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NOTICE TO OUR READERS

Happy New Year to our readers! Kuwait Times will not publish its print edition on January 2, 2022, but readers can stay informed with breaking news and information via KuwaitTimes.net and our digital media channels on Instagram, Twitter and Facebook: @KuwaitTimes. Also, from 2022, Kuwait Times on Fridays will be published as a regular broadsheet and not as a tabloid. However, we hope to be back soon with an exciting new format with all the features that you loved in Friday Times!



Jahra Nature Reserve: An oasis of calm

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KUWAIT: Kuwait Times staff pose for a group picture.

Kuwait Times staff welcome 2022

By Nawara Fattahova

With the arrival of the New Year, people wish for things they hope will come true. They make resolutions for things they want to work on to improve their lives. Sometimes they succeed in achieving their resolutions, while in many cases they fail to do so. Like every year, Kuwait Times staff share our resolutions for 2022 with our readers.

Nawara: I fulfilled most of my old resolutions, but I certainly didn't fulfill last year's resolution of travelling every month in 2021 to compensate for my lack of travelling in 2020 due to the pandemic. So my New Year's resolution for 2022 will again be to travel every month to compensate for the previous two years, as I only travelled once in 2021. I will also work hard on realizing my dream of fashion designing.

Marilyn: My resolution for 2022 is to travel around the world.

Mustafa: I hope that in 2022, we will finally get back to normal life. I wish to travel without

fear of getting stuck abroad, and I hope that the pandemic will end soon.

Islam: This year my resolution is to improve my career and life in general. I also aim to help my son finish his university studies in 2022.

Zakir: In 2022, I hope to change my habits to awake early. I will try to work harder and double my income. I will also try to start walking more, exercise and take more care of myself.

Tony: My New Year's resolution is that the world in 2022 should be free from any new pandemic. This year I will try to be at my best and help in whatever way I can to bring smiles on people's faces.

Sajeev: I won't even make a wild guess as to what 2022 holds for me, given the unpleasant experiences I had in the last two years. The world has become so unpredictable. Although I am an avid traveler, I haven't traveled in the last two years. I earnestly hope that

I can travel out of the country, at least to a couple of places, in 2022. I will make serious efforts to fulfill this resolution. The odds are that I may be able to make it.

Chidi: I want to be a blessing to others and promote peace, love, equity and unity. There will be need to pray more and worry less. Above all, I would like to be a good ambassador of Christ.

Shakir: I hope to travel somewhere - anywhere! Also aiming to be punctual and diligent in everything I do. Looking forward to achieving all my personal and professional goals.

Ben: Goodwill and peace to mankind! I still want to be a billionaire, although it was my resolution last year, the year before and maybe for the past 10 years now. Until I fulfill this dream and fly to the moon, I will never stop dreaming.

Abdullatif: I'm an optimist by nature, and my resolution this year is to try and help the community around me to understand and

practice tolerance towards all, as our great faith asks us to do. Peace be upon all.

Sreenu: I pray to God that this year the world will be free from any kind of pandemic, and hope people heal from its devastating effects. I also wish to travel to my hometown, as I couldn't for two years due to the pandemic. By God's grace, I hope to help a few affected people in my city as much as I can.

Hasan: I strongly believe that fate plays a negative role in all my New Year resolutions. So this year, I want to be the worst husband and hopefully a bad father as well. My last year's resolution was to not get married.

Ahmad: I would like to get a new phone, and hopefully travel if the COVID-19 situation permits. Speaking of which, I must not forget to add taking the fourth dose of the COVID vaccine!

Sabastian: My New Year's resolution is to focus on my health - eat healthy and exercise.

Local

News in brief

Kuwait sets PCR test price at KD 9 max

KUWAIT: The Ministry of Health announced yesterday setting a maximum price of KD 9 for a PCR test in Kuwait starting from January 2, 2022. Health authorities had in September reduced a PCR test's cost to a maximum of KD 14, after it had previously reached as high as KD 20 per test.

Kuwait lists 399 COVID-19 cases

KUWAIT: Kuwait's Health Ministry on Wednesday said that 399 people tested positive for COVID-19 in the past 24 hours, taking the total to 416,077. The recoveries rose by 62 to 411,504, while death toll from the pandemic remained unchanged at 2,468, the Ministry's Spokesman Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad said. There were four cases in ICUs in addition to 21 patients at COVID-19 wards, while active cases reached 2,105 as of Wednesday, he noted. Medical swabs conducted over the same period hit 20,527, raising the total to 5.9 million, Dr Sanad made clear.

No drones without permission, DGCA warns

KUWAIT: The Directorate General of Civil Aviation sent a reminder to obtain permission from relevant authorities in order to use drones in Kuwait. Failure to take permission from DGCA and other state departments such as the Interior Ministry can lead the user to face legal action, it warned in a statement on Thursday.

Ultra gasoline price increased to 200 fils

KUWAIT: Kuwait National Petroleum Company announced increasing the ultra (98 octane) gasoline price from 180 fils per liter to 200 fils per liter, starting from tomorrow. All other types of gasoline remain at the same price: 85 fils per liter for premium and 105 fils per liter for super. Kuwait had first increased the ultra gas price from 165 fils per liter to 175 in July, before increasing it again to 180 in October. The price is reviewed every three months.

Desert goers urged to avoid foreign objects

KUWAIT: The interior ministry sent a security warning on Thursday urging people to avoid coming near any foreign object they may come across while in the desert. Rain may expose foreign objects such as explosives buried in the sand, the ministry explained, urging people camping or going on picnics to immediately call the emergency number (112) if they see any suspicious foreign object.

Kuwait oil price up 47 cents to \$79.07 pb

KUWAIT: The price of Kuwaiti crude oil went up Wednesday by 47 cents to \$79.07 per barrel (pb), compared with \$78.60 pb on the day before, Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) said yesterday. Globally, Brent crude was up by 29 cents to \$79.23 pb and West Texas Intermediate also went up by 58 cents to \$76.56 pb. — KUNA

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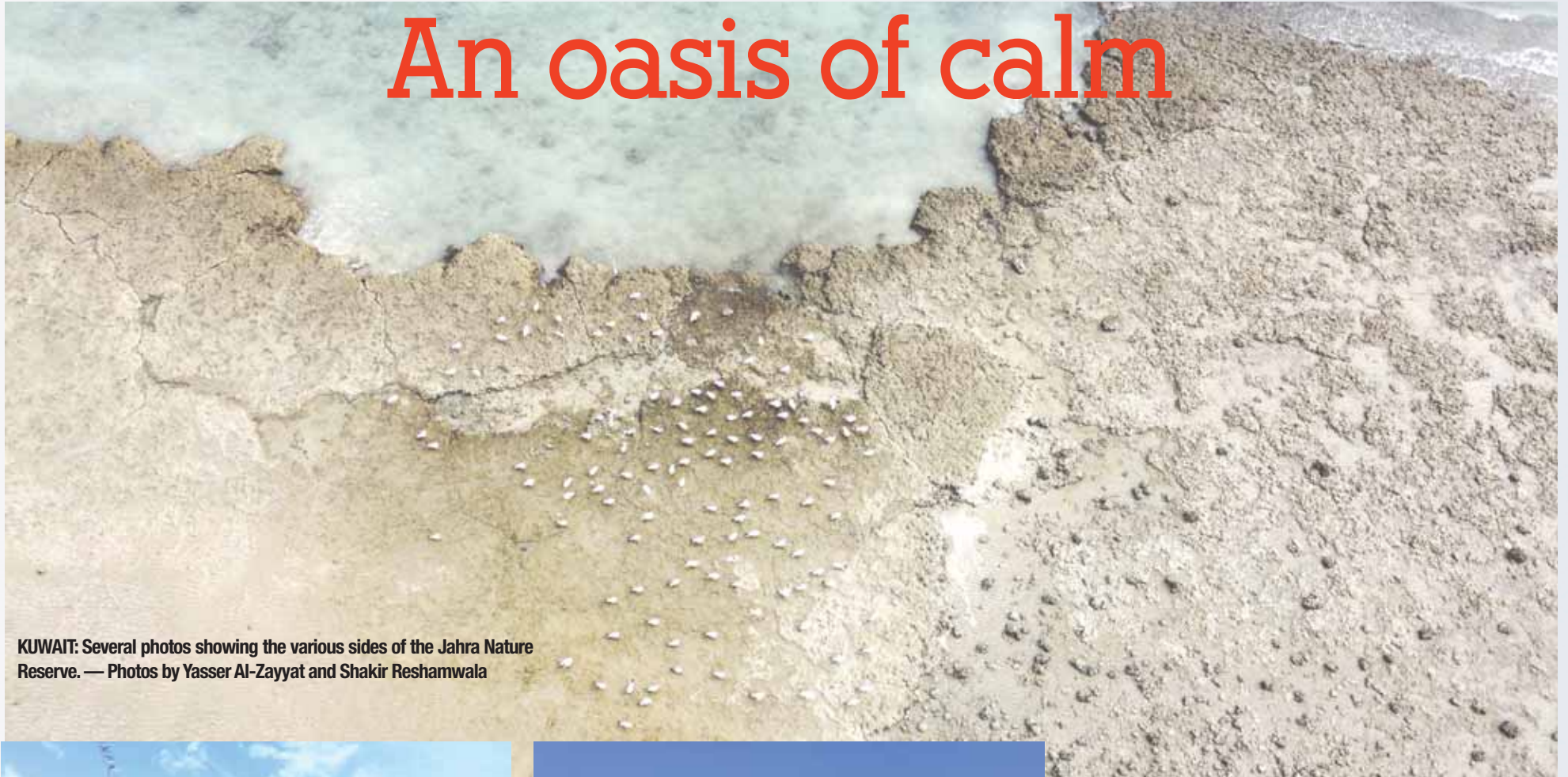
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Jahra Nature Reserve:

An oasis of calm



KUWAIT: Several photos showing the various sides of the Jahra Nature Reserve. — Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat and Shakir Reshamwala



By Nawara Fattahova

After four years of preparatory work, the Jahra Nature Reserve is finally open to the public. Managed by the Environment Public Authority (EPA), the reserve welcomes visitors daily from 9:00 am to 4:30 pm. The reserve is spread over an area of 18 square kilometers, from Khuwaisat in the north to Jaber Al-Ahmad in the south.

Prior online booking is needed to visit the Jahra Reserve. Only two groups can enter at a time for a period of 90 minutes. The entry fee is a minimum of KD 10 for a group of five or fewer people, with KD 2 extra for every additional person. Visitors have to park their vehicles outside the reserve, and will be taken by golfcarts for the tour of the reserve.

“The lakes in this reserve make it distinct from other natural reserves in Kuwait. Around 330 migratory birds can be found here, in addition to local birds. If the visitor is lucky, they may sight a fox or other predators,” Nasser Al-Shimmari from the Public Relations Department of EPA told Kuwait Times.

Huge areas of the reserve are covered with phragmites, a plant that is rarely seen in other areas of Kuwait. “It grows here mainly because the soil has moisture all the time. There are around 70 kinds of plants here, including mangroves that grow near the sea. Because these plants are not found in other areas, many Kuwaiti soap operas have been filmed here,” he pointed out.

“Residents of Jahra used to call this area Kadhma, which was fenced to be a protectorate in 1987. Currently there are two observatories here, which will increase to nine soon. Each group will use one observatory. We will also improve these observatories in the future by adding seats and tables for visitors to rest,” explained Shimmari.

According to EPA officials, opening the Jahra reserve to the public aims to kickstart local ecotourism, amid a paucity of entertainment facilities in the country, especially after the pandemic. EPA officials have said more reserves and protectorates will be opened by EPA in the future, especially in the south of the country, to serve as national parks. Another park will soon open in Doha near the Jahra reserve to serve residents of this area.

To book your visit, visit the official website www.epa.gov.kw



Local



Residents raise concerns as **rats** run amok

By Chidi Emmanuel & Nawara Fattahova

Rats are becoming a disturbing urban problem. Parts of Maliya and Mirqab in Kuwait City are ravaged by rodents. Owing to the speed at which rats breed, a minor infestation that is not dealt with quickly can soon become a major invasion. Some abandoned and dilapidated properties and restaurants offer an ideal habitat for rats, and once they have settled in, they reproduce rapidly.

These little creatures are now becoming more brazen and are beginning to infest places where they are usually not found, such as residential and office buildings. Garbage on the streets and areas behind restaurants and cafes means there is lots of food available for the local rat population, thus making them more visible.

Some residents have expressed concern as rats run rampant in their neighborhoods. The rodent control department of the ministry of health deals with rats and inspects infested areas. According to Fawzi, one of the inspectors there, the department has recently received hundreds of phone calls from people reporting rats or mice around houses. "We receive lots of calls daily from residents complaining about rats. Most calls come from areas including the capital and Sulaihiya. Our call centers deal with the complaints as soon as possible," he told Kuwait Times.

"Apart from reports from people, our inspectors do go on daily

inspections to all the 42 areas across Kuwait. We focus on residential areas, such as Shamiya, Dahiyat Abdullah Al-Salem, Faiha and others. They also go to crowded areas such as Mirqab, Bneid Al-Gar and Khaitan. We usually use poison through a bait hanging on a wire in manholes. Sometimes, inspectors set traps in areas where people have reported seeing rats," Fawzi explained.

Next to some shops near the justice ministry in Mirqab, a resident said rodents are burrowing into the ground and under nearby buildings. "Surprisingly, we are getting used to them. They move around freely. It is quite unfortunate that Kuwait City is gradually becoming the dirtiest capital city in the Gulf region," Kumar lamented.

In Khaitan, Mohammed Ahmed pointed at a place he calls "the home of rats". "Rats are even finding their way into houses these days. I even saw some of them on my couch," he said. With the onset of winter, neighbors fear rats will get more desperate. "Some of these rats are seen in filthy areas and in dilapidated buildings. Also, excessive food waste and leftovers dumped in these areas has led to an increase in the number of rats," said Julius Hans, a Salmiya resident.

Some shop owners and residents have urged the rodent control department to tackle the rising rat population in Kuwait. Here are the numbers to call to report rodent cases: 24840328 or 24848088 (from 8:00 am to 2:00 pm).



KUWAIT: Several photos showing abandoned buildings where rats find a safe place to flourish.

Photo of the Day



KUWAIT: This aerial view shows Kuwait City skyscrapers caught in heavy fog yesterday. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

Mamun, Jleeb's proud mechanic who turned dream into reality

By Ben Garcia

Every day is a new day, with new challenges, new opportunities and new customers. This is the mantra of Mamun, a Bangladeshi man whose business has flourished over the past 18 years. Mamun is an experienced mechanic and owner of 'Mamun Shop' garage in Jleeb. He has worked dedicatedly to perfect his craft by repairing the mechanical and electrical works of cars.

Since 2003, he has seen a growing number of new customers who come to his garage to diagnose and repair everything from engines to air-conditioning. "At the beginning, it was a real struggle dealing with different customers because I was young and inexperienced. Few customers came to the garage as they did not trust me. So my uncle put me on cleaning and petty jobs. Slowly, I took advantage of opportunities and honed my skills in this profession," he said.

Mamun's uncle brought him to Kuwait when he was only 16 and had just completed

high school. "I came and joined him from 2003 to 2007, working and honing my skills as an auto mechanic," he said. "I was passionate about the job, because back in Dhaka I worked part-time at my relative's garage since I was 11. I also did a auto mechanic course, but only after coming to Kuwait I had practical hands-on experience."

Mamun was a dreamer, and wasn't satisfied working as an assistant mechanic. To his fortune, one day his uncle decided to go back to Bangladesh for good, so he took over the garage as the new owner. "At first I used to return the favor to my uncle by remitting money to him regularly, but after his death, I stopped doing so," he told Kuwait Times.

Mamun said anyone with a passion for cars can be a good mechanic, and he is proud that he aimed for bigger things than just being a helper. "I admit that during my early days as a mechanic, I made many mistakes, and some of my work had to be redone by my uncle or an experienced mechanic. In this profession, you need skills plus experience," he pointed out. "When a customer comes with their car to diagnose the problem and fix it in a professional way by doing a good job, they in return recommend you to their friends, and your business grows, he said.

Mamun's strength is in overhauling the engine. "I am an expert in overhauling diesel and petrol engines, and after many failed attempts, I was able to master the art. Now I can diagnose any fault only by the sound of the engine," he said.

Borrower tells story of falling into loan shark trap

By Ben Garcia

Rosal Oniola hasn't gone home to the Philippines for nearly 16 years, because of a travel ban imposed on her after she borrowed money from at least five loan sharks. She came to Kuwait in Nov 1999, and only traveled once in 2006. Last month, when one of the lenders died due to COVID-19, Rosal was happy and thankful, because she wouldn't have to pay her back. "I feel I am drowning in the middle of an ocean. I need help badly," she told Kuwait Times.

Rosal said her borrowing spree started soon after arriving in Kuwait. First, she took KD 450 from a loan shark to pay her employer the money he demanded for her release. "I repaid the KD 450 loan for years with a 20 percent monthly interest. There were times I could not pay on time, which increased both the principal and the interest amounts," she recalled.

A loan shark is a person or entity that lends money at high interest rates. They often use threats to collect their debts. The interest rates are generally well above the local bank interest rates. Loan-sharking is a criminal offence in Kuwait as lenders do not have legal licenses or permits to operate. Loan sharks often target vulnerable people, offering to help solve their financial problems. Payments are collected on a monthly basis, and sometimes even weekly or daily. Failure to pay

back means a doubling of the interest rates.

Like Rosal, many other Filipinos have fallen into this trap of borrowing easy money for immediate financial relief. Borrowers find it easy to get cash without providing documents or guarantors. But loan sharks sometimes ask for their passport or debit card. The bank card is kept by the lenders to guarantee the amount borrowed is paid on time from their monthly salary. Other loan sharks don't ask for any documents, but require borrowers to sign on a blank paper, which serves as a promissory note known as a 'compiala'. Since the borrowers are signing on a blank paper, there is a risk the lender may change the amount.

On one occasion, Rosal signed on a blank paper for a loan of KD 200. "I borrowed it from a bedoon loan shark in 2013, but he altered the amount in the compiala from KD 200 to KD 2,000. After paying KD 1,700 with interest, he still wanted me to pay KD 2,000, as he denied receiving the amount. Later, I was stopped by the police, who found I had a case filed against me. I was taken to the police station and was behind bars for a day," she said. "At the police station, I explained to the officers my side of the story, but they didn't believe it because they saw my signature on the compiala. So I agreed to pay KD 50 monthly to be released from detention."

One of the reasons why she ended up borrowing money was because her salary was not enough to cover her expenses and remittances to the Philippines. "I have three school-going children. At this time, I need rest, and am longing to go back home," the 58-year-old told Kuwait Times. She also claimed to have undergone a series of heart-related surgeries at Amiri Hospital recently. "I have sought help from the Philippines Embassy," she added.

Local

Foreign Minister affirms importance of continuing Kuwait's foreign policy

KUWAIT: Kuwaiti Foreign Minister and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah affirmed yesterday the importance of continuing to consolidate Kuwait's foreign policy and diplomacy. This came in a statement during his meeting with the Deputy Foreign Minister and assistants, as he stressed on strengthening Kuwait's diplomacy that the late Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah established. He also stressed on reinforcing Kuwait's bilateral ties with its brotherly countries to enhance cooperation in all fields. The Foreign Minister also reviewed his ministry's departments and discussed latest developments regionally and internationally. — KUNA



KUWAIT: Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohamad Al-Sabah meets the Deputy Foreign Minister and assistants yesterday. — KUNA



KUWAIT: Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohamad Al-Sabah receives credentials of the newly assigned Japanese Ambassador to Kuwait Yasunari Morino. — KUNA

Foreign Minister receives new Japanese envoy

KUWAIT: Foreign Minister and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah yesterday received credentials of the newly assigned Japanese Ambassador to the State of Kuwait Yasunari Morino, during a session at the Foreign Ministry headquarters. The foreign minister wished the new ambassador success in his new assignment, hoping to see further elevation of the Kuwait-Japan relations. — KUNA



Indian Ambassador Sibi George

and also for our dear children who could not go to schools or attend universities. It is still not over, when we welcome New Year 2022, we are now faced with the new challenges of a new variant," he said.

The ambassador thanked the Indian Community Support Group (ICSG) and the many associations and groups, who individually and collectively, joined hands with the embassy and have been important pillars in the collective struggle to help hundreds of thousands of people in need. He also thanked the frontline warriors-doctors, nurses and medical professionals.

The Indian embassy will soon have a new service provider and new premises for its consular services. "Our endeavor is to provide the best possible consular and community welfare services. Our 24x7 WhatsApp numbers are always available for the community for direct contact with us. I look forward to your ideas and suggestions in further promoting our excellent bilateral relations with Kuwait and also in improving our consular services and community welfare efforts. Let's join hands and work together to defeat the many challenges we will for sure face in 2022," he added.

NBK supports Girls 4 Girls initiative

KUWAIT: National Bank of Kuwait (NBK) is sponsoring the Girls 4 Girls (G4G) program in its 2022 for women empowerment outreach. The program is conducted with the cooperation of the Women Cultural and Social Society (WCSS).

The G4G program is a global initiative spread over 28 countries and created in 2017 by a group of highly accomplished women, all alumni of Harvard University-Kennedy School of Government. It aims to address the persistent gender inequality in leadership positions across the globe and to generate a pipeline of girls ready to take on leadership positions across key areas in government, business, and civil society hence it addresses and encourages girls and women aged between 16 and 50 years to attend.

The G4G in Kuwait started its operation in 2021 with 4 interactive modules and it aims to have more programs in 2022. The first module will start on January 8, 2022, ending on February 12, 2022 with one session per week.

