuwait National Guard. He thanked the technical and administrative departments for their efforts to ensure the success of the tournament.



Duaj Al-Otaibi

Local

Kuwaitis without third dose can't travel: Civil Aviation

New coronavirus cases on the rise

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: Kuwait's Civil Aviation Department yesterday issued a decision barring Kuwaiti citizens who had taken the second vaccine dose nine months ago from leaving the country unless they take the third booster dose. The decision is effective from January 2.

Kuwaiti citizens who had got the second dose nine months and more must get the third vaccine dose to be able to travel, the department said. The decision comes after the council of ministers said those who had taken the second dose nine months ago are no longer considered immune to the coronavirus and must take the third booster shot.

The Department also issued regulations for the entry of expats to Kuwait, saying that expats who had been vaccinated in Kuwait should produce the vaccination proof through Kuwait ID application or Immunity.

For those who had been vaccinated outside the country, they should produce a vaccination certificate showing identical name as in the passport, the types and dates of the vaccines, the name of the authority that gave the vaccination

and the QR Code of the vaccination.

It said that expats who had received their vaccinations outside the country can upload their vaccination certificates through the health ministry website to verify the vaccination.

The new decisions come as the number of new coronavirus cases reported in the country has increased sharply with the health ministry announcing 143 new cases on Wednesday, the first time exceeding 100 cases in more than three months, according to official statistics.

The ministry of health meanwhile has decided to suspend all annual leave for the medical staff for the month of January. The decision is effective on January 2. But the medical association said that the ministry undersecretary Mustafa Redha has promised to reconsider the decision as soon as possible.

Kuwait has already reported 13 COVID-19 Omicron cases, all of them coming from several European countries. Authorities have urged the public to strictly observe health conditions especially wearing face masks and keeping distance. Malls have been instructed not to admit unvaccinated people or those who are not considered immune.



KUWAIT: This archive photo shows a traveler wearing a face mask walking among social distancing floor stickers at the departure hall of Kuwait International Airport. —Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

Iraq confirms paying final reparations for invasion of Kuwait

BAGHDAD: Iraq has paid its last war reparations to Kuwait more than 30 years since the invasion of the Gulf country by former autocrat Saddam Hussein, officials said yesterday. On August 2, 1990, Hussein ordered his army to invade Kuwait and seize what he described as "Iraq's 19th province", before being pushed back seven months later by a US-led coalition.

"Iraq has closed the file of the Kuwait war reparations, having paid the last of its dues," Mozher Saleh, the prime minister's economic advisor, was quoted as saying by the official Iraqi News Agency. In total, Iraq has paid \$52.4 billion in reparations, he said.

The central bank announced Tuesday the payment of the final portion of the reparations, valued at \$44 million. The payments were suspended in 2014 when the Islamic State group took over large swathes of Iraq but were resumed in 2018, following the group's defeat.

Funds for the reparations come from a five percent tax levied on sales of Iraq's petroleum and petroleum products. The compensation is distributed by a UN agency to claimants who suffered losses or damages as a result of the invasion. —AFP

Customs officers foil marijuana, liquor smuggling attempts



KUWAIT: Customs officers foiled an attempt to smuggle nearly 17 kilograms of marijuana that were found with a passenger who arrived at terminal 4 of Kuwait International Airport, the General Administration of Customs said in a

Two Kuwaiti MPs take oath as Arab Parliament members

AMMAN: Member of the Kuwaiti National Assembly Dr Abdullah Al-Turaiji yesterday expressed hope his participation in the current sessions of the Arab Parliament would result in "serving Arab causes." In a statement



statement yesterday.

The marijuana were kept inside seven paper wraps and were handed over to Drug Control General Department personnel, it added. Meanwhile, Customs officers discovered 118 liquor

bottles kept in a container that was not claimed for 90 days at Shuwaikh Port. The 20-foot container arrived from a Gulf country with a note saying that it contained car spare parts, the General Administration of Customs said.

to the press after he took the oath, along with his peer Nasser Al-Dosari, as new members of the Arab Parliament, Dr Turaiji said he and his colleague aspire to attain some of the Arab Parliament objectives, namely serving Arab causes and interests of the Arab peoples at various levels. On the Arab Parliament session, held earlier yesterday, Dr Turaiji said the meeting focused on political and security developments in the Arab world, namely in Yemen, Libya, Somalia, Sudan and Iraq. The Kuwaiti MPs took part in the second session of the third legislative term of the Arab Parliament, held at headquarters of the Jordanian parliament earlier today. Dr Turaiji and Dosari swore in during the session, also attended by Kuwaiti legislators Khaled Al-Otaibi and Dr Mohammad Al-Huwailah. —KUNA

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International

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Myanmar landslide death toll rises to four, dozens still missing

Rescuers called off second day's search due to fading light

YANGON: The death toll from a landslide at an illegal jade mine in northern Myanmar rose to four yesterday, rescuers said, warning that the dozens still missing are likely dead. Scores die each year working in the country's lucrative but poorly regulated jade trade, which sees low-paid migrant workers scrape out gems highly coveted in neighbouring China. Rescuers pulled three bodies from the nearby lake in Hpakant township near the Chinese border yesterday, adding to the one found the previous day.

Authorities had initially said at least 70 people were feared missing after the torrent of rocks and earth swept into the lake early Wednesday, but later said that they were still trying to confirm that figure. Two of the men found yesterday came from Yinmar Pin, hundreds of kilometres away in central Myanmar, they said, while the third was from Rakhine state in the southwest.

The miners at Hpakant come from across Myanmar to scratch a living picking through the piles of waste left by industrial mining firms in hopes of finding an overlooked hunk of jade. Rescuers called off the second day's search due to fading light, said Ko Jack of the Myanmar Rescue Organisation.

They would be back at the lake for a third and final day today, he added, after which his team would only come and retrieve the bodies "if they appear on the water". Hundreds of diggers came to Hpakant during the rainy season to prospect in the treacherous open-cast mines despite a junta ban on digging until March 2022, according to a local activist.

Determining how many people were working when the disaster struck would be difficult, rescuers said, with families hesitant to admit their relatives were there and survivors unwilling to come forward. Rescuers said increased pressure from the weight of dumped soil and rock had pushed the ground downhill into the nearby lake.

The incident is the latest tragedy to hit the poorly regulated multi-billion-dollar industry. Jade and other abundant natural resources in northern Myanmar—including timber, gold and amber—have helped finance both sides of a decades-long civil war between ethnic Kachin insurgents and the military.

Civilians are frequently trapped in the middle of the fight for control of the mines and their lucrative revenues, with a rampant drug and arms trade further curdling the con-



HPAKANT, Myanmar: This photo taken and received via an anonymous source shows onlookers watching as rescue officials search for missing people after a landslide at a jade mine in Hpakant, Kachin state. — AFP

flict. Last year, heavy rainfall triggered a massive landslide in Hpakant that entombed nearly 300 miners. Watchdog Global Witness estimated that the industry was worth some \$31 billion in 2014.

But corruption means very little reaches state coffers. The military coup in February also effectively

extinguished the reforms in the industry initiated by the ousted civilian government, a Global Witness report said earlier this year.

Wednesday's disaster "is a haunting reminder that lives too often come second to profit in the jade mines of Hpakant," Hanna Hindstrom, Senior Campaigner for

Myanmar at Global Witness, told AFP. "As the military is busy turning the sector into a financial lifeline for its illegitimate regime, once again miners are paying the ultimate price." On Wednesday, a five-day junta-run jade emporium "concluded successfully", according to a state-backed newspaper. — AFP

International

Libyans voice frustration and unease over poll delay

'For me, this delay is a setback and a disappointment'

TRIPOLI: Libyans have voiced a mix of frustration and anxiety after elections set for today were postponed, which some had hoped would help turn the page on a decade of violence. After weeks of speculation, authorities confirmed Wednesday that the poll, part of a United Nations-led peace process, would be delayed.

"I had picked up my voting card and I was waiting for the election," said trader Nabil al-Sharef, sat at a cafe in Tripoli, the capital in the west. "For me, this delay is a setback and a disappointment," the 51-year-old said. The poll was meant to take place just over a year after a landmark east-west ceasefire.

But the run-up to the North African country's first-ever presidential election has been overshadowed by angry disputes over its legal basis and the candidacies of several controversial figures. The electoral board has suggested pushing the vote back by a month to January 24, but given the animosity between the eastern-based parliament and authorities in Tripoli, agreeing a new date will be far from easy.

The delay will be a disappointment to some 2.5 million Libyans who had collected their voter cards, out of a population of seven million. But for Sharef, the situation could get a lot worse. "I'm waiting for the war to break out again, because each faction only serves its own interests, and the people who were against the elections are backed by armed groups," he said.

Parliament 'main obstacle'

That would be a sobering prospect for a coun-

try that had seen a year and a half of relative calm, since western-based armed groups defeated an offensive by eastern-based military chief Khalifa Haftar to seize Tripoli. Following a formal ceasefire and a UN-led dialogue process, a transitional government was formed to lead the country to elections. But tensions between armed groups and institutions remain. In September, the speaker of the eastern-based parliament elected in 2014 unilaterally passed an elections law ready-made for a presidential bid by Haftar — a law later endorsed by UN envoy Jan Kubis.

For many observers, the law was a key obstacle to the elections taking place on time. "The main obstacle to the elections is the parliament," said Mohamad Treish, a phone company employee. The delay is another setback in Libya's interminable transition, after 42 years of dictatorship and a decade of civil war.

The rule of Moamer Gaddafi from 1969-2011 was marked by brutal repression, but Libyans did benefit from a generous welfare system paid for by revenues from Africa's biggest oil reserves. But the revolt that toppled Gaddafi turned into a complex war dragging in mercenaries and foreign powers, and the country's infrastructure and economy steadily degraded. Electricity cuts and runaway inflation have become the norm.

Revolutionary hopes dashed

In Tripoli, the interim government of Abdulhamid Dbeibah has been working to sign reconstruction contracts and revive the city, heavily damaged by Haftar's 2019-2020 attack. Were



TRIPOLI: A man reads a local newspaper in the Libyan capital Tripoli, yesterday, with an article on its front page about the postponement of the country's presidential elections. —AFP

those efforts all in vain? Businessman Ibrahim Ali-Bek believes war could easily break out again.

If it does, "normal citizens will pay the price," he said. At the other end of the country in Benghazi, the birthplace of the uprising against Gaddafi, residents face similar problems. Engineer Mohamed El-Jadi says he took part in the revolution in the hope of "more freedom and prosper-

ity". El-Jadi said he was disappointed by the delay to the elections. "Our standard of living has dropped, our salaries haven't changed despite inflation and we're living in an unstable environment," he said. "The main players in the conflict, who mostly then decided to stand in the elections, knew they had little chance of winning. That's why they disrupted it," he said. — AFP

Beirut blast probe: What's the snag?

BEIRUT: Sixteen months since a monster blast ripped through the Lebanese capital, the judge investigating the tragedy has been beset by numerous lawsuits, mostly filed against him by officials demanding his removal. With judge Tarek Bitar forced to suspend his probe for a fourth time yesterday in the face of such complaints, here is a look at the increasingly complex web of court challenges obstructing investigations into Lebanon's worst peacetime disaster.

What has prevented the probe?

The August 4, 2020 explosion of a shipment of ammonium nitrate fertiliser stored haphazardly in a port warehouse for years killed at least 215 people and disfigured the capital. Top political and security officials were aware of the threat posed by the stored chemicals but failed to take action.

In February, Fadi Sawan, the judge initially appointed to lead the probe, was removed from the case after chasing some of the country's top brass. Bitar succeeded him, and has since faced similar hurdles amid a concerted political campaign to force his removal.

Officials he had summoned on charges of negligence have filed more than a dozen lawsuits against him, forcing him to suspend his probe four times. They include several ex-ministers, two of whom were hit with arrest warrants in recent months after they

failed to show up for questioning.

Attempts by officials to dodge accountability have been aided by the state. Parliament has refused to lift immunity granted to lawmakers and top officials have turned down requests to interrogate top security officials. The interior ministry has also failed to implement arrest warrants issued by Bitar, further undermining his investigation.

What is the political fallout?

Attempts to obstruct Bitar's work have spilled onto the streets, with the powerful Shiite Hezbollah movement staging a rally in Beirut in October demanding his removal. The protest turned Beirut into a war zone, with live fire exchanges between rival parties leaving seven dead.

Hezbollah and its Amal movement allies are spearheading efforts to replace Bitar. Their affiliates in cabinet have said they would boycott sessions until an official stance is taken on his replacement. As a result, Lebanon's fragile government, formed in September to stem the country's worst-ever financial crisis, has failed to meet since October.

In a country where political leaders determine judicial appointments, including in top courts, there is little room for the judiciary to work against Lebanon's ruling elite. Bitar has been forced to suspend his probe repeatedly over lawsuits filed by officials he had called in for questioning on suspicion of negligence.

A judicial source said the number of lawsuits filed against Bitar now stands at 18. Some of the judges who turned down requests to replace Bitar have since been hit with lawsuits themselves by the same officials, and they have in turn mobilised

affiliated judges at every opportunity.

Last month, a judge backed by Hezbollah and Amal processed a lawsuit filed against Bitar that forced a third suspension in the investigation. This created a rift within judicial circles, with many arguing that the judge in question had no authority over the Beirut blast case. Following accusations of political "hijacking", a legal complaint filed against the Shiite judge forced him to stand down.

What is the judiciary's role?

The lawsuits against Bitar will inevitably delay the presentation of his findings which were previously expected by the year's end, according to a judicial source. In a country where even high-profile assassinations and bombings go unpunished, many fear a Lebanon-led blast probe will fail to hold anyone to account.

"The judicial body in Lebanon is sick," a former judge told AFP on condition of anonymity. "Some judges are merely an echo chamber for the political leaders that appointed them," the same judge said. In a joint letter sent to the United Nations Human Rights Council in September, rights groups and relatives of blast victims said "flagrant political interference, immunity for high-level political officials, and lack of respect for fair trial" have rendered the Beirut blast probe incapable of delivering justice.

Nizar Sagheh, who heads the local organisation Legal Agenda, said divisions over Bitar's fate expose deeper rifts within the state. "The democratic components of the Lebanese state are supporting judges working to tighten the space for impunity, while others are backing judges that are working to preserve this system," he wrote on social media. — AFP

International

Morocco, Zionist entity mark anniversary of renewed ties

Blinken hailed 'a positive step for the region as we aim to widen the circle of peace'

RABAT: Morocco, Zionist entity and the United States on Wednesday marked the first anniversary of the US-sponsored resumption of diplomatic relations between the North African kingdom and the Jewish state. During a videoconference, the foreign ministers of the three countries—Nasser Bourita, Yair Lapid and Antony Blinken—welcomed a partnership aimed at establishing what the US secretary of state called “an achievement that has deepened ties, partnerships and avenues to pursue shared goals”.

Bourita said Rabat was committed to help achieve “a lasting peace in the region”. Morocco renewed official relations with Israel in December last year, two decades after it cut ties when the second Palestinian intifada, or uprising, began.

The rapprochement was part of a string of normalisation deals between Zionist entity and several Arab countries, brokered by the administration of then US president Donald Trump and known as the Abraham Accords.

It infuriated the Palestinians as it shattered the longstanding Arab consensus opposing normalisation until Zionist entity agrees to a comprehensive and lasting peace. On Wednesday, Blinken hailed “a positive step for the region as we aim to widen the circle of peace”. “The United States is committed to supporting and expanding the Abraham Accords. We’d look forward to seeing your liaison offices becoming embassies in the near future,” he said.

Bourita also accepted an invitation from Lapid to visit Zionist entity “as soon as possible”. On the Jewish-Palestinian conflict he reiterated Morocco’s support



RABAT: Moroccan Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita, takes part in a virtual meeting with his US and Jewish counterparts, in his office in the capital Rabat. Morocco, Zionist entity and the United States today marked the first anniversary of the US-sponsored resumption of diplomatic relations between the North African kingdom and the Jewish state. —AFP

for a two-state solution. A pro-Palestinian coalition of far-left militants and Islamists had called for sit-ins in several cities to protest the accord anniversary but authorities in Rabat forbade it. Turnout was modest elsewhere, according to videos on social media. Despite pro-Palestinian sympathies in Morocco, the renewal of relations with Israel did not spark major protest, as Washington at the same time recognised the kingdom’s sovereignty over the disputed Western Sahara. Morocco controls most of Western Sahara and considers the former Spanish colony part of its sovereign territory, while neighbouring Algeria backs the Polisario Front independence movement.

Morocco and Zionist entity had previ-

ously established diplomatic relations in the early 1990s. A large Jewish community once flourished in the kingdom, and a year after ties were restored, normalisation is proceeding apace. Jewish Defence Minister Benny Gantz made an unprecedented visit last month that saw the signing of a security pact which angered Algeria and the Palestinians.

Media in both countries have since reported on Moroccan acquisition of Zionist defence technology. Zionist entity’s Economy and Industry Minister Orna Barbivai is also expected to visit early next year, media in the kingdom have reported. Algeria cut diplomatic ties with Morocco in August, citing “hostile actions”, a charge Rabat has denied. —AFP

well as to withdraw his diplomatic passport. A Tunisian judge last month issued an arrest warrant for the former president.

During an early October demonstration in Paris, Marzouki, in a reference to Saied, called on the French government to “reject all support for this regime and this man who plotted against the revolution and abolished the constitution”. On July 25 Tunisia’s Saied sacked the government and began to seize sweeping powers after months of political and economic crisis.

Since then, Marzouki has used regular television appearances and social media to launch withering broadsides against Saied, whom he has called a “dictator”. Tunisia was the birthplace of the Arab Spring revolts a decade ago and became the only democracy to emerge from that movement.

A human rights activist who was imprisoned then exiled under Tunisia’s former dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, Marzouki returned home and was elected president for three years following the 2011 revolution. He shared power with the Islamist-inspired Ennahdha party, a move which drew criticism.

