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Xi arrives in Saudi Arabia for energy-focused visit

Kuwait Crown Prince heads to Riyadh to take part in summits



RIYADH: China's President Xi Jinping is being received by Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al-Saud and the Governor of Riyadh Prince Faisal bin Bandar Al-Saud at King Khalid International Airport. — AFP

RIYADH: Chinese President Xi Jinping touched down in Saudi Arabia on Wednesday for a visit that is likely to focus on energy ties but also follows months of tensions with the United States. Xi, recently reappointed as leader of the world's second biggest economy, arrived in the capital Riyadh, Chinese and Saudi state media said, for a three-day visit that will include talks with the Saudi rulers and other Arab leaders.

Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan and Riyadh Governor Prince Faisal bin Bandar were among those who welcomed Xi at the airport, where a ceremonial purple carpet was laid out from the steps of the plane. On major roads in Riyadh, the red-and-gold Chinese flag alternated with the green Saudi emblem. China is the top customer for oil from Saudi Arabia, the leading exporter of crude, and both sides appear keen to expand their relationship at a time of economic turmoil and geopolitical realignment.

The trip - only Xi's third overseas journey since the coronavirus pandemic began, and his first to Saudi Arabia since 2016 - comes after US President Joe Biden's visit in July. It will feature bilateral meetings with Saudi King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, as well as a summit with the six-member Gulf Cooperation Council and a wider

China-Arab summit.

III the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah's Representative, HH the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, and an accompanying delegation will head on Thursday to Saudi Arabia to take part in the 43rd session of the GCC High Council meeting, as well as the China-GCC Summit and China-Arab Summit due to be held in Riyadh.

The program represents the "largest-scale diplomatic activity between China and the Arab world since the founding of the PRC", or People's Republic of China, foreign ministry spokeswoman Mao Ning said on Wednesday. The official Saudi Press Agency said the kingdom accounted for more than 20 percent of Chinese investment in the Arab world between 2005 and 2020, "making it the biggest Arab country to receive Chinese investments during that period".

Oil markets are expected to be a top agenda item for talks between China and Saudi Arabia, especially given the turbulence the markets have experienced since Russia invaded Ukraine in February. The G7 and European Union on Friday agreed to a \$60-per-barrel price cap on Russian oil in an attempt to deny the Kremlin war resources, injecting further uncertainty into the markets.

Continued on Page 6

News in brief

250 jobs for Egyptian medics

KUWAIT: The Egyptian manpower authority announced the general administration of employment abroad has received a request from health insurance hospitals in Kuwait for 50 doctors and 200 nurses to work under their sponsorship in accordance with Kuwait's labor law. "Expected salaries will range from KD 1,800 to KD 2,450 for doctors, while salaries for nurses will be around KD 400, with the addition of housing and transportation allowances," the authority announced.

Zelensky 'Person of the Year'

NEW YORK: Time magazine named President Volodymyr Zelensky as well as "the spirit of Ukraine" as its 2022 person of the year on Wednesday, for the resistance the country has shown in the face of Russia's invasion. Calling Zelensky's decision to remain in Kyiv and rally his country amid the ongoing war "fateful", Time editor in chief Edward Felsenthal said this year's decision was "the most clear-cut in memory". — AFP



Panel approves govt purchase of citizens' loans

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: The National Assembly's Legal and legislative committee on Wednesday approved a draft law calling on the government to purchase con-

sumer and personal loans of Kuwaiti citizens, estimated at several billion Kuwaiti dinars. The committee saw no legal or constitutional problem with the bill and sent it to the concerned financial and economic affairs committee to study the financial aspects of the bill and its cost to public funds.

The bill, submitted by MP Saleh Ashour, proposes that the government should purchase consumer and personal loans of Kuwaitis by simply deducting the cost-of-living allowance paid every month. The deduction should not exceed KD 120 each month. Citizens who will not benefit by the draft legislation will continue to receive their cost-of-living

allowance as usual, the bill stipulates. Ashour said he proposed the draft law because of the difficult economic conditions, the sharp rise in prices and high inflation rate.

The government had in the past aborted several attempts by lawmakers to write off consumer loans of hundreds of thousands of Kuwaiti citizens to help them face difficult living conditions, according to MPs. The legal committee also cleared several other draft legislation and sent them to the concerned panels. These include a bill calling for the establishment of a public authority for fighting drugs and a

Continued on Page 6

Dems capture Senate seat in Georgia runoff

WASHINGTON: US President Joe Biden celebrated the strengthening of his party's majority in the Senate on Tuesday after Democrat Raphael Warnock was declared the winner of a runoff election in Georgia. The incumbent senator defeated Republican Herschel Walker, a former football star and protege of former president Donald Trump, according to

projections by television networks. Warnock's win confirms the very slim Democratic majority - 51 to 49 - in the upper house of Congress. "Tonight Georgia voters stood up for our democracy, rejected Ultra MAGAism, and most importantly: Sent a good man back to the Senate. Here's to six more years," Biden tweeted. The party's electoral triumph does not change the balance of power in the Senate, of which Democrats had already secured control on Nov 8. But the win by Warnock, a pastor at the Atlanta church where civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr once preached, hands Democrats