There will be other modules spread all through the year, and the program encourages all to register. The program will bring together insights from key leaders and a global mentoring network to empower young women to play a greater role in leadership.

Nabila Abu-Hantash, a Harvard alum, a corporate strategist, and the program Country Lead stated that "G4G is a modest, informal, yet powerful, platform that channels Harvard knowledge, established to listen to, and cooperate with, women so we can learn from each other, and inspire girls to aspire." In her turn, Sharifa Al-Khamees a board member in the women cultural society said that she "believes in the effectiveness of the program and is excited about its interactive modality."

On the other hand, Joanne Al-Abduljaleel, NBK Public Relations Officer, said "We are proud to support this international program, as we aspire to improve more developmental outcomes in terms of empowering women and improving their representation and development in their societies.

Abduljaleel admired the efforts put in the program both by the G4G - WCSS team and praised the objectives of the program that focus on courageous leadership, the art of communication, negotiations, public service, stepping up to the office, ethics, and values in decision making. Al Abdul Jaleel noted that these focus points for women's empowerment are at the forefront of NBK's strategic priorities for sustainable development.

The G4G program requires active participation in identifying great leaders, presenting a great speech and leading a conversation; identifying public service, giving back, and conferring the difficult moral decisions to take.



Joanne Al-Abduljaleel



Nabila Abu-Hantash

Ambassador urges Indians to follow COVID guidelines

By Sajeev K Peter

KUWAIT: In view of the resurgence of COVID-19 pandemic across the world, Indian Ambassador Sibi George has called upon Indian community in Kuwait yesterday to strictly follow the guidelines and protocol issued by the health authorities in the country to combat the infections. Kuwait also has recorded a spike in COVID-19 cases in the last few days.

"The COVID-19 crisis is far from over. In 2022, we might face each of the challenges that we faced in 2020 and 2021. We should spread the message to all to follow COVID-19-related guidelines and protocol. Those who have not taken their vaccines should take vaccines including the booster shot immediately," the ambassador said in a New Year message. While conveying greetings and best wishes to the people on the occasion, he called upon Indian medical professionals, teachers and office-bearers of various professional and other associations in Kuwait to continue to generate awareness among the community and also to offer their voluntary services to the vulnerable segments of the community. "In the embassy, we will follow all COVID-19 related protocol and guidelines. But I will continue to meet our community in small groups," he said.

"In 2020 and 2021, the challenges were too many for most of us

Local

Prime Minister pledges cooperation with parliament

New Kuwaiti Cabinet holds first session



KUWAIT: His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah chairs the Cabinet's meeting on Wednesday. —KUNA



KUWAIT: The newly formed Kuwaiti Cabinet held its first meeting at Seif Palace on Wednesday, and the session was marked with a vow by the prime minister to cooperate with the parliament. The session of the freshly set up government was held shortly after His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah and members of his Cabinet took part in a swearing-in ceremony in front of His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah at Bayan Palace.

Following the Cabinet session, Foreign Minister and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah stated that His Highness the Prime Minister inaugurated the session with a statement, expressing gratitude to His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah for the precious confidence accorded to him to head the Council of

Ministers. He lauded the purposeful instructions by His Highness the Crown Prince urging members of the government for perseverance and working as a single team to pursue the process of reforms, execute economic schemes and boost development.

Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser, in his statement after the Cabinet's session, noted that His Highness the Prime Minister expressed aspiration to see fruitful cooperation between the executive and legislative authorities to implement the legislations and laws that serve interests of the homeland and the citizens, while adhering to the Kuwait Constitution. Moreover, His Highness the Prime Minister noted that the current positive phase in Kuwait constitutes some of the requirements for development and achievements "for our beloved homeland," also applauding the recent initiative by His Highness the Amir pardoning a number of citizens; a step that would create the adequate atmosphere to push development

forward, close the national ranks and make more achievements in various spheres.

His Highness the Prime Minister, during the Cabinet session, underscored bases of the aspired government's tasks noting that the purposeful instructions by His Highness the Amir and His Highness the Crown Prince will guide the government to perform the tasks and shoulder the national responsibilities. He further affirmed the government's keenness on establishing the aspired cooperation with the National Assembly to make further achievements and promote the homeland, the foreign minister added, also noting that His Highness the Prime Minister expressed appreciation toward members of his previous Cabinet.

In reply to the address by His Highness the Prime Minister during the session, Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah expressed deep gratitude to the confidence accorded to him and his col-

leagues by His Highness the Amir and His Highness the Crown Prince. Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali pledged to work hard for implementing His Highness the Amir instructions and act as a single team for serving the country, achieve development while combating corruption and overhauling utilities.

Meanwhile, Minister of Health Dr Khaled Al-Saeed briefed the conferees about the national health status presenting statistics about the coronavirus cases and precautions against the new strain of the coronavirus Omicron. In this respect, the Cabinet urged the public to adhere to the health precautions, wearing protective masks and taking the vaccines. The ministers adopted transfer of some authorities and institutions and forming ministerial committees. In conclusion, they expressed congratulations to His Highness the Amir, His Highness the Crown Prince and gracious people of Kuwait on forthcoming advent of the new year. —KUNA

KISR conducted record number of researches in 2021

KUWAIT: Kuwait Institute for Scientific Research (KISR), one of Kuwait's scientific landmarks, conducted up to 52 researches for public and private institutions and authorities in the year 2021, a KISR official said yesterday. In addition to the record number of research, the institute had also presented technical and consultative services for some sectors, said Dr Adel Al-Sdirawi, KISR's acting director general in a statement.

Moreover, the institute increased number of scientific bulletins and publications, he indicated, adding that the institute researchers presented, in 2021, 98 scientific studies at conventions held locally and abroad. The researchers at KISR had also contributed with many studies, he said, noting that the efforts had been exerted by personnel serving in the divisions of petroleum research, water research, energy and environmental affairs. A

number of local and foreign scientific institutions benefited from KISR's researches, he said, disclosing that the institute recorded six invention patents at the US patents agency. These patents were for a high output water desalination system, organic soil reclamation, a system for treating salty water pressure, others for air-conditioning and waste treatment technologies.

Despite negative ramifications of the coronavirus, KISR earned many awards and certificates of admiration from renowned local and international institutions. Moreover, a number of the institute's personnel were rewarded and honored. Dr Sdirawi said among the honored KISR personnel was Dr Fotooh Abdulaziz Al-Raqam, who was appointed as the head of the energy engineers association in the US for 2021 — it was the first time that an Arab woman scientist elected to the prestigious post. Elaborating, he mentioned that Dr Samira Ahmad Al-Sayed Omar was decorated with "Italy Star" by the Italian ambassador to Kuwait. Furthermore, Dr Abdulhamid Hashem was elected member of the US national academy for engineering. Shedding further light on KISR's accomplishments over the passing year, Dr Sdirawi said the institute finished construction of the ship 'Al-Mostakshaf', a unique marine vessel equipped with state-of-art laboratories and specialized in marine sciences and fisheries. —KUNA

Child rescued from nine-meter-deep hole near Mangaf Co-op

KUWAIT: Firemen rescued a child who fell in a nine-meter-deep hole near Mangaf Co-op Society, Kuwait Fire Force said yesterday. Firemen used rescue tools to help the child out of the hole, KFF said, noting that he was in a stable condition. Paramedics onsite took the kid to hospital for a medical checkup, it added.



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International

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Biden, Putin emphasise diplomacy

Moscow is 'in the mood for a conversation'

MOSCOW: US President Joe Biden and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin emphasised the need for diplomatic solutions ahead of their latest phone call yesterday aimed at defusing tensions surrounding the Ukraine conflict.

The call comes after Moscow earlier this month presented Western capitals with sweeping security demands, saying NATO must not admit new members and seeking to bar the United States from opening new bases in ex-Soviet countries. The call, which will begin at 2030 GMT, also comes ahead of talks between representatives of the two rivals in Geneva in January, with Washington saying it expects to discuss the Ukraine conflict and Moscow insisting its security demands be contended with.

Biden, who is at his home in Delaware for the New Year's holiday, will stress in his call with Putin that Washington is looking for a "diplomatic path" out of the crisis, a senior administration official told reporters. "But we are also prepared to respond if Russia advances with a further invasion of Ukraine," Biden will tell Putin, the official said, adding that Washington remained "gravely concerned" about the military build-up and wanted to see the Russian forces return "to their regular training areas."

In a holiday message to Biden hours before the call, Putin said he is "convinced" that "we can move forward and establish an effective Russian-American dialogue based on mutual respect and consideration of each other's national interests".

Conversational mood

His spokesman Dmitry Peskov then told reporters that Moscow is "in the mood for a conversation". "We believe that only through talks is it possible to solve all the immediate problems that we have in abundance between us," Peskov said, adding that the call was Putin's initiative.

The call will be the second in less than a month between the two leaders, with Biden in early December warning Putin of "severe consequences" if Russian troops invaded Ukraine. Washington has led the charge in raising the alarm over Russian troop movements near its ex-Soviet neighbour Ukraine, where the West says Moscow has massed around 100,000 forces ahead of a possible winter invasion.

Putin has denied the allegation and accused the West of stoking tensions, saying that NATO's eastward expansion is a threat to Russian security. Ukraine, which has since 2014 fought a pro-Russia insurgency in its east that has claimed over 13,000 lives, has

repeatedly said it wants to join the US-led security alliance.

But Russia considers ex-Soviet states to be within its sphere of influence, and has grown increasingly insistent that the only way out of the crisis is the West accepting its demands that would redraw Europe's security architecture. At the talks in Geneva next month, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has vowed that Moscow will take a "hard line" aimed at avoiding concessions.

US support for Ukraine

His ministry yesterday said that delegations for the talks will be led by Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov and US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman. The United States has called some of the Russian positions non-starters, but said it is willing to talk and will also bring up its own concerns.

Ahead of the US-Russia talks, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke by telephone on Wednesday with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. "I was assured of full US support for Ukraine in countering Russian aggression," Zelensky tweeted afterward.

Blinken also spoke separately to his counterparts from Britain, France and Germany on "coordination to deter any further Russian aggres-



WASHINGTON: This combination of file pictures created on December 06, 2021 shows US President Joe Biden during a signing ceremony at the White House in Washington, DC on November 18, 2021; and Russian President Vladimir Putin in a congress of the United Russia party in Moscow. — AFP

sion against Ukraine", State Department spokesman Ned Price said. The Biden administration has vowed to take all actions in lockstep with its European allies.

Following the Geneva talks, Russian delegates will meet with delegates of the NATO alliance ahead of a meeting of the Organization for Security and Co-

operation in Europe, a key Cold War forum that brings together Moscow and the West.

"We will determine further steps depending on the readiness of the United States and NATO for substantive talks regarding our concerns," Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova told reporters yesterday. — AFP

Saudi king urges Iran to end 'negative' behaviour in region

King Salman addresses Shura council for a second year in a row

RIYADH: Saudi Arabia's King Salman urged arch-rival Iran yesterday to end its "negative behaviour" in the region, after Riyadh accused Tehran of aiding Yemeni rebels in launching deadly attacks on his country. However, the monarch who turns 86 today appeared to soften his hawkish tone towards the Islamic republic, after having urged world powers last year to take a "firm stance" against Tehran.

Salman, addressing the Shura council, the top government advisory body, virtually for a second year in a row, spoke for less than four minutes. He read slowly from a white piece of paper, pausing at times, in a speech broadcast three hours after its initial scheduled time. The official Saudi Press Agency later released the king's full statement.

"We hope (Iran) changes its policy and negative behaviour in the region, and it heads towards dialogue and cooperation," he said, according to the statement. "We are following with great concern the Iranian regime's destabilising policy to security and safety in the region."

Riyadh and Tehran have been bitter foes for decades, taking opposing sides in a range of regional conflicts, including in Yemen where Saudi Arabia leads a military coalition against Iran-backed Huthi rebels. The two sides have held several rounds of talks since April aimed at improving relations.

King Salman, however, accused Iran of "establishing and supporting" sectarian and armed groups in the region. "We are also

following the Iranian regime's support of the terrorist Huthi militia, which is prolonging the war in Yemen and exacerbating the humanitarian situation there, as well as threatening the security of the kingdom."

Yemen has been wracked by civil war since 2014 pitting the government—supported by the Saudi-led coalition—against the Huthi Shiites who control much of the country's north, including the capital Sanaa. Tens of thousands of people have been killed in what the United Nations describes as the world's worst humanitarian crisis, with over 80 percent of Yemen's population dependent on aid.

The coalition on Sunday accused Iran and Lebanon's Hezbollah group of helping the Huthis launch missiles and drones at Saudi Arabia, where two people were killed last week. Saudi Arabia has long accused Iran of supplying the Huthis with sophisticated weapons and its Hezbollah proxy of training the insurgents.

Tehran denies the charges, while Hezbollah has dismissed them as "ridiculous". On oil, King Salman said Riyadh was "keen to keep the OPEC+ agreement working due to its essential role in stabilising oil markets", stressing the importance of all participating countries' commitment to the deal.

The Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and allied producers agreed this month to stick to planned increases in output in January, despite the economic uncertainties linked to the Omicron coronavirus variant. — AFP



RIYADH: A handout picture provided by the official Saudi Press Agency shows Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz during his annual speech at the shura council, a top advisory body, in the capital Riyadh yesterday. —AFP

Iran announces new space launch amid nuclear talks

TEHRAN: Iran announced yesterday it has carried out a new space launch, in a move likely to irk Western powers amid tough talks on reviving a 2015 nuclear deal. "The Simorgh satellite launcher carried three research cargos into space," defence ministry spokesman Ahmad Hosseini said, quoted by state television.

"The research goals foreseen for this launch have been achieved," Hosseini added, without elaborating on the nature of the research. "This was a preliminary launch. We will have operational launches in the near future." The television aired footage of a rocket rising from a desert launchpad.

It gave no details of its location although US media reported earlier this month that preparations for a launch were under way at Iran's space centre in Semnan, 300 kilometres (190 miles) east of Tehran. In February, Iran announced it had launched its most powerful solid fuel rocket to date, the Zoljanah, boasting that it can put a 220-kilogramme (480-pound) payload into orbit.

The United States voiced concern about that launch, saying the test could



TEHRAN: A handout picture released by Iran's Defence Ministry yesterday shows a Simorgh (Phoenix) satellite rocket lifting off during its launch at an undisclosed location in Iran. — AFP

boost Iran's ballistic missile technology at a time when the two nations are inching back to diplomacy. Iran successfully put its first military satellite into orbit in April 2020, drawing a sharp rebuke from Washington.

But according to the Pentagon and satellite imagery of the Semnan centre, an Iranian satellite launch failed in mid-June. Tehran denied it failed. Western governments worry that satellite launch systems

incorporate technologies interchangeable with those used in ballistic missiles capable of delivering a nuclear warhead.

Iran insists its space programme is for civilian and defence purposes only, and does not breach the nuclear deal or any other international agreement. UN Security Council Resolution 2231 of 2015, endorsing the nuclear deal, imposed no blanket ban on Iranian rocket or missile launches. — AFP

New Iraq parliament to open January 9

BAGHDAD: Iraq's parliament will open on January 9 for its first session since lawmakers were elected in an October vote won by Shiite cleric Moqtada Sadr, President Barham Saleh said yesterday. In multi-confessional and multi-ethnic Iraq, the formation of governments has involved complex negotiations ever since the 2003 US-led invasion toppled dictator Saddam Hussein, and the inauguration of parliament will come almost three months on since the October 10 vote.

"I signed the presidential decree inviting the new parliament to meet on January 9," Saleh said in a statement, adding his "hope for a genuinely strong and active government... protecting and serving" the Iraqi people. "This requires the cooperation (of all) to carry out the reforms necessary for a stable and prosperous Iraq," Saleh added.

The oldest of the 329 lawmakers will chair the first session, with parliament given 30 days to elect a president, who will then name a prime minister—tasked with forming a new government within 30 days. Some experts and politicians hope for a new government by March.

Sadr's movement won more than a fifth of the seats, 73 out of the assembly's total of 329. The Fatah Alliance, the political arm of the pro-Tehran Hashed al-Shaabi former paramilitary alliance, took 17 seats, sharply down from its 48 seats in the past assembly, and Hashed leaders rejected the result.

Former premier Nuri al-Maliki's pro-Iran State of Law Alliance won 33 seats in the legislature. Iraq is trying to recover from years of war and jihadist violence but remains hobbled by political divisions, corruption and poverty. Parties from Iraq's Shiite majority have previously struck compromise deals to work together, but Sadr is insistent he wants to forge a coalition capable of forming a parliamentary majority. — AFP

International

South Africans pay respects as Tutu's body lies in state

South African flag will be presented to his wife Leah

CAPE TOWN: South Africans streamed into a Cape Town cathedral yesterday to pay their last respects to Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the globally venerated anti-apartheid icon, who lay in a simple pine coffin. Six Anglican clerics carried the coffin into St George's Cathedral, where the Nobel Peace laureate once railed against white rule and was formerly archbishop, at 0640 GMT and placed it near the altar.

The simple coffin, adorned with a small bouquet of carnations, was in line with wishes for modesty expressed by the much-loved rights advocate before he died. The tireless spiritual and political leader passed away peacefully aged 90 on Boxing Day. His body will be cremated and his ashes buried on New Year's Day.

His body will lie in state throughout Thursday and Friday to allow as many people as possible to say their final goodbyes. Reverend Gilmore Fry told AFP that the lying-in state had been extended to two days "for fear there might be a stampede". Ordinary South Africans of all races and ages started streaming into the Anglican church as soon as the doors opened to the public.

"We've come to pay our respects," said Joan Coulson, 70, who arrived with her sister early in the morning to be one of the first to enter. She first met Tutu, her "rock star", aged 15. "I would compare him with Elvis," referring to the legendary US rock and roll star. A young girl spotting a purple top, paused briefly before the



CAPE TOWN: Thandi Tutu, the daughter of South African anti-Apartheid icon Archbishop Desmond Tutu, is comforted while her father's coffin arrives to lie in state at St. George's Cathedral in Cape Town yesterday. —AFP

coffin, gesturing the sign of the cross and waived her braided hair.

A woman donning a purple Muslim veil, stood briefly before the coffin. Other mourners stood before the coffin and bowed in a show of respect. Purple has become the preferred colour in honour of Tutu's purple clerical robes.

Before opening up to members of the public, the church conducted a private service for the family, including his widow Leah.

'No ostentatiousness'

The coffin was opened for the family to view the body and they sang Tutu's favourite hymn,

according to Tutu's successor, Thabo Makgoba. Following a private cremation, Tutu's ashes will be interred inside the cathedral and where bells have been ringing in his memory for 10 minutes at midday every day since Monday.

Hundreds of people have already flocked to St George's since Sunday—where Tutu served as the Anglican archbishop of Cape Town for a decade until 1996 — to lay flowers and sign a book of condolences.

He then led a harrowing journey into South Africa's dark past as chairman of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which exposed the horrors of apartheid in terrible detail. South Africa is marking a week-long mourning for Tutu with the country's multi-coloured flag flying at half-mast nationwide and ceremonies taking place every day until the funeral.

The service on New Year's Day will be simple in line with his wishes. "He wanted no ostentatiousness or lavish spending," said his foundation, adding he even "asked that the coffin be the cheapest available". In line with COVID-19 restrictions, the numbers of mourners attending the funeral will be restricted.

Tutu had also wanted military rites to be limited. Only the South African flag will be presented to his wife Leah. The couple married in 1955 and had four children. Weakened by advanced age and prostate cancer, he had retired from public life in recent years. — AFP

British socialite Maxwell convicted of sex trafficking

NEW YORK: British socialite Ghislaine Maxwell was found guilty in New York on Wednesday of recruiting and grooming young girls to be sexually abused by the late American financier Jeffrey Epstein. Maxwell faces spending the rest of her life behind bars after the 12-person jury convicted her on five of the six counts she was facing, including the most serious charge of sex trafficking a minor.

The conviction, just days after she turned 60 on Christmas, caps a remarkable fall from grace for the Oxford-educated daughter of the late British press baron Robert Maxwell, who grew up in wealth and privilege as a friend to royalty. She sat passively in the Manhattan courtroom, slowly removing her mask to take sips of water, after Judge Alison Nathan read out the verdicts, reached after five full days of deliberation by the jury.

Afterwards, Maxwell's attorney, Bobbi Sternheim, said her legal team was already working on an appeal and they were "confident that she will be vindicated." "We firmly believe in Ghislaine's innocence. Obviously we are very disappointed with the verdict," Sternheim told reporters outside the courthouse.

Sex trafficking of minors carries a maximum 40-year sentence. The lesser charges have terms of five or 10 years. Maxwell was found not guilty of one count—enticement of a minor to travel to engage in illegal sex acts. Nathan offered her "sincere thanks" to

the jury for their service, adding that they served with "diligence."

Maxwell walked out of the courtroom into detention as she has done every day of the month-long trial. She was not handcuffed and will return to the Metropolitan Detention Center in Brooklyn. No date was set for her sentencing.

US Attorney Damian Williams welcomed the verdict, saying Maxwell had been found guilty of "the worst crimes imaginable—facilitating and participating in the sexual abuse of children." "The road to justice has been far too long. But, today, justice has been done," Williams said in a statement. The charges against Maxwell stemmed from 1994 to 2004.

Two of Epstein's alleged victims said they were as young as 14 when Maxwell allegedly began grooming them and arranging for them to give massages to Epstein that ended in sexual activity. One, identified only as "Jane," detailed how Maxwell recruited her at summer camp and made her feel "special."