Ennahdha was also the largest party in the parliament suspended by Saied. The president last week extended the months-long suspension until new elections in December 2022, while calling for a July referendum on constitutional reforms. —AFP

News in brief

Official arrested over murder

COATZACOALCOS: A Mexican official working in the Senate has been arrested on suspicion of involvement in the murder of a mayoral candidate during a bloody election campaign last year, prosecutors said Wednesday. Jose Manuel del Rio, technical secretary of a political coordination body, was detained in connection with the June 4 murder of Remigio Tovar, who was running for mayor in the eastern state of Veracruz. Tovar was shot dead two days before the local and legislative polls—one of dozens of politicians murdered during a violent election season. His campaign manager, named by the authorities as Omar “N,” was arrested for allegedly conspiring to kill the mayoral hopeful in order to take his place. Running for office in the Latin American nation—particularly at the local level—can have deadly consequences due to violence linked to corruption and the multibillion-dollar narcotics trade. —AFP

Two dead after blast in court

NEW DELHI: Two people were killed and two others injured after a powerful explosion ripped through an Indian court building yesterday, police said. Footage showed police officers carrying the injured out of the building and asking others to leave the premises after the explosion near a rest-room of the judicial complex in Ludhiana, north of the capital New Delhi. “There’s been a blast but we cannot confirm the cause,” a police officer at the scene said. “We can confirm that four people are injured and out of four, two are dead,” he added. The blast damaged the walls of the bathroom and shattered glass in other rooms, broadcaster NDTV reported. Punjab state chief minister Charanjit Singh Channi said the government was “on alert” and announced an investigation. —AFP

Former Tunisia leader sentenced to four years

TUNIS: A Tunisian court sentenced in absentia exiled former president Moncef Marzouki, a fierce critic of the power grab by current leader Kais Saied, to four years in prison, a judicial source said Wednesday. The source was not able to clarify on what charge Marzouki, 76, was convicted by the court of first instance in the capital Tunis.

His lawyer, Lamia Khemiri, told AFP that Marzouki had not received any summons to court and she also did not know why he was convicted. Local media said he was found guilty of “undermining the security of the state from abroad” and of having caused “diplomatic harm”.

Saied has said Marzouki is among the “enemies of Tunisia”, and asked the courts to investigate statements he had made, as

Iran nuclear talks to resume next week

VIENNA: Talks to revive the 2015 Iran nuclear deal will resume next Monday, the EU diplomat chairing the negotiations said yesterday, urging a “picking up of the pace”. Officials have said the deal would become obsolete within weeks if Iran continued to step up its nuclear activities as it has been doing since 2019, a year after the United States left the landmark agreement and reimposed sanctions.

“Vienna talks to resume on Monday 27 December. The JCPOA Joint Commission will meet to discuss and define the way ahead,” EU diplomat Enrique Mora wrote on Twitter, referring to the acronym of the deal’s formal name. “Important to pick up the pace on key outstanding issues and move forward, working closely with the US. Welcome to the 8th round.” —AFP

International

Putin sees 'positive' US reaction to Russia security proposals

Washington ready for talks at the start of next year in Geneva: Putin

MOSCOW: President Vladimir Putin said yesterday that Washington's willingness to discuss Russia's security proposals aimed at curbing NATO's eastward expansion was "positive", as fears mount in the West over a major military escalation in Ukraine.

The Kremlin has grown increasingly insistent that the West and NATO are encroaching dangerously close to Russia's borders. Moscow presented the West with sweeping security demands last week, saying NATO must not admit new members and barring the United States from establishing new bases in former Soviet countries. Washington responded that it is willing to discuss the security proposals, but disagrees with part of them and insists European allies must be part of the talks. "The ball is in their court. They need to provide us with some answer," Putin said at his annual end-of-year press conference.

But he added: "Overall we see a positive reaction." Putin said Washington is ready for talks at the start of next year in Geneva, adding that representatives from both sides have been appointed.

The growing tensions peaked this week when Putin vowed that Russia would take "appropriate retaliatory" military steps in response to what he called the West's "aggressive stance". He also announced a new arsenal of hypersonic missiles that he has previously described as "invincible" were nearing combat readiness.

'Russia can't be defeated'

Tensions have been slowly building since mid-November when Washington sounded the alarm over a massive Russian troop build-up around Ukraine and accused Putin of planning an invasion. The West has long accused the Kremlin of providing direct military support to pro-Russia separatists in eastern Ukraine, who seized two regions shortly after Moscow annexed Crimea in 2014.

Moscow court considers shutting down Memorial human rights centre

MOSCOW: A Moscow court yesterday heard a case against Memorial that could shut down Russia's most prominent rights organisation capping off a year marked by a historic crackdown on dissent. Prosecutors have asked the court to dissolve Memorial's Human Rights Centre, which campaigns for political prisoners and other disadvantaged groups, for alleged failures to use the "foreign agent" label on all their publications and for justifying terrorism.

As the Moscow City Court reconvened to hear the case, dozens of supporters gathered outside and observers were not allowed inside amid the coronavirus outbreak. Speaking in court, the prosecutors said Memorial's failure to properly mark its materials could harm Russians' "psychological health" and cause depression.

The prosecution also said that the group's website contained information "justifying terrorism and extremism", adding that it "negatively affects children". The trial comes in a year that witnessed an unprecedented crackdown on opponents of President Vladimir Putin, including the jailing of top opposition politician Alexei Navalny.

But the move to shutter Russia's top rights group stands out and would have been unimaginable a few years ago. Authorities have also brought another case against Memorial International, the group's central structure, which is also accused of violating the "foreign agent" law.

Next week, Russia's Supreme Court is set to re-convene to hear

Russia denies the claims and Putin has suggested that the conflict, which has claimed over 13,000 lives, is genocidal.

In addition to the growing tensions, Putin on Thursday addressed an unprecedented wave of arrests against voices critical of the Kremlin, saying the crackdown is aimed at curbing foreign influence. "I remind you of what our adversaries have been saying for centuries: Russia cannot be defeated, it can only be destroyed from within," he said. He added that it was domestic dissent that brought about the collapse of the Soviet Union 30 years ago this month.

The presser also coincided with a high-profile court case in Moscow where the esteemed rights group Memorial is on trial for violations of "foreign agent" legislation. The case follows other key trials, including the jailing of Russia's most prominent opposition figure Alexei Navalny and the closure of his anti-corruption and political organisations on extremism convictions. "There have always been, are and will be comen," Putin said of his main domestic opponent. "There is no need to commit crimes."

'Faster' economic recovery

The presser kicked off with Putin fielding questions on the coronavirus pandemic and its economic fallout. Rattling off facts and figures to apparently illustrate Russia's prowess, Putin hailed his country's response. "We have recovered much faster than others," he said, adding he expected growth of around 4.5 percent next year, continuing Russia's 2021 rebound.

That was largely due to authorities avoiding strict lockdowns, a policy that some say has contributed to over 520,000 Russians dying from the coronavirus, according to a count by state statistic agency Rosstat—more than in any European country.

The deaths have furthered Russia's steep demographic decline,



MOSCOW: Russian President Vladimir Putin holds his annual press conference at the Manezh exhibition hall in central Moscow yesterday. — AFP

which has seen the country lose more than a million people in less than two years. Putin called the situation worrying on Thursday and complained about Russia's level of herd immunity, saying it was at 59.4 percent—a figure calculated by counting both people who had been inoculated and infected. Authorities have faced a vaccine-sceptic population, and Putin once again urged Russians to get inoculated. As of yesterday, only 44 percent of the population had been fully vaccinated, despite several homemade jabs having been available for free since last year. — AFP



MOSCOW: Defence lawyer Maria Eismont speaks to the media outside the Moscow City Court after a hearing into prosecutor's request to dissolve Memorial's Human Rights Center. — AFP

the case against Memorial International. The two cases are the largest threat to the organisation's existence since it was founded in 1989 by rights activists including renowned scientist and Soviet dissident Andrei Sakharov.

They bookend a year that has seen authorities launch an unprecedented crackdown on the opposition and independent media, imprisoning Navalny in February and banning his organisations. The pressure on Memorial has led to a major outcry in Russia and the West. — AFP

OSCE: Parties set to revive eastern Ukraine truce

KIEV: Russia, Ukraine and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) have agreed to restore a ceasefire in eastern Ukraine where Kiev is fighting Russia-backed separatists, the OSCE said. Kiev has been battling a pro-Moscow insurgency in two breakaway regions bordering Russia since 2014, shortly after the Kremlin annexed Ukraine's Crimean peninsula. Western countries accuse Russia of having massed around 100,000 troops near Ukraine's borders and accuse Moscow of planning a winter invasion. The United States has warned the Kremlin of unprecedented sanctions should it launch an attack.

"I was delighted that participants expressed their strong determination to fully adhere to the measures to strengthen the ceasefire agreement of 22 July 2020," OSCE chairperson-in-office in Ukraine, Mikko Kinnunen, said in a statement late Wednesday. "This is of utmost significance for the people living on both sides of the contact line," Kinnunen added. The statement was issued following a meeting of officials from Ukraine, Russia and the OSCE—known as the Trilateral Contact Group—and representatives of the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics. Kinnunen said that priority was given "to the issues of security" and "compliance with the ceasefire". — AFP

International

Maxwell to spend Christmas, 60th birthday behind bars

Ghislaine faces an effective life sentence if convicted of the charges

NEW YORK: Ghislaine Maxwell will spend Christmas Day—her 60th birthday—behind bars, after the jury in her sex crimes trial suspended deliberations Wednesday without reaching a verdict. The 12-person jury began considering Maxwell's fate on Monday after a three-week trial and has since met for two full days to weigh the charges against her.

Judge Alison Nathan granted a request from the jurors that they take Thursday off and told them to return on Monday, after the Christmas holiday. Maxwell, the daughter of former British newspaper baron Robert Maxwell, is accused of recruiting and grooming young girls to be sexually abused by the late American financier Jeffrey Epstein.

She faces an effective life sentence if convicted of the charges, one of which is conspiracy to commit sex trafficking of a minor that carries a maximum 40-year prison sentence. At one point Wednesday, the jury asked the judge for the transcript of the testimony of the former manager of Epstein's property in Palm Beach, Florida.

The jury has also asked the judge for transcripts of the testimony of the four women who testified against Maxwell during her high-profile trial. The jury must reach a unanimous decision on each of the six counts facing Maxwell. If they cannot agree, then the judge could declare a mistrial.

The charges against Maxwell stem from 1994 to 2004. Two of Epstein's alleged victims said they were as young as 14 when Maxwell al-

legedly began grooming them and arranging for them to give massages to Epstein that ended in sexual activity. One, identified only as "Jane," detailed how Maxwell recruited her at summer camp and made her feel "special."

She said sexual encounters with Epstein became routine, with Maxwell sometimes present. Another, going by "Carolyn," said she was usually paid \$300 after sexual encounters with Epstein, often by Maxwell herself. A third alleged victim was Annie Farmer, now 42, who said Maxwell fondled her when she was a teenager at the New Mexico ranch owned by Epstein. Epstein, 66, killed himself in jail in 2019 while awaiting his own sex crimes trial. Maxwell was arrested the following year and has been held in prison after prosecutors deemed her to be a flight risk.

'Sophisticated predator'

During the trial, the prosecution portrayed Maxwell as a "sophisticated predator who knew exactly what she was doing." Prosecutor Alison Moe said she was "the key" to Epstein's scheme of enticing young girls to give him massages, during which he would sexually abuse them.

"Epstein liked underage girls, he liked to touch underage girls. Maxwell knew that," Moe charged, recalling that three of the four victims testified that Maxwell had participated in the sexual acts. Moe also said that Maxwell had been the "lady of the house" at Epstein's properties, handling every detail, including picking the lotions and oils for the massages, which always



NEW YORK: Isabel Maxwell leaves court as deliberations continue in the trail of her sister Ghislaine Maxwell in New York. — AFP

ended in sexual acts.

Maxwell "was Epstein's partner in crime," said Moe. "It is time to hold her accountable." Maxwell's defense team countered that there was a lack of evidence to convict and questioned the accusers' ability to recollect quarter-century-old events. The team also argued that Maxwell was

being used as a "scapegoat" for Epstein's crimes after he evaded justice.

Maxwell declined to take the stand but made a brief statement to the judge on Friday. "Your honor, the government has not proven its case beyond reasonable doubt so there is no need for me to testify," she said. —AFP

Denmark extends detention of pirates

COPENHAGEN: A Copenhagen court on Wednesday extended the detention of four suspected pirates arrested by a Danish navy ship after a shootout off the Nigerian coast, but bringing them to justice in Denmark still poses a legal challenge. The men's detention was extended for another four weeks, Birgitte Skjoldt, one of their lawyers, told AFP. The four men—whose nationalities have not been made public—were arrested in November following a firefight with a Danish navy ship in the Gulf of Guinea.

Four other suspected pirates were killed in the skirmish, and a ninth is believed to have fallen overboard, according to the Danish authorities. One of the four prisoners, who was injured in the shootout and has since had a leg amputated, has been transferred to a hospital in Ghana under the supervision of Ghanaian police.

The Danish navy has been patrolling the area since early November. Denmark has never repatriated pirates to its soil and does not have an extradition agreement with any of the countries near where the incident took place. According to the prosecutor's office, the men opened fire first as the Danish navy approached and are being prosecuted for attacking the Danish soldiers, which they deny. According to Skjoldt, the men acted in self-defence, believing to be under attack in their small boat. The Gulf of Guinea, which stretches 5,700 kilometres (3,500 miles) from Senegal to Angola, is a troubled area for shipping companies, with 195 attacks on ships recorded in 2020 alone. In early December, six crew members of a container ship were kidnapped despite the intervention of a patrolling Danish frigate. — AFP

Madagascar shipwreck death toll rises to 85

ANTANANARIVO: A boat disaster off the coast of Madagascar this week has claimed 85 lives, maritime officials said yesterday, after retrieving 21 more bodies a day earlier. A total of 138 people had been aboard the 12-metre-long (39-foot) wooden vessel, which sank off the island's northeastern coast on Monday, they said.

Fifty people have been rescued, most of whom had been on the bridge of the vessel when it foundered, while three others remain missing, they said. "The toll stands at 85 dead, with 21 bodies recovered" on Wednesday, police general Zafisambatra Ravoavy told AFP.

The dead include five children. The vessel—a cargo boat not authorised to carry passengers—had set off from the village of Antseraka for Soanierana-Ivongo, about 100 kilometres (60 miles) to the south, say investigators. After suffering an apparent engine failure, the boat was driven by waves onto a reef, where it took on water, according to Adrien Fabrice Ratsim-

bazafy of the River and Maritime Port Agency (APMF).

Alban Menavolo, the mayor of Soanierana-Ivongo, said personal belongings, identity cards and money had been recovered by rescue teams. "Most of the passengers were seasonal workers, from the countryside," he told AFP. "They had gone to harvest cloves... and were returning to their families with the money they had earned for the end-of-year festivities," he said. Cloves rank alongside vanilla as Madagascar's signature species, and the harvest seasons usually runs from October to late December.

The distance between Antseraka and Soanierana-Ivongo can be covered in less than three hours by boat, compared with more than eight by road, residents said. A church service to mourn the dead took place yesterday, which has also been declared a day of national mourning by President Andry Rajoelina.

Two people remain missing from a police helicopter that crashed during a search for survivors. The chopper was flying close to the sea when it was buffeted by winds and crashed into the waves, according to one of the two survivors, police minister Serge Gelle. He and another police were thrown out of the craft and survived by swimming nearly 12 hours to reach land. They were separately picked up by fishermen near the beach at Mahambo, about 75 kilometres (45 miles) from the port of Toamasina. — AFP

International

Spain's Catalonia to reimpose curfew to fight COVID surge

First Spanish region to reinstate nightly curfew

MADRID: Spain's Catalonia will reimpose a night-time curfew starting Christmas Eve to fight a record spike in COVID-19 infections after a court yesterday approved the measure in the northeastern region. It is the first Spanish region to reinstate a nightly curfew in response to surging infections fuelled by the Omicron variant.

Catalonia's regional government earlier this month asked the courts to approve a nightly curfew between 1:00 am and 6:00 am in areas where infection rates surpass 250 cases per 100,000 inhabitants, a criteria met by virtually the entire region.

It also sought permission to close nightclubs, cap indoor restaurant capacity at 50 percent, and limit gyms and theatres to 70 percent capacity to try to curb infections over the holidays. The measures will start today and will last 15 days, affecting most New Year's celebrations.

The court said the measures were "proportional" and had struck a balance between "a limited restriction of rights" and the "protection of individual and community health". Spain has around 80 percent of its population of 47 million people vaccinated—one of the highest rates in the world.

Until recently, it had avoided the surge in infections seen elsewhere in Europe which led to

tighter rules. But the arrival of the Omicron variant of the virus has fuelled infections, with a record of just over 60,000 new cases recorded on Wednesday, even if hospital admissions and ICU occupancy remain lower compared to previous COVID-19 waves.

"Omicron has changed the panorama. We must reintroduce measures which we don't like but which are necessary," the head of Catalonia's regional government, Pere Aragonés, said Wednesday. Omicron accounted for around half of total COVID-19 infections in Spain in the week ending on December 12, having shot up from just 3.0 percent the week before, according to health ministry data.

Catalonia has been especially hard-hit by the latest wave of infections, with around 30 percent of its intensive care unit beds occupied by COVID patients, twice the national average. The region of around 7.7 million people on the border with France and Barcelona as capital imposed a nightly 1-6 am curfew in mid-July in most municipalities due to rising infections.

A court ordered it lifted the following month after infections dropped, arguing it was no longer justified. Spain's central government imposed a nationwide nightly curfew in October 2020. It was lifted in May 2021. — AFP



MADRID: Passers-by, wearing a face mask as a protection against COVID-19, walk past Christmas lights in the streets of Madrid. Spain will reimpose a nationwide rule requiring the use of face masks outdoors. —AFP

'Exhaustion' as Belgium hospital workers brace for Omicron intake

LIEGE, Belgium: Just as Belgium emerges from a fourth wave of COVID infections it is bracing for a fifth, spurred by the Omicron variant, with staff at a hospital telling AFP they are already at breaking point. Doctors and nurses are in a state of "extreme exhaustion," said Martial Moonen, head of the infectious diseases service at the public hospital in Liege.

He said his ward, currently holding 70 COVID patients of whom 14 are in intensive care, was struggling with "permanent saturation". A patient with severe COVID could fill an intensive care bed for up to four weeks, significantly longer than the three-day average for other conditions at the hospital, he said.

For the 50-year-old specialist, the calculation is brutal: "While you're treating 15 COVID patients in intensive care for a month, you are preventing between 100 and 150 other people from accessing that care." He said temporary reinforcements were no longer available to cover for nurses' absences through illness or burnout.

For those still working, "there is exhaustion, so much exhaustion," he said. The "vast majority" of hospitalised patients are unvaccinated,

Moonen said. "Our aim is obviously to treat everyone in the same way.... But seeing the current situation is due to 15 percent of the population (the proportion of unvaccinated people in the Walloon region served by the hospital), that becomes really difficult."

Turning to the issue of unvaccinated nurses-

for whom the Belgian government is poised to order mandatory jabs—he said only "a few people" in his service were in that category. His staff are contemplating little rest in the coming days, with festivities and family reunions taking place under the lengthening shadow of Omicron. On Wednesday, the government an-

nounced that concert halls, cinemas and other entertainment venues must close from the weekend to combat Omicron.