She said sexual encounters with Epstein became routine, with Maxwell sometimes present. Another, going by "Carolyn," said she was usually paid \$300 after sexual encounters with Epstein, often by Maxwell herself. 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.

'Partners in crime'

Epstein, 66, killed himself in jail in 2019 while awaiting his own sex crimes trial. Maxwell, his lover-turned-close friend, was arrested the following year. She pleaded not guilty to all counts. Prosecutor Alison Moe said Maxwell was "the key" to Epstein's scheme of enticing young girls to give him massages, during which he would sexually abuse them.

They cited bank records showing that she received \$30 million



NEW YORK: Defense attorney Bobbi Sternheim speaks outside the Thurgood Marshall Federal Court House in lower Manhattan, New York, after a jury found Ghislaine Maxwell guilty of recruiting and grooming young girls to be sexually abused by the late American financier Jeffrey Epstein. —AFP

from Epstein between 1999 and 2007 as evidence that her participation was motivated by money. "They were partners in crime," Moe said. Maxwell's defense team questioned the accusers' ability to recollect quarter-century-old events and argued that Maxwell was being used as a "scapegoat" for Epstein's crimes after he evaded justice.

Maxwell declined to take the stand during the trial. Her siblings Kevin, Isabel and Christine were in the front row in court as their sister's fate was read out. Pursued by reporters as they left, the family declined to comment, with Kevin Maxwell saying they would issue a statement on the verdict later. — AFP

International

Sudan forces seal Khartoum ahead of new anti-coup rally

New surveillance cameras installed on major thoroughfares

KHARTOUM: Sudanese security forces deployed on Khartoum's streets yesterday, sealing the capital off from its suburbs and cutting phone lines and mobile internet as opponents of the military government prepared to hold fresh protests.

Pro-democracy activists have kept up a campaign of street demonstrations against the army's October 25 coup, despite a crackdown that has seen at least 48 people die in protest-related violence, according to the independent Doctors' Committee. Army, police and paramilitary patrols criss-crossed Khartoum's streets, while shipping containers blocked the Nile bridges that connect the capital with its northern suburbs and its twin city Omdurman.

The bridges were blocked off for the last protests on December 26, when tens of thousands took to the streets. But for yesterday's planned protests, new surveillance cameras had been installed on the major thoroughfares along which demonstrators were due to march.

For the first time, authorities also cut all phone lines, both international and domestic. Web monitoring group NetBlocks reported mobile internet services were cut from mid-morning yesterday. Activists use the internet for organising demonstrations and broadcasting live footage of the rallies.

US appeal for calm

The US embassy appealed for restraint from the government led by military chief General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, which had been counting on a controversial November partnership deal with civilian Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok to calm public anger.

"The US embassy reiterates its support for peaceful expression of democratic aspiration, and the need to respect and protect individuals exercising free speech," a statement said. "We call for extreme discretion in use of force and urge authorities to refrain from employing arbitrary detention." Activists have condemned sexual attacks during December 19 protests, in which the UN said at least 13 women and girls were victims of rape or gang-rape. Hamdok had been held under effective house arrest for weeks before being reinstated under the November deal, which promised elections for July 2023.

But the deal was widely criticised as a gift to the military that gave a cloak of legitimacy to its coup. Sudan still has no functioning government, a prerequisite for the resumption of international aid cut in response to the coup. Over 14 million people, a third of Sudan's population, will need humanitarian aid next year, according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the highest level for a decade. — AFP



KHARTOUM: Sudanese demonstrators carry posters of killed protesters as they protest in the capital Khartoum against the army's October 25 coup, on December 30, 2021. —AFP

Saudi boosts pandemic measures at Mecca's Grand Mosque

RIYADH: Saudi Arabia yesterday reimposed social distancing measures at the Grand Mosque in the Muslim holy city of Mecca, after recording the highest number of infections in months. Workers have returned floor markings removed on October 17 to guide people to social distance in and around the Grand Mosque—which is built around the Kaaba, the black cubic structure towards which Muslims around the world pray.

Saudi authorities said they will reimpose "social distancing requirements between worshippers and pilgrims" at the Grand Mosque, without specifying whether a capacity has been set. Earlier, the kingdom had said social distancing and masks were again required in both indoor and outdoor venues.

The kingdom of approximately 34 million people has so far recorded more than 554,000 coronavirus cases, including 8,874 deaths, the highest number of fatalities among the Gulf Arab countries. On Wednesday, Saudi recorded 744 cases, the highest number since mid-August.

The COVID-19 pandemic hugely disrupted Muslim pilgrimages, which are usually key revenue earners for the kingdom, bringing in some \$12 billion annually. The six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states—Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar—have been recording their highest numbers of new cases in months.



MECCA: Rows of worshippers pray at the Grand Mosque in Saudi Arabia's holy city of Mecca, yesterday, following the imposition of new restrictions due to a surge in COVID-19 cases. —AFP

Despite having the world's highest vaccination rate, the UAE has recorded the largest number of infections among Gulf countries at more than 757,000. On Wednesday, it recorded 2,234 infections, the highest number since June. The Emirates' Abu Dhabi crown prince, Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed, sought to reassure the people that "the UAE health sector is fully geared and prepared to address any challenges", according to the official WAM news agency.

The UAE is gearing up to host New Year's Eve celebrations, including at Burj Khalifa, the world's tallest tower, in the emirate of Dubai. Dubai, which is heavily dependent on tourism, was one of the world's first destinations to welcome back visitors July 2020. It is also counting on the six-month Expo 2020 trade fair to boost its economy. — AFP

Four soldiers killed in Mali attack

BAMAKO: Four Malian soldiers were killed and around a dozen others were wounded when they were attacked in the west of the country, the army said yesterday.

Mali's Armed Forces said the attack occurred late Tuesday in a region of the country where jihadists have attacked soldiers in the past. An army "unit in the Nara region was the target of a sophisticated attack combining IED (Improvised Explosive Devices) and heavy weapons," the army said in a statement.

It said the army suffered at least "four dead and a dozen seriously wounded," but did not say who carried out the attack. On Wednesday evening, a brigade in Niema in the far south of the country was attacked, but without any casualties, the army said.

In the centre of the country, a mortar attack targeted the Hombori camp also on Wednesday evening, but there was no material damage. Mali is the epicentre of a jihadist insurgency that began in the north of the country in 2012 and spread three years later to neighbouring Niger and Burkina Faso.

Thousands of people across the region have died and around two million have been displaced by the conflict.

Despite the presence of French and UN troops, the conflict spread to neighbouring Burkina Faso and Niger. France intervened in 2013 and now has roughly 5,000 troops in the region, but plans to lower that number to 2,500-3,000 by 2023.

The spiral of violence has continued despite the coup that brought the military to power in Bamako in 2020. — AFP

International

World heads into New Year facing COVID 'tsunami'

Omicron, has pushed infection levels to record levels in recent days

PARIS: Millions around the world braced yesterday for drastically curtailed New Year celebrations as record coronavirus cases fuelled by the Omicron variant saw the WHO warn a COVID "tsunami" threatens to overwhelm healthcare systems.

Coronavirus, first detected two years ago and declared a global pandemic in March 2020, has killed more than 5.4 million people, triggered economic crises and seen societies ricochet in and out of lockdowns. The latest variant, Omicron, while tentatively considered to cause milder illness, has pushed infection levels to record levels in recent days in the United States, Britain, France and other European countries, forcing governments to reimpose restrictions.

The number of daily new COVID cases worldwide crossed one million for the first time, according to an AFP tally yesterday, with more than 7.3 million in the last seven days. From Greece to Mexico, from Barcelona to Bali and across swathes of Europe, authorities have cancelled or curtailed public gatherings, either closing or imposed curfews on nightclubs.

In France, wearing masks outdoors will be compulsory while walking the streets of Paris from Friday for everyone over the age of 11. Nightclubs have been closed until well into January. In Spain, public festivities have been cancelled across most regions and in the biggest cities except Madrid, where a stripped-down gathering is scheduled with the crowd limited to 7,000 people compared to 18,000 in 2019 before the pandemic swept Europe. Yesterday, Britain's National Health Service announced that it would start opening temporary field hospitals to contain a possible overspill of inpatients in England, where the government stopped short

England to open field hospitals as virus cases surge

LONDON: England is set to open temporary field hospitals to contain a possible overspill of inpatients due to a surge in coronavirus cases, the national health service said yesterday. Fuelled by the highly contagious Omicron variant, daily cases have ballooned, standing at more than 183,000 on Wednesday.

NHS England said it would start building the structures in the grounds of eight hospitals in cities including London, Bristol and Leeds from this week, with each designed to house around 100 extra patients.

"Given the high level of COVID-19 infections and increasing hospital admissions, the NHS is now on a war footing," National Medical Director Stephen Powis said. The extra



MIAMI: Healthcare workers conduct tests at a drive-thru COVID-19 testing site at the Dan Paul Plaza yesterday in Miami, Florida. —AFP

of mandating curbs on New Year festivities.

'War footing'

"Given the high level of COVID-19 infections and increasing hospital admissions, the NHS is now on a war footing," National Medical Director Stephen Powis said. Indonesia, which has reported more than 4.2 million confirmed cases, warned that foreign travellers may be deported from the resort island of Bali if they are caught violating COVID health rules during New Year.

"Get ready to be kicked out," Bali immigration office head Jamaruli Manihuruk told AFP. Bali has

beds are designed for patients who are recovering from illnesses, including those who no longer have COVID, to free up space and staff to treat large numbers of virus cases.

The number of patients in hospital with the virus are also growing fast, exceeding 10,000 in England on Wednesday—the highest figure since March. The UK has been one of Europe's worst hit countries with a death toll of 148,089.

The government opened large "Nightingale" field hospitals in venues such as exhibition centres during the first wave of the virus. The facilities named after nursing pioneer Florence Nightingale were not widely used. This time, the plan is to make available as many as 4,000 "super-surge beds", in some cases using existing hospital facilities such as gyms.

Health Secretary Sajid Javid said: "We hope the Nightingale surge hubs at hospitals will not have to be used but it is absolutely right that we prepare for all scenarios and increase capacity". —AFP

barred carnivals, fireworks and gatherings of more than 50 people over the Christmas and New Year period. Mexico City has also cancelled its massive New Year's Eve celebrations as a preventative measure after a rise in COVID cases. "I feel that this casts doubt on a lot of what we thought was already secure, because it is scary, it is worrying," said Aaron Rosas, an engineering student. "By doing that cancellation they are sending a message in a way: 'You know what? This is serious,'" said teacher Victor Arturo Madrid Contreras.

In Saudi Arabia, authorities reimposed social distancing measures at the Grand Mosque in the

Muslim holy city of Mecca, after recording the highest number of infections in months. "I am highly concerned that Omicron, being more transmissible, circulating at the same time as Delta, is leading to a tsunami of cases," said WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus.

'Brink of collapse'

"This is and will continue to put immense pressure on exhausted health workers, and health systems on the brink of collapse." Omicron has already started to overwhelm some hospitals in the United States, the hardest-hit country, where the seven-day average of new cases has hit 265,427, according to a Johns Hopkins University tracker.

Harvard epidemiologist and immunologist Michael Mina tweeted that the count was likely just the "tip of the iceberg" with the true number likely far higher because of a shortage of tests. "Half of my family has it," said Victoria Sierralta at a testing site in Miami. "It's like we're back in like the first stage of COVID. It's absolutely crazy."

The NBA, NFL and NHL are scrambling to keep teams competing and sports leagues are grappling with how best to adjust their coronavirus protocols to protect players, staff and fans while keeping their schedules intact. In China, residents in the city of Xi'an, where 13 million people are under lockdown, said they were struggling to find enough food, despite Beijing insisting that there were adequate supplies. State TV showed footage of workers in hazmat suits sorting eggs, meat and vegetables, before delivering food to residents door-to-door. "I live on.... a bowl of porridge every day, just to keep alive," one resident surnamed Wang told AFP, saying she was working through all her supplies. — AFP



LONDON: A pedestrian walks past a directional sign for a COVID-19 test centre on Hoe Street in Walthamstow, north London yesterday. —AFP

China warns US will 'face unbearable price' on Taiwan

Washington's interference could lead to a dangerous situation

BEIJING: China's foreign minister said yesterday the United States will "face an unbearable price" over its actions towards the self-ruled island of Taiwan, in Beijing's latest threat over the flashpoint island. Tensions between China and the US have soared in recent years over issues including human rights, trade and technological competition, with Taiwan emerging as a major flashpoint.

China claims the democratic island of Taiwan as its own territory, and has vowed to seize it one day by force if necessary. Although most countries have chosen to formally recognise Beijing over Taipei, many have retained strong unofficial links with the latter, which China bristles at.

In an interview with state broadcaster CCTV and official news agency Xinhua broadcast yesterday, Foreign Minister Wang Yi warned that Washington's interference could lead to a dangerous situation. "The US violated the promises made when China and the US established diplomatic relations, condoned and encouraged 'Taiwan independence' forces, and tried to distort and hollow out the one-China principle," Wang Yi said.

"This will not only bring Taiwan into an ex-

tremely dangerous situation, but also cause the US to face an unbearable price." In a snub to China, the US invited Taiwan to its Democracy Summit earlier this month. US President Joe Biden last month described Taiwan as "independent"-but he later clarified his remarks, confirming there was no change in US policy towards Taiwan.

Under the Taiwan Act, the United States does not recognise Taiwan's independence, yet commits to helping the island defend itself. Beijing regards any formal declaration of an "independent" Taiwan as a provocation and has repeatedly threatened consequences for countries who support Taipei in its self-determination.

In recent months, the Chinese military has mounted an increasingly aggressive series of sea and air military operations near the island, conducting military drills near the Taiwan Strait following a visit by a group of American lawmakers last month. In recent years China has stepped up pressure to isolate Taiwan internationally.

Earlier this month, Nicaragua switched its diplomatic allegiance to China in a blow to Taiwan, which now only counts 14 remaining allies globally. — AFP



WASHINGTON: File photo shows US President Joe Biden meets with China's President Xi Jinping during a virtual summit from the Roosevelt Room of the White House in Washington, DC. —AFP

Destitute 'heir' of India's emperors demands residence

KOLKATA: A destitute Indian woman who claims she is heir to the dynasty that built the Taj Mahal has demanded ownership of an imposing palace once home to the Mughal emperors. Sultana Begum lives in a cramped two-room hut nestled within a slum on the outskirts of Kolkata, surviving on a meagre pension.

Among her modest possessions are records of her marriage to Mirza Mohammad Bedar Bakht, purported to be the great-grandson of India's last Mughal ruler. His death in 1980 left her struggling to survive, and she has spent the past decade petitioning authorities to recognise her royal status and compensate her accordingly. "Can you imagine that the descendant of the emperors who built Taj Mahal now lives in desperate poverty?" the 68-year-old asked AFP. Begum has lodged a court case seeking recognition that she is rightful owner of the imposing 17th-century Red Fort, a sprawling and pockmarked castle in New Delhi that was once the seat of Mughal power.

"I hope the government will definitely give me justice," she said. "When something belongs to someone, it should be returned." Her case, supported by sympathetic campaigners, rests on her claim that her late husband's lineage can be traced to Bahadur Shah Zafar, the last emperor to reign.

By the time of Zafar's coronation in 1837, the Mughal empire had shrunk to the capital's boundaries, after the conquest of India by the commercial venture of British merchants known as the East India Company. A massive rebellion two decades later—now hailed as India's first war of independence—saw mutinous soldiers declare the now frail 82-year-old as the leader of their insurrection. The emperor, who preferred penning poetry to waging war, knew the chaotic uprising was doomed and was a reluctant leader.



KOLKATA: Sultana Begum works on a garment inside her house in Kolkata. A destitute Indian woman who claims she is heir to the dynasty that built the Taj Mahal has demanded ownership of an imposing palace once home to the Mughal emperors. — AFP

British forces surrounded Delhi within a month and ruthlessly crushed the revolt, executing all 10 of Zafar's surviving sons despite the royal family's surrender. Zafar himself was exiled to neighbouring Myanmar, travelling under guard in a bullock cart, and died penniless in captivity five years later. Many of the Red Fort's buildings were demolished in the years after the uprising and the complex fell into disrepair before colonial authorities ordered its renovation at the turn of the 20th century. It has since become a potent symbol of freedom from British rule.

India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru hoisted the national flag from the fort's main gate to mark the first day of independence in August 1947, a solemn ritual now repeated annually by his successors. Begum's court case hinges on the argument that India's government are the illegal occupants of the property, which she says should have been passed down to her. — AFP

Georgia's Saakashvili returns to prison from hospital

TBILISI: Georgia's opposition leader and ex-president Mikheil Saakashvili returned to prison from hospital yesterday after being treated for a hunger strike protesting his incarceration. Saakashvili refused food for 50 days until late last month after being jailed on a conviction of abusing office, which he denounced as politically motivated.

The 54-year-old pro-Western reformer called off the hunger strike after he was admitted—in a critical condition—to a military hospital in Georgia's eastern city of Gori. "Convict Mikheil Saakashvili is in the 12th penitentiary establishment," the prison service said yesterday, referring to a jail in the town of Rustavi about 30 kilometres (20 miles) from capital Tbilisi.

A lawmaker for the ruling Georgian Dream party, David Sergeyenko, told reporters that military hospital doctors said Saakashvili's health had "stabilised". Saakashvili's lawyer Nika Gvaramia said, however, that his client left the military hospital weighing the same as when he had arrived.

"He is weak, he is stupefied," Gvaramia said. "There will be an announcement tomorrow," he added, saying that Saakashvili was currently not "communicative". Saakashvili's doctors, who examined him in custody, said this month he had developed a number of neurological diseases "as a result of torture, ill-treatment, inadequate medical care, and a prolonged hunger strike".

They said he had been diagnosed with the potentially life-threatening brain disease Wernicke encephalopathy and with post-traumatic stress disorder, among other conditions. Georgia's president from 2004 to 2013, Saakashvili was arrested in October, shortly after he returned to Georgia from exile in Ukraine. — AFP

International

School board battles open new front in US culture wars

One particularly debate triggered a flood of vitriolic messages to his inbox

LEVITTOWN, United States: As Joshua Waldorf was running for a third term on the Pennsbury school board in November, one particularly heated debate triggered a flood of vitriolic messages to his inbox—one of them urging him to shoot himself.

In a shift mirrored in cities across America, his local council overseeing schools in the leafy suburbs of Philadelphia had unwittingly become a battleground in the politicized culture wars roiling the nation. The hateful messages aimed at Waldorf were just one example of the flow of anonymous slurs and threats directed at him and fellow members of the nine-seat board in past months—as their once studious meetings turned to angry shouting matches.

“I’ve been pretty consistent in terms of my views,” Waldorf, a 58-year-old businessman, told AFP as the board prepared to meet in an elementary school gym in Fallsington, in a leafy neighborhood of family homes. “But I’m being vilified for those that I wasn’t 18 months ago.”

In much of the United States, locally elected school boards are tasked with governing a community’s public schools—deciding who to hire as superintendent to manage day-to-day operations, which textbooks to buy, and what education policies to enact. But over the past year, with the country in the grip of the Covid-19 pandemic and a historic reckoning over race relations, the boards have had to rule on far more charged issues—prompting intense backlash from parents often bitterly di-

vided along political lines.

For choosing to require all students and staff to wear masks, the Pennsbury School Board—all Democrats—were accused of “child abuse,” and seeking to “dehumanize” students. After hiring a specialist in “equity, diversity, and education” last year, the board came under fire from parents convinced they had “far left radical agenda to indoctrinate students.”

Polarization

School boards from coast to coast have had similar experiences, reflecting “a national polarization now seeping into other levels of government,” according to Dan Hopkins, a political scientist at the University of Pennsylvania. “By and large, school board politics in the United States tend to be relatively uneventful and relatively free of emotion,” Hopkins told AFP.

But now, he says, “the really contentious questions that occupy national politics are finding their way” into the meetings. In Pennsbury, things took a turn for the worse after the board appointed Dr. Cherrissa Gibson—a local assistant principal—to a newly created role overseeing diversity and equity in the district’s 10 elementary schools, three middle schools, and one high school.

Her first audit in April 2021 found “an under-representation of professional staff of color,” as well as a disproportionate level of discipline targeting Black students. Situated in the woody outer suburbs of Philadelphia, Pennsbury has



LEVITTOWN, Pennsylvania: Pennsbury School District Board Member Joanna Steere speaks during a Pennsbury School Board meeting in Levittown, Pennsylvania on December 16, 2021. —AFP

about 10,000 students, of whom 75 percent are white, seven percent are Black, eight percent are Asian, and four percent are Hispanic, according to the district’s website.

For Thomas Smith, the district’s superintendent, the audit was a way to help “ensure that every student regardless of where they come from, regardless of their gender, or regardless of

the color of their skin are treated equally.” But opponents, like 54-year-old Simon Campbell, believe such initiatives only sharpen divisions.

“It is all about trying to stereotype people by race, by gender and separate them and then customize education based upon those separations,” said the former school board member and stock trader. — AFP

Seven killed in Kashmir fighting

SRINAGAR, India: Six suspected rebels and a soldier were killed during two separate clashes in Indian-administered Kashmir overnight, police said yesterday, rounding off another bloody year in the disputed territory.

Indian police said the six killed in two villages belonged to the Pakistan-based Islamist group Jaish-e-Mohammad, claiming two of them were Pakistani nationals. India has long accused Pakistan of facilitating cross-border attacks in the territory, which has been divided between the two since 1947 and which both claim in full. Islamabad denies the charge.