Prime Minister Alexander De Croo told a media conference that while overall COVID infections were down 60 percent from three weeks ago, three of 10 positive tests were now of the Omicron variant. "We have to be more careful than ever in this period where there are many uncertainties," he said.

Several virologists and epidemiologists in Belgium say they expect a fifth COVID wave within days, leaving little respite as the fourth fades. The country of 11.5 million people, nestled between France, the Netherlands, Luxembourg and Germany, has recorded 28,000 COVID deaths over the entire pandemic.

'Everything is hypothetical'

Authorities counted a daily average of 8,300 infections over the past week, a drop of a third over the week before. But that was the Delta chapter of the pandemic. Now, more than 27 percent of new infections are of the Omicron variant, according to eight genetic sequencing labs.

Omicron is expected to become the dominant strain within days, as has already happened in other countries, such as the US, Denmark and Britain. Omicron is already seen to be far more contagious than Delta, and that alone could be bad news for hospital capacity. For Moonen, at this point, with Omicron "everything is hypothetical". But, he said, "we are still going to try to make sure everyone gets their Christmas holidays". — AFP



LIEGE, Belgium: A medical staff's member assists a patient infected by COVID-19 at the intensive care unit of the Centre Hospitalier Regional de la Citadelle in Liege. —AFP

International

Death stalks displaced people in eastern DR Congo

Bloodshed in hillside villages accelerated over two years

BUNIA, DR Congo: Automatic weapons fire crackled out, and Captain Miraj, a Bangladeshi peacekeeper, told everyone to run. Around 20 local Red Cross workers had gathered in Dhedja, a village in the troubled northeastern Democratic Republic of Congo.

They had come to help bury bodies that had been rotting since a massacre three weeks earlier—and the killers had now returned. Abandoning their shovels, the panic-stricken helpers fled across fields and burned-out houses, cowering behind a wall as UN MONUSCO peacekeepers fired off random bursts into the high grass.

UN armoured vehicles edged their way to help the terrified group, coming under fire as they advanced. After a 20-minute exchange of gunshots, silence returned. No-one was hurt and no-one was missing. Bloodshed in the hillside villages of Ituri province has accelerated over the past two years, driven by a political-religious sect called CODECO.

Its innocuous-sounding name—the Cooperative for the Development of the Congo (CODECO) — belies a bitter ethnic feud between the Lendu, which the group claims to defend, and the Hema. Fighting between the two communities flared between 1999 and 2003, claiming tens of thousands of lives before being quelled by a European Union peacekeeping force, Artemis. Violence then resumed in 2017, blamed on the emergence of CODECO. Since October, CODECO has stepped up attacks in the Djugu area, bordering Lake Albert and

Uganda which lie to the east. At least 82 people were killed in the last 10 days of November, according to a respected monitor, the Kivu Security Tracker (KST).

Devastation

The UN vehicles stopped over at a devastated camp for displaced people at Drodro. Less than a month ago, the camp was a home to 16,000 people. It was then attacked by militia-men on November 21, who torched shacks and shelters and killed 26 people.

Today, a few women and young children forage through the wreckage in search of food or salvageable materials, as flocks of crows whirl and caw overhead. A child clutched a school exercise book on whose cover was written, in French: “Time for class!”—a sad irony, given that the camp’s schools have been closed since the attack, as is a hospital supported by the French medical charity MSF. The convoy reached a UN base on the flanks of Mount Rhoo, a peak 2,000 metres (6,500 feet) high. Makeshift shelters, devised from plastic sheets and branches, cover some 20 hectares (50 acres) around the base, where desperate people have fled violence.

‘Waiting for death’

“The area is completely hemmed in,” said Audrey Riviere, the local coordinator for the French NGO Action Contre la Faim (Action against Hunger). One of the few humanitarian workers there, Riviere had only been able to get to Rhoo



BUNIA, DR Congo: Displaced women and children prepare food at sunset in the Rhoo IDP camp. Since late November, several villages and IDP camps have been attacked and nearly 100 people have been killed in the area, forcing up to 70,000 people to gather on the Rhoo hill around a base of Bangladeshi peacekeepers from Monusco. —AFP

by helicopter. “There’s less than three square metres (33 square feet) per person,” she said. “People here lack everything—water, food, places where they can go to the toilet.”

At least three displaced people have been killed in the past two weeks as they ventured out of the camp to forage in nearby fields or fetch water. “In spite of the risks, we have to leave the

camp to look for food, but there’s no safety,” said Constant Ngaz, a trader. “At Rhoo, people are just waiting for death.”

The World Food Programme (WFP) managed to get the first trucks to Rhoo on Monday. Last week, a truck driver seeking to deliver buckets and soap to Rhoo told AFP he had been extorted at CODECO checkpoints. — AFP

North Macedonia’s PM steps down

SKOPJE, Republic of North Macedonia: North Macedonia’s Prime Minister Zoran Zaev formally resigned yesterday, weeks after the embattled leader announced plans to step down following the drubbing of his party in municipal elections.

The country’s parliament formally ratified Zaev’s resignation a day after he sent a letter to the legislative body, paving the way for his exit. Zaev’s resignation announcement late October came after months of sliding popularity as he struggled to keep the country’s pandemic-hit economy on track.

The turmoil came amid stalled talks over possible accession to the European Union. The resignation came as a surprise to his political allies, who pleaded with him to reconsider after his government survived a no-confidence vote and added seats to his razor-thin majority in the parliament. “It would be politically irresponsible and unjustified in front of my people and my country to continue to lead the government on its Euro-Atlantic path,” Zaev wrote in the letter delivered to the legislature. The country’s deputy finance minister Dimitar Kovacevski is set to replace Zaev in the coming days. Zaev, elected prime minister in 2017, is best



Zoran Zaev

known for the tough deal he struck with Athens to add the geographical qualifier “North” to the country’s official name to distinguish it from the Greek province of Macedonia.

The change enabled North Macedonia to join NATO and was a precondition for paving the way for the country’s possible EU membership. Skopje’s EU dreams have since been sideswiped by Bulgaria, with Sofia disputing the origin of the Macedonian language, calling it a Bulgarian dialect. The country will now be in the hands of Kovacevski, an experienced technocrat who largely flew under the radar until being selected days ago by a sizable majority in a party vote to lead the SDSM. — AFP

French fugitive captured in Indonesia after storm damages yacht

MANADO, Indonesia: A French fugitive convicted of a double murder was arrested after 20 years on the run when a storm damaged his yacht in waters off Indonesia’s Sulawesi island, police said yesterday. Thierry Ascione, 62, and another French national made an emergency landing in the Talaud islands between the Philippines and Indonesia on October 3 to seek help for repairing the boat.

Authorities nabbed them for violating immigration rules, said local police chief Lendi Hutabarat. “The navigation system (on the yacht) was damaged due to strong waves,” Hutabarat told AFP. Ascione was hiding in the boat when the police questioned and arrested his compatriot, who was found wandering around the island trying to buy a SIM card.

The police later raided the boat and found Ascione without a passport. The two were handed over to immigration authorities. They are currently in Manado, North Sulawesi. Ascione told officials that his passport was stolen while in transit in the Philippines, said Novly TN Momongan, the local immigration office chief from the neighbouring Sangihe islands.

Paris has formally requested Ascione’s extradition to Jakarta but the legal process might take months since the two countries have no extradition treaty, according to a source close to the case. Ascione was found guilty of the murder in 1991 of two French nationals who owned a restaurant in Guatemala. —AFP

International

Friday, December 24, 2021

China locks down city as COVID cases surge around the world

Scientists warn that Omicron is highly contagious

BEIJING: China shut down a city of 13 million people yesterday in a bid to extinguish a tiny COVID-19 outbreak and chase its zero-case goal, as other nations around the globe battled huge infection surges driven by the Omicron variant.

Early studies from South Africa and Britain gave some cause for hope, however, indicating Omicron infections appear to result in fewer hospitalisations compared with the Delta variant. But despite that initial data, scientists have warned that Omicron is highly contagious, driving record infection numbers in many countries and forcing governments to tighten virus controls.

China locked down the northern city of Xi'an-home to the world-famous Terracotta Warriors-to stamp out a cluster of several hundred cases. "I think it is necessary to have the lock-down," a Xi'an resident, who wanted to be identified only as Yuan, told AFP.

Omicron has not been reported in Xi'an, with only dozens of cases of the less infectious Delta variant detected in the city of 13 million people in recent days. But the Chinese government, in pursuit of its zero-case strategy ahead of the Beijing Winter Olympics, has reacted with typical forcefulness and ordered all Xi'an residents to stay indoors.

Only one person per household can go outside every two days to buy necessities, while non-essential businesses are closed. February's Olympics are set to be the most restrictive mass sporting event since the pandemic began, with international spectators banned and all participants required to stay inside a closed-loop system.

In addition to mandatory vaccinations before landing in China, all athletes and personnel inside the bubble must undergo daily testing. Those who test positive will not be able to participate, officials have said.

Afghan exiles worry about Taliban violence

PARIS: Usman has been safe from the violence in his native Afghanistan ever since he fled to France seeking asylum after the Taliban took Kabul back from the retreating Americans, but what happens at home can still upend his world. The worst moment was two months ago, when the Taliban took his father. "One night, in the middle of the night, they knocked at our door and they told my father to follow them. He was put in a small room, all dark, where he was beaten," Usman, a former government official, who asked for his real name and even that of his home town to be withheld, told AFP.

Accusing him of being an infidel, and his son of working for the US, they threatened to kill Usman's father and take away his land and "give it to our mujahedin", guerilla fighters. "I knew the Taliban are cruel. They could do anything," Usman said. After three days, Afghanistan's new rulers let their prisoner go, thanks to pleading from his family and tribal elders. "A miracle," sighed Usman. The episode's toll on the mental

wellbeing of Usman, who came to France with his wife and children, is high. He feels "eaten up by guilt" for leaving his relatives behind, he said, and by fear about what may happen next. Both Usman and his wife take anti-depressants to cope, he said.

Usman's brother Omar — also not his real name — said although their father seemed safe for now, other Taliban factions could decide at any time to arrest him again. Omar, who has been living in France since last year, said he "was crying all the time" during his father's abduction and even now, "every time I wake up, I am worried that the same thing will happen again".

Abductions for ransom, a widespread practice under the former regime in Afghanistan, have become rarer under Taliban, but the new rulers often detain, and sometimes kill, those deemed hostile to them, said Mirwais Afghan, who runs the British-based Khabarial.com website, which has confirmed Usman's story.

'People are scared'

The UN accuses the Taliban of having, since August, executed over 70 former Afghan army soldiers and others with ties to the former government and security forces. The Taliban reject the allegations as "rumours" and call Khabarial.com, which runs almost daily stories of killing by Taliban troops, a "propaganda" site.

'More careful than ever'

Europe has been hit hard by the ongoing surge, recording 60 percent of global cases over the past week, according to an AFP tally from official sources on Wednesday. "We have to be more careful than ever in this period," Belgian Prime Minister Alexander De Croo said, with an impending wave threatening to overwhelm the country's already burned-out health workers.

The European Union's drug regulator last week allowed member states to use Pfizer's COVID treatment ahead of formal approval as an emergency measure against the Omicron wave. And on Wednesday, Pfizer won US approval for the anti-COVID pill for high-risk people aged 12 and up.

Pills that are available at pharmacies are likely to be much easier to access than synthetic antibody treatments, which require infusions at hospitals or specialised centres. The United States has spent \$5.3 billion procuring 10 million courses of the treatment, according to the White House. AstraZeneca said yesterday that a third, or booster dose of its COVID-19 vaccine "significantly" lifted antibody levels against the Omicron strain in a laboratory study.

'Qualified good news'

While better able to bypass prior immunity, the Omicron variant is less likely to result in hospitalisation compared with Delta, according to the research from Britain published Wednesday. The two preliminary studies, one from England and the other from Scotland, were cautiously welcomed by experts.

They stressed that any advantage in milder outcomes could still be negated by the new strain's heightened infectiousness, which may still lead to more overall severe cases. "We're saying that this is qualified good news," said Jim McMenamin, a co-au-



XIAN, Shaanxi, China: A resident undergoes a nucleic acid test for the COVID-19 coronavirus at a residential area that is under restrictions following a recent coronavirus outbreak in Xian, in China's northern Shaanxi province yesterday. —AFP

thor of the Scottish research.

But healthcare workers in Europe have said there has not been much of a reprieve as they struggle to cope with a constant stream of patients, many needing intensive care. Doctors and nurses are in a state of "extreme exhaustion", said Martial Moonen, head of the infectious diseases service at the public hospital in Liege, Belgium.

Several of the country's virologists and epidemiologists say they expect a fifth COVID wave to strike within days. But Moonen said: "We are still going to try to make sure everyone gets their Christmas holidays". —AFP



MAZAR-I-SHARIF, Balkh Province, Afghanistan: A Taliban fighter sits at a checkpoint in Mazar-i-Sharif. —AFP

"The real numbers are much higher than the ones from the UN, said Mirwais Afghan, who has counted more than 550 deaths over four months in eight of Afghanistan's 34 provinces. Afghan, who used to work for the BBC, says he always double checks his information, which AFP was unable to verify. "Last month, one of my relatives was beheaded. We are still looking for the head. I am not releasing the story. So who will know

about it?" he said. Others also try and keep a count of the dead. Majeed Qarar, a former Afghan diplomat now living in Canada, says the "killings are really systematic", adding that "on my Twitter account alone, you can find more than 200 killed".

At the end of November, the Human Rights Watch NGO said there had been 100 murders or forced disappearances in just four Afghan provinces. —AFP

International

HK university dismantles Tiananmen Square statue

‘Decision on the aged statue was based on external legal advice’

HONG KONG: Hong Kong’s oldest university launched an overnight operation yesterday to dismantle a statue commemorating those killed in Beijing’s Tiananmen Square in the latest blow to academic freedoms as China cracks down.

The eight-metre (26-feet) high “Pillar of Shame” by Jens Galschiot has sat on the University of Hong Kong’s (HKU) campus since 1997, the year the former British colony was handed back to China. The sculpture features 50 anguished faces and tortured bodies piled on one another and commemorates democracy protesters killed by Chinese troops around Tiananmen Square in 1989. Its presence was a vivid illustration of Hong Kong’s freedoms compared to the Chinese mainland where the events at Tiananmen are heavily censored. But Beijing is currently remoulding Hong Kong in its own authoritarian image after democracy protests two years ago and commemorating Tiananmen has become effectively illegal. In October, HKU officials ordered the removal of the sculpture citing new but unspecified legal risks. They made good on that promise in the early hours of yesterday morning.

Clanging through the night

University staff used floor-to-ceiling sheets and plastic barriers to shield the statue from view as sounds of drilling and metal clanging could be heard throughout the night, according to an AFP reporter at the scene. Security guards

blocked journalists from getting close and tried to stop media outlets filming. Workers in hard hats could then be seen using a crane to manoeuvre a large chunk of the sculpture, wrapped in plastic, toward a nearby container.

HKU confirmed the statue had been removed and placed in storage after the operation was completed. “The decision on the aged statue was based on external legal advice and risk assessment for the best interest of the University,” the university said. Its statement said no party had ever obtained approval to display the statue and also cited the colonial-era Crimes Ordinance in justifying its removal. That law includes the crime of sedition and has been increasingly deployed by authorities — alongside a new national security law imposed by Beijing — to criminalise dissent.

‘Shocking’

Galschiot told AFP it was “strange” and “shocking” for the university to make a move on the statue, which he said remains his private property. “This is a really expensive sculpture. So if they destroy it, then of course we will sue them,” he added. “It’s not fair.”

Galschiot said he had offered to take the statue back and, with the help of lawyers, tried different ways to get in touch with the university. HKU officials never contacted him or alerted him to the action that began late Wednesday, he said. The artist sent an email to



HONG KONG: A boy poses for a photo in front of the site of the ‘Pillar of Shame’, a statue that commemorates the victims of the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown in Beijing, after it was removed by workers from the University of Hong Kong (HKU) in Hong Kong yesterday. —AFP

supporters, encouraging them to “document everything that happens with the sculpture”. “We have done everything we can to tell (HKU) that we would very much like to pick up the sculpture and bring it to Denmark,” it said.

Hong Kong used to be the one place in China where mass remembrance of Tiananmen was still tolerated. For three decades, the city’s annual June 4 candlelight vigil would attract tens of thousands. With its slogans for democracy and ending one-party rule in China it became a sym-

bol for the political freedoms enjoyed by Hong Kong. But that era is now over. Authorities have banned the last two vigils citing both the coronavirus pandemic and security fears. They have charged the leaders of the vigil organisers with subversion — a national security crime — and shut down a Tiananmen museum that the group used to run. Unlawful assembly prosecutions have been brought against dozens of activists who took part in both the 2020 and 2021 banned Tiananmen vigils. —AFP

China to send police advisors, riot gear to crisis-hit Solomons

BEIJING: China said yesterday it would send police advisors and riot gear to the Solomon Islands, a day after foreign peacekeepers deployed during deadly protests last month began leaving the Pacific nation.

The crisis in the island chain of 800,000 people erupted in November when protesters tried to storm parliament and then went on a three-day rampage, torching much of the capital Honiara’s Chinatown.

The protests were sparked by opposition to veteran Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare and partly fuelled by poverty, unemployment and inter-island rivalries.

But a subplot to the unrest was Sogavare’s efforts to forge closer ties with Beijing after abruptly breaking off the island’s long-time ties with Taiwan in 2019.

China baulks at any official exchanges between other countries and self-ruled Taiwan, which it sees as its own territory awaiting reunification. Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian said Beijing would “urgently provide” support “at the request of the Solomon Islands government”, adding that the materials and personnel would arrive “in the near future”. —AFP

Funeral held after Australian bouncy castle tragedy

SYDNEY: Mourners gathered in Australia yesterday to farewell a 12-year-old boy who died in a tragic bouncy castle accident, the first funeral held for the six children killed in the incident. Emotional attendees embraced before the service in the northern Tasmanian city of Devonport as grieving family and friends arrived.

“Today will be one of the hardest days of my life,” the boy’s mother, Georgie Gardam, posted on Facebook. “What do I weigh up... the day I lost you or the day I put you to rest. I’m not sure.” The boy’s blue coffin—seen in a livestream from inside the chapel—was decorated with PlayStation logos, a poster of the videogame Red Dead Redemption II and a bouquet of sunflowers.

Four boys and two girls, aged between 11 and 12, died after a gust of wind blew a bouncy castle into the air at a celebration to mark the end of the school year. Two other children remain in critical condition in hospital in the state capital Hobart, while one child is recovering at home.