Rebel groups have fought Indian forces for over three decades, demanding freedom for Kashmir or its merger with Pakistan, which has controlled part of the region since after independence. A police statement issued yesterday said one of the four government forces personnel wounded in the clashes died of bullet injuries in a hospital.

Officials say that at least 380 militants, nearly 100 civilians, and over 80 security forces personnel have been killed in the region since August 2019. That was when New Delhi revoked the region’s limited autonomy and brought it under direct rule, adding to anger among

locals and galvanising support for self-determination.

This year the death toll was 264, compared to 321 in 2020, according to the South Asia Terrorism Portal. Police say that with intensified military operations against the rebels, the number of local fighters has dropped to fewer than 100 for the first time in a decade.

Local police chief Vijay Kumar told the Economic Times daily this week that some 70 percent of the youth who joined militant ranks this year “were either killed or arrested”. Most of those arrested are being held under anti-terror legislation called the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA).

The law allows people to be held for six months—often rolled over—without being charged and bail is virtually impossible. One of those—in custody since November—is Khurram Parvez, programme coordinator for respected rights group the Jammu Kashmir Coalition of Civil Society (JKCCS).

On December 1 the UN Human Rights Office criticised the arrest and said that the UAPA “raises serious concerns relating to the right of presumption of innocence along with other due process and fair trial rights.”

The Indian government said the statement “betrays a complete lack of understanding on the part of the OHCHR of the security challenges faced by India from cross-border terrorism”. India has an estimated 500,000 soldiers deployed in Kashmir, and the two countries have fought two of their three wars over Kashmir, coming close to another in 2016. — AFP

India extends security law after botched army ambush

NEW DELHI: The Indian government extended yesterday a special law giving armed forces sweeping powers in the north-eastern state of Nagaland, days after a botched army ambush killed 14 people. The killings triggered protests against the law which gives the armed forces sweeping powers to conduct raids, warrantless searches and open fire, with broad protection from prosecution.

But the six-month extension issued by India’s ministry of home affairs said the government believed the state was “in a disturbed and dangerous condition.” “The use of armed forces in aid of the civil power is necessary,” the government said, justifying the extension of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA).

Earlier this month, the Indian army shot dead six miners returning to their homes in the state’s Mon district, near the Myanmar border, believing them to be insurgents. Another eight people were killed by the troops when they were confronted by an angry crowd. A soldier was killed and a military vehicle was set alight.

Those calling subsequently for a repeal of the AFSPA included the head of the state government, an ally of Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s ruling party. “India is the biggest democratic country in the world. This is a draconian law. So it should be removed from our country,” Nagaland chief minister Neiphiu Rio told reporters after the killings.

The Indian army said in a statement Wednesday that a court of inquiry set up to probe the incident was “proceeding expeditiously.” Nagaland and other states in northeast India, linked to the rest of the country by a narrow land corridor, have seen decades of unrest among ethnic and separatist groups. While insurgent activity has declined in recent years, the AFSPA governs military deployments in the state. — AFP

Shuttered Hong Kong news outlet's editors charged with sedition

More than 200 officers deployed to search the Stand News office

HONG KONG: Two senior editors of Hong Kong media outlet Stand News were charged with "conspiracy to publish seditious" material yesterday, authorities said, following a raid that drew international condemnation over China's crackdown on press freedom in the city. China has tightened its control of Hong Kong since massive and sometimes violent pro-democracy protests engulfed the financial hub in 2019, using a sweeping national security law to clamp down on dissent.

Police stormed into the Stand News office in the latest crackdown on Wednesday, seizing phones, computers, documents and thousands of dollars. Its acting editor-in-chief Patrick Lam was brought handcuffed to the headquarters during the search.

Lam and former editor-in-chief Chung Pui-kuen were charged along with Stand News' parent company for conspiring "together and with other persons, to publish and/or reproduce seditious publications," according to court documents. Chung and Lam were arrested on Wednesday with five others.

Among the violations listed on the charge sheet were the promotion of "hatred or contempt or to excite disaffection" against the government and the incitement of "persons to violence". The Chinese government's liaison office in Hong Kong termed the arrests an "act of justice" and accused Stand News of inciting secession.

"Bringing the relevant Stand News personnel to justice is a matter of 'the wicked getting what they deserve' and has nothing to do with freedom of the press," a spokesperson said in a statement. Chung, 52, appeared in court yesterday afternoon, nodding to acknowledge supporters in the public gallery—including several

former Stand News employees.

Lam's lawyer told the court her client had been hospitalised and was therefore absent from proceedings. No legal representative appeared on behalf of Stand News' parent company. More than 200 officers were deployed to search the Stand News office with court authorisation to seize journalistic materials.

Its assets of around HK\$61 million (\$7.8 million) were also frozen, with senior official Steve Li saying it was one of the largest sums the police's national security unit has ever seized. Stand News announced after the raid that it would cease operations. China's foreign ministry hit out at "irresponsible" criticism of the arrests on Thursday after the US, Canada and the EU condemned the raid and Beijing's wide-ranging crackdown on press freedom in the semi-autonomous city.

"Some external forces, under the guise of media freedom, have been making irresponsible remarks about law enforcement in Hong Kong," foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian said at a briefing. "But media freedom and freedom of speech cannot be a shield for criminal acts."

China also slapped sanctions on five US citizens "freezing their assets in China, and banning Chinese citizens and organisations from dealing with them" in response to a US advisory on deteriorating freedoms in Hong Kong.

'Journalism is not sedition'

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said the raid and wider crackdown on press freedom by China and "local authorities undermine Hong Kong's credibility and viability". "Journalism is not



HONG KONG: Pro-democracy activist and singer Denise Ho (C), a former board member of Stand News, leaves the Western Police Station after being released from custody in Hong Kong yesterday, following her arrest the previous day along with six other current and former staff members. —AFP

sedition," Blinken said.

"A confident government that is unafraid of the truth embraces a free press." Hong Kong leader Carrie Lam responded yesterday, saying she agreed with Blinken's sentiment that "journalism is not sedition" but added that seditious acts "could not be condoned under the guise of news reporting".

Lam accused Western governments of trampling on Hong Kong's rule of law by calling for charges to be dropped. "These actions have nothing to do with so-called suppression of press freedom or so-called suppression of democracy, as some would put it," she said. —AFP

Bangladesh scraps women-only beach zone after social media outcry

COX'S BAZAR, Bangladesh: Authorities in Bangladesh's main tourist resort scrapped a dedicated beach section for women and children after a social media outcry over gender segregation, officials said yesterday. On Wednesday afternoon, Cox's Bazar officials inaugurated a section of the shoreline on the world's longest natural sea beach as an exclusive zone for women and children.

But hours later, the administration issued a press release saying that it had "withdrawn its decision" after "negative comments". Abu Sufian, a senior official in Cox's Bazar, told AFP the section had been created following requests from conservative women in the Muslim-majority country.

"They requested a dedicated beach section for themselves, because they felt shy and insecure in a crowded place," he said. Earlier this month the gang rape of a woman in Cox's Bazar sparked an outcry over women's safety in the city.

But the move to cordon off a section of the beach caused uproar on social media, with critics saying it was pandering to hardline Islamists who still wield considerable influence in the country. "This is Talebistan," veteran journalist and commentator Syed Ishtiaque Reza wrote on Facebook, referring to the Taliban in Afghanistan.



COX'S BAZAR, Bangladesh: In this photograph taken yesterday, people walk past a signboard reading "Reserved area for women and children as instructed by the district commissioner" along a beach in Cox's Bazar. —AFP

Another commentator compared it to "Mollahtantra", which translates as hardline Islamist ideology. Parts of Bangladesh society remain very conservative, and in recent years, a hardline Islamist group has held massive rallies demanding segregation of the sexes in workplaces and factories.

Hundreds of thousands visit Cox's Bazar during festive periods, and the tourism sector has boomed in recent years. To provide security to the growing number of tourists, authorities have set up a tourism police unit to patrol beach towns. —AFP

Arson suspect in Japan fire that killed 25 dies in hospital

TOKYO: A 61-year-old man suspected of starting a fire at a Japanese mental health clinic that claimed 25 lives died in hospital yesterday, local media said. Morio Tanimoto had been in critical condition due to burns and carbon monoxide poisoning following the deadly attack in Osaka on December 17. Tanimoto, a former patient of the clinic, died without being interrogated by police, public broadcaster NHK said, citing investigative sources. An Osaka police spokesman declined to comment when contacted by AFP. The fire raged for half an hour, gutting the fourth floor of the narrow commercial building where the clinic, which also provided general medical care, was located.

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

Osaka in western Japan is a major economic hub and the country's second-biggest metropolis after the greater Tokyo region. One year ago, a man was charged with murder over a 2019 arson attack on a Kyoto animation studio that killed 36 people, the country's deadliest violent crime in decades. —AFP

International

India's tiger conservation body saw record 126 big cat deaths in 2021

India is home to around 75 percent of the world's tigers

NEW DELHI: India's tiger conservation body said 126 of the endangered big cats died in 2021, the most since it began compiling data a decade ago. The previous highest number of deaths per year before the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) began compiling data in 2012 was in 2016, when 121 perished.

India is home to around 75 percent of the world's tigers. It is believed there were around 40,000 tigers at the time of independence in 1947 but hunting and habitat loss has slashed the population to dangerously low levels. In 2010, India and 12 other countries signed an agreement to double tiger numbers by 2022. Last year, the government announced that it had reached the target ahead of schedule, with an estimated 2,967 tigers in 2018 versus a record low of 1,411 in 2006. The number is still lower than 2002 when the tiger population stood at around 3,700 but Prime Minister Narendra Modi hailed it as a "historic" achievement.

The 2018 data may have been partly down to the survey size, however, which used an unprecedented number of camera traps to identify individual tigers using stripe pattern recognition software.

'Natural causes'

Over the past decade the biggest reason for deaths recorded by the NTCA was "natural

causes", but many also fell victim to poachers and "human-animal conflict". Human encroachment on tiger habitats has increased in recent decades in the country of 1.3 billion people. Nearly 225 people were killed in tiger attacks between 2014 and 2019, according to government figures.

Kartick Satyanarayan, founder of Wildlife SOS, told AFP deaths due to human-animal conflict were driven by "the fragmentation of the tiger's natural habitat." "Tigers range over large jungle areas and find it impossible to migrate to other forests without crossing human habitations, increasing chances of conflict," he said.

Critics say that the government has also loosened environmental regulations for projects including mining. Satyanarayan also said increasing demand for tiger skins and use of tiger body parts in traditional Chinese medicine were some of the major reasons for poaching.

The government has made efforts to manage the tiger population better, however, reserving 50 habitats across the country for the animals. Conservation group WWF said in a report last year that tigers were making a "remarkable comeback" in much of South Asia as well as Russia and China.

But tigers were still under threat from poaching and habitat destruction and the wild animal populations had fragmented, increasing the risk of in-



HYDERABAD, India: File photo shows tiger cubs bath in their enclosure with their mother Apama (R) at the Nehru Zoological Park in Hyderabad. India's tiger conservation body said 126 of the endangered big cats died in 2021, the highest toll since it began compiling data a decade ago. —AFP

breeding, the WWF said. "This has reached critical levels in much of Southeast Asia, where a snaring crisis is decimating wildlife, including tigers and their prey," the group said.

The Indian government's 2020 report mean-

while warned that many tiger populations were confined to small protected areas. Many of the "habitat corridors" enabling the animals to roam between these areas were at risk due to human activity and development, it warned. —AFP

'Get ready to be kicked out,' Bali warns New Year COVID violators

DENPASAR, Indonesia: Foreign revellers on Indonesia's resort island of Bali have been warned they may be deported if they are caught violating COVID-19 health rules during New Year celebrations, authorities warned yesterday. "Get ready to be kicked out," Bali immigration office head Jamaruli Manihuruk said in an interview with AFP, warning that health rules must be observed as the country seeks to fend off the Omicron variant now sweeping the world.

Bali's governor has barred carnivals, fireworks and gatherings of more than 50 people over the Christmas and New Year period. Malls, restaurants and cafes must shut by 10 pm, and only operate at 75 percent capacity. Bali's beautiful tropical scenery, surf beaches and party scene have made it a playground for masses of Australian and New Zealand tourists, as well as those based in nearby cities such as Singapore. Almost 200 tourists were deported from Bali in 2021, Manihuruk said, with seven booted out for violating COVID-19 protocols.

In July three foreign tourists from the United States, Ireland and Russia were sent home after they were caught not wearing masks in public during a raid. In May, a Russian influencer and a US-based Taiwanese YouTuber were deported after posting a video where the former was seen strolling around Bali with a painted mask on her face. —AFP

Former Australian parliament damaged by protest fire

SYDNEY: Australia's former parliament building caught fire during a rights protest yesterday, officials said, with the flames causing limited damage.

The blaze occurred when police broke up a traditional Aboriginal smoking ceremony by a small number of activists at the building's entrance.

The Canberra building was home to the country's federal parliament from 1927 to 1988 and now houses the Museum of Australian Democracy.

The museum said in a statement that it is "closed until further notice while we address fire damage caused by protesters today".

There was no immediate news about the extent of the damage, but images showed flames and smoke coming from wooden double-doors at the building's entrance.

The vast majority of the edifice remained untouched, and the blaze was said to have been quickly extinguished.

Activist Albert Hartnett said in a Facebook post that police had used pepper spray to break up the demonstration, which he alleged had caused the roof of a portico to catch fire.

The National Heritage Register-listed building has been the scene of a series of protests by an "Aboriginal



CANBERRA, Australian: Australian federal police forensic team members (L) examine the site after the entrance of Australia's former parliament building caught fire during an Aboriginal rights protest in Canberra yesterday. —AFP

Tent Embassy" in recent weeks.

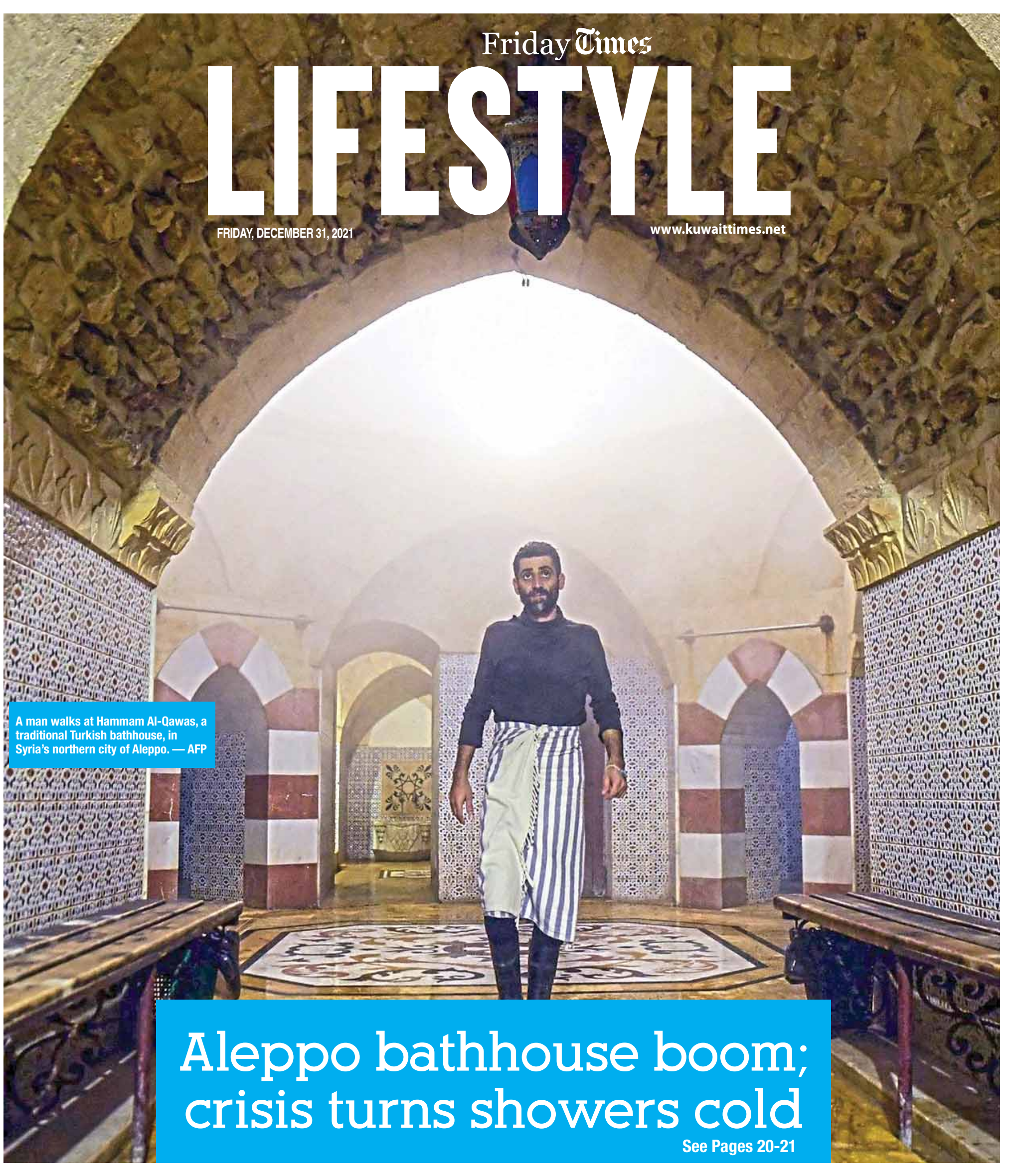
Past protests included lighting a fire by the building's doors and were said to have been linked to so-called sovereign citizen groups.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison said he was "disgusted" and "appalled" by an attack on what he called a symbol of democracy. "People should face the consequence of their actions," he said. —AFP

LIFESTYLE

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 31, 2021

www.kuwaittimes.net



A man walks at Hammam Al-Qawas, a traditional Turkish bathhouse, in Syria's northern city of Aleppo. — AFP

Aleppo bathhouse boom; crisis turns showers cold

See Pages 20-21

ALEPPO BATHHOUSE BOOM AS SYRIA CRISIS TURNS SHOWERS COLD



A worker checks the facility pamphlet at the entrance of Hammam Al-Qawas - a traditional Turkish bathhouse, in Syria's northern city of Aleppo. —AFP photos



Men eat lunch after bathing at Hammam Al-Qawas, a traditional Turkish bathhouse, in Syria's northern city of Aleppo.



Men dry up after bathing at Hammam Al-Qawas.

The ancient bathhouses of Syria's second city Aleppo are filling up again, not because of a revived fad, but due to power cuts that have made hot showers a luxury. "We mainly rely on electricity to heat water at home, but the electricity is cut off most of the time," said Mohammed Hariri from a crowded bathhouse where he had waited half an hour for his turn.

"Here, we take all the time we need showering," the 31-year-old told AFP. With their marble steam rooms, hexagonal fountains and distinctive domes, Aleppo's bathhouses have for centuries served as a social hub where men come together to wash, listen to music and even eat. But shortages of water, fuel and electricity across war-torn Syria have also turned them into a refuge for those looking for a long, warm bath during the cold winter.

In Hammam Al-Qawas, one of more than 50 traditional bathhouses in Aleppo's Old City, diesel fuel and firewood are used to power furnaces providing hot water and steam. Under its arched dome, men swaddled in towels sit in one of many side rooms, some singing traditional Arabic tunes as they scoop up hot water from stone basins. In an adjoining area, masseurs use soap and loofahs to scrub clean clients lying flat on the marble floor, as restrictions against the coronavirus pandemic seem a world away.

Brisk business

Hariri said he used to visit Aleppo's bathhouses with his father and uncles as a child. Now, he comes with his son—not to continue a tradition, but because the water at home is not enough for his family of five. "At home you have to shower in five minutes, but at the bathhouse you can stay for five hours," he said.

Many of the structures were severely damaged dur-

Lifestyle | Feature

ing several rounds of battles between regime forces and rebels. Only around 10 have reopened since Aleppo returned to full government control in 2016, according to AFP correspondents. Sitting at the reception room inside Hammam Al-Qawwas, Ammar Radwan fielded calls from clients looking to book an appointment.

The 33-year-old who inherited the 14th-century bathhouse from his grandfather said he never thought business would bounce back. “We reopened the hammam in 2017, after the battles in Aleppo ended, but we never expected to see such a turnout,” he told AFP while updating a client register. Among the bathhouse’s regular customers is Jalal Al-Helou, a 53-year-old father of three. “I go to the bathhouse at least once a month for a good clean,” he told AFP from inside a washing room, a towel covering his wet body.