The tragedy triggered an outpouring of grief in the local community and around Australia. Floral tributes grew outside the school, with an online fundraiser for affected families raising more than



DEVONPORT, Tasmania, Australia: This screengrab taken from video released by Australian broadcaster ABC shows cuddly toys and messages left at a makeshift memorial outside the Hillcrest Primary School the day after five children died and four others were injured when a bouncy castle was blown into the air at an end-of-term school party. —AFP

Aus\$1.4 million (\$1 million).

Authorities have said that initial witness reports indicated the children were thrown from a height of about 10 metres (33 feet). Tasmanian authorities have started a probe into the incident, which they expect will “take some time”. Specialist police are being flown to the island state to assist with interviewing people who were at the outdoor party, which some 40 primary school children attended. —AFP

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 24, 2021

LIFESTYLE

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This picture shows a sample of Arabic calligraphy designed and crafted by Iraqi calligrapher Wael Al-Ramdan at his workshop in Al-Ashar district of Iraq's southern city of Basra. — AFP

Building on tradition:
Iraqi laborer preserves
calligraphic art

See Pages 20-21

BUILDING ON TRADITION: IRAQI LABORER PRESERVES CALLIGRAPHIC ART



Verses from the Quran written in Kufic script, a style of Arabic calligraphy, decorate the dome of the Musawi Grand Mosque in Iraq's southern city of Basra. Ramadan earns money by teaching the discipline in schools but also sells his skill for advertisement purposes. —AFP photos

When he is not hauling concrete blocks on a construction site in northern Iraq, Jamal Hussein devotes his time to preserving the gentle art of Arabic calligraphy. Though he has won awards in numerous competitions, Hussein acknowledged that “you can't live on this”, the artistic handwriting of Arabic script.

“I have a big family. I have to find other work,” said the father of 11, who is 50 years old and earns his keep working on building sites in the Iraqi Kurdish town of Ranya. Last week, the United Nations culture agency declared Arabic calligraphy an “Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity”, following a campaign by 16 countries led by Saudi Arabia and including Iraq. “The fluidity of Arabic script offers infinite possibilities, even within a single word, as letters can be stretched and transformed in numerous ways to create different motifs,” UNESCO said on its website.

Abdelmajid Mahboub from the Saudi Heritage Preservation Society involved in the proposal to UNESCO said the number of specialized Arab calligraphic artists had dropped sharply. Hussein is one of them, and he welcomed the UNESCO decision. He hopes it will push “the Iraqi government and the autonomous Kurdistan region to adopt serious measures” to support calligraphy - “khat” in Arabic - and its artists. Practicing since the 1980s, his decades of experience and participation in competitions are attested to by about 40 medals and certificates displayed at his home.

No support

In October he came second in an Egyptian online competition, and is now training for a contest next month in the Iraqi holy Shiite city of Najaf. Hussein's creations are made with a reed pen that he buys from Turkey or Iran. He sometimes sells the work for posters, shop displays and even tombstones, he said.

For decades, in the major regional centers of Cairo, Amman, Beirut or Casablanca, calligraphy was displayed on storefronts, on walls featuring popular sayings, or on plaques at the en-



An Arabic calligraphy mural by Iraqi calligrapher Sajjad Mustafa is pictured in Iraq's southern city of Basra.



Iraqi calligrapher Wael Ramadan uses a stylus to produce a sample of Arabic calligraphy at his workshop in Al-Ashar district of Iraq's southern city of Basra.



Verses from the Quran written in Thuluth script, a style of Islamic calligraphy and a style of Arabic calligraphy decorate the Musawi Grand Mosque in Iraq's southern city of Basra. —AFP



Iraqi calligrapher Wael Al-Ramdan, 49, hangs up one of his Arabic calligraphy framed art pieces reading 'Allah' in the 'Thuluth' calligraphic style at his workshop in Al-Ashar district of Iraq's southern city of Basra.

trances of buildings to signal the presence of a lawyer or a doctor. Today, the remnants of this calligraphy are only visible on the faded facades of old shops. Still, nostalgia for the vintage aesthetic has become something of a trend, as hipsters of the region post pictures of their discoveries for their followers on social media.

But in impoverished, war-scarred Iraq, there is no support from the government "whether for calligraphy or for other arts," Hussein lamented. "Because of technology, the sanctity of calligraphy has declined," he said. "Calligraphy requires more time, more effort and is more costly. People are moving towards cheaper technological production." But it is impossible for Hussein to abandon his art. He dreams of "travelling to Egypt or Turkey and living there temporarily to improve my khat".

At the other end of Iraq, in the southern city of Basra, Wael al-Ramadan opens his shop in an alley. A client arrives to inquire about the preparation of an administrative stamp used to confirm attendance. Ramadan seizes one of his sharp-nibbed pens and starts again to practice the art which his father introduced him to when he was still a child. On paper he slowly begins to trace the requested words, with Arabic letters distinguished by their elegant curves. Like his fellow calligrapher Hussein, Ramadan applauds UNESCO for its "great support for calligraphy and calligraphers all over the world."

Ramadan earns money by teaching the discipline in schools but also sells his skill for advertisement purposes. "We hope that the government will take an interest in this art, through exhibitions and competitions," said Ramadan, 49, who is clad in black with a shaven head. "The survival of Arabic calligraphy depends on the support of the state." It depends, too, on the devotion of men like Hussein and Ramadan. "I obviously hope that my children will succeed me, just like I followed in my father's footsteps," Ramadan said with a smile. —AFP



Iraqi calligrapher Wael Al-Ramdan, 49, presents one of his Arabic calligraphy framed art pieces at his workshop.



People take photos of members of Extinction Rebellion Argentina dressed with model designs created with recycled elements by Trash Couture fashion designers, during a demonstration against fast fashion industry, at Florida pedestrian street in Buenos Aires, on December 22, 2021. —AFP Photos

China says celebrities have 10 days to cough up unpaid taxes

China's tax authorities have set a 10-day deadline for entertainers and social media influencers to pay overdue taxes, part of a government campaign to tighten the noose on tax evasion and celebrity excesses. Beijing has launched a sweeping state crackdown on tax evasion and perceived immoral behavior in the entertainment industry, a tightening that has already targeted some of the country's biggest stars.

Tax bureaus in several entertainment hubs across the country — including Beijing, Shanghai, and the provinces of Guangdong, Zhejiang and Jiangsu — warned celebrities who have under-reported earnings could face severe penalties if they don't refile by year end, according to government notices issued Wednesday.

"If the self-inspection and self-correction are still refused or... not thorough, the taxation department will seriously deal with it," a statement from the Guangdong tax office said. The order comes after China's "livestreaming queen" Huang Wei was ordered to pay a record \$200 million fine for tax evasion on Monday, with her social media accounts with over 110 million followers shut down a day later. Chinese actress Zheng Shuang was also hit with a \$46 million fine for tax evasion in August.

Actress Fan Bingbing's career has been on ice since a 2018 tax evasion scandal. Fan was one of China's highest paid actresses before her downfall and appeared in the X-Men and Iron Man film franchises. The State Administration of Radio, Film and Television has said it had "zero tolerance" for tax evasion and entertainers' "sky-high pay". The tightening coincides with the launch of President Xi Jinping's "common prosperity" drive to reduce economic inequality - partly by reining in excessive incomes in the entertainment and technology sectors.—AFP

HONORARY OSCARS GALA DELAYED AS HOLLYWOOD BRACES FOR OMICRON

The Governors Awards - an annual gala where honorary Oscars are handed out - became the latest glitzy Hollywood event postponed Wednesday, as fears grow of a surge in coronavirus cases fueled by the Omicron variant. Actors Samuel L. Jackson and Danny Glover, Norway's Liv Ullmann and actress-director Elaine May had been due to receive golden statuettes to honor their careers next month at an event that typically draws a who's who of Tinseltown. "We have made the difficult decision to change our plans in hosting the Governors Awards in person on January 15," the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences said in a statement. "Given the uncertainties around the variants, and the impact this could have on our community, we feel this is the best and safest decision for our honorees and guests." The Academy said "rescheduled plans will come at a later date" for this season's Governors Awards. The main Oscars ceremony is still currently set to take place on March 27.

In recent months, Hollywood's annual film award season had kicked off with a return to the usual in-person premieres, galas and receptions. But several events have been scrapped or delayed in just the past few days. On Wednesday, the starry Critics Choice Awards gala was also postponed from its early January slot. "We are currently working diligently to find a new date during the upcoming awards season in which to host our annual gala in-person with everyone's safety and health remaining our top priority," said

Belgium closes entertainment venues as Omicron spreads

Belgium's government has announced concert halls, cinemas and other entertainment venues would have to close from the weekend as Omicron cases increased. Prime



Beyoncé (left) and Jay Z perform during a Get Out the Vote performance in Cleveland, Ohio. —AFP

the Critics Choice Association in a statement. Others to delay or cancel included a red-carpet event for new Star Wars series "The Book of Boba Fett," the Palm Springs International Film Festival gala, the annual BAFTA Los Angeles Tea Party and a premiere for Peter Dinklage musical "Cyrano." California currently boasts the lowest positivity rate of any US state at 3.3 percent, and continues "to lead the nation in terms of administered doses of vaccine," Governor Gavin Newsom said Wednesday.

But California has still "seen a signifi-

Minister Alexander De Croo told a media conference that while overall COVID infections were down 60 percent from where they were three weeks ago, worryingly three out of 10 positive tests were now of the Omicron variant. "We have to be more careful than ever in this period where there are many uncertainties," he said.

While entertainment venues would have to shut from Sunday, the additional

cant increase in the number of identified cases of COVID" in the past week, he warned. Data suggests Omicron has become the main variant for new cases in the state. While A-list film events are disappearing, movie theaters are enjoying a rare spell of positive news, with "Spider-Man: No Way Home" obliterating box office records. The superhero film took in \$260 million at domestic theaters on its first weekend. No other film opening during the pandemic had previously reached \$100 million.—AFP

restrictions would not affect museums, De Croo said. He added that restaurants and bars would still be able to remain open until 11 pm, under curtailed hours imposed since the start of the month. But, if the increase in Omicron cases led to more hospitalizations, he did not rule out stricter restrictions being brought in. De Croo noted that so far nearly 40 percent of adults in Belgium had received booster shots.—AFP

RUSSIA READY TO 'FIGHT' FOR SPACE TOURISM SUPREMACY

After a decade-long hiatus, Russia is relaunching an ambitious bid for dominion over the world's budding space tourism industry, jostling with zealous billionaires, the United States, and rising China. Russia flaunted its comeback this month dispatching two cosmic adventurers—Japanese billionaire Yusaku Maezawa and his assistant—to the International Space Station (ISS) in its first launch of tourists in 12 years.

Buoyed by the success, firebrand space chief Dmitry Rogozin talked up Russia's next steps to supremacy: a special module at the ISS for Russia's visitors, spacewalks outside the station, and down the line—trips around the moon. "We will not give this niche to the Americans. We are ready to fight for it," he told reporters at a press conference as Maezawa was blasting towards the ISS on a 12-day mission.

Yet Russia's path to industry dominance is dotted with new obstacles that have emerged since it was last in the game a decade ago. Back then, the Russian space agency Roscosmos had a monopoly on sending the cash-flushed curious to space. That changed when US agency NASA retired its own shuttle for astronauts in 2011 and snatched up every seat to the ISS Roscosmos had on offer for the next decade.

Then, last year, billionaire Elon Musk's SpaceX barged onto the scene with its first successful ISS mission and NASA dropped Roscosmos. At a reported \$90 million per seat, this was a huge financial blow to the cash-strapped Russian space agency, hit simultaneously with budget cuts and corruption scandals. Analysts say Roscosmos has no choice but to turn to tourism to cover the shortfall. "The Russian space industry is reliant on consistent orders for these launches," industry analyst Vitaly Yegorov told AFP.

The price tag for one seat—estimated at \$50-60 million—covers the cost of building the three-person Soyuz spacecraft to shuttle



(Left to right) Russian cosmonaut Alexander Misurkin and space flight participant Japanese billionaire Yusaku Maezawa and production assistant Yozo Hirano attend a post-flight press conference in Star City on December 22, 2021.

Both their spacecrafts completed maiden voyages this year, remaining several minutes in zero gravity before returning to Earth. But Andrei Ionin of the Russian Academy of Cosmonautics says you just can't compare the billionaires' brief, low-orbit flights to a days-long mission to the ISS. "It's like comparing the Ferrari and the Renault market," he said. Loskutov echoed the point, saying the trips were more a part of the "entertainment industry" than the space travel.

Still, Yegorov said, "competition is heating up," particularly from SpaceX. Russia has taken note. It wants to expand offer-



A helicopter carrying the International Space Station (ISS) crew lands at Zhezkazgan airport, Kazakhstan.

—AFP photos

Loskutov said Russia has pre-ordered a rocket for the next launch and Rogozin instructed his agency to boost its Soyuz production. Real demand—not just interest—is hard to assess too. Candidates must be willing to shell out, meet health requirements and commit to months of training and a rehabilitation period after returning to Earth. "In my opinion, there aren't a lot of people—but you don't need many, anyway," Ionin said. At least for now, he said, Russia is ahead thanks to the Soviet-designed and time-tested Soyuz. "For the next five to 10 years, there is no threat to the business of Roscosmos," Ionin added.—AFP

Visitors return to Afghan national museum Taleban once ransacked

Afghanistan's national museum is once again welcoming visitors and exhibiting pre-Islamic artefacts with the Taleban's blessing—a stark contrast to when the hardliners ransacked and shuttered the facility during their last stint in power. A trickle of citizens made their way around the sprawling exhibit rooms in Kabul when AFP recently visited, marveling at treasures ranging from painted Stone Age pottery to ancient coins and religious items.

"It's inborn in humans that they attach value to their history," said Rahmatullah, 65, after intently examining a collection of 2,000-year-old swords. "I wanted to know more about the history of my country. It has a special place in my heart". The museum reopened in late November with permission from the Taleban's new ministry of information and culture, around three months after the Islamists retook power and ended their two-decade insurgency.

Some artefacts on open display are fundamentally at odds with the Taleban's radical ideology, including pottery collections featuring images of animals and humans. During their first 1996-2001 rule, Taleban fighters destroyed items including statues at the museum, while tens of thousands of items were looted and never recovered. In that period, the Islamists also blew up 1,500-year-old giant statues of the Buddha in the central Bamiyan valley. But Taleban fighters now guard the museum and its treasures from potential attack by Islamic State insurgents.

According to chief curator Ainuddin Sadaqat, there has been no attempt to restrict what is on display. Only "15 to 20 percent of exhibits are of

Islamic heritage", the 35-year-old told AFP. "We also have visitors from the Taleban," who sometimes come to tour the museum in large numbers, Sadaqat said. The reopening comes as the hardline Islamists try to present a more moderate image while seeking to unlock billions of dollars in international aid suspended since the fall of the western-backed government and for sanctions to be lifted.

'Felt hopeful'

The museum also boasts a collection of 18th- and 19th-century jewelry. "I came here to see the jewelry—what it looked like in the past; the necklaces, earrings," said Zohal, 24, who only gave her first name. "I wanted to see the difference between the jewelry of the past and what we have now," said this Afghan woman, who works for the Norwegian Refugee Council. Visitor numbers are well below the hundreds who used to visit daily under the previous regime—a time when numbers were swollen by coachloads of children. "For the moment, the cultural policy of the Taleban towards artefacts does seem very positive and realistic," said Philippe Marquis, who formerly headed the French archaeological delegation in Afghanistan. Future policy "will probably depend on the reaction of the international community" to Taleban pleas to restore suspended aid, he added, with the risk that withholding such assistance will result in backsliding in culture and other policy areas. Another key cultural institution, the Afghanistan National Institute of Music, remains closed. Its director Ahmad Naser Sarmast fled the country along with hundreds of staff, students and their families.—AFP



A man visits the National Museum of Afghanistan in Kabul. —AFP photos



People visit the National Museum of Afghanistan in Kabul. Afghanistan's national museum is once again welcoming visitors and exhibiting pre-Islamic artefacts with the Taleban's blessing - a stark contrast to when the hardliners ransacked and shuttered the facility during their last stint in power.



Marine biologists look at sea turtles in their tanks at the Phuket Marine Biological Center in Phuket. —AFP photos



A sea turtle gets an X-ray at the Phuket Marine Biological Center in Phuket.

Sea turtles return to Thailand's shores during pandemic



A marine biologist inspects a sea turtle at the Phuket Marine Biological Center in Phuket.

After laying eggs on a deserted Thai beach, a green sea turtle dives back into the turquoise-colored waters of the Andaman Sea - a welcome sight for biologists who say the absence of tourists spurred the marine animal's return. The turtle's nesting was spotted in November by scientists. In about two months, the 100 eggs will hatch and babies will slide towards the sea, guided by the moonlight. Pre-pandemic, millions of tourists thronged to the white sand beaches of southern Thailand, ferried to the islands by tour boats which dissuaded the skittish creatures from venturing ashore.

But with almost 20 months of COVID travel restrictions in place, several different species of sea turtles have returned to nesting around Phuket, an ultra-popular beach destination before the pandemic. Between October 2020 and February 2021, 18 nests of leatherback turtles - which can grow up to 400 kilograms as an adult and are the largest species of sea turtles - were found in Phuket.

"Their nesting has improved in the last two years thanks to the absence of tourists, noise and light pollution," Kongkiat Kittiwatanawong, director of the Phuket Marine Biological Center, told AFP. "We had never seen such a number in 20 years." Although chances of survival are very low - about one egg hatched out of 1,000 will reach adulthood - Kongkiat said the increase in nesting is a positive sign for efforts to preserve

endangered species. A nest of the olive ridley sea turtle was also spotted - the first time in two decades. Other species that live in the warm waters around Thailand include leatherback, hawksbill, green and loggerhead turtles.

No long-term reprieve

But as Thailand tentatively begins to reopen its doors to fully vaccinated international tourists, scientists have tempered their optimism. "The pandemic may offer sea turtles a welcome break," Thon Thamrongnawasawat from Kasetsart University in Bangkok said. "But they live long and are a highly migratory species. Without effective policies to protect them, we can't expect many long-term benefits to population recovery."

In Thailand - as in many other countries - the marine animal's future is threatened by global warming, which harms coral reefs and increases temperatures of waters. The hotter conditions could in turn disrupt turtle species' populations: studies have shown that warmer sands where they nest leads to more female hatchlings relative to males.

Pollution is also a problem. At the moment, plastic and discarded fishing lines and nets remain the primary cause of disease and death. "In 56 percent of the cases, the turtles that are brought to us have ingested marine waste or become trapped in it," said Dr Patcharaporn Kae-



A sea turtle surfaces for air while swimming in a tank at the Phuket Marine Biological Center in Phuket.

wong from the Phuket Marine Biological Center. Currently, 58 turtles are being treated there. Some need operations, amputation or prosthetics before they are released back into the wild.

Tracking the turtles

At the moment, scientists and local authorities are on high alert for nesting season, which runs until February. After a female turtle lays a nest, the authorities will act quickly - either moving them to a safe place if they are too close to the water or surrounding it with bamboo fences and security cameras. "After hatching, we take care of the weak turtles until they are strong enough to go to the sea," Patcharaporn said. She added that educating the public about conservation was also important. Up until a few decades ago, eating turtle eggs was a common custom in Thailand, but gathering them was banned by the Thai government in 1982.

Illegally possessing or selling leatherback turtle eggs is now punishable by three to 15 years in prison, and carries fines of up to \$50,000. Some marine protection NGOs are also financially rewarding locals who report a nest, while technology - like microchipping a turtle - also plays a part in long-term monitoring. "Thanks to satellite tracking, we have observed that they can migrate much further than we thought," Kongkiat said, adding that some have gone as far as Australia. — AFP



Baby sea turtles are being raised at the Phuket Marine Biological Center, before being released into the wild when they are older.



A marine biologist spreads out the flippers of a sea turtle for an X-ray at the Phuket Marine Biological Center in Phuket.



Photo shows sea turtles swimming in tanks at the Phuket Marine Biological Center in Phuket.



A tourist poses for a picture inside a cell at what was the prison at Gorgona Island, in the Pacific Ocean, off southwestern Colombia. —AFP photos



The last director of the Gorgona prison, Colombian police major Miguel Dario Lopez, shows old pictures of the jail, during an interview with AFP in Bogota.

Colombia's forgotten Alcatraz: The island prison of Gorgona

At the end of October, a presidential candidate stirred up old memories when proposing to send corrupt politicians to Colombia's notorious former island prison of Gorgona. No one took the threat seriously but it did pique interest about a little known part of Colombia's history that could be compared to Alcatraz or Robben Island. Right up until 1984, this 26 square kilometer island situated 55 kilometers off Colombia's Pacific coast was a tragic place where political prisoners and dangerous criminals were sent to serve out their sentences, sometimes until death.

Far from prying eyes, among several species of venomous snakes, prisoners were left to suffer their fate at the hands of the island's brutal guards or violent fellow inmates. "Damned be this place," wrote one former inmate in a poem. These days, only a few crumbling walls of the prison remain on an island that attracts a small amount of eco-tourism, mostly for scuba-diving or to explore its incredible biodiversity.

'Terrible suffering'

The only way to reach Gorgona is a two-hour boat ride from the coastal town of Guapi, hidden amongst mangroves. Gorgona is a humid mass of volcanoes and jungle, with daily rain and waters teeming with dolphins and whales. It was discovered in 1526 by Spanish conquistadors, who lost 87 men to venomous snake bites within a few months of arriving. It was thus named after Medusa, a gorgon in Greek mythology whose hair was made of snakes and who could turn people to stone by looking into their eyes.

For a time it was a pirate haven before passing into private hands. The Colombian state appropriated it in the 1960s to build the prison. "There are many legends around Gorgona," said Corazon de Jesus Aguino, 35, a park technician and local celebrity. Most of them are



Corazon de Jesus Aguino (left), a forest ranger, speaks with tourists at what was the prison at Gorgona Island, in the Pacific Ocean, off southwestern Colombia.

Lifestyle | Feature

unverifiable," he added. "What is certain, is that it was a place of punishments and terrible suffering." More than a thousand prisoners passed through the prison: murderers and rapists, but also political detainees from La Violencia, Colombia's 10-year civil war (1948-58) between the governing conservative party and the liberals.

Nazi model

"The prison was built along the lines of Nazi camps," said De Jesus Aguino. Several courtyards with dormitories, each with their own "corridor of death" leading to the disciplinary area. "Visitors sometimes have very negative feelings," added De Jesus Aguino. A single dormitory has resisted being swamped by the encroaching jungle and its constant hum of insects.

Prisoners slept in wooden bunk beds, often directly on the boards with no mattress. "Each prisoner was designated by a number," he said. Visitors were rare, and outdoor exercise only allowed for prisoners to help cut down the forest. The 120 guards reined with impunity. "Nothing left here," said De Jesus Aguino. One place embodied the misery of the prison: the disciplinary quarter with isolation cells secured with heavy iron bars.

'Torture through hunger'

The most feared punishment was "the can" - an 80 centimeter wide pit where the prisoner would be forced to stand for days on end in squalid water up to his neck. "Torture, mistreatment, infected food ... when I arrived, Gorgona was a hellhole," said the prison's last director, Miguel Dario Lopez, who AFP spoke to in Bogota. Appointed in 1981, Lopez, 78, proudly claims to have ended abuse by guards and "pacified" the prison.

"The guards here were thieves, corrupt, they took their revenge on prisoners," said Lopez, now retired. "Ten 'cans' were still in use. I stopped all that. There was also torture through hunger. Inmates were only allowed potatoes and a bit of rice, with occasionally a bit of barely cooked snake. "They often cried, they all had mental problems ... they killed each other with makeshift blades or strangled each other with simple rags."

As well as snakes and tarantulas, "the beaches were infested with sharks and barracudas, it's no legend," he said. In total "almost 150 prisoners died in Gorgona," he estimates, denying that the bodies were thrown into the sea. "With the help of Franciscan priests and Adventist pastors we worked to re-socialize the inmates." A "human rights committee" was installed on every courtyard. "The food was improved by teaching some prisoners to fish. The number of visits was increased."

Serial killer escaped

"Through music, painting and even Latin, we managed to calm down the inmates and teach them to forgive," said Lopez, showing off a large scar on his palm suffered when trying to break up a knife fight. "With me, there were no more deaths," he added, showing off



Photo shows the infirmary of the prison at Gorgona Island.

a faded photo of himself posing next to an escapee, who was caught after three days at sea on a log raft. "It was very difficult to escape." Most escapees were picked up by passing ships and returned to the island but "five or six managed it." Among them was Eduardo Muneton Tamayo, nicknamed "the Colombian Papillon" - after the 1973 film starring Steve McQueen and Dustin Hoffman - who escaped in 1969 but was caught three years later.

Serial killer Daniel Camargo Barbosa, known as the "sadist of El Charquito," escaped in 1984 with authorities insisting he died at sea. He was arrested two years later in Ecuador and admitted to murdering 71 young girls there, although he is believed to have killed more than 180. The prison was closed in 1984 after pressure from human rights organizations, as well as ecologists and scientists eager to protect the island's natural paradise after 70 percent of its jungle had been cut down by prisoners.

Since then, the jungle has reclaimed its lost territory. "Colombians need to discover this dark historical place," said Omar Nanez, the only tourist visiting the island alongside AFP. Given how quickly the ruins are being devoured by vegetation, "the government will have to decide what it wants to preserve of the prison," said one national park employee. "Is this a cultural or historical asset? Or should it be left to disappear forever?" — AFP



View of what were the bedrooms of the prison at Gorgona Island.



View of what was the dining hall of the prison at Gorgona Island, in the Pacific Ocean, off southwestern Colombia.

Kids Page

Word Search



Costume Party

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



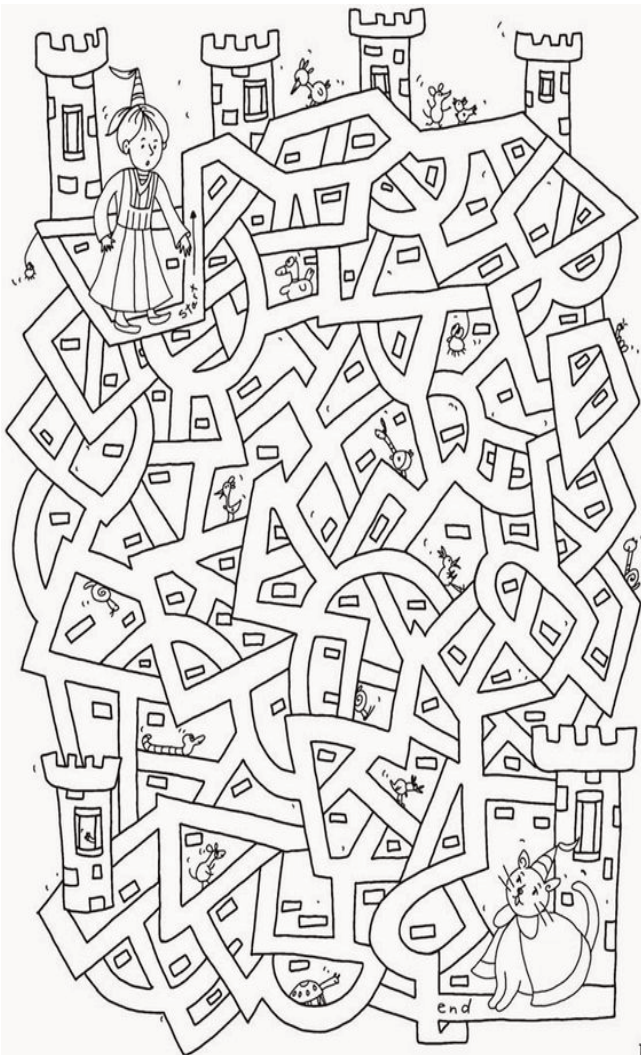
ANGEL
 ASTRONAUT
 CAVEMAN
 COWBOY
 CLOWN
 FAIRY
 FIREMAN

GHOST
 MUMMY
 NINJA
 NURSE
 POLICEMAN
 PIRATE
 PRINCESS

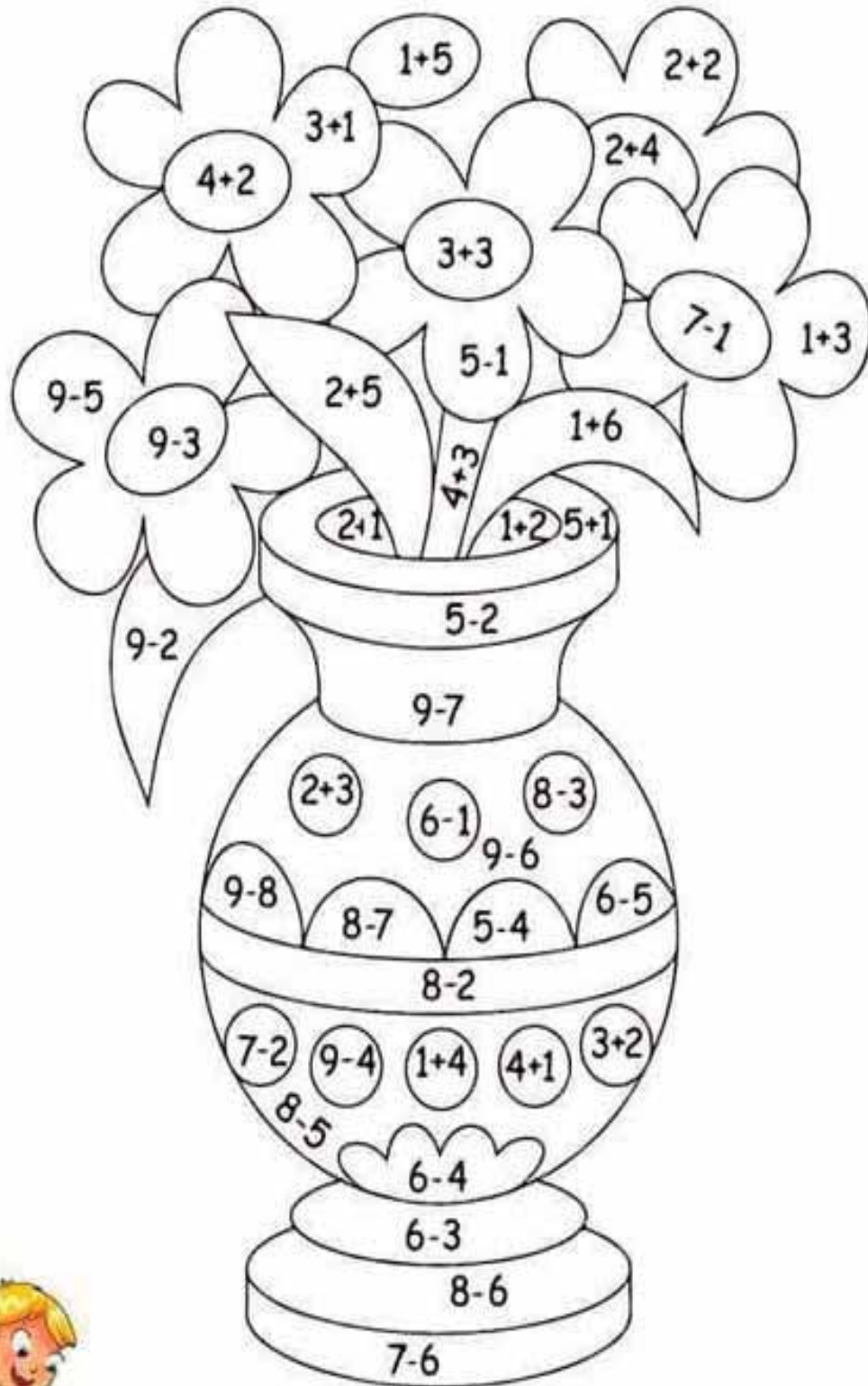
ROBOT
 VAMPIRE
 WITCH



Kids Mazes



Color It



Find the objects

Hidden Picture

Can you find the hidden pictures?

Word Scramble

Father's Day Word Scramble

DIRECTIONS: Unscramble the letters to form the names of ten different words to describe Dad. Then unscramble the shaded letters to answer the riddle.

- RFUELAC
- OSDAEHNM
- ONRGTS
- YALLO
- LUEHPFL
- DINK
- RLEECV
- EEVDTOD
- NLILTARIB
- WIES



What do you call a monkey who is just like his father?

!

Join the dots

Business

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 24, 2021

32 US existing home sales rise for third straight month**32** AAW unveils INTERSPORT store at the Assima Mall**33** Sheraton Kuwait Hotels celebrate festive season**34** EU details crackdown on shell companies

Lufthansa cancels several flights

Flights grounded over sick pilots



FRANKFURT: Aircrafts of German airline Lufthansa stand at the airport in Frankfurt am Main, western Germany. German national carrier Lufthansa cancelled several transatlantic flights around Christmas, after the number of pilots calling in sick was greater than normal for this time of year. — AFP

FRANKFURT: German national carrier Lufthansa cancelled several transatlantic flights around Christmas, after the number of pilots calling in sick was greater than normal for this time of year, a spokesman said yesterday. Asked whether the absences were linked to the new Omicron variant of the coronavirus, the spokesman said he “could not speculate” as he did not have any information about the causes of illness.

In total, the airline has been forced to axe six flights between December 23 and 26, including services to Chicago, Boston and Washington. The lack of personnel came despite Lufthansa’s “big planned reserves” of crew, the spokesman said. The airline industry has been battered since the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, with countless flights grounded in 2020 as countries closed their borders.

The emergence of the Omicron has raised

concerns that the more transmissible variant could lead to more travel restrictions with a knock-on effect for the industry. Germany has placed stricter limits on travellers coming from the United Kingdom and South Africa, among others, where the new variant has caused a surge in cases. Lufthansa posted its first operating profit since the beginning of the pandemic in the third quarter of this year, after a difficult 18 months.

The carrier booked an underlying, or operating loss of 5.5 billion euros (\$6.2 billion) in 2020 and turned to the state for support. In November, Lufthansa announced it had finished paying back the nine-billion-euro bailout it received from the government earlier than planned. Swedish national carrier SAS on Wednesday also cancelled nine flights due to the coronavirus, after striking some 30 flights worldwide the day before.— AFP

PREMIER MARKET WEEKLY TECHNICAL BULLETIN

WEEK ENDED ON 23 DECEMBER 2021

No.	Ticker	Sector	Price Movement & Performance										Valuation Multiples *				
			Open Price	Close Price	Week High	Week Low	Range	Volume	WTD Change	WTD %	YTD %	Support Level	Resistance Level	P/E	P/B	Yield	Beta
101	National Bank of Kuwait	Banking	970	999	1005	948	57	40,913,334	29	2.99%	15.48%	990	1005	21.6	2.08	1.9%	1.26
102	Gulf Bank	Banking	267	279	282	261	21	26,219,349	10	3.72%	22.83%	270	282	19.9	1.16	1.9%	1.13
106	Kuwait International Bank	Banking	211	215	216	208	8	27,759,096	4	1.90%	1.44%	212	218	73.1	0.91	0.0%	1.01
107	Burgan Bank	Banking	223	235	238	223	15	18,868,110	11	4.91%	5.16%	234	238	16.7	1.00	1.9%	1.05
108	Kuwait Finance House	Banking	826	839	841	820	21	37,649,887	13	1.57%	22.01%	837	841	31.8	3.54	1.1%	1.40
109	Boubyan Bank	Banking	786	788	790	770	20	3,428,817	6	0.77%	37.68%	787	791	57.3	4.48	0.0%	1.05
204	National Investments	Financial Services	227	220	227	219	8	8,739,923	-8	-3.51%	68.89%	218	227	7.0	0.93	4.5%	1.25
205	Kuwait Projects	Financial Services	136	137	139	133	6	8,184,762	1	0.74%	-14.47%	136	140	24.7	1.34	3.4%	0.59
252	Al Imtiaz Investment	Financial Services	120	119	120	117	3	4,028,738	-2	-1.65%	8.04%	117	123	NM	0.72	0.0%	1.00
401	Kuwait Real Estate	Real Estate	178	179	179	172	7	24,405,090	0	0.00%	64.22%	178	181	26.8	1.26	0.0%	0.98
413	Mabaneer	Real Estate	805	805	813	797	16	2,082,883	-4	-0.49%	23.14%	798	814	17.6	1.80	0.7%	1.10
501	National Industries	Financial Services	276	277	281	272	9	14,065,245	3	1.09%	55.68%	272	281	5.3	0.97	0.0%	1.45
505	Gulf Cable	Industrials	890	910	915	888	27	833,884	7	0.78%	19.60%	900	914	32.5	0.93	5.4%	0.94
514	Boubyan Petrochemical	Basic Materials	868	875	881	850	31	1,067,391	8	0.92%	35.47%	860	880	23.7	1.96	6.4%	0.73
526	Al Qurain	Basic Materials	340	355	358	337	21	4,008,183	14	4.11%	0.89%	333	357	NM	0.92	4.5%	0.75
603	Agility	Industrials	954	950	956	942	14	6,329,315	-4	-0.42%	41.12%	935	955	2.1	1.01	0.9%	1.48
605	Zain	Telecommunications	596	594	598	590	8	12,177,334	-1	-0.17%	-1.82%	593	599	13.4	2.13	3.4%	1.35
623	Human Soft Holding	Industrials	3,201	3,220	3,244	3,197	47	862,326	2	0.06%	-15.29%	3200	3275	7.1	3.55	12.2%	0.49
642	ALAFCO	Industrials	224	219	224	217	7	2,141,105	-6	-2.67%	4.17%	216	224	NM	0.71	0.0%	0.88
818	Ahli United Bank	Banking	278	280	282	273	9	96,017,201	3	1.08%	22.03%	278	282	19.6	2.20	1.3%	1.15
821	Warba Bank	Banking	272	267	272	247	25	21,422,375	-5	-1.84%	15.25%	262	268	20.3	2.63	0.0%	1.00
823	Mezzan Holding	Consumer Staples	591	599	600	591	9	1,470,197	3	0.50%	-1.97%	593	601	18.4	1.66	2.9%	0.44
824	Integrated Holding	Industrials	373	369	375	367	8	3,883,184	-7	-1.86%	2.73%	368	371	NM	1.57	0.0%	0.47
826	Shamal Az-Zour	Utilities	229	227	230	226	4	3,277,840	-2	-0.87%	-17.33%	227	233	19.9	4.15	5.1%	0.64
827	Boursa Kuwait	Financial Services	2,000	1,986	2,025	1,960	65	593,536	-34	-1.68%	83.64%	1983	2000	24.7	6.85	2.1%	0.65

* As of end of week closing

Business

Asian markets rise as COVID-19 fears ease

In Europe, Paris and Frankfurt tick higher

HONG KONG: Asian markets rose yesterday following Wall Street's lead as concerns over inflation and COVID eased with US data showing optimism about the economy despite the spread of the Omicron variant. The upbeat pre-holiday mood was helped by two preliminary studies from Britain indicating Omicron infections were less likely to result in hospitalization compared with the Delta variant, confirming a trend first identified in South Africa. The cautious optimism was also lifted by news that the US Food and Drug Administration had authorized Pfizer's anti-COVID pill, providing fresh tools to battle the disease.