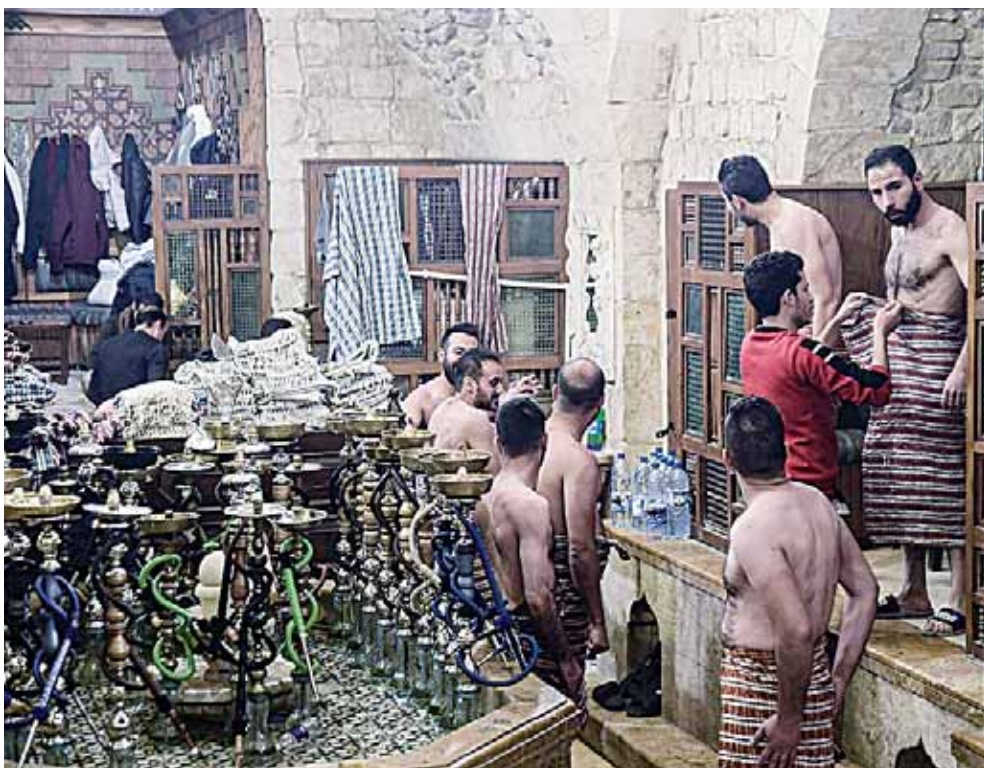
‘Necessity’

Like most of Aleppo’s residents, Helou usually has to make do with cold or lukewarm water at home. Round-the-clock power cuts have reached 20 hours a day this year due to severe diesel fuel shortages. Helou said he has sometimes had to resort to firewood instead of the electric water heater so his family can bathe. “Our priority is to provide (hot water) for the children,” he said. The situation is the same for fellow bathhouse patron Nader Mashlah. “The last time I took a proper bath was two weeks ago,” the 58-year-old said after a scrub-down at the hammam.

At home, “priority goes to the children, and if there is some hot water left, my bath is quick and unsatisfying,” he added. A government employee and father of six, Mashlah said he could afford few comforts in his own home. But in the bathhouse, he was relaxing and smoking shisha across from a large fountain as other clients walked by. “In the past, going to the bathhouse was mainly for entertainment,” he said in between puffs. “Today, it has become a necessity at least once or twice a month.” —AFP



A man carries a child inside Hammam Al-Qawwas, a traditional Turkish bathhouse, in Syria's northern city of Aleppo.



Men bathe at Hammam Al-Qawwas, a traditional Turkish bathhouse, in Syria's northern city of Aleppo.

Japan faces royal dilemma as ancient monarchy shrinks

Japan's imperial family is facing extinction due to a shortage of eligible emperors, but some experts say the ideas floated in a government inquiry for boosting the dwindling number of royals are out of touch. With women barred from the throne under male-only succession rules, the place of Emperor Naruhito, 61, will one day be filled by his nephew Prince Hisahito instead of his only child Princess Aiko.

But if 15-year-old Hisahito does not have a son, the royal family, whose history dates back more than 2,600 years, will run out of male heirs to continue the bloodline. Polls show the public broadly supports the idea of a woman taking the role of emperor - one that holds no political power under Japan's post-World War II constitution but carries huge symbolic importance.

However, pressure to stick to long-held tradition from conservative lawmakers and voters, who revere the royals as the perfect example of a patriarchal Japanese family, makes female succession unlikely any time soon. Officials are brainstorming possible solutions to the dilemma, and last week a specially commissioned panel submitted two suggestions to the government.

One is to allow royal women to keep their title and public duties when they wed outside the family. Currently, they must leave the family, as former princess Mako Komuro did in October after marrying her university sweetheart. The second is to allow men from 11 former branches of the royal family abolished in post-war reforms to "rejoin" the direct line through adoption. The panel's report recommends that male lineage rules are preserved at least until Prince Hisahito becomes emperor.

But its ideas are "not at all based on the



Photo Japan's Princess Kako, niece of Emperor Naruhito and younger daughter of Crown Prince Akishino, posing in the garden of the Akasaka imperial property residence in Tokyo. —AFP

current family system in Japan or ideas about gender equality", Makoto Okawa, a history professor at Chuo University in Tokyo, told AFP. "I think the public is wondering what's wrong with Princess Aiko succeeding the throne," said Okawa, who researches the imperial system. Although traditionalists say Japan should not sever the "unbroken imperial line", their logic is flawed, Okawa argued, because Aiko - who turned 20 this year - is both the emperor's direct descendent and older than her cousin Hisahito.

Exacting standards

Hideya Kawanishi, associate professor of Japanese history at Nagoya University,

warned that the panel's proposals "will not solve the problem fundamentally". Some married women might not want to live a restricted royal life, while the adoption of male family members who grew up as regular citizens would be complicated, he said. The issue has been debated for years - after Aiko was born, a government panel concluded in 2005 that imperial succession should be decided in order of age and not gender.

However, these discussions lost momentum after Hisahito's birth in 2006, meaning the male bloodline could continue. The latest panel report said it was necessary to discuss possible changes to succession rules in the future but, unlike in

2005, did not use the words "female emperor". This means that for the wives of male royals like Hisahito, "there will be pressure to conceive boys to keep the line going," Kawanishi said.

Royal women have long walked a difficult path in Japan. Naruhito's wife Masako, a former high-flying diplomat, struggled for years with a stress-related illness after joining the household, which some have put down to the pressure of producing a male heir. Younger royals are also held to exacting standards. Mako and her husband Kei Komuro, both 30, were plagued by tabloid gossip over allegations that Kei's family had run into financial difficulties, leading the former princess to develop complex post-traumatic stress disorder.

An empress is not an alien concept in Japan, with the imperial family itself said to be descended from the legendary sun goddess Amaterasu. There have been as many as eight empresses throughout history, although their rule has often been temporary. The last, Gosakuramachi, was on the throne about 250 years ago. The divine status of the imperial family was renounced after World War II following Japan's militaristic sweep across Asia in the name of Emperor Hirohito.

Since 1947, royal succession has been dictated by the Imperial Household Law, and issues surrounding it remain a delicate topic tightly bound with ideas of national identity. Nowadays, politicians are "scared of changing the system" while they are in office, Kawanishi said. But after Mako's wedding garnered huge attention, one way the debate could be pushed forward is "if the public becomes more interested in the subject, and pushes for discussions", he said. —AFP

Arnold Schwarzenegger, Maria Shriver's divorce becomes official

A court in Los Angeles has made Arnold Schwarzenegger and Maria Shriver's divorce official 10 years after they separated following the actor-turned-politician's infidelity, US media reported Wednesday. Celebrity news site TMZ said the pair's divorce proceedings took a particularly long time because of the number of financial assets to negotiate. Shriver, a journalist and the niece of former US president John F Kennedy, first filed for divorce in July 2011.

Weeks later, the "Terminator" star admitted to having an affair with the family nanny, Mildred Baena, with whom he had a son in 1997. "After leaving the governor's office I told my wife about this event, which occurred over a decade ago," Schwarzenegger, who was governor of California from 2003 to 2011, said in a statement to the Los Angeles Times when he and Shriver separated. Shriver cited "irreconcilable differences" in the divorce filing. The couple, who met in 1977 and were married in 1986, have four children together. —AFP



Arnold Schwarzenegger and Maria Shriver

Greece bans music in bars over rising COVID-19 cases

Greece on Wednesday banned music in bars and restaurants in a bid to limit New Year's Eve parties as the government attempts to fight the highly contagious Omicron coronavirus variant. "Omicron is now the dominant strain and the public health system is under pressure," Health Minister Thanos Plevris said in a televised address. From yesterday and until January 16, "restaurants and entertainment venues will only be able to host tables of six people and music will be banned," he said. "Bars and restaurants will close at midnight, but will be authorized to stay open until 2 am on December 31 - still without music," he added.

Greece has been forced to implement

new measures earlier than expected as daily cases soar, announcing on Wednesday a new 24-hour record of 28,828 COVID-19 infections. As part of the new restrictions, initially planned for January 3, 50 percent of employees in the public and private sectors should work from home, up from 20 percent previously. Catering staff and people who want to go grocery shopping or take public transport must wear either a FFP2 face mask or two medical masks one on top of the other.

All public New Year's Eve events have been cancelled, and the minister urged Greeks to test for Covid before any necessary family gatherings. Greece has recorded 1,134,713 coronavirus cases and 20,636 related deaths since the start of the pandemic. On December 14, the country said a record 130 people had died of COVID in 24 hours, but that daily figure has since dropped below 100. On Wednesday, Greece announced another 72 people had died of the virus. —AFP

YEARS AFTER WAR, HEALTH SECTOR AILING IN MOSUL

Months after a minor motorbike accident, Amer Shaker is still suffering from poor treatment at a hospital in Iraq's Mosul, forcing him like many others to seek help elsewhere. "At public hospitals, we have to pay for everything," said Shaker. "As soon as we arrived, we paid for the medicine, bandages, the anaesthesia."

But for the past seven months, he has been treated free of charge at Al-Wahda hospital, opened by Doctors Without Borders (MSF) in Mosul in 2018. Having spent a small fortune in current Iraqi terms—about \$8,000—on medical care after an initial surgery by a Mosul doctor who failed to heal his leg, which had been fractured in three places, Al-Wahda was a godsend for the construction worker.

"The doctor had inserted a platinum plate, but it was not done right. I tried to find another doctor, but none of them were any good," said the 21-year-old. On his left leg, MSF doctors have attached an external fixator, an impressive frame of pins and screws—nearly impossible to find elsewhere in Mosul, he said. His case is symptomatic of the wider affliction that ails Iraq's health sector, which like other public services has suffered from dilapidated infrastructure and the effects of successive conflicts.

The former stronghold of the Islamic State group, Mosul was devastated by the battle to oust the jihadists that ended in summer 2017. More than four years on, the northern metropolis remains a patchwork of gutted concrete carcasses interspersed between buildings under construction. Five hospitals are being refurbished or reconstructed in the city, according to a public official, and nine health institutions are functioning—leaving a total of 1,800 beds for a population of 1.5 million.

'Lack of hospital beds'

In the coming weeks, Shaker will need to undergo a sixth operation to remove 13 centimeters (about five inches) of dead bone. At Al-Wahda hospital, patients vary in profile, from Khawla Younes, the 60-year-old housewife who broke her leg in a fall, to Mahmud Al-Meemari, undergoing his "16th or 17th surgery" for an injury from a 2017 bomb blast.

Majid Ahmed, an official in the public health authority of Nineveh province—of which Mosul is the capital—acknowledges "a lack of hospital beds and care units". The destruction "has affected 70 percent of our health facilities", he said. Before the



Medics transport a patient at the Al-Wahda hospital, opened by Doctors Without Borders (MSF) in 2018, in Iraq's northern city of Mosul. —AFP photos



A medic works at a laboratory at the Nablus hospital in Iraq's northern city of Mosul.



Children receive treatment at the Nablus hospital, run by Doctors Without Borders (MSF), in Iraq's northern city of Mosul.



Relatives sit with children receiving treatment at the Nablus hospital.

rise of IS in 2014, Nineveh had 3,900 hospital beds, compared to 600 in 2017 after the government wrested back control of Mosul, Ahmed explained. Today, the province has about 2,650 beds. "The destruction that has struck health institutions in the province requires a significant budget," Ahmed added.

After the conflict, the medical sector was at ground zero, according to orthopaedic surgeon Hisham Abdel Rahman, who works with MSF alongside his job in the public health sector. "With time, we see improvement, but it's very slow," he said. At Al-Wahda hospital "we offer services that will not be available in other facilities in Mosul for many years", he continued. He said Mosul needs new hospitals, medical equipment and medicine, especially for cancer treatment.

'Filling a gap'

MSF also runs the Nablus hospital and maternity ward in Mosul, where nearly 900 infants are delivered on average every month. "This hospital has been filling a gap," said Kyi Par Soe, MSF's medical activity manager at the hospital, adding that the two other maternity hospitals in Mosul are "overloaded".

On a positive note, the public health authority's Ahmed said the number of COVID-19 cases officially recorded in Mosul was "very low", with 30 percent of capacity in public hospitals reserved for patients with serious infections. Apart from the hospitals, the rest of Mosul is also struggling to regain a sense of normalcy. Residents crowd into cafes and restaurants, many of which have opened under buildings left in a suspended state

of construction, their top floors scarred by gaping holes.

Less than 15 percent of residents of eastern Mosul, where fighting for the city ended, have "enough water to meet their daily needs", according to the International Committee of the Red Cross. In western Mosul, that figure is 35 percent. And despite the restoration of certain historic sites, entire swathes of the Old City in central Mosul remain a pile of debris. Reconstruction efforts have rumbled on at such a slow pace that it is not unusual to uncover bodies under the rubble to this day. In December, civil defense teams found more than a dozen corpses from the battle for Mosul.—AFP



A group of initiates of the men's religious secret society known as Abakua (or Nanigo) take part in the oath ceremony of the Efi Barondi Cama 'potency' in Simpson neighborhood, in Matanzas, Cuba. — AFP photos



A member of the men's religious secret society known as Abakua (or Nanigo) sits next to costumes used by Iremes, Abakua dancers, after an oath ceremony.

As pandemic crisis bites, young Cubans find solace in sect with African origins

Five blindfolded young men kneel before a priest who is uttering blessings in the West African language Yoruba, while they vow to be brave, respectful and good to their community. But this scene is not taking place in West Africa: this is Cuba, and the five young men here are converting to Abakua, a uniquely Cuban spiritual practice.

Faced with economic hardships and the COVID-19 pandemic, many young Cubans have sought refuge in religion, including Abakua, a belief system that originated as a brotherhood of protection for enslaved Africans in Havana nearly 200 years ago. "With this problem of the pandemic, it has grown a lot, we've had a lot of" new devotees, Juan Ruiz Ona, a religious leader, told AFP. The religion shares attributes with Santeria and Palomonte, other popular Latin American sects with African origins and influences from various belief systems. But while the other two are practiced across the region, Abakua is exclusive to Cuba.

At the Efi Barondi Cama temple in Matanzas, 100 kilometers east of Havana, Ona is the Yamba - the second-highest ranking official. The private initiation ceremony for the young men taking place here is open only to the Abakuas and their guests. The person taking on the role of the Ireme - or little devil - rubs a chicken over the new disciples' bodies as part of a purifying ritual, before allowing them into the sacred space where the secret ritual takes place. Dancing to a rhythmic drumbeat, the Ireme represents the presence of the ancestors.



A member of the men's religious secret society known as Abakua (or Nanigo) dances during a ceremony of the Efi Barondi Cama 'potency' in Simpson neighborhood.



Practitioners of the men's religious secret society known as Abakua (or Nanigo) are seen on the street in Simpson neighborhood.

'Support our brothers'

Becoming an Abakua has traditionally been difficult, and the secret rules imposed on devotees were notoriously harsh. There are about 130 Abakua fraternities in Cuba, made up entirely of heterosexual men. The fraternities are known as "powers," "games" or "plants." Over time, the groups have lost their cloak of secrecy, but not their rigid principles, such as the support for brothers in faith.

"During this pandemic... we've tried to support our brothers, even though some have died, others were ill, and others we visited and helped," said Ruiz. Like many Cubans, some of the faithful have emigrated and send money home to help their fraternity. "We're a constructive institution, we contribute with our revolution and our young," added Ruiz, a firm supporter of the island nation's communist regime.

Following the 1959 socialist revolution, the government de-

clared itself atheist, but after the fall of the Soviet Union - the regime's major backer - Cuba in 1990 became an officially secular state, albeit with a Catholic majority. Sociologists estimate that 85 percent of the population of 11.2 million consider themselves believers —though not necessarily practicing ones - of a religion, often in sects that combine Catholicism with animist African beliefs. — AFP



Ivanieski Quintana (right), who hold the embakara title of the Efi Barondi Cama 'potency', cleanses Yosleny Luna (Enkrikamo Taria Condo) - another member of the men's religious secret society with dry beverage during the oath ceremony.



An Ireme, a masked dancer of the men's religious secret society known as Abakua (or Nanigo), dances during the oath ceremony.

2021: A YEAR OF SPACE TOURISM, FLIGHTS ON MARS, CHINA'S RISE



Photo shows a Simorgh (Phoenix) satellite rocket lifting off during its launch at an undisclosed location in Iran. The Islamic republic carried out a new space launch, in a move likely to irk Western powers amid tough talks on reviving a 2015 nuclear deal. —AFP Photos



Photo shows a Simorgh (Phoenix) satellite rocket lifting off during its launch at an undisclosed location in Iran.



From the Mars Ingenuity helicopter's first powered flight on another world to the launch of the James Webb telescope that will peer into the earliest epoch of the Universe, 2021 was a huge year for humanity's space endeavors. Beyond the science milestones, billionaires battled to reach the final frontier first, an all-civilian crew went into orbit, and Star Trek's William Shatner waxed profound about what it meant to see the Earth from the cosmos, as space tourism finally came into its own. Here are selected highlights.

Red Planet robot duo

NASA's Perseverance Rover survived its "seven minutes of terror," a time when the craft relies on its automated systems for descent and landing, to touch down flawlessly on Mars' Jezero Crater in February. Since then, the car-sized robot has been taking photos and drilling for samples for its mission: determining whether the Red Planet might have hosted ancient microbial life forms. A rock sample return mission is planned for sometime in the 2030s.

With its state-of-the-art instruments, "Percy," as the helicopter is affectionately known, can also zap Martian rock and chemically analyze the vapor. Percy has a partner along for the ride: Ingenuity, a four-pound (two kilogram) rotorcraft that in April succeeded in the first powered flight on another

celestial body, just over a century after the Wright brothers' achieved the same feat here on Earth, and has performed many more since.

"Perseverance is sort of the flagship mission, it's doing a long-term detailed investigation of this fascinating area of Mars," Jonathan McDowall, an astronomer at the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics, told AFP. By contrast, "Ingenuity, is one of these cute, small, cheap little technology demos that NASA can do so well," he added. The insights gained from Ingenuity could help scientists develop Dragonfly, a planned thousand-pound drone copter, to search for signs of life on Saturn's moon Titan in the mid-2030s.

Private spaceflight takes off

An American millionaire became the world's first space tourist in 2001, but it took 20 more years for the promise of private space flight to finally materialize. In July, Virgin Galactic founder Richard Branson faced off against Blue Origin's Jeff Bezos to be the first non-professional astronaut to complete a suborbital spaceflight.

While the British tycoon won that battle by a few days, it was Blue Origin that raced ahead, launching three more flights with paying customers and celebrity guests. Elon Musk's SpaceX entered the fray in September with a three-day orbital mission around the Earth featuring an all-civilian crew on

Lifestyle | Feature

Friday, December 31, 2021

Inspiration 4. "It's really exciting that finally, after so long this stuff is finally happening," said space industry analyst Laura Seward Forczyk, author of the forthcoming book "Becoming Off-Worldly," intended to prepare future space travelers.

But it was William Shatner, who played the swashbuckling Captain Kirk on the 1960s TV series "Star Trek," who stole the show with a moving account of his experience. "What you're looking down on is Mother Earth, and it needs protecting," he told reporters. A Russian crew shot the first feature film in space aboard the International Space Station (ISS) in 2021, and Japanese tourists made their own visit there on a Russian rocket.

For a few minutes on December 11, there were a record 19 humans in space when Blue Origin carried out its third crewed mission, the Japanese team were on the ISS along with its normal crew, and Chinese taikonauts were in position on their station. The sight of wealthy elites gallivanting in the cosmos hasn't been to everyone's liking, however, and the nascent space tourism sector triggered a backlash from some who said there were more pressing issues to face, such as climate change, here on Earth.

Globalization of space

During the Cold War, space was dominated by the United States and the former Soviet Union. Now, in addition to the explosion of the commercial sector, which is sending up satellites at a dizzying pace, China, India and others are increasingly flexing their space flight muscles.

China's Tiangong (Palace in the Sky) space station—its first long-term outpost—was launched in April, while its first Mars rover, Zhurong, landed in May, making it the only the second country to achieve such an exploit. "In the past 20 years since China finally decided to go big on space, they've been in catch up mode," said McDowall. "And now they're kind of there, and they're starting to do things that the US hasn't done."

The UAE placed a probe into Martian orbit in February, becoming the first Arab nation and fifth overall to reach the planet. Russia meanwhile launched a missile at one of its own satellites, becoming the fourth country to hit a spacecraft from the ground, in a move that reignited concerns about the growing space arms race. Washington slammed Moscow for its "reckless" test, which generated over 1,500 pieces of large orbital debris, dangerous for low Earth orbit missions such as the ISS.

Coming soon...

The year closed out with the launch of the James Webb Space Telescope, a \$10 billion marvel that will make use of



Photo shows a Soyuz-2.1b rocket booster with a Fregat upper stage and satellites of British firm OneWeb blasting off from a launchpad at the Baikonur Cosmodrome.

infrared technology to peer back 13 billion years in time. "It's arguably the most expensive, single scientific platform ever created," said Casey Drier, chief advocate of the Planetary Society.

"To push the boundaries of our knowledge about the cosmos, we had to build something capable of accessing that ancient past," he added. It will reach Lagrange Point 2, a space landmark a million miles from Earth, in a matter of weeks, then gradually start up and calibrate its systems, coming online around June. Also next year, the launch of Artemis 1 - when NASA's giant Space Launch System (SLS) will carry the Orion capsule to the Moon and back, in prepa-

ration for America's return with humans later this decade.