New cases of the highly mutated Omicron

strain continued to soar, but market watchers are becoming more confident the health effects will be milder than with earlier strains. "Markets hate uncertainty and not knowing, and when Omicron hit the markets, we didn't know," Carol Schleif, deputy chief investment officer at BMO Family Office, told Bloomberg Television. "But it seems like it's edging toward something more positive."

Wall Street closed with healthy gains after US data showed consumers remained upbeat about the economy despite the rise of the fast-spreading Omicron strain. The Conference Board's consumer confidence index jumped nearly four points to 115.8 compared to the prior

month. Sentiment was also boosted by revised data from the US Commerce Department showing GDP expanded at a faster annual rate of 2.3 percent in the third quarter, up from earlier estimates of 2.1 percent.

The positive mood carried over into Asia yesterday, with Tokyo adding 0.8 percent to cheerlead the advance as regional markets climbed across the board. "The market remains generally optimistic, although there are concerns about the Omicron variant's spread, particularly during the year-end and New Year season when people move around," Okasan Online Securities said. Even a COVID lockdown in the Chinese city of Xi'an failed to dampen en-

thusiasm, with Shanghai closing 0.6 percent higher and Hong Kong up 0.4 percent.

In Europe, Paris and Frankfurt ticked higher at the open while London was marginally lower. "A cocktail containing better US Q3 GDP data, along with positive Omicron headlines further inoculated financial markets against a year-end sell-off overnight," said OANDA's Jeffrey Halley. "It would take some huge downside misses from the US data dump this evening to unsettle what appears to be an inevitable Santa rally on Wall Street into the end of the week," he added, ahead of the release of US jobless claims, personal spending and durable goods orders later. —AFP

US existing home sales rise for 3rd straight month

WASHINGTON: Even in the face of rising prices and short supply, sales of existing homes in the United States increased for the third consecutive month in November, according to industry data released Wednesday. Sales jumped 1.9 percent compared to October, to an annual rate of 6.46 million, seasonally adjusted, the National Association of Realtors (NAR) said.

Record low mortgage rates have fueled rising sales and driven prices higher, but rates are expected to rise in 2022 as the Federal Reserve moves to get a handle on inflation. The median existing-home price hit \$353,900 last month, up 13.9 percent from the same month of 2020 as prices increased in every region, NAR said. This marks 117 straight months of year-over-year increases, the longest-running streak on record.

"Determined buyers were able to land housing before mortgage rates rise further in the coming months," NAR's chief economist Lawrence Yun said, adding that he does not expect a dramatic increase in borrowing costs. The hot real estate market has boosted housing costs, for renters and homeowners in recent years but in particular during the COVID-19 pandemic. "Locking in a constant and firm mortgage payment motivated many consumers who grew weary of escalating rents over the last year," Yun said.

Buyers also are hindered by a shortage of inventory - down 13.3 percent compared to a year ago - which has been exacerbated by supply chain snags that mean building materials are in short supply and cost more, Yun noted. Joel Kan of the Mortgage Bankers Association said the dynamics in the market, which favor those who snap up available properties quickly, "is impacting prospective first-time buyers." "They continued to struggle reaching the market" and represent only a quarter of all homebuyers, he said. —AFP

AAW unveils new INTERSPORT store at Assima Mall



KUWAIT: Ali Abdulwahab Al Mutawa Commercial Co (AAW) yesterday unveiled a brand new INTERSPORT store at Kuwait City's new Assima Mall, the largest mixed-use development in the heart of Kuwait City. AAW Senior Deputy CEO Khaled Al-Mutawa said: "We are thrilled to unveil the new INTERSPORT store at Assima Mall, the

new store showcases best-in-class modern sportswear, a vast selection of footwear and top-of-the-line equipment. We look forward to welcoming all our customers, whether they are hobbyists, enthusiasts or professional athletes."

INTERSPORT Kuwait is the go-to destination for an extensive assortment of global athletic brands covering vari-

ous sporting categories, including running, football, training, swimming, boxing, racket sports, outdoor and Lifestyle. INTERSPORT stores are located at Murouj Complex, The Avenues, Bairaqa Mall, Manara Complex in Shuwaikh Industrial Area, the Pro Shops At Rafa Nadal Academy Kuwait and Sultan Center Salmiya.

Business

Hunger closes in on Brazilians; Christmas holiday approaches

A quarter of Brazilians suffer from food insecurity

RIO DE JANEIRO: Rice, black beans, oil, flour, pasta and sugar. It hardly sounds like a feast but without this 12 kilogram food parcel donation, Rita Maria De Souza would not have had enough to eat at Christmas. In Brazil, hunger is affecting ever more families and NGO donations are vital with the holiday season fast approaching. Almost a quarter of Brazilians suffer from food insecurity. "It's not much but I will be able to share it with my family," De Souza, 59, told AFP from Duque de Caxias, a poor neighborhood in the north of Rio de Janeiro. Widowed three years ago, she lives alone in a small brick house in the Morro do Garibaldi favela.

De Souza walks with a limp due to diabetes and struggles to eat an adequate diet. "I need healthy food but it's not possible with what I earn," she said. Unemployed for the last six years, her only income is a monthly 100 reais

(\$17) government allowance. She relies almost exclusively on donations to eat. Her son died five years ago but she has a 38 year-old daughter, granddaughters aged 22 and 24, a great grandson and soon another two as twins are imminent. Yet since her husband died, she has spent Christmas alone or with her sisters, who live in the same neighborhood.

Hunger returning

De Souza welcomed Jeferson Ribeiro, one of the founders of the Amac NGO, with open arms and a sigh of relief when he delivered her Christmas food parcel. Amac is one of the partners involved in the Natal sem Fome (Christmas without hunger) initiative, which has already distributed 1,500 tons of food this end of year, enough to prepare eight million meals.

Launched by the Acao da Cidadania (Citizen-

ship Action) NGO in 1994, the campaign was halted in 2007 when hunger levels in Brazil had dropped markedly. At the time, leftist then-president Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva (2003-2010) benefitted from a favorable economy that allowed him to implement policies that helped millions of Brazilians out of poverty. But the Natal sem Fome program had to be restarted a decade later. "We relaunched the operation in 2017 because we realized that hunger was on the rise again. And since then it (hunger) has only increased," said Rodrigo Afonso, Acao da Cidadania's director.

'One meal a day'

"With the pandemic we have to make do with one meal a day," said Maria Elena Huertas Rosales, a Peruvian living in Nova Iguacu, a suburb neighboring Duque de Caxias. "I only see meat

on television and we're always asking ourselves: 'what will we eat tomorrow?'" added the 50-year-old, who moved to Brazil with her husband and son in 2009. According to a United Nations report, between 2018 and 2020, close to 50 million Brazilians "had to go without food or suffered a significant reduction in the quantity or quality."

Things have got worse in recent months due to the coronavirus pandemic and accelerating inflation in the country of 213 million. Brazilians have been shocked by viral social media images of hungry people in Rio fighting over bones in a dumpster. Things were already worsening before the pandemic, according to Afonso, who blames a "drastic reduction" in policies to fight food shortages. "If these policies were put in place we wouldn't have hungry people fighting over bones in the street," he said. —AFP

AUB congratulates Al-Hassad winners

KUWAIT: Ahli United Bank (AUB) held the weekly draw on 22 December 2021 of Al-Hassad Islamic account - the first Islamic prizes account in Kuwait which offers over 750 prizes over a 12 month period and provides numerous features. Such features include the simplest and easiest savings program, loyalty multipliers, and unique account opening feature online with all ease with instant deposit option.

The Bank announced 20 Winners of KD 1,000 as follows: Wael Saad Mesbah, Shaikhah Ahmad Al-Zuwawi, Abdullateef Ali Al-Saleh, Basem Suliman Butaiban, Raweyah Mohammad Felfel, May Meshal Mahboub Al-Noun, Mohammad Issa Shublaq, Bibi Khalifa Alabdulla, Nehayyer Bardi Al-Enezi, Barghash Khalaf Al-Failakawi, Nwayer Saud Al-Azmi, Bader Saleh Al-Enezi, Reemeyah Mohammad Al-Helaili, Amr Mohammad Ameen, Saber Jamaan Abdullah, Huda Abdullah Al-Ansari, Mohd Naser Al-Marzoug, Liyan Abdallah Al-Ali, Nada Rashad Ahmed and Laila Abdulqader Adlouni.

The draws of Al-Hassad include several cash prizes, such as KD 100,000 each Eid and the grand quarterly draw of KD 250,000 prize which continues to be a key aspiration for customers who are wishing to fulfill their dreams. Al Hassad offers also 20 weekly prizes of KD 1,000 for each winner. Furthermore, for the first time in Kuwait, the AUB Al-Hassad presents the "Privilege Draw", which is a quarterly draw of KD 25,000 exclusively for Al-Hassad customers who maintained their balances for more than one year and have not won a prize in the past five years.

For all draws, the clients are eligible for one draw chance for each KD 50 deposited in their Al-Hassad account. In addition to this attractive package of rewards, Al-Hassad Islamic account incorporates a Wakala contract for projected annual profits, making this account unique and attractive to all society segments that are aspiring to build their short and long-term savings through a unique savings account with many advantages.

Sheraton Kuwait Hotels celebrate festive season

KUWAIT: A festive and memorable season awaits you at the Sheraton Kuwait and the Four Points by Sheraton Kuwait. Indulge in a lively atmosphere and bring a touch of warmth to your year-end celebrations. A medley of dining offers and staycation options are available to showcase the season's best with holiday themed lunches and celebratory dinners for you to enjoy. The Riccardo Restaurant welcomes you to experience an intimate fine dining experience of genuine Italian cuisine.

Enjoy a variety of international holiday dishes specially prepared at the Al Hambra. Authentic Lebanese food at the Le Tarbouche, classic Indian cuisine at the Bukhara and Persian favorites at the Shahrayar restaurant. Delight in a traditional English ambiance at the English Tea Lounge. Share the joy with holiday feasts at our distinctive restaurants. Four Points by Sheraton Kuwait, offers you a breathtaking view of the city, join us as we welcome the New Year with a special holiday dinner. An array of unique selection of dishes prepared specifically to suit your tastes accompanied by live music. La Mamma Pizzeria welcomes you with delicious Italian favorites prepared from fresh ingredients. A place with the traditional Italian atmosphere and the true flavors from the charming countryside. Exclusive staycation packages are available on our rooms and suites to create the perfect holidays at both the Sheraton Kuwait and the Four Points by Sheraton Kuwait. Let's Celebrate!



Business

Cyprus resumes energy search with ExxonMobil

Drilling program resumes in the EEZ

NICOSIA: Cyprus announced it has resumed searching for oil and gas with US energy giant ExxonMobil after drilling operations stopped for more than a year because of coronavirus. The search is focused on Block 10 of Cyprus's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Joint venture ExxonMobil and Qatar Energy have an exploration license for Block 10. Work has begun there on appraisal drilling in Glafcus 2, where natural gas has been detected.

"With the appraisal drilling in Glafcus 2, the drilling program resumes in the EEZ of Cyprus," Energy Minister Natasa Pilides tweeted on Wednesday. "We worked with our licensees to ensure the safety of their activities amid the pandemic." The energy ministry said drilling con-

ducted by the drillship Stena Forth would be "monitored continuously" by officials. It is the first drilling operation off the Cyprus coast since the COVID-19 pandemic began in March 2020.

Despite Turkish opposition, Nicosia has gone ahead with its energy search. In February 2019, ExxonMobil and Qatar Energy discovered a huge natural gas reserve off Cyprus in Block 10, the island's largest find to date. It is estimated to hold between five and eight trillion cubic feet. Results of the new drill are expected by the end of February. Turkey had threatened to prevent ExxonMobil's search for oil and gas off Cyprus after Nicosia awarded it the rights to Block 5 earlier this month.

The Turkish foreign ministry said a sector of

the licensed area violates Turkey's continental shelf in the eastern Mediterranean. "Turkey will never allow any foreign country, company or ship to engage in hydrocarbon exploration activities in its maritime jurisdictions," the ministry said earlier in December. Ankara would "defend" its rights and those of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, it said. The breakaway TRNC, recognized only by Ankara, lays claim to energy resources discovered off its coast, insisting that the island's natural resources belong to both communities.

The eastern Mediterranean has become an energy hot spot, with significant natural gas finds for Cyprus, Israel and Egypt. Ankara was accused of "gunboat diplomacy" in February 2018 when the Turkish navy prevented a ship leased by Italy's ENI

from reaching its drilling destination in Cyprus's Block 3. The European Commission has urged Turkey to de-escalate and vowed to defend the interests of member states Greece and Cyprus.

Turkey was widely condemned for sending its own drillships into Cypriot waters for energy exploration, with the EU slapping sanctions on Ankara. During the first half of 2022, ENI and France's Total are expected to drill in their licensed blocks. Cyprus has been divided since Turkey invaded and occupied its northern third in 1974 in response to a Greek-engineered coup aiming to annex the island. Nicosia has pushed ahead with offshore energy exploration despite the collapse in 2017 of UN-brokered talks to end the country's decades-long division.—AFP

EU expects 17bn euros from carbon tax, other revenues

BRUSSELS: The EU said it could raise up to 17 billion euros (\$19 billion) annually through a carbon border tax, emissions trading and taxes on big corporations. Money from the three new revenue streams would go to pay down debt raised to cover a chunk of the bloc's 800-billion-euro coronavirus recovery fund, branded as NextGenerationEU, that is being shared between member states.

EU budget commissioner Johannes Hahn, who laid out details of the package in a media conference, said the projected 17-billion-euro windfall would only be realized in 2026-2030, when the measures reached "cruising speed". "This well-calibrated package will not only provide a steady stream of revenue used for the repayment of NextGenerationEU but also align the revenue side of the union budget with the union's policy goals: the green and digital transition," Hahn said. The European Parliament and EU member states have to sign off on the package for it to come into force.

The carbon border tax, the most controversial of the instruments, is projected to bring in one billion euros a year from 2026. It would be a levy on imports in targeted sectors coming from countries whose production lags the EU in terms of costly carbon reduction policies. The European Commission says the "carbon border adjustment mechanism" will be compliant with World Trade Organization rules. Another tax, on emissions trading within the EU, already exists but currently money from it goes into the national coffers of EU member states.

Under the package, 25 percent of money from that tax would be transferred to the EU budget, raising around 12 billion euros a year over 2026-2030. Finally, the tax on big corporations is money raised from an OECD deal validated by the G20 that sets a minimum 15 percent tax on the world's biggest companies. The Commission contemplates getting a 15-percent slice of what that tax raises in the EU, for an annual amount estimated at between 2.5 billion and 4.0 billion euros a year.—AFP



ITAGUAI: Aerial photo shows the Floating Production Storage and Offloading Vessel (FPSO) 'Cidade de Itaguaí' oil platform, operating at Santos basin exploration unit of Pre-Salt in Itaguaí. The auctioning of two pre-salt oil blocks in Brazil brought in 11.14 billion reais (nearly \$ 2 billion) with several foreign groups in the winning consortia, including Total and Shell.—AFP

EU details crackdown on shell companies

BRUSSELS: The European Commission has outlined planned tougher rules on shell companies alongside details of its implementation of an international agreement to impose a minimum 15-percent tax on big multinationals. The rules have the goal of "tightening the screws on shell companies - or letterbox companies - used as vehicles for tax avoidance or evasion", EU economy commissioner Paolo Gentiloni told a media conference. The plan needs final approval from the European Parliament and all 27 EU member states before coming into force with a target date of the start of 2024.

It consists of three benchmarks, looking at a company's passive income, whether most of its transactions are cross-border, and if its management and administration is outsourced. If all those

boxes are ticked, the firm would be considered a shell company subject to new tax reporting obligations and unable to benefit from tax breaks. Also, one EU country could require another EU country to carry out a tax audit of a firm with shell company characteristics.

Those characteristics include indications that a company gets more than three-quarters of its global revenue elsewhere than from its business activity, or if more than three-quarters of its assets are in expensive property or high-value dividends. The European Commission at the same time presented its proposed legislative text to impose a 15-percent minimum tax on corporations as worked out between OECD countries and then approved by the G20.