NASA plans to build lunar habitats and use lessons learned there for forward missions to Mars in the 2030s. Observers are encouraged that the program launched by former president Donald Trump has continued under Joe Biden—even if he hasn't been as vocal in his support. Finally, sometime next fall, NASA's DART probe will smash into an asteroid to kick it off course. The proof-of-concept test is a dry run should humanity ever need to stop a giant space rock from wiping out life on Earth, as seen in Netflix's new hit film "Don't Look Up."—AFP



Photo shows a Soyuz-2.1b rocket booster with a Fregat upper stage and satellites of British firm OneWeb blasting off from a launchpad at the Baikonur Cosmodrome.



ArianeSpace's Ariane 5 rocket with NASA's James Webb Space Telescope onboard lifts up from the launchpad, at the Europe's Spaceport, the Guiana Space Center in Kourou, French Guiana. The telescope, the most powerful space observatory ever built, is now tentatively set for launch on Christmas Day, after decades of waiting. An engineering marvel, it will help answer fundamental questions about the Universe, peering back in time 13 billion years.

Kids Page

Word Search

Fall Word Search



ACORN
APPLE
FALL
JACKET

LEAF
PUMPKIN
RAKE
SCHOOL



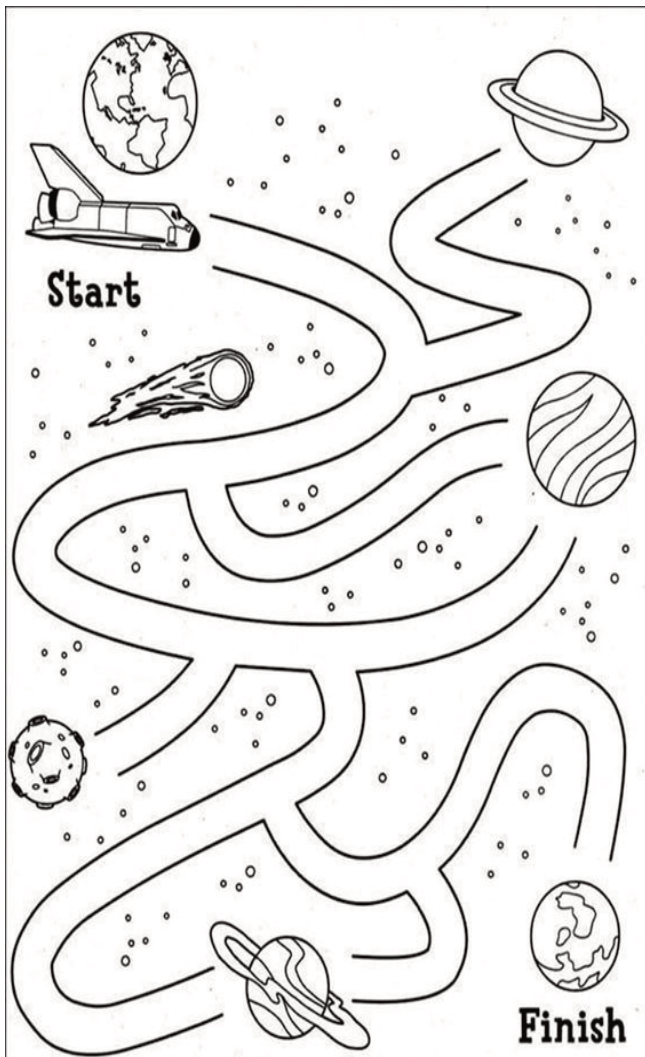
© 2011 graphics for print.com

Color It



- 1—Red
- 2—Yellow
- 3—Blue
- 4—Green
- 5—Orange
- 6—Purple
- 7—Brown
- 8—Black

Kids Mazes



Find the objects



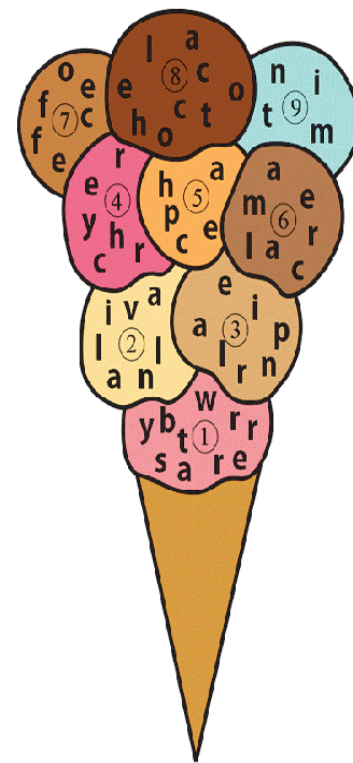
Find 15 objects in the picture



Word Scramble

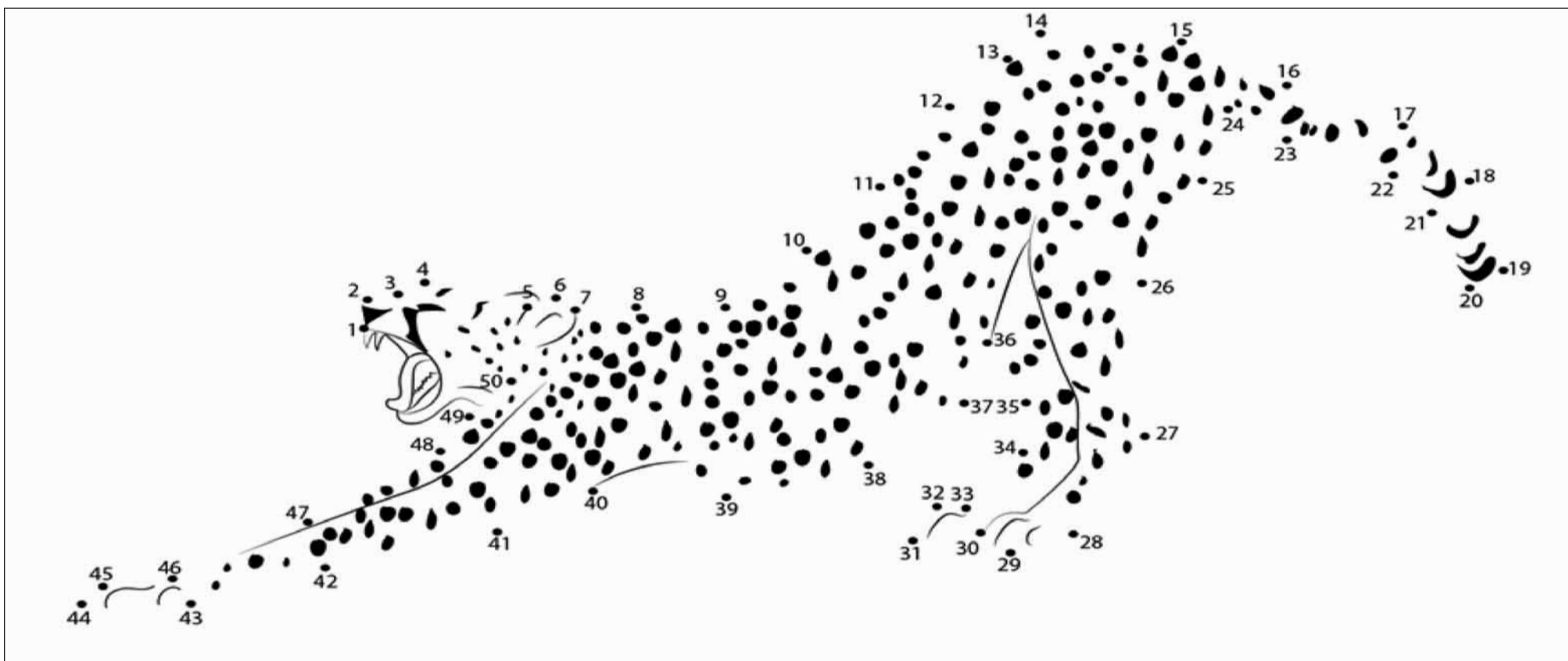
Andrew couldn't decide what flavor of ice cream he wanted most, so he just asked for a nine scoop cone. Unscramble the letters on each scoop to find out what flavors he enjoyed.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____



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Join the dots



Business

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 31, 2021

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33 Energy costs soar in 2021, fuelled by political unrest

33 Huawei MatePad Pro with EMUI 11 and Huawei M-Pencil

34 Citroen pulls Egypt ad over 'harassment of women'



Turkish currency crisis turns political with lawsuit threat

Top minister urges citizens to sue economists who comment on lira's slide

ISTANBUL: Turkey's currency crisis turned increasingly political yesterday after a top minister urged citizens to sue economists who comment on social media about the lira's slide. Finance Minister Nureddin Nebati's unusual remarks late Wednesday followed the banking regulator's decision to file complaints against more than 20 people—including a former central bank governor—over their Twitter posts.

Turkey's beleaguered currency entered a tailspin that saw it lose nearly half its value from the start of November to the moment President Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced new currency support measures last week. Analysts blame the falls on Erdogan's unorthodox decision to fight inflation by orchestrating sharp interest rate cuts—the exact opposite of what countries usually do in similar circumstances.

The criminal complaint targeted journalists and economists who said the lira's falls would continue until Erdogan radically reversed his policy course. Nebati accused the commentators of using “psychological warfare” by urging Turks to buy gold and dollars in order to preserve their savings against further lira declines. “File a lawsuit against anyone who misleads you,” Nebati urged citizens in a wide-ranging interview on CNN Turk.

“Let the small investor who makes a loss sue the one who misled them.”

‘Violation of privacy’

The Turks named in the criminal complaint include former central bank chief Durmus Yilmaz—now a parliament member from the nationalist opposition Iyi Parti (Good Party)—and economist Guldem Atabay. Emerging markets economist Timothy Ash of BlueBay Asset Management called Yilmaz “the best governor during my stint in covering Turkey”.

Yilmaz headed the policy-setting bank when Turkey was still a foreign investors' darling between 2006 and 2011. “Guldem Atabay is just an excellent economist trying to do her best covering Turkey,” Ash added. The controversy comes with Erdogan's government preparing to unveil new legislation ahead of an election due within the next 18 months aimed at further tightening government controls over social media.

Turkey has used the threat of heavy penalties to force Twitter and other platforms to appoint local representatives who can quickly follow through on court orders to take down contentious posts. Yilmaz continued his attacks on Erdogan's team yesterday by poking fun at the finance minister's suggestion that the US Federal Reserve was owned “by five families”



ISTANBUL: A bystander looks at shops in Eminonu bazaar district of Istanbul. —AFP

and lacked real independence.

“I swear, we are so tired of this,” Yilmaz wrote. Economist and journalist Mustafa Sonmez lodged his own complaint against Istanbul's chief public prosecutor and the banking regulator yesterday for publicly naming him in its press release. “Their crime: violation of the privacy of private life, damage to reputation and targeting,” Sonmez said on Twitter.

Erdogan's new currency support measures are designed to make Turks

feel safer about holding liras in the bank. They effectively tie the value of special new deposits to the dollar by promising to compensate excessive losses incurred from swings in the exchange rate.

The central bank said late Wednesday it would also extend this “incentive” program to people who hold their savings in gold. Much of the focus in Turkey is now centered on how ordinary citizens respond to the policy moves. Top officials have been

incensed by media reports and claims from opposition leaders that the government has spent huge sums in the past few weeks indirectly supporting the exchange rate.

Erdogan's team argues that the lira's gains last week were prompted by trust in the new banking schemes and not the alleged currency interventions. The lira has reversed its course correction and lost about 15 percent of its value against the dollar since the start of the week. —AFP

PREMIER MARKET WEEKLY TECHNICAL BULLETIN

WEEK ENDED ON 30 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	1002	997	1002	987	15	15,697,184	-2	-0.20%	15.48%	990	1005	21.6	2.08	1.9%	1.26
102	Gulf Bank	Banking	280	279	282	275	7	14,758,613	0	0.00%	22.83%	270	282	22.4	1.30	1.7%	1.13
106	Kuwait International Bank	Banking	216	218	221	214	7	25,227,544	3	1.40%	1.44%	218	222	76.6	0.95	0.0%	1.01
107	Burgan Bank	Banking	235	251	252	234	18	24,265,806	16	6.81%	5.16%	242	256	19.0	1.14	1.7%	1.05
108	Kuwait Finance House	Banking	840	832	840	831	9	17,454,726	-7	-0.83%	22.01%	830	837	32.6	3.64	1.1%	1.40
109	Boubyan Bank	Banking	786	790	799	782	17	2,117,782	2	0.25%	37.68%	787	791	58.3	4.56	0.0%	1.05
204	National Investments	Financial Services	218	219	222	212	10	151,780,052	-1	-0.45%	68.89%	218	224	7.0	0.93	4.6%	1.25
205	Kuwait Projects	Financial Services	138	142	145	136	9	15,935,777	5	3.65%	-14.47%	140	145	32.3	1.76	2.6%	0.59
252	Al Imtiaz Investment	Financial Services	118	118	120	116	4	4,009,007	-1	-0.84%	8.04%	117	123	NM	0.72	0.0%	1.00
401	Kuwait Real Estate	Real Estate	179	179	181	177	4	10,135,566	0	0.00%	64.22%	178	181	27.6	1.30	0.0%	0.98
413	Mabaneer	Real Estate	807	793	807	788	19	4,367,695	-12	-1.49%	23.14%	790	798	17.6	1.81	0.7%	1.10
501	National Industries	Financial Services	277	283	284	276	8	8,973,667	6	2.17%	55.68%	281	294	5.6	1.02	0.0%	1.44
505	Gulf Cable	Industrials	905	871	910	870	40	2,454,350	-39	-4.29%	19.60%	867	886	30.7	0.88	5.7%	0.94
514	Boubyan Petrochemical	Basic Materials	875	875	852	875	849	1,520,501	-23	-2.63%	35.47%	850	860	24.2	2.00	6.3%	0.73
526	Al Qurain	Basic Materials	354	347	354	343	11	2,782,469	-8	-2.25%	0.89%	333	357	NM	0.95	4.4%	0.75
603	Agility	Industrials	950	945	953	940	13	4,660,264	-5	-0.53%	41.12%	935	955	2.1	1.02	0.9%	1.48
605	Zain	Telecommunications	593	595	600	593	7	8,872,268	1	0.17%	-1.82%	593	599	13.6	2.17	3.4%	1.34
623	Human Soft Holding	Industrials	3,235	3,224	3,235	3,197	38	380,760	4	0.12%	-15.29%	3200	3275	7.0	3.52	12.3%	0.49
642	ALAFCO	Industrials	218	218	222	215	7	4,098,264	-1	-0.46%	4.17%	216	224	NM	0.70	0.0%	0.88
818	Ahli United Bank	Banking	278	278	284	276	8	62,779,565	-2	-0.71%	22.03%	277	282	19.1	2.15	1.3%	1.15
821	Warba Bank	Banking	267	284	277	264	13	11,776,683	7	2.62%	15.25%	273	278	20.9	2.71	0.0%	1.00
823	Mezzan Holding	Consumer Staples	595	589	598	588	10	2,183,025	-10	-1.67%	-1.97%	589	596	18.4	1.66	2.9%	0.44
824	Integrated Holding	Industrials	370	370	372	368	4	500,842	1	0.27%	2.73%	368	371	NM	1.55	0.0%	0.48
826	Shamal Az-Zour	Utilities	227	228	228	225	3	2,575,269	1	0.44%	-17.33%	227	233	19.4	4.04	3.9%	0.63
827	Boursa Kuwait	Financial Services	1,990	2,020	2,038	1,982	56	977,778	34	1.71%	83.64%	2000	2030	25.9	7.18	2.0%	0.65

* As of end of week closing

Business

China's troubled ride-hailing giant Didi reports \$4.7bn loss

Revenues plummeted after a regulatory crackdown by Beijing

BEIJING: Chinese ride-hailing giant Didi Global yesterday reported a \$4.7 billion loss in the third quarter, as its revenues plummeted because of a regulatory crackdown by Beijing. The troubles for the firm—once called China's Uber—began after it listed in New York in June, seemingly against the wishes of Beijing.

China then shocked investors by launching cybersecurity investigations into the company. Didi was removed from app stores, and its stock has since fallen almost two-thirds in value. The firm announced this month it would delist from the New York Stock Exchange and prepare to shift to Hong Kong.

It reported a third-quarter loss of \$4.7 billion, the bulk of the company's losses for the year to date, in a regulatory filing to the US Securities and Exchange Commission yesterday.

It recorded an operating loss of \$6.3 billion for the first nine months of the year. Total revenues slipped 11 percent in the last quarter, after

China removed Didi from domestic app stores in July, preventing new users from signing up.

China recently proposed a new law under which companies seeking foreign IPOs would need to register with the securities regulator. A listing will be blocked if it is considered a threat to national security. Some of China's biggest firms have listed in the United States in search of more developed markets and fresh lines of cash from a massive investor base, but enthusiasm has wavered as tensions have soared between Washington and Beijing.

Instead, Beijing has encouraged companies to list on domestic exchanges to protect information and prevent data from heading overseas, and to develop China's capital markets.

Beijing's regulatory crackdown has expanded during the last year to curb runaway growth in China's powerful tech and internet sectors, and to reign in the influence of big businesses. — AFP



Shares in China's SenseTime rise on Hong Kong debut

HONG KONG: Shares in Chinese artificial intelligence start-up SenseTime jumped by as much as 23 percent on its Hong Kong debut yesterday despite the company being blacklisted by the United States over accusations of aiding genocide in Xinjiang. The company pulled an initial listing earlier this month after the US Treasury announced sanctions, saying SenseTime was part of China's "military-industrial complex" that provides technology for mass surveillance in the northwestern Chinese province.

Washington said SenseTime's facial recognition software, which can determine a person's ethnicity, was designed in part to be used against Uyghurs and other mostly Muslim minorities in Xinjiang.

SenseTime filed a revised listing on December 20 with the Hong Kong stock exchange, after dismissing the accusations as unfounded and saying the company was "caught in the middle of geopolitical tension". It raised HK\$5.78 billion (\$741 million) selling 1.5 billion shares at HK\$3.85 per share, the bottom of its price range, according to Bloomberg.

SenseTime shares yesterday morning rose as high as HK\$4.74. The sale boosted the wealth of the company's co-founder Tang Xiao'ou, with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology alum's wealth jumping by \$500 million to roughly \$3.9 billion, according to the Bloomberg Billionaires Index.

It is the last major listing this year on Hong Kong's bourse, which has underperformed in recent months as a number of large Chinese listings have been pulled or delayed.

SenseTime earlier secured about \$512 million from nine cornerstone investors, including state-backed Mixed-Ownership Reform Fund and Shanghai Xuhui Capital Investment Company, Bloomberg reported.

After initially denying the existence of the Xinjiang camps, China later defended them as vocational training centers aimed at reducing the appeal of Islamic extremism. Hong Kong finance chief Paul Chan, who attended Thursday's livestreamed listing ceremony, said the company "was subjected to unjustified interference by a foreign government shortly before its listing, an attempt to obstruct the progress of its IPO". "But, for the strong, difficulties and hardships are just ornaments for their success story," he added. —AFP

KFH offers 24/7 e-services during holiday

KUWAIT: Kuwait Finance House (KFH) continues to provide its banking services around the clock through a group of various technological and digital tools during New Year's holiday.

Most of the banking services are available in several channels around the clock, whether through the bank's website, KFH.com, or via the KFHOnline mobile application, or through the KFH Go electronic branches that are spread in many important locations, in addition to the KFH accounts on social media and many E-service channels as per the latest financial technology and digital platforms. KFH Go branch is considered a new electronic channel that helps transfer normal customer transactions to an innovative automated branch, that provides capabilities that allow customers to benefit from highly efficient banking services. It includes more than 80 percent of the services and business provided by the branches in their traditional sense, which makes KFH Go branches the preferred choice to many segments of customers, especially the youth.

KFH GO branches include the XTM device that allows direct video call with service personnel, as well as automatic teller machines and cash deposit machines. The cash deposit machines receive 300 notes per transaction.

Moreover, Customers can perform a variety of interactive banking services through KFH Go's 10 branches located in various places in Kuwait, including Kuwait International Airport, such as: establishing "Murabaha" financing transactions, requesting credit and prepaid cards, updating data and phone numbers, activating bank cards, opening deposits and accounts, instant cheque printing, receiving gold biscuits (10 grams), opening (gold, savings, Al-Rabeh, electron) accounts, online gold purchase and

sell, cardless withdrawals using QR code through mobile, or by using Civil ID or phone number, in addition to many other financing and banking services conducted quickly, easily and safely.

The electronic banking services at KFH are also characterized by their high efficiency in addition to ease and safety. This was evident in the number of electronic banking operations that KFH customers carried out via KFHonline, on the website or through the mobile application.

The e-banking transactions includes: opening a bank account online for citizens and residents to join become a KFH customer without having to visit the branch, local and telex financial transfers, opening deposits, adding beneficiaries, balance inquiry, cheque book request, requesting financing, opening an account, requesting Al-Kheir Card, and checking the PINs for credit and debit cards, activating new bank cards, reporting a lost credit/debit cards, checking the financing obligations and the number of installments, perusal of investment plans, receiving account balances and deposits summary, along with other wide range of digital services.

KFH has recently launched digital signature service in personal financing products through KFH mobile app or desktop from anywhere without having to visit the branch, instant card issuance within 3 minutes, Live FX Pricing, instant cross-border payments service at KFH-Turkey using Ripple's technology and digital Wallet service through smart mobiles and watches which provides advanced and smart digital payment methods according to highly developed security standards in cooperation with Samsung, Fitbit and Garmin.

Meanwhile, the call center continues to provide services around the clock to receive customer calls, listen to their enquiries and respond to them through a qualified and technically advanced staff. KFH provides the automated telephone service 1803333 that works with the same efficiency and speed, to respond to transfers between accounts, inquire about financial operations, pay bills, and recharge Mobile phone cards, along with other services.

Energy costs soar in 2021, fuelled by political unrest

Geopolitical tensions between producers and consumers escalate

PARIS: Energy prices soared in 2021 — with gas, oil, coal, electricity and carbon all shooting higher in large part owing to a resurgence of geopolitical tensions between producers and consumers.

The “steep rise in prices was probably the most dramatic development on the commodities markets in 2021”, noted Commerzbank analyst Barbara Lambrecht. The most spectacular surge was that of Europe’s reference gas price, Dutch TTF, which hit 187.78 euros per megawatt hour in December — 10 times higher compared with the start of the year.

The spike has been fuelled by geopolitical tensions surrounding Russia, which supplies one third of Europe’s gas. Western countries accuse Russia of limiting gas deliveries to put pressure on Europe amid tensions over the Ukraine conflict and to push through the controversial Nord Stream 2 pipeline set to ship Russian gas to Germany.

Critics say Nord Stream 2 will increase Europe’s dependence on Russian gas and Ukraine has described it as a “geopolitical weapon”. Russian energy giant Gazprom has strongly rejected Western accusations that Moscow is limiting gas deliveries to Europe, already hit by low stocks as economies reopen from pandemic lockdowns.

Reliance on gas increased as calmer

weather has reduced the availability of wind power.

OPEC oil impact

Crude oil prices rocketed also in 2021, gaining more than 50 percent as demand recovered and oil producing nations led by the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries and allies including Russia modestly boosted supplies. It came after OPEC+ drastically slashed output in 2020 as the pandemic began to unfold, and virus-related restrictions caused demand and prices to crash.

Although crude prices have shot back up, trading above \$75 per barrel heading into the new year, the jump “seems almost moderate by comparison” with gas, noted Lambrecht.

US oil benchmark contract, West Texas Intermediate, reached a seven-year peak at \$85 per barrel in October, before easing.

Chain reaction

Soaring gas and oil prices have pushed up the cost of coal, one of the most polluting fossil fuels, at a time when countries are under pressure to increasingly switch to cleaner energy sources.

A ton of coal for delivery to the ports of Amsterdam-Rotterdam-Antwerp struck \$280 at the start of October, nearly three times the



price that had lasted for around a decade. This helped to push up European carbon prices, which reached above 90 euros per ton for the first time in December, around three times the level at the start of the year. Carbon trading, while seen as a key way to prevent climate change, involves companies buying the right to pollute from others who have a

lower carbon footprint.

Electricity prices have also surged. Electricity for delivery in France next year rose above 450 euros per megawatt hour in December, four times more than in early September.

The surge in energy prices is fuelling high inflation worries as soaring costs badly affect businesses and consumers globally. —AFP

Huawei MatePad Pro with EMUI 11 and Huawei M-Pencil can help bring out artistic eye in you

KUWAIT: You never know when a moment of inspiration will arrive. Therefore, it is important to have a creative tool that is always by your side even when on-the-move, like the Huawei MatePad Pro. With EMUI 11 new software update on the Huawei MatePad Pro., this is exactly what you are getting and with the Huawei M-Pencil, you get to explore your artistic side and do things you did not know you could.

Whether you are taking notes, sketching, painting or animating here are a few useful apps that work well with the Huawei MatePad Pro and the Huawei M-Pencil to help enhance your creativity and artistry.

Huawei M-Pencil: A magical wand right at your hands

The Huawei M-Pencil works with Huawei MatePad Pro to offer precise and smooth controls as well as low latency for traditional handwriting experience. It is easy to store and carry along, making it an ideal note taking and sketching tool. The Huawei M-Pencil offers precise control with pressure sensitivity. Briefly, the thickness of lines change according to the amount of pressure you apply; the lighter you hold the pen, the thinner the lines will be. This may not be a concern for regular handwriting, but it is necessary for those who use the Huawei M-Pencil to draw.

Noteshelf: watch your thoughts flow as you write

Noteshelf is a top app designed for journals, planning daily activities, creating travel blogs, writing lyrics, sketching and jotting down shopping lists. The Noteshelf app offers multiple types of brushes, colors and stroke thickness for you to choose from and you can save them as your favorites to use them directly next time. If you also need to erase or highlight lines the eraser as well as a marker can help with that respectively.

In addition, the Noteshelf app supports image and text insertions giving you the chance to create notes with a combination of handwriting and texts in print. Other features include the Lasso feature, which lets you select any area and move it around. Additionally, the Shape feature allows you to convert a random sketch into a certain standard shape.

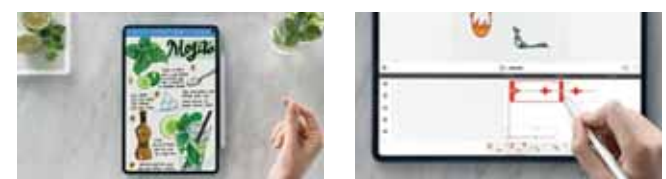
Zen Brush 3: Sketch, draw and paint - let your imagination fly

The popular and unique calligraphy and ink painting app, Zen Brush 3, is now available on Huawei AppGallery for download, which you can use on the Huawei MatePad Pro. Not only does it offer special brush sketching and painting experience, this app can accurately mimic your haptic effects of writing on paper with a brush. The ink looks real with layers as if written on a piece of paper. You do not have to be a pro to appreciate it - even amateurs will find the Zen Brush 3 app charming.

You also do not need to have the technical expertise of working with a brush - just go ahead and write on the Huawei MatePad Pro as you would with a regular pen. However, if you are keen, Zen Brush 3 offers various, customizable brushes and papers that will entice you to hone your craft even more.

FlipaClip: Animate your content with style

Perhaps you want some animations to add into your videos, blogs or posts. FlipaClip, an easy-to-use tablet animation app is available on the Huawei AppGallery for download can help you to just that and a little more as well. The FlipaClip app provides various free painting tools and allows you to edit complicated content on different layers. By using easy-to-use animation tools, you can edit and create every single frame with handwriting or drawing. Whether you are a regular



user or professional, FlipaClip helps display your inspirations and creative ideas to life.

Creativity is no longer exclusive to certain software or apps, it is now easily accessed no matter where you are to create and explore your artistic vibe anytime, anywhere with EMUI 11 software update on the Huawei MatePad Pro and the Huawei M-Pencil and that is certainly the right way to unleash your potential.

Business

Citroen pulls Egypt ad over 'harassment of women'

The advert slammed on social media in Egypt where women harassment is on rise

Burgan Bank continues to service customers on New Year holiday

KUWAIT: Burgan Bank announced that it will closing all branches on Sunday, January 2, 2022, on the occasion of the New Year's holiday. The Bank will resume normal operating hours at all branches on Monday, January 3, 2022. However, to accommodate Burgan Bank customers, the Airport Branch will resume for 24/7 during the holidays.

For more information on any products or services, customers are encouraged to contact Burgan Bank's contact center or WhatsApp at any time. Customers can conduct their financial transactions using Burgan Bank App & online services easily and securely. Burgan Bank would like to take this opportunity and extend its best wishes and greetings in the celebration of the New Year.

AUB offers its services to its customers during New Year holiday

KUWAIT: On the occasion of the Gregorian New Year, Ahli United Bank (AUB) congratulates and extends its warm wishes to His Highness the Amir of Kuwait Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, the government, the citizens of Kuwait and all residents across the country. May Allah the Almighty bless the nation with prosperity and joy. During the occasion of the New Year, all AUB branches in Kuwait will be closed on Sunday 02 January 2022 and will resume work on Monday 03 January 2022.

AUB has confirmed that during this period customers will be able to conduct their banking services through the Bank's electronic channels, including mobile and internet Banking (www.ahliunited.com.kw), and through the 24/7 telebanking 'Hayakom'. Furthermore, customers can also conduct their financial transactions through the Bank's ATMs which are conveniently located across Kuwait.

CAIRO: French car manufacturer Citroen withdrew yesterday an advertisement featuring Egyptian singer Amr Diab after it sparked widespread accusations of promoting the harassment of women. In the ad posted on Egyptian social media in early December, the 60-year-old pop star uses a camera installed in the car's rearview mirror to secretly take a picture of a woman crossing in front of the vehicle.

The woman clearly does not give her consent to the photograph, but Diab is shown smiling at the image as it pops up on his phone. He then invites the woman to join him in the car. The advert was slammed on social media in a country where some 90 percent of women aged between 18 and 39 reported having been harassed in 2019, according to a survey by the Arab Barometer research network.

"Taking a picture of a woman without her consent is creepy," women's rights activist Reel Abdellatif wrote on Twitter. "You're enabling sexual harassment." Another critic, Ahmed Tawfik, questioned how the company could have thought the advert had been a good idea.

"How did this ever get approved in the first place?" he wrote, beneath the post on Instagram.

"That's the real issue here. This shows that there's a whole TEAM of individuals who at no point along the way ever thought 'is this appropriate?', or 'is there nothing wrong with this?'"

Yesterday, Citroen said it had removed the advert. "We have been made aware that a scene... had been perceived as inappropriate", Citroen wrote in a statement posted on their Instagram account. "We take the decision to withdraw this version of the commercial... and we present our sincere apologies to all offended communities by this film."

Cash-strapped Tunisia to borrow \$7bn more in 2022

TUNIS: Debt-ridden Tunisia unveiled a 2022 budget on Tuesday that will see it borrow almost \$7 billion more, as it seeks to stimulate an economy battered by the coronavirus pandemic. The 2022 finance law boosts spending by over three percent year on year to 57.3 billion dinars (\$19.8 billion, 17.6 billion euros), finance minister Sihem Boughdiri said.

The deficit is expected to hit some 6.2 percent of gross domestic product (GDP), she told reporters.

The government will borrow almost 20 billion dinars (\$6.9 billion, 5.7 billion euros) to cover 2022 expenditures, bringing government debt to 82.6 percent of GDP. Around two thirds of the figure is to come from foreign lenders, and the remainder from domestic sources, Boughdiri said. Tunisia has suffered years of economic woes exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic, with high inflation and unemployment at around 18 percent. Foreign debt in 2021 hit 100 percent of GDP.

In order to replenish state coffers, the authorities are also hoping to reach a bailout deal with the International Mone-



CAIRO: French car manufacturer Citroen withdrew yesterday an advertisement featuring Egyptian singer Amr Diab after it sparked widespread accusations of promoting the harassment of women.

Online, people kept up criticism of Diab, a megastar in the Arab world, for his part in the advert and failure to apologize.

"People look up to him as an idol and he is well aware of the unsafe situations Egyptian women constantly face," wrote a Twitter user called Mena. "It's alarming that he didn't see the red flags in this scenario." Diab posted the advert on his social media accounts so millions of Arabs had access to it. —AFP



A mask-clad customer speaks with a fruit seller at the central market in Tunisia's capital Tunis. —AFP

tary Fund, Boughdiri confirmed. "Negotiations with the IMF will restart at the beginning of 2022," Boughdiri said.

She said 80 experts had formulated "a program of reforms in several sectors". Tunisia's previous government had been in talks with the IMF over a new bailout package, when President Kais Saied in July sacked ministers and seized far-reaching powers. A deal with the global lender could entail politically painful reforms, such as cutting subsidies on basic goods or tackling the wage bill of a public sector that employs some 680,000 of the country's 12 million inhabitants. —AFP

India make 'perfect start' to series with victory over South Africa

CENTURION, SOUTH AFRICA: India completed a convincing 113-run win on the fifth day of the first Test against South Africa at SuperSport Park in Centurion yesterday to make a "perfect start" to the series. Resuming on 94 for four in a chase of 305 to win, South Africa were bowled out for 191, losing their last three wickets in the first two overs after lunch.

Jasprit Bumrah and Mohammed Shami took three wickets each. Fellow fast bowler Mohammed Siraj claimed two wickets and off-spinner Ravichandran Ashwin dismissed the last two batsmen off successive deliveries. The win gave India a 1-0 lead in the three-match World Test Championship series and boosted their chances of winning a series in South Africa for the first time.

"We got off to the perfect start," said Indian captain Virat Kohli. "Getting a result in four days (the second day was lost to rain) shows how well we played this Test match and how motivated and keen we were to start off in the manner we did." There was early resistance from South African captain Dean Elgar and Temba Bavuma, with Elgar surviving a caught and bowled chance to Shami when he was on 63.

Bumrah switched to bowling around the wicket and trapped Elgar leg before wicket for 77 when the batter played around a

delivery angled into his stumps. Siraj ended an aggressive innings of 21 by Quinton de Kock when the batter edged an attempted drive into his stumps and Shami had Wiaan Mulder caught behind with a ball which moved just enough off the seam to take the outside edge of the bat.

Marco Jansen was caught behind off Shami in the first over after lunch before Ashwin wrapped up the innings, leaving Bavuma, South Africa's top-scorer in the first innings with 52, stranded on 35. "You need runs to compete," said Elgar of South Africa's first innings of 197 in reply to India's 327. "The basics of the game still apply and we didn't do them well from a batting point of view."

India were in command from the first day, when KL Rahul's century enabled them to reach 272 for three after winning the toss. Kohli said playing at Centurion, where South Africa had won 21 out of 26 previous Test matches, was always difficult for visiting teams. "We had to be absolutely clinical with the bat, the ball and in the field," he said.

Kohli said a key factor was the discipline shown by India's opening batters, Rahul and Mayank Agarwal, who put on 117 for the first wicket on the first day. "Winning the toss and batting first in tough conditions



CENTURION, South Africa: South Africa's Quinton de Kock plays a shot as India's wicket-keeper Rishabh Pant looks on during the fifth day of the first Test match between at SuperSport Park yesterday. — AFP

overseas is always a tough challenge. A lot of credit has to go to Mayank and KL who set up this Test match for us."

The entire second day was lost to rain and conditions proved more difficult for batters when play resumed on the third day,

with fast bowlers of both sides exploiting indentations on the pitch which caused variable bounce. Shami took five for 44 in the first innings to give India a crucial lead of 130 runs. He finished with match figures of eight for 107. — AFP

Bangladesh series farewell tour for Kiwi great Taylor

WELLINGTON: The decision by New Zealand great Ross Taylor to end his illustrious Test career after the looming Bangladesh series has placed a new emphasis on the two matches which start at Mt Maunganui's Bay Oval tomorrow. From being a chance for New Zealand to get their World Test championship campaign back on track after the recent 1-0 loss to India, it has become a farewell to Taylor, a cricketing great who hit the winning runs when the Black Caps won the first World Test crown this year.

After the Tests, Taylor has a series of one-day internationals to play against Australia and the Netherlands before stepping away from international cricket. While he is uncomfortable with the closing weeks of his career being termed "a farewell tour", the 110-Test veteran accepts that's the way it will be. "It doesn't sit that well with me but I know it needs to be done," he said. "I would have liked to have just pulled the stumps but it gives my family and friends and fans a chance to come and watch me for one last time."



Ross Taylor

It will also give him a chance to build on his 19 Test centuries and close in on the New Zealand record of 24 held by Kane Williamson. Bangladesh always struggle in New Zealand conditions and have never won there, losing nine from nine in five visits and unable to even scramble a draw in rain-disrupted Tests as they fail to make the transition from their slow-turning home wickets to the Black Caps' traditional pace-friendly green tops.

They arrived in New Zealand on the back of a 2-0 home-series loss to Pakistan and without talismanic batsmen Shakib al Hasan, who made himself unavailable after being selected, and Mahmudullah, who retired recently. Liton Das stood out against Pakistan, especially in the first Test with innings of 114, 59, although his best in New Zealand conditions is 33 at the Basin Reserve two years ago when Bangladesh were beaten by an innings and 12 runs. — AFP

England coach to miss Sydney Test after virus case

SYDNEY: England's beleaguered Ashes tour went from bad to worse yesterday with under-pressure coach Chris Silverwood to miss the fourth Test in Sydney after a family member tested positive for the coronavirus. Silverwood and his family have to isolate in Melbourne for 10 days while the rest of the team head to Sydney for the clash starting on Jan 5.

The touring party has now registered seven positive cases - three support staff and four family members - since a PCR testing regime was implemented on Monday after the virus was first detected during the Boxing Day Test. "A fourth successive round of PCR tests will be administered today," the England Cricket Board said in a statement, adding that the team would share a charter flight with Australia to Sydney on Friday.

Australian reports said England fast bowling coach Jon Lewis, spin coach Jeetan Patel and strength and conditioning boss Darren Veness were also believed to be in isolation. Batting coach Graham Thorpe is expected to take over as head coach in the interim. International Cricket Council match referee David Boon, who has officiated at every Test so far, will also miss

Sydney after he too tested positive.

Silverwood's absence is another major setback for England on a tour where little has gone right, suffering three heavy defeats in Brisbane, Adelaide and Melbourne to ensure Australia retained the hallowed Ashes urn with two Tests still to play. And the timing could not have been worse, with his job widely seen as on the line. Joe Root's captaincy has also been criticised, but fast-bowler Chris Woakes insisted he had the support of the players.

"Absolutely. Joe is a great cricketer, he's got a great cricket brain and I think his record as England captain is actually pretty good," he told English media. "Definitely it feels like Joe will continue. Hopefully he will. It's clear that the captaincy isn't having an effect on his batting, which a lot of the time with captains can be the case." Root will overtake predecessor Alastair Cook's record of 59 Tests at the helm when he leads the side out in Sydney.

Australia has experienced a surge in Covid cases in recent weeks, with an Omicron variant outbreak centered in Sydney that on Thursday recorded more than 12,000 cases. In New South Wales, where Sydney is located, anyone considered a close contact is supposed to isolate for seven days, but authorities have pledged the rules would not impact the "sacred" Ashes.

"The SCG (Sydney Cricket Ground) Test is sacred, an important date at the start of the third year of our life with Covid-19," NSW Health Minister Brad Hazzard said this week. — AFP

Sports

Djokovic 'trying' to get to Australian Open

SYDNEY: Novak Djokovic could still play at the Australian Open, a Serbian teammate said yesterday, despite the world number one's last-minute decision to pull out of the ATP Cup in Sydney. The 20-time Grand Slam champion withdrew from this week's teams event days before its start on Saturday, heightening doubts over whether he will defend his Australian Open title. Djokovic has refused to confirm if he has been inoculated against Covid-19, with all participants at the opening Grand Slam of the year needing to be vaccinated or have a medical exemption.

Dusan Lajovic, who will lead Serbia's ATP Cup drive in Djokovic's absence, said his teammate wanted to be in Sydney. "Unfortunately he's not able to come here, but, you know, he was I think hoping, same as we did, that somehow he will be here. Unfortunately he's not, and we've got to deal with it," he said. "I don't know the official reason. Maybe the ATP knows. He just said that he's not coming to the ATP and trying to get to the Australian Open."

Pressed on whether Djokovic would be at Melbourne Park, Lajovic said: "I mean, the decision, he said, 'I'm not coming, guys,' to the ATP Cup. We'll see about the Australian Open. "He didn't specify if he's coming or not but that he's waiting for a decision." It is not clear what that decision is, but if he were to apply for a medical exemption it would be assessed by an independent panel of experts and

remain confidential.

However, government officials in Victoria state, which hosts the Australian Open, have been adamant for months that only vaccinated players can play the tournament from Jan 17-30. "They're the rules. Medical exemptions are just that - it's not a loophole for privileged tennis players," the state's Deputy Premier James Merlino said this month.

'It's his choice'

World number four Stefanos Tsitsipas, who will open Greece's ATP Cup against Poland's Hubert Hurkacz on Saturday, said he respected whatever decision Djokovic made. "If he thinks he's not ready to play here for whatever reason, it's his choice. I think most of the players respect his choice. He has the freedom to choose," he said. Asked whether he felt the rules to play the Australian Open were too tough, he replied: "The rules are rules, and the rules are established for a certain purpose and reason. "So if some players decide not to follow them, it's their choice. I wouldn't say it's right or wrong here."

Spearheaded by Djokovic, Serbia won the inaugural ATP Cup in 2020, beating Rafael Nadal's Spain. Nadal is another no-show in Sydney this year after contracting Covid-19 earlier this month. Lajovic admitted Serbia's task will be much harder without Djokovic when they open their campaign against Norway on Saturday. "You know, it's never



MADRID: In this file photo taken on Dec 3, 2021, Serbia's Novak Djokovic hits a return during the men's singles semifinal match between Croatia and Serbia of the Davis Cup tennis tournament at the Madrid arena. —AFP

the same when you have the number one in your team and then you don't have him. It's a big difference," he said.

In Nadal's absence, Spain are led by world num-

ber 19 Roberto Bautista Agut. They also open their tournament tomorrow, against Chile. Defending champions Russia, led by Daniil Medvedev, play France on Sunday. —AFP

Iran federation defends footballer in row over jersey

TEHRAN: Iran's football federation threw its weight behind former national team captain Mehdi Mahdavi Wednesday after he faced criticism for wearing a jersey bearing the Zionist flag during a friendly game. "He is one of the greats of Iranian football" and "a symbol of pride for the Islamic Republic of Iran", secretary-general Hassan Kamranifar said in a statement on the federation's website.

Ultraconservative lawmakers had lambasted the veteran player after he wore a jersey featuring the flags of all FIFA member countries, including the Zionist entity, during a friendly match in Qatar on December 17. Iran does not recognize archrival Israel as a state and prohibits contact between athletes from the two countries.

Mahdavi "must apologize to the Iranian people for his act and must stand trial because he has betrayed the Iranian nation", MP Bijan Nobaveh-Vatan said, according to the ultraconservative Fars news agency. Kamranifar said Mahdavi had handled the situation with "vigilance". The federation had spoken with him and examined the case "despite prejudice and sometimes unfair attacks", Kamranifar added.