The EU intends to be the first jurisdiction to implement the agreement and the text provides common rules to be applied by all 27 nations in the bloc. "The directive we are putting forward will ensure that the new 15 percent minimum effective tax rate for large companies will be applied in a way that is fully compatible with EU law," Gentiloni said. Members of the European Parliament and EU countries also have to approve that directive.—AFP

Sports

Langer backs struggling Harris for Melbourne Ashes Test

MELBOURNE: Australia coach Justin Langer yesterday said struggling opener Marcus Harris will play in the Boxing Day Ashes Test at Melbourne, and backed fast bowler Mitchell Starc to recover from a rib niggle. Harris's Test career appeared in doubt after another failure in the day-night second Test at Adelaide this week, where he made just three and 23 as Australia thumped England by 275 runs. It followed just 12 from two innings in the home team's nine-wicket win at the first Test in Brisbane.

But Langer said he still had faith that the 29-year-old would succeed alongside David Warner, who has had multiple opening partners during his 10-year Test career. "He'll play in the Test, no worries about that," Langer said. "This is his home ground. He's played a lot at the MCG. "He hasn't made the runs he'd like to so far, but he dominates domestic cricket. So he knows that he knows how to play. "For him and for us we're hoping he plays well and gets a good partnership with Davey Warner in this Boxing Day Test match."

Finding a long-term partner for Warner has been a problem since Chris Rogers' retirement after the 2015 Ashes, with Harris averaging just 22.19 from his 12 Tests, and a top score of only 79. Langer said it was important for Harris's confidence to keep a settled line-up. "That's absolutely one of the most important things in life, knowing people have got your back," he said. "My experience, when Steve Waugh, Ricky Ponting, Mark Taylor or Allan Border said 'you're in the team', you feel like Superman. You feel like you're important to the team and Marcus Harris is important to the team."

With Harris a confirmed starter, Australia's only question mark is over their bowling unit. Captain Pat Cummins missed Adelaide after being a close contact of a COVID positive case, but is set to re-

turn. This is less certainty around Josh Hazlewood as he continues to recover from a side strain, while the fitness of Jhye Richardson and Michael Neser is being assessed. Left-armers Starc, who spearheaded the attack in Adelaide with match figures of 6-80, has a rib concern.

But Langer said he expected him to line up in Melbourne on Sunday as Australia look to clinch the five-Test series. "He should be fine, he's tough. If he's not right, we'll look at it, but at this stage there's no indication he won't be playing in the next Test match," said the coach, who praised Starc for leading from the front in the second Test. "I honestly thought Mitch Starc was almost the man of the match last game. "The way he controlled the tempo of the last game was a credit to him, particularly with Patty and Josh Hazlewood not playing, he did a fantastic job." Fast bowler Scott Boland has been added to the squad as injury cover.

Meanwhile, England are "hurting" but determined to rise to the challenge and claw their way back into the Ashes series against Australia, batsman Dawid Malan said yesterday. After slumping by nine wickets in Brisbane and then by 275 runs in Adelaide, the visitors will enter the Melbourne Cricket Ground cauldron for the third Test on Sunday needing to win. If they don't, the five-Test series is over with Australia retaining the urn as holders.

Malan said there had been frank discussions after Adelaide, where a first-innings batting collapse coupled with poor bowling and fielding cost England the match. "The boys are hurting after our performances in the last two games. They realize we haven't been good enough across all facets of the game," he told journalists. Speaking to all the guys, everyone is up for the challenge, everyone is really keen to face up to the Australians. The boys want to win, we want to win the series too. I know it's a long way to come but



ADELAIDE: Australian players celebrate the dismissal of England's batsman Jos Buttler during the second cricket Test match of the Ashes series at Adelaide Oval on Dec 20, 2021. —AFP

we have to do well and play our best cricket to get ourselves back in the series."

The odds are against them - the only instance of a team coming from 2-0 down to win the Ashes was Donald Bradman's Australia way back in 1936-37. Malan and captain Joe Root have been the only two English batsmen to excel, both hitting half-centuries in Brisbane and Adelaide, but unable to go on and make a big score. "Scoring 80's good, scoring 180's brilliant, so that's the goal," said the South African-born Malan, who has hit nine Test 50s but only converted one into a century.

He suggested that England's travails against a high-quality attack was also down to a lack of Test

experience on Australian pitches, with he and Root among the few to have played an away Ashes series before. "We are almost learning on the job in Test matches because a lot of the guys haven't played in Australia, so they are facing bowlers they've never faced before and getting used to the bounce out here," he said.

British media have suggested changes could be afoot for the Boxing Day Test with Zak Crawley tipped to replace either Rory Burns or Haseeb Hameed, who have both struggled for runs at the top of the order. Ollie Pope has also been disappointing at number six, with the experienced Jonny Bairstow a potential replacement. —AFP

USA cricketers defeat Ireland in T20 contest

LAUDERHILL, Florida: The United States scored a famous and deserved T20 cricket triumph over Ireland on Wednesday to get the most important series in their history off to the best possible start. A brilliant 65 from Gajanan Singh helped the hosts reach a competitive 188 for 6 in their 20 overs and some disciplined bowling from Saurabh Netravalkar and Ali Khan helped keep the Irish at bay to secure an opening victory in the five-game set, the first USA home series ever against a Test playing nation.

The United States, wanting to compete at the very highest level, will need more performances like this to stand them in good stead moving forward. Ireland had never lost to an American side coming into the clash, thrashing them four times in T20 World Cup qualifier tournaments from 2010 to 2015. But the visitors were distinctly second best in Florida as the US notched their best-ever win against a Test playing nation in the Twenty20 format.

"This is a good start," spinner Nisarg Patel, who bowled well in taking 2-27, told AFP. "We've been playing well for the last year and a half. Winning against bigger teams like Ireland will send out a good message across the country and the world. "Hopefully we can keep it going." It was the first of five games - two T20s and three one day internationals - between the sides, with Ireland's arrival in the United States complicated by some COVID-19 cases in the camp.

Reaching the World Cup in either format, as well as possibly compet-

ing in the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics, remains the US aim while moves are well underway to establish an American professional competition, Major League Cricket, within the next two years. Young players are also being produced, with 18-year-old Ritwik Behera, born in Rockville, Maryland, and New Jersey native Yasir Mohammad the only players in the starting XI at the Broward County Stadium who were born in the United States. Skipper Patel's side were desperate to make a strong start and show the lively couple of hundred fans in attendance as well as the International Cricket Council (ICC), the sport's global governing body, the team was deserving of future high-profile series.

Early stages against a new look Ireland side aiming to bounce back from a disappointing T20 World Cup showing were a struggle for the US team, which slumped to 16 for four quickly, which included losing captain Patel to the second ball of the match. But a brilliant fifth-wicket stand between Singh and Sushant Modani helped turn the tide for the hosts. Their partnership of 110 saw Singh lay into a Irish bowling attack that seemed to alarmingly wilt in the Florida sun.

Singh smacked the first six of the match in the 12th over - a sign of just how slow the US came out of the blocks - and proceeded to hit four more maximums in a splendid, crucial innings of 65. Modani weighed in with an equally important 50 before Marty Kain, one of five debutants for the home side, crushed a quick-fire 39 from only 15 balls to reach a very competitive target of 188 for six from their 20 overs.

Ireland's bowling at the death was woeful and their batting response suffered the worst possible start when captain Andy Balbirnie was dismissed in just the second over. A breezy 31 from 15 balls from opener Paul Stirling, however, steadied the ship and at the halfway point, Ireland were 74 for three and a close finish beckoned. —AFP

Pak opener Abid Ali on road to recovery after heart scare

KARACHI: Pakistan Test opener Abid Ali faces a long road to recovery following surgery after he was forced off the field with chest pain during a domestic match, officials said yesterday. The 34-year-old fell ill Tuesday while batting for Central Punjab in a Quaid-e-Azam Trophy match in Karachi and was rushed to a hospital. He underwent two angioplasty procedures after being diagnosed with Acute Coronary Syndrome, a Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) statement said.

"Abid has commenced rehabilitation... did light walking in the morning without showing any discomfort," it said, adding he is likely to be discharged next week. The stocky Abid made headlines in December 2019 when he became the first batsman to hit a century on debut at both Test and one-day international levels. His ODI hundred came against Australia in Dubai in March 2019, while the Test century was scored against Sri Lanka at Rawalpindi nine months later. —AFP

Sports

Joe Johnson back in NBA at 40 to help COVID-hit Celtics win

WASHINGTON: Jaylen Brown and Jayson Tatum sparked the Boston Celtics over Cleveland on Wednesday, but it was the return of their new 40-year-old teammate Joe Johnson that stole the show. Brown scored 34 points to lead the Celtics past the visiting Cavaliers 111-101 while Tatum added 18 and Robert Williams III had 21 points and 11 rebounds.

With the Celtics having seven players in Covid-19 protocols, they turned to 17-year NBA veteran Johnson - who hadn't played in the league since 2018 - and 15-year NBA guard C.J. Miles to fill out the roster and provide some wisdom to Boston's current superstars. "Adding some older voices can't hurt," Brown said. "It can only help."

Johnson, who was drafted 10th overall by the Celtics in the 2001 NBA Draft, managed only two points in two minutes on the court but received huge applause for his comeback efforts. "It's great to be back here 20 years later. It has been amazing to me. Still surreal but a lot of fun," Johnson said. "I really appreciate these Celtics fans. It was exciting to get that kind of reaction. It's special."

Johnson was a seven-time All-Star who averaged 16.0 points in 1,276 prior games with Boston, Atlanta, Phoenix, Brooklyn, Miami, Utah and Houston. He sees his role as advising Brown and Tatum as much as filling out the roster. "Staying in their ear, making sure they know what they have to do

for us to be victorious night in and night out," Johnson said.

Jrue Holiday scored 24 points and passed off 10 assists while Khris Middleton added 23 points as the reigning NBA champion Milwaukee Bucks defeated visiting Houston 126-106. The Bucks improved to 20-13, third in the Eastern Conference, despite the lack of Greek superstar Giannis Antetokounmpo, who is in the NBA's Covid-19 health and safety protocols. Christian Wood had 20 points and 11 rebounds to lead the Rockets.

German forward Franz Wagner scored 25 points and Gary Harris added 17 to spark the Orlando Magic over Atlanta 104-98, lifting the NBA's second-worst club to 7-25 with a fifth road victory. Orlando's Robin Lopez scored 10 points and passed out a career-high 11 assists. The Hawks, led by 36 points from Cam Reddish, fell to 11th in the Eastern Conference at 14-16. John Collins added 28 points and 12 rebounds for Atlanta.

Triple double for Shai

Shai Gilgeous-Alexander delivered the second triple double of his NBA career with 27 points, 11 rebounds and 12 assists to ignite the Oklahoma City Thunder over visiting Denver 108-94. Darius Bazley came off the bench to score 17 points and grab 11 rebounds for the Thunder, who had six double-figure scorers,



BOSTON: Joe Johnson of the Boston Celtics leaves the court after the game against the Cleveland Cavaliers on Wednesday at the TD Garden. —AFP

while Nikola Jokic led the Nuggets with 13 points. Eric Bledsoe scored 19 points while Paul George and Spanish big man Serge Ibaka each added 17 as the Los Angeles Clippers collected a 105-89 victory at Sacramento.

Tyrese Haliburton led the host Kings with 22 points and 13 assists. Toronto's contest at Chicago was postponed because the visiting Raptors could not field the minimum eight players needed to compete due to COVID-19 health and safety protocols. —AFP

Irish rugby great Murray signs contract extension

DUBLIN: Conor Murray said he is delighted to be able to "continue living this dream" of playing for Munster and Ireland after the scrum-half signed a contract extension with country and province taking him up to July 2024 yesterday. The 32-year-old formed one of the most feared half-back partnerships in Test rugby with Ireland skipper Johnny Sexton.

However, the 92-times capped Murray lost his first choice spot to Leinster's New Zealand-born scrum-half Jamison Gibson-Park for the November Test victories over Japan and New Zealand. "I'm delighted and grateful to be able to continue living this dream of playing here in Ireland," Murray said in an Irish Rugby Football Union statement.

"With my home province Munster and the national squad, I truly believe there's huge potential of success and that there will be many more big days ahead." David Nucifora, the IRFU Performance Director, said Murray is as big an influence off the pitch as he is on it especially for the less experienced players.

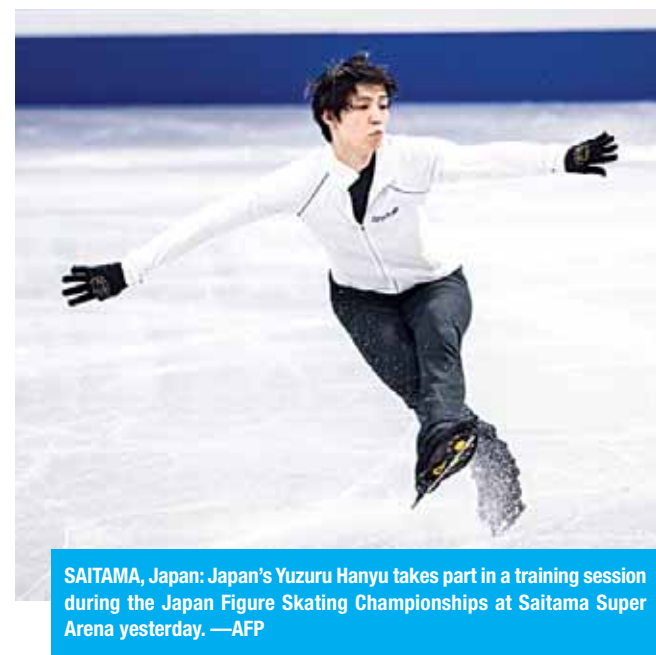
"Conor has had some challenges in the past few seasons but has put some niggling injuries behind him to play a central role with Munster, Ireland and the Lions," said Nucifora. "He is a popular figure in every squad he is involved in and adds a huge amount of experience and value to younger players coming through." —AFP

Hanyu eyes skating first with Beijing Olympics in view

SAITAMA, Japan: Yuzuru Hanyu yesterday gave his clearest indication yet that he intends to defend his figure-skating title at the Beijing Olympics and said he will attempt a quadruple axel at this week's Japan national championships. The Japanese star came close to nailing the legendary jump in practice yesterday, allaying fears about his fitness for February's Games after an ankle injury forced him to miss the entire Grand Prix season. The quad axel has never been successfully landed before in competition and is considered the holy grail of men's figure skating.

The 27-year-old Hanyu, who won Games gold in 2014 and 2018, is determined to do it in Sunday's free skate at the Japanese nationals—and may attempt it again at the Beijing Games. Hanyu has never explicitly stated that he intends to compete in Beijing, but he told reporters yesterday: "If I land the jump here it might make me complacent, but I won't give up trying it. "I think Beijing might be the end point of this, so I've come here fully resolved to meet it head-on."

Hanyu has been out of action since last month after injuring his right ankle ligaments in a fall in practice, and skipped official practice on Wednesday. But he came back with all guns blazing a day later, launching himself into the quad axel near the end of the session. He appeared to land cleanly on one foot, but said later that he felt he had under-rotated by a whisker. "Today was about creating the axel - I wasn't focusing so much on the rotations," he said. "I did what I set



SAITAMA, Japan: Japan's Yuzuru Hanyu takes part in a training session during the Japan Figure Skating Championships at Saitama Super Arena yesterday. —AFP

out to do today."

Hanyu is looking to lay down a marker this week in Saitama, north of Tokyo, in his first competitive appearance since April. Hanyu will face stiff competition from 18-year-old Yuma Kagiyama, the current world number one and winner of two Grand Prix titles this season. The 2018 Pyeongchang Games silver medalist Shoma Uno, who won the NHK Trophy in November, is also among the favorites. The men's short program is set for today, with the free skate on Sunday. The Beijing Olympics start on February 4. —AFP

Sports

Ahly edge Raja for dramatic CAF Super Cup victory

AL-RAYYAN, Qatar: Taher Mohamed and Akram Tawfik played key roles as Al Ahly of Egypt edged Raja Casablanca of Morocco 6-5 on penalties after a 1-1 draw to win a CAF Super Cup thriller in Qatar on Wednesday. Mohamed levelled during the final minute of regular time in Al Rayyan, firing a low shot into the corner of the net after being set up by South African Percy Tau.

Raja had led from the 13th minute when an Abdelilah Madkour shot deflected off Yassir Ibrahim into the net at the Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium, one of eight 2022 World Cup venues. In a superb exhibition of penalty taking, the clubs converted five each to send the shootout to sudden death. Tawfik nudged Ahly ahead for a sixth time with a kick that gave Raja goalkeeper Anas Zniti no chance before a large crowd in the 45,000-capacity ground.

Madkour had to score to keep Raja in contention, but he blazed his shot over the crossbar

and Ahly celebrated a record-extending eighth Super Cup success. "My team showed wonderful spirit - they never accepted that defeat was inevitable," said South Africa-born Ahly coach Pitso Mosimane. Mosimane, who joined Ahly in 2019 from Pretoria club Mamelodi Sundowns, has won six CAF club titles, two less than record-holder Manuel Jose, the Portuguese who had two spells in charge of Ahly.

In the other dugout was Belgian Marc Wilmots, who joined Raja last month and will be hoping for a more successful second stint in Africa after lasting just six months as coach of the Ivory Coast. The nail-biting success confirmed Ahly as the dominant force in Africa with 23 titles - 10 in the CAF Champions League, eight in the Super Cup, four in the Cup Winners Cup and one in the Confederation Cup. TP Mazembe from the Democratic Republic of Congo and another Egyptian club, Zamalek, share second place with 11 titles each. — AFP



AL-RAYYAN, Qatar: Ahly players celebrate winning the CAF Super Cup football match between Egypt's Al-Ahly and Morocco's Raja Club Athletic (Raja Casablanca) at the Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium on Wednesday. — AFP

Simeone joins stellar cast at helm of top-level club

PARIS: Diego Simeone celebrates 10 years in charge of Atletico Madrid yesterday, an increasingly rare accomplishment in the febrile arena of top level football management. The feat is even more remarkable given Atletico's track record before the Argentine's arrival in 2011. The Spanish side's previous owner, Jesus Gil, went through 37 coaches in his 16 years in charge.

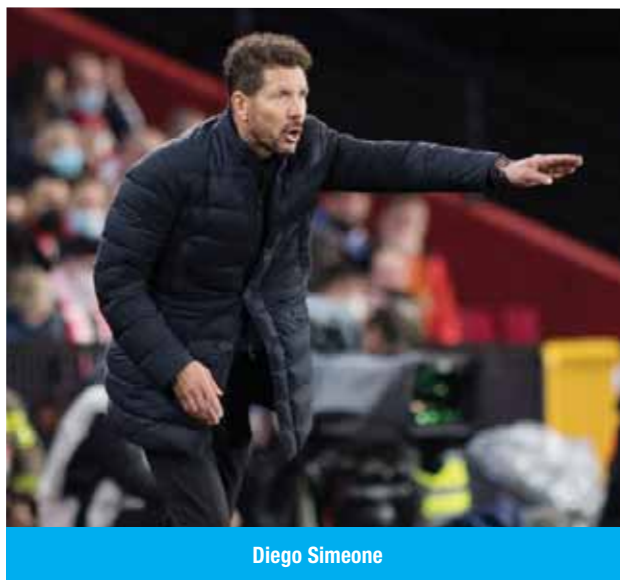
During the past decade Simeone has awoken a sleeping giant to upset the domestic duopoly of Real Madrid and Barcelona, guiding Atletico to two league titles, two Europa Leagues and a Copa del Rey as well as reaching the Champions League final twice. AFP Sports picks out five other managers who have spent 10 years or more at the same club.

Guy Roux - Auxerre (36 years five months 29 days)

"I am not an extra-terrestrial," commented Roux about his longevity in the Auxerre dug-out with the second of his three spells at the club stretching from 1964-2000. Roux turned Auxerre into a force in French football, peaking with the Ligue 1 title in the 1995/96 season. Renowned also for developing young players careers, including Eric Cantona and Basile Boli, he would later bemoan how managers have become more expendable in the modern game. "Clubs do not give people time to construct something. The first ill wind and the manager is gone."

Alex Ferguson - Manchester United (26 years six months 13 days)

Ferguson's era at Old Trafford got off to an inauspicious start and he could easily have been sacked without lifting any silverware but for an FA Cup third round win at Nottingham Forest in January 1990 that proved the launch-pad for decades of success. The Scot would go on to win 13 Premier League titles as United became the dominant force in English football and in Ferguson's own words knocked Liverpool "off their perch" as the club with most English league titles.



Diego Simeone

Otto Rehhagel - Werder Bremen (14 years, two months and 28 days)

Rehhagel turned Werder Bremen into genuine title contenders and delivered two Bundesliga crowns and also lifted the 1992 European Cup Winners Cup. 'King Otto' nurtured the talents of the likes of Rudi Voller, Karl-Heinz Riedle and Mario Basler and the side's exploits became known as 'the wonders of the Weser'. "If I had listened to journalists, I would have left before the (1988) championship. But I only listen to my wife and President Dr. (Franz) Bohmert," he commented in 1991.

Miguel Munoz - Real Madrid (13 years, eight months 29 days)

Munoz was given the unenviable task of rebuilding Real's empire after the side containing Ferenc Puskas and Alfredo di Stefano that won the first five European Cups went passed their prime. The former midfielder was also part of those sides and became the first man to win Europe's showpiece club competition as a player and a coach on top of nine league crowns. Even that legacy of success did not stop the demanding Madrid crowd calling for his head once Barcelona gained the upper hand in the mid-1970s. —AFP

China says virus infections certain in Olympics bubble

BEIJING: Chinese officials said yesterday they were ready for coronavirus outbreaks inside the Winter Olympics bubble, with plans in place to send symptomatic athletes to designated Beijing hospitals. February's Olympics are set to be the most restrictive mass sporting event since the pandemic began, with international spectators banned and all participants required to stay inside a closed-loop system.

"There will definitely be infections and there could be a chance of a small-scale cluster outbreak happening," said Beijing Olympics virus control official Huang Chun at a briefing, adding that the large number of people involved will have a "very high risk of transmission". "There will be a certain number of positive cases" another organizing committee official, Han Zirong, said. "This is a high probability event."

China - where COVID-19 was first detected - has slowed new cases to a trickle, implementing a strict "zero-Covid" strategy involving tight border restrictions, targeted lockdowns, lengthy quarantines and population tracing technology. Even a single case can lead to a swift imposition of curbs, and officials deemed to have failed at controlling COVID-19 are often sacked.

Hosting a high number of foreigners for the Winter Olympics remains a high-risk endeavor for China's leaders. In addition to mandatory vaccinations before landing in China, all athletes and personnel inside the bubble must undergo daily virus testing and health monitoring. Officials strongly encouraged athletes to get a booster jab due to the global spread of the Omicron variant.

They also provided guidelines for the limited number of domestic spectators. "We encourage clapping to encourage athletes and don't recommend (spectators) take their masks off to sing or shout," Han said. Athletes who test positive for the virus cannot participate in the Games. Asymptomatic patients will be sent to on-site quarantine facilities and patients with symptoms will be sent to hospitals in Beijing and Zhangjiakou designated for treating COVID-19 patients, said Huang. — AFP

Sports

Milan keep pace with leaders Inter, Napoli stunned by Spezia

MILAN: AC Milan stayed in touch with the Serie A summit on Wednesday, a 4-2 win at Empoli moving them into second after Napoli's shock 1-0 home defeat to struggling Spezia. Stefano Pioli's side stayed four points behind city rivals and league leaders Inter Milan, who were 1-0 winners over Torino, heading into the winter break thanks to Franck Kessie's first-half brace and further goals from Alessandro Florenzi and Theo Hernandez.

The win allowed Milan to reclaim second spot from Napoli after their controversial loss at the hands of Luciano Spalletti's team at the weekend and leaves the seven-time European champions as the principle pretenders to Inter's Serie A crown. "Every win is worth three points but there are moments in the season when certain victories have a bigger impact than others and tonight was one of them so I'm very happy," said Pioli to DAZN.

Milan are three points ahead of third-placed Napoli who, still afflicted by a host of absences, were sunk by a Juan Jesus own goal in the 37th minute which ended Spezia's run of six matches without a win and moves them five points away from the relegation zone in 17th.

Milan back on track

A fine team display in Tuscany meanwhile blew away some of the dark clouds hovering over Milan following their humiliating flop in the Champions League and just two wins in their

previous seven league matches which allowed red-hot Inter to take the initiative in the title race. Kessie opened the scoring with a first-time strike from Olivier Giroud's lay-off in the 12th minute but it looked like it would be another uncomfortable night for Milan when Nedim Bajrami levelled only six minutes later.

However Kessie, who was denied a last-gasp equaliser against Napoli by VAR on Sunday, reestablished the away side's lead shortly before the break with a low drive from a tight angle which fizzed between Guglielmo Vicario's legs. Two quick-fire strikes midway through the second ensured the points for Milan, with Florenzi scoring his first Rossoneri goal from a 63rd-minute free-kick before Hernandez lashed home the fourth from close range. Andrea Pinamonti's penalty six minutes from the end made no difference to the result.

Merry Christmas for Inter

Already ensured of first place over the winter break, which starts yesterday and ends on Jan 6, Inter claimed victory thanks to Denzel Dumfries' winner on the half hour mark at the San Siro. Dutch wing-back Dumfries met Edin Dzeko's pass with a calmly-placed finish after a rapid break, making sure it would be a happy Christmas for the blue-and-black half of Milan. Inter have won seven league games on the bounce, collected six straight clean sheets and are by some distance Serie A's top scorers with 49 goals.



MILAN: (From left) Torino's Swiss defender Ricardo Rodriguez, Inter Milan's Uruguayan midfielder Matias Vecino and Torino's Nigerian defender Ola Aina go for the ball during the Italian Serie A match on Wednesday at the Giuseppe-Meazza (San Siro) stadium. — AFP

"We still have a long road full of obstacles ahead of us," said coach Simone Inzaghi to DAZN of Inter's title push. "We'll take the good period we're going through but from the very beginning there was confidence here." Roma missed the chance to close the gap on the Champions League places after a 1-1 draw with Sampdoria at the Stadio Olimpico.

Jose Mourinho's side thought they were set to move four points behind fourth-placed Atalanta when Eldor Shomurodov drilled home the opener in the 72nd minute. But Manolo Gabbiadini snatched a point with his fifth goal in as many matches eight minutes later to move Samp nine clear of the relegation zone and leave Roma sixth on 32 points. — AFP

Inter in driver's seat in title tussle as scandals bubble

MILAN: Inter Milan have stolen a march in the Serie A title race as the champions reach the halfway point of the campaign in pole position with archrivals Juventus out in the cold. Under Antonio Conte Inter broke almost a decade of Juve dominance when they claimed their 19th league championship last season and have defied expectations following a turbulent summer to hold onto top spot at Christmas.

With key figures in that triumph, Romelu Lukaku, Achraf Hakimi and Conte all gone, and Christian Eriksen now officially no longer a Serie A player, few expected Inter to retain their crown under new boss Simone Inzaghi while the return of Massimiliano Allegri at Juve was seen as a sign of intent to take the crown back to Turin. However Cristiano Ronaldo then fled to England and in the absence of the superstar's goals the obvious flaws in the Old Lady's squad were exposed, to the point that they now sit in fifth and 12 points off pacesetters Inter, with the best they can realistically hope for a spot in the Champions League.

Meanwhile what looked like a tight group of pretenders gunning for their own chance at glory, has begun to fall away just as Inter got motoring. Two weeks ago four points was all that separated then-leaders AC Milan, Inter, Napoli and Atalanta in the top four, but straight home defeats to Empoli and Spezia have left Napoli seven off the pace, one less than dark horses Atalanta. — AFP

Real round off year on a high as Atletico suffering continues

BILBAO: Karim Benzema scored the goals in Real Madrid's 2-1 win at Athletic Bilbao on Wednesday to send Carlo Ancelotti's side into the winter break eight

points clear atop La Liga. As Real ended the year with a bang, city rivals and defending champions Atletico Madrid suffered their fourth straight defeat, a 2-1



BILBAO: Real Madrid's French forward Karim Benzema (center) celebrates with Real Madrid's French midfielder Eduardo Camavinga and Real Madrid's French defender Ferland Mendy after scoring his team's first goal during the Spanish league football match between Athletic Club Bilbao and Real Madrid CF at the San Mames stadium on Wednesday. — AFP

reverse at Granada, to leave them fifth but a yawning 17 points adrift.

Benzema ultimately put the fixture out of reach of Real's Basque hosts in a matter of minutes, Oihan Sancet pulling one back with his speedy 10th minute reply which hit the woodwork before evading Thibaut Courtois. Benzema's 14th and 15th goals of the season consolidated his position at the top of the league's goalscoring chart.

Earlier Atletico's shaky defense of their La Liga crown took another big hit with injured duo Antoine Griezmann and Stefan Savic absent. Atletico would be more than happy to swap trajectories with Granada for whom this was a third consecutive win in front of their home fans and their fifth game without loss.

This was certainly not how Diego Simeone envisaged the night before his 10th year anniversary in charge at Atletico. What's more his Portuguese striker Joao Felix had Granada on the backfoot in the second minute when his low angled shot got the better of his fellow countryman Luis Maximiano. Venezuelan forward Darwin Machis levelled in the 17th minute. Felix had a header arguably harshly disallowed as the first half drew to a close with Jorge Molina grabbing the winner after the hour mark for Granada. — AFP

Sports

Liverpool fight back to beat Leicester as Spurs, Chelsea reach League Cup semis

LIVERPOOL: Liverpool came from two goals down to beat Leicester on penalties after a pulsating League Cup quarterfinal ended 3-3 at Anfield as Tottenham and Chelsea also made the semifinals on Wednesday. Spurs were 2-1 winners over West Ham and will face Chelsea in the last four after they needed two late goals to see off Brentford 2-0. Liverpool will take on Arsenal in the semifinals over two legs in January.

All three matches went ahead in front of full crowds despite the worrying rise of coronavirus case numbers that had seen last weekend's Premier League schedule decimated by call offs. Leicester's previous two fixtures had been called off due to a combination of a coronavirus outbreak in the squad and a mounting injury list.

However, Brendan Rodgers was able to name a close to full strength side on his return to Anfield and it showed early on against a much-changed Liverpool. Jamie Vardy struck twice inside the first 13 minutes as he angled a drive across Caoimhin Kelleher and then tapped in Patson Daka's pass from close range. Jurgen Klopp had made 10 changes from the side that drew 2-2 at Tottenham on Sunday with Liverpool also depleted by four positive COVID cases.

However, it was one of their more experienced starters who got them back in the game as Alex Oxlade-Chamberlain smashed home

from the edge of the area. Leicester restored their two-goal cushion before half-time thanks to James Maddison's piledriver from 30 yards that flew past Kelleher. Klopp introduced three first-team regulars at half-time and one of them, Diogo Jota, gave Liverpool life again 22 minutes from time.

Kasper Schmeichel then needed to produce a stunning save to deny the Portuguese a second, but Leicester still could not hold out as Takumi Minamino sent the game to penalties in the fifth minute of stoppage time. Minamino then missed with the chance to win the tie from the spot in the shootout, but Kelleher saved from Luke Thomas and Ryan Bertrand before Jota fired home the winning penalty.

Bergwijn ends goal drought

Tottenham boss Antonio Conte showed his determination to end the club's 13-year trophy drought as soon as possible as he named Harry Kane among a strong starting line-up. But it was the other two of Spurs' front three who were on target in north London. Steven Bergwijn scored his first goal of the season after two clever one-twos with Pierre Emile Hojbjerg.

Tottenham's lead lasted just three minutes as West Ham seized upon Eric Dier's slack pass and Jarrod Bowen fired low past Hugo Lloris. Two



LIVERPOOL: Liverpool's Portuguese striker Diogo Jota scores the final penalty past Leicester City's Danish goalkeeper Kasper Schmeichel in the shootout after the English League Cup quarterfinal at Anfield on Wednesday. —AFP

minutes later it was 2-1 as Bergwijn this time turned provider for Moura to prod home from close range. "In England it's very difficult to win something," said Conte, who will come up against his old club in the last four. "It's good for Tottenham to reach the semi-finals of this competition. You can see the names of these teams that have reached the semi-finals - Liverpool, Chelsea and Arsenal with us - so every side wants to try to lift this trophy."

Chelsea boss Thomas Tuchel handed debuts

to academy prospects Harvey Vale, Jude Soonsup-Bell and Xavier Simons with the Blues short of seven players due to a COVID outbreak. However, Tuchel emptied his bench in the second half with the introduction of N'Golo Kante, Mason Mount, Christian Pulisic, Reece James and Jorginho. And that extra quality made the difference as Pontus Jansson turned James' cross into his own net 10 minutes from time. Jorginho then stroked home a penalty after Pulisic had been upended in the box. —AFP

Celtic held by COVID-hit St Mirren

GLASGOW: Celtic suffered a hangover from lifting the Scottish League Cup as the Hoops were held 0-0 by a St Mirren squad decimated by coronavirus infections on Wednesday. The Saints had a request for the game to be postponed rejected by the Scottish Professional Football Leagues (SPFL) with 11 players unavailable due to positive cases or close contact rules. However, manager Jim Goodwin was able to name a side with just four changes from their last outing with academy players making up the bench.

"This is the best point this club have had for a hell of a long time," said Goodwin. Celtic were without top scorer Kyogo Furuhashi, who scored twice in Sunday's League Cup final over Hibernian, as the Japanese continues to nurse a hamstring strain. His presence was badly missed as a Celtic side without a recognized striker struggled to break down the mass ranks of the home side's defense.

Stand-in St. Mirren goalkeeper Dean Lyness saved from Micky Johnson and Nir Bitton before half-time. Johnson had an effort cleared off the line and Celtic captain Callum McGregor fired just wide in the second half. But two costly dropped points for Ange Postecoglou's men means they reach the halfway point of the league season six points behind Rangers.

There will only be one more match for both sides this year after the SPFL decided to bring forward the planned winter break by a week due to new Covid restrictions on crowds. Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon said on Tuesday that crowds at outdoor public events would be capped at 500 from December 26 for "up to three weeks". All six matches scheduled for Boxing Day will still go ahead despite the lack of supporters, but the following two rounds

Ramos sent off as PSG snatch draw with Lorient

PARIS: Sergio Ramos was sent off as Paris Saint-Germain salvaged a 1-1 draw away at Ligue 1 strugglers Lorient thanks to Mauro Icardi's injury-time equalizer on Wednesday. In their final outing of 2021, PSG trailed in Brittany to Thomas Monconduit's thunderous first-half strike for Lorient until Icardi rescued a point with a header in the 91st minute.

Ramos had come off the bench at the start of the second half for just his third appearance since moving to France from Real Madrid in the close season, but he was dismissed four minutes from time after receiving a second yellow card. PSG, with top scorer Kylian Mbappe and playmaker Marco Verratti both missing due to suspension and Neymar still injured, produced another worryingly sub-standard performance that will put the focus on coach Mauricio Pochettino. The Argentine, approaching the first anniversary of his appointment, has struggled to get the very best out of PSG's array of superstar players, although they sit a huge 13 points clear of their nearest challengers Nice and Marseille at the French season's halfway stage. The Parisians, who will play Real Madrid in the last 16 of the Champions League, were lucky to avoid defeat against a Lorient side who had lost their last eight matches and had not won a game in three months.

Nice, Marseille lead chasing pack

Nigerian striker Terem Moffi notably squandered a great chance on an early breakaway for Lorient, seeing his effort saved by Keylor Navas in the PSG goal. Lionel Messi, who still has just one Ligue 1 goal, struck the post with a volleyed effort midway through the first half and Lorient went ahead five minutes before the interval as Enzo Le Fee teed up Monconduit to smash a shot into the top-right corner from just outside the box.

Armand Lauriente was denied by Navas on the hour mark, although Angel Di Maria blazed a great chance over the bar at the other end just before



LORIENT, France: Paris Saint-Germain's Argentinian forward Lionel Messi fights for the ball with Lorient's French goalkeeper Paul Nardi during the French L1 match at the Yves Allainmat-Le Moustoir Stadium on Wednesday. —AFP

that after being set up by Messi. Lorient looked set to hold on for a precious victory in their fight to avoid relegation after Ramos was shown a second yellow for a blatant bodycheck on Moffi. But then, in the first minute of added time, Achraf Hakimi held up a cross from the right and Icardi headed in.

Nice climbed up to second place, above Marseille on goal difference, after coming from behind to win 2-1 at home to Lens, with Mario Lemina and Justin Kluivert scoring their goals after Arnaud Kalimuendo had put the away side ahead. Marseille needed a Dimitri Payet penalty in the eighth minute of injury time to draw 1-1 at home to Reims. Rennes are fourth despite losing 2-1 away at Monaco, with Wissam Ben Yedder's penalty cancelling out Martin Terrier's opener for the away team before German international Kevin Volland scored the winner. Montpellier are fifth after hammering Angers 4-1, while Ligue 1's leading scorer Jonathan David scored a late winner for his 12th of the season as Lille came from behind to beat Bordeaux 3-2 away. Struggling Lyon were held 1-1 at home by Metz, and Clermont's game against Strasbourg was called off at the last minute due to fog. —AFP

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Dramatic CAF Super Cup victory for Ahly

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