Mahdavi, 44, was named coach of Iran's U23 team in July. He played 111 matches for the national team, and is particularly celebrated for having scored a goal in Iran's famous 2-1 victory over the United States in the 1998 World Cup. The 2003 Asian Player of the Year served as captain of the national team from 2006 to 2009 and spent much of his career playing for European teams, most notably Hamburg SV. —AFP

US sports leagues scramble amid COVID spike

LOS ANGELES: The NBA, NFL and NHL are scrambling to keep teams competing, even as COVID case rates skyrocket in the United States and Canada due to the Omicron variant. As of Wednesday, the United States had hit its highest ever average of new COVID cases, with a seven-day average of 265,427 surpassing the previous peak of 251,989, set in mid-January 2021 - according to a tracker maintained by Johns Hopkins University.

But as evidence mounted of milder outcomes under the new variant, sports leagues were grappling with how best to adjust their coronavirus protocols to protect players, staff and fans while still keeping their schedules intact. The NBA, NFL and NHL all changed their return-to-play rules for players who test positive for COVID-19.

The NFL reduced the period of isolation for both vaccinated and unvaccinated players from 10 to as little as five days if they are asymptomatic. The NBA reduced quarantine time from 10 days to six for asymptomatic, vaccinated players who test positive as they try to avoid the kind of game cancellations that hit Miami on Wednesday - when the Heat found themselves without the requisite eight players to take the floor.

Heat coach Erik Spoelstra admitted that navigating the Omicron surge was sometimes "perplexing", as people with no visible illness were suddenly ruled out amid the league's increased testing. "I think we've gotten to a point where we need more information," Spoelstra said. "Are there more asymptomatic cases? And all this is with the caveat of, OK, with double vaccination, with a booster and then asymptomatic-what does that mean and what adjustments can we make from there."

While it is good news that more of those sidelined by COVID show no signs of serious illness, that does not necessarily help the quest to maintain competitive balance when key players are ruled out. That problem is especially acute in the NFL, with playoff berths up for grabs in the final two weeks

of the regular season. More than 500 NFL players have tested positive for coronavirus in December.

Indianapolis Colts quarterback Carson Wentz, who is unvaccinated, was among them - a potentially massive blow for a team that is in the thick of the chase for a wild card playoff spot. However, Wentz and the Colts could benefit from the NFL guidelines revised in the wake of new CDC recommendations that allow for a quicker return of both vaccinated and unvaccinated players who have had no fever for 24 hours and whose other symptoms, such as a cough, "have resolved or improved".

That might mollify Green Bay Packers quarterback Aaron Rodgers, who complained on a podcast this week that the NFL had created an unfair "two-class system" for vaccinated and unvaccinated players. But teams still have a bewildering array of variables to negotiate, from the NFL's return to stricter masking and social distancing rules in club facilities to varying local public health regulations.

COVID crapshoot

Many teams have tightened up their social distancing rules, going back to virtual meetings in a bid to keep players healthy. "It's tough, especially with the NFC and AFC playoff races close," Colts defensive lineman DeForest Buckner said. "I just feel like the teams that can handle the COVID-19 situation are going to be the ones that are going to be able to pull out and get into the playoffs, to be honest." The NBA are still shy of their season midpoint, but the uncertainties posed by the virus are taking a toll nonetheless. "It's literally a crapshoot every single time you take a test at this point on who is negative and who is positive," Los Angeles Lakers superstar LeBron James said. "You've just got to see who is available and go from there."

Coronavirus cases have led to cancelled training and less than a dozen cancelled games in the NBA, but teams have had to cope without head coaches sidelined by the virus and in some cases filled out lineups with journeymen from the developmental league under special signing rules implemented to keep the season rolling. "Of course there's a certain amount of unfairness," NBA commissioner Adam Silver said of a solution that sees depleted teams soldiering on. "But the other advantage is we do have an 82-game season and we have a long playoffs and my sense is things will work out by the end of the season." —AFP

Morant fires Grizzlies over James's Lakers

LOS ANGELES: Ja Morant scored 41 points to power the Memphis Grizzlies to a third straight NBA victory on Wednesday, a 104-99 come-from-behind win over LeBron James and the Los Angeles Lakers. Morant, whose last-second basket lifted the Grizzlies to a 114-113 win over the Phoenix Suns on Monday, scored a career-high six three-pointers. He spearheaded the Grizzlies' comeback from a 14-point third-quarter deficit, delivering 25 points in the second half as Memphis consolidated their fourth-place position in the Western Conference.

The Phoenix Suns, meanwhile, tied the Golden State Warriors atop the West with an 115-97 victory over the Oklahoma City Thunder. The Lakers were ultimately undone by 18 turnovers in an often sloppy performance that wasted a stellar 37-point effort from James. James, on the eve of his 37th birthday, tied a career-high with eight three-pointers and pulled down 13 rebounds.

Along with James' 14th game this season of 30 or more points Russell Westbrook added a triple-double with 16 points, 10 rebounds and 12 assists. But when the Grizzlies offense warmed up in the second half the Lakers couldn't respond and lost for the sixth time in seven games just a day after ending a five-game skid. "I was taking what the defense gave me and it turned out good for us," Morant said. "That's normally how I attack every game. Tonight was just my night."

It was 22-year-old Morant's second big game

against the Lakers this season, after he scored 40 points against them in October. "The guy is a true superstar," said Lakers coach David Fizdale, who is standing in as head coach with Frank Vogel sidelined by COVID. The Lakers had a chance to tie it up in the waning seconds but couldn't get a shot off. "Ja was spectacular once again versus us," James said. "And we just lost a game we could have won. "We've got to cut down the careless turnovers, where literally you just turn the ball over and there's no pressure, no reason for it - those are the ones that get us in trouble."

In Phoenix, Devin Booker scored 38 points for the Suns, who snapped a two-game losing streak and match the Golden State Warriors for best record in the league at 27-7. Booker, 25, became the seventh-youngest NBA player to reach 10,000 career points as the Suns bounced back from losses to the Warriors and Grizzlies. JaVale McGee and Cameron Payne scored 16 points each for the Suns.

LaVine leads Bulls

Ty Jerome scored 24 points to lead the Thunder, who have had five players sidelined by Covid-19 since they fell to the Suns in Phoenix last Thursday. Elsewhere, Chimezie Metu drained a buzzer-beating three-pointer to lift the Sacramento Kings to a 95-94 victory over the Dallas Mavericks. Zach LaVine scored 25 points for Chicago as the Bulls beat the short-handed At-



MEMPHIS: Los Angeles Lakers guard Russell Westbrook #0 reaches out for the ball as Memphis Grizzlies guard Ja Morant #12 falls to the ground at FedExForum on Wednesday. —AFP

lanta Hawks for the second time in three days, 131-117. he Bulls pushed their winning streak to five games against a Hawks team that was without 15 players due to Covid health and safety protocols and injuries. The Los Angeles Clippers beat the Celtics 91-82 in Boston, where Eric Bledsoe

scored 10 of his 17 points in the fourth quarter to help the visitors get over the line. Marcus Morris led Los Angeles with 23 points and 10 rebounds, and Terance Mann and Luke Kennard scored 17 points apiece for the Clippers, who snapped a two-game skid. — AFP

Nets' Irving 'where I belong' despite vaccine holdout

NEW YORK: Kyrie Irving said Wednesday he's grateful to be back in training with the Brooklyn Nets and looking forward to a return to the NBA despite his decision to forego a coronavirus vaccine. "I missed it," Irving acknowledged as he spoke to reporters for the first time since pre-season training camp. The All-Star guard has yet to play this season, but the Nets this month opted to welcome him back, even though his vaccination status means he won't be able to play home games at the Barclays Center because of New York City's vaccine mandate.

The Nets had said in October that they would not allow him back until he could become a full-time player, but after a spate of COVID and injury absences the team decided that having Irving available for road games would be benefit enough. Irving, who has tried to maintain his fitness with pickup games and solo training, admitted he felt nervous as he looked forward to getting back on the court with his NBA peers.

But when he did, he said, he felt right at home. "This is where I belong, this is where I've worked my entire life to be, so it was like riding a bike, or being at the first day of school again, just going back out there and I missed it," Irving said. He is particularly eager to see what he and fellow stars Kevin Durant and James Harden can produce as the Nets try to build on their lead in the Eastern Conference and, ultimately, challenge for a championship.

"We have a lot more left in the tank but obviously our age between us three, us being at a certain level of mastery in this game



Kyrie Irving

is only going to last for a certain amount of time, so we want to strike while the iron is hot," Irving said. Nets coach Steve Nash said Irving "looks great" for a player who hasn't played all season. In addition, he landed in the league's COVID protocols a day after the Nets announced he was returning, further limiting his practice for more than a week.

Nash said the team would have to gauge Irving's readiness, and it's not clear when his first game will be. For Irving, it can't be soon enough. "It's felt like days have just been slowly being crossed off the calendar while I'm sitting at home," Irving said. — AFP

News in brief

Simeone among five COVID cases

MADRID: Atletico Madrid coach Diego Simeone and forward Antoine Griezmann have tested positive for COVID-19, as the reigning La Liga champions announced five new cases yesterday. Atletico said Simeone and 2018 World Cup-winner Griezmann were asymptomatic and isolating along with Koke, Hector Herrera and Joao Felix. La Liga rivals Barcelona also confirmed three new cases, bringing the total to at least nine at the Catalan club, with the league set to resume this weekend after the winter break. Barcelona's Sergino Dest, Philippe Coutinho and Abde Ez-zalzouli join the list of players infected, the club said, after Ousmane Dembele, Clement Lenglet, Samuel Umtiti, Jordi Alba, Gavi and Dani Alves tested positive. — AFP

Osimhen tests positive for COVID

ROME: Nigeria striker Victor Osimhen is isolating after testing positive for coronavirus for a second time, his club side Napoli announced yesterday, with the Africa Cup of Nations due to kick off in just over a week. The 23-year-old, who is still recovering from surgery after suffering a smashed cheekbone against Inter Milan in late November, was tested before travelling to Italy for a check-up today. Osimhen also tested positive for COVID last January after returning from Christmas holidays in Nigeria. "Victor Osimhen has tested positive for COVID-19 but is asymptomatic," Serie A team Napoli said in a statement, without specifying where the player currently is. — AFP

Sports

'Snow guns' spewing manmade Olympics snow raise concerns

YANQING, China: Bright yellow turbines line the slopes of the Beijing Winter Olympics, spraying out the artificial snow needed for the Games to take place. Manmade snow has been used to varying degrees since the 1980 Winter Olympics in Lake Placid, New York. But February's Beijing Games will depend almost entirely on artificial snow because they are happening in one of the driest parts of China.

With just five weeks until the Games begin, organizers are racing to coat the pistes in high-quality snow - a vast and complex task that critics say is environmentally unsustainable. The venues use automated snow-making systems that monitor air temperature and humidity to maximize production. Fed by local reservoirs, about 300 turbines - known as "snow guns" - mix water with compressed air before propelling the droplets into the air to form snow.

Workers then use truck-like vehicles called "snowcats" to spread the snow onto the pistes and sculpt jumps and turns. Venues must ensure the snow meets precise standards of depth, hardness and consistency. "The biggest challenge for us is maintaining uniform snow quality," said Li Xin, deputy chief of mountain operations at the National Alpine Skiing Centre in Yanqing, about 80 km from Beijing. Variations in the snow-making process "can cause snow quality to be too hard in some places and too soft in others, which could be dangerous for the ath-

letes", he told a press event at the site.

Water shortages

The stark white patches stand out vividly against Yanqing's brown mountains, which see minimal natural snowfall. An International Olympic Committee evaluation report said that Zhangjiakou and Yanqing - the Games zones hosting alpine skiing and snowboarding, among other outdoor events - "would rely completely on artificial snow". A 2020 study in science publication *Nature* warned that groundwater depletion in northern China was a "critical issue" and among the highest globally, due to intensive agricultural irrigation, rapid urbanization, and a dry climate.

This has meant water shortages for millions of Beijing residents and the water supply is likely to worsen in the future, researchers said. Organizers at the Winter Olympics say the snowmakers are powered by renewable energy and will not damage mountain ecosystems, while the water they use will return to local reservoirs as the snow melts in spring. The equipment's automated systems reduce the kind of human error that can lead to wastage, said Florian Hajzeri, the China general manager for TechnoAlpin, the Italian company that supplies the machines.

With resorts worldwide turning to artificial snow to operate smoothly through the winter, "no matter which Olympics, there will always



ZHANGJIAKOU, China: This photo taken on Dec 21, 2021 shows a snowmaking machine at the Genting Snow Park, a venue for the Beijing 2022 Olympic Winter Games, during a media tour. — AFP

be snow-making systems for all of the venues", he told AFP. But experts say the reliance on man-made snow undermines Beijing's pledge to hold a "green" Games. Using large quantities of power and resources to create snow in the

water-scarce region is "irresponsible", said Carmen de Jong, a geography professor at France's University of Strasbourg. "We could just as well hold the Olympics on the Moon or on Mars," she said. — AFP

Remove tattoos, Beijing warns football players

BEIJING: Footballers playing in China's national team should remove any existing tattoos and are "strictly prohibited" from getting any new ones, the country's sports administration body has said. The sport has found itself in the crosshairs of the Communist Party's purity drive in recent years, and players on the national football team routinely cover their arms with long sleeves or bandages to hide their tattoos.

But the China Sports Administration statement, dated Tuesday, said that players in the national team "are strictly prohibited from having new tattoos". "Those who have tattoos are advised to have them removed," the statement continued. "In special circumstances, the tattoos must be covered during training and competition, with the consent of the rest of the team." It went on to say that the under-20 national teams and those even younger were "strictly prohibited" from recruiting anyone with tattoos.

But not all fans appeared to be behind the new rules. "Are we choosing a good football player or a saint?" asked one angry fan on the social media platform Weibo. "Shall we

just say outright that only the Party members could play football?" asked another. Body ink is traditionally frowned upon in China but it is increasingly popular among young adults, even as authorities make plain their disdain for it.

The Chinese Football Association has ordered players in the national team to cover tattoos in recent years and packed young footballers off to military camps for drills and Marxist-style "thought education". That has prompted complaints from fans that it is thinking more about politics than sport. Last year, a women's university football match was eventually called off after players were told they were not allowed to have dyed hair.

President Xi Jinping wants China to host and even win the World Cup one day. But they are fifth of six teams in their qualifying group for next year's World Cup, with only the top two guaranteed to qualify. This year, Beijing has also pushed through a series of restrictions on youth culture, including sweeping measures to ban "abnormal aesthetics" and crack down on the perceived excesses of modern entertainment.

It has made an example out of movie stars that allegedly stepped out of line, banned reality talent shows and ordered broadcasters to stop featuring "sissy" men and "vulgar influencers". As tensions have mounted with the West, China has also pushed a nationalist and militaristic narrative at home, including a vision of tough masculinity. — AFP

Japan's Kobayashi wins Four Hills ski jump opener

OBERSTDORF, Germany: Japan's Ryoyu Kobayashi won the first leg of the Four Hills ski-jumping tournament in the German resort of Oberstdorf on Wednesday. Kobayashi, winner of the Four Hills in 2019 and a former overall World Cup champion, scored 302 points to record his fourth World Cup victory of the season as he eyes the Beijing Winter Olympics in February.

The 25-year-old Japanese beat the 299.2 points of Norway's Halvor Egner Granerud with another Norwegian, Robert Johansson, third on 298.6 points. The shock of the day came when the reigning Four Hills champion and three-time winner Kamil Stoch of Poland failed to qualify for a second jump of the day and finished just 41st.

The next stage of the Four Hills is scheduled to take place in Garmisch-Partenkirchen on January 1. The final two legs are in the Austrian resorts of Innsbruck and Bischofshofen on January 4 and 6, respectively. Tens of thousands of spectators normally gather for the event but it is taking place without fans this year because of measures taken by the local authorities to fight coronavirus. — AFP



OBERSTDORF, Germany: Japan's Ryoyu Kobayashi reacts after the final competition round of the Four-Hills FIS ski jumping tournament on Wednesday. — AFP

Man City extend lead to 8 points as Chelsea stumble

LONDON: Manchester City beat Brentford 1-0 on Wednesday to extend their lead at the top of the Premier League to an ominous eight points as title rivals Chelsea conceded a last-gasp equalizer at home to Brighton. Phil Foden's first-half goal was enough to give Pep Guardiola's champions a 10th consecutive league win as they took full advantage of injury-hit Chelsea's slip-up at Stamford Bridge.

The defending champions now have 50 points after 20 matches, putting them eight clear of second-placed Chelsea. Liverpool, who lost to Leicester on Tuesday, are a further point behind. The coronavirus pandemic has ravaged English football's fixture list, leaving some clubs needing to play catch-up, but 2021 will end with City out on their own. Brentford threatened in the opening stages in west London, but City took the lead in the 16th minute when Foden cleverly tucked in a pinpoint cross from Kevin De Bruyne. Foden and Jack Grealish were left out of the starting XI for City's wins over Newcastle and Leicester after they were pictured on a night out following the 7-0 home victory over Leeds. But the England pair were back on the teamsheet on Wednesday and Foden's goal made it a perfect 10 out of 10 for City.

Despite their dominance of possession, the visitors mustered just three shots on target in the entire game and Guardiola looked edgy in the latter stages as his team attempted to see out the victory. They thought they had sealed the three points in the dying minutes

when Aymeric Laporte rose to head home but his goal was ruled out by VAR for a marginal offside. Guardiola, who hailed the "exceptional" Foden, refused to be complacent despite his side's huge lead at the top of the Premier League. "There are 54 points to play for," he told the BBC. "It is not expected to have this distance for eight and nine, but Liverpool play one game less. But it is 54 points. "In December no one is champion. We are going to lose games. I see in my mind Arsenal, Chelsea, Southampton coming.... I cannot say more than congratulations to the team but we must focus."

Chelsea pain

Thomas Tuchel's Chelsea, who kicked off 45 minutes before City, looked poised for victory after Romelu Lukaku headed them into a first-half lead but Brighton substitute Danny Welbeck struck in stoppage time for a 1-1 draw. Chelsea wingback Reece James limped off in the 27th minute with a hamstring injury, to be replaced by Marcos Alonso. The home side went ahead immediately, when Lukaku shook off the attentions of Neal Maupay after a tussle to power a header past goalkeeper Robert Sanchez from a Mason Mount corner. But Graham Potter's side came back strongly, with Adam Lallana and the impressive Yves Bissouma testing Chelsea goalkeeper Edouard Mendy either side of half-time. It looked as though it was going to be a familiar story for Brighton, who have struggled to score this season, but substitute Welbeck had other ideas, heading



LONDON: Chelsea's Spanish defender Marcos Alonso (left) vies with Brighton's English midfielder Tariq Lamptey during an English Premier League match at Stamford Bridge on Wednesday. —AFP

home Marc Cucurella's cross in the 91st minute.

Tuchel counted the cost of further injuries to an already stretched squad after James limped off and Andreas Christensen had to be substituted at half-time.

The club announced on Tuesday that left wing-back Ben Chilwell faced surgery on a knee injury and defender Thiago Silva missed the Brighton game due to a thigh complaint. —AFP

Mohammed Jaffar to make a second run at Dakar Rally

Kuwaiti motocross champion sets different priorities this year

KUWAIT: Mohammed Jaffar, the highly decorated Kuwaiti motocross champion, is ready to attempt a second run at the historic Dakar Rally. The Dakar will begin on Jan 1, and continue for two weeks, concluding on Jan 14, 2022. The Dakar Rally will take place in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, as it has the past several years. In preparation for his return to the rally, Mohammed Jaffar has made adjustments to his goals, and his game plan. This time, his primary target will be to complete the course, and obtain the coveted Dakar Rally medal that is awarded to those who have successfully braved the circuit, start to finish. "This year, I'm going safe all the way," Jaffar said, referring to his careful approach this time around at the upcoming rally.

Other considerations that Jaffar is putting into place are his change of focus, from being primarily speed-oriented, to properly surveying and covering the terrain with precision. "I'm going to focus more on the navigational aspects and worry less about going as fast as I can," Jaffar said. Speed and skill are vital in standard races, but the unrelenting Dakar Rally has forced Jaffar to improvise this approach, as he doesn't want to burn out the engine. It is an outcome that happens quite frequently with Dakar racers.

He's also going in this year very grateful for the ex-

periences he had from his first attempt at rally, last year. He will be riding with Red Bull KTM Factory Team Duust, based out of Poland. They are the home of many famous riders, like previous Dakar Rally winner Toby Price. The KTM 450 Factory Rally Replica bike that Jaffar will ride is renowned for its dependability across terrain, right out of the box performance, and comfort.

Jaffar is making sure that he doesn't overtrain, either. He is a dedicated rider who is known for his intense pre-race training schedules, but the Dakar Rally requires a racer who is able to take on the rigors of the endurance test ahead, and the race will test every athlete. Leading up to race day he's relaxed his routine, in the hopes that he will have more to give over the long and grueling rally. "I've got a very strong feeling that I'll be bringing home the medal this year!" Jaffar said. All his fans home and abroad will very much look forward to that and continue to watch him closely throughout the rally weeks this January. Mohammed Jaffar is a championship motocross racer. He lives and trains in his home city of Kuwait City, Kuwait. To find out more about Mohammed Jaffar, the Dakar Rally, and more events and athletes, follow @RedBullKuwait on Instagram and Twitter, and @RedBull on Facebook, or visit redbull.com





India make 'perfect start' with South Africa victory

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