Continued on Page 6



ATLANTA: US Sen Raphael Warnock waves to supporters as he walks onstage to speak during an election night watch party on Dec 6, 2022. — AFP

Germany busts cell plotting to overthrow govt

FRANKFURT: German police staged nationwide raids on Wednesday and arrested 25 people suspected of belonging to a far-right "terror cell" plotting to overthrow the government and attack parliament. Around 3,000 officers including elite anti-terror units took part in the early

morning raids and searched more than 130 properties, in what German media described as one of the country's largest police actions ever against extremists.

The raids targeted alleged members of the "Citizens of the Reich" (Reichsbuerger) movement suspected of "having made concrete preparations to violently force their way into the German parliament with a small armed group", federal prosecutors said in a statement. Those arrested are accused of having formed "a terrorist group by the end of Nov 2021 at the

Continued on Page 6



FRANKFURT: German special police forces detain Heinrich XIII Prinz Reuss after searching a house on Dec 7, 2022. — AFP



Local

Kuwait, French military participate in Pearl of the West 2022 exercise

Top security chiefs discuss military ties, cooperation



French Ambassador to Kuwait Claire Le Fleischer poses for a group photo with French troops. — Photos by Fouad Al-Shaikh



By Majd Othman

KUWAIT: Admiral Commander of the French Forces in the Indian Ocean and the United Arab Emirates Emmanuel Slaars affirmed France's unwavering commitment to the security of Kuwait and the region. Slaars' statement came in a press conference on the eve of the conclusion of the "Pearl of the West 2022" exercise in Kuwait held by the Kuwait armed forces and the National Guard with friendly French forces.

Slaars, who is also the commander of the French forces in the United Arab Emirates, said 85 percent of the French forces in the UAE participated in Pearl of the West 2022 and that more than 500 French soldiers in the region

are also participating in this exercise, noting it included air and sea exercises, diving exercises and other military exercises. The admiral explained that the role of the French navy in the region includes combating piracy, human trafficking, and drugs and arms smuggling.

French Ambassador to Kuwait Claire Le Fleischer stressed that the Pearl of the West 2022 exercise comes within France's commitment to peace and security in the region and its defense. "France is showing its ability to remain committed to its allies and partners, not only within the borders of NATO, but also here in Kuwait," she said, pointing out that it is possible to strategically rely on France.

Le Fleischer noted that the governments of France and Kuwait signed a bilateral defense

cooperation agreement in 1992 aimed at developing cooperation between the two countries to deter any threat and defeat any attack on Kuwait's security, sovereignty and territorial integrity in accordance with the United Nations charter and international treaties.

Meanwhile, Chief of the General Staff of Kuwait Army Lt Gen Khaled Saleh Al-Sabah discussed with Slaars military ties and defense cooperation. He received Slaars at the general staff building on Wednesday, where they exchanged cordial conversations and discussed the most vital matters and topics of common interest, the general staff said in a press statement. During the meeting, the chief of staff acclaimed the depth of bilateral ties between both sides, it added.



Admiral Commander of the French Forces in the Indian Ocean and the United Arab Emirates Emmanuel Slaars



RIYADH: Photos show GCC's Foreign Ministers during the 154th preparatory meeting ahead of the 43rd Gulf Summit in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. — KUNA photos



GCC FMs hold 154th preparatory meeting

RIYADH: The 154th preparatory for the GCC Foreign Ministers began on Wednesday in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, ahead of the 43rd Gulf Summit. Foreign Minister Salem Abdullah Al-Jaber Al-Sabah heads the Kuwaiti delegation to the preparatory meeting. During the meeting, Omani Foreign Minister Bader Al-Busaidi, the current chair of the

gathering, highlighted the importance of the upcoming summit and its topics focusing on the security and welfare of the region.

The Omani Foreign Minister commended Qatar for its outstanding achievement in hosting the 2022 FIFA World Cup, saying that the event was a message of peace from the Arab countries to the rest of the world. He also noted that GCC countries were looking forward to 2023 UN Climate Change Conference (UNFCCC COP 28) to be hosted by the UAE, expressing support towards the Emirates in organizing this important event. — KUNA

Kuwait's DAI wins praise for fostering global peace

BRUSSELS: A highly-respected Ambassador and a renowned Dutch Orientalist, both based in Brussels, Belgium, have praised and lauded the Dar Al Athar Al Islamiyyah of Kuwait for its important role in promoting global peace and understanding. Ismat Jahan, a career diplomat from Bangladesh is presently serving as the Permanent Observer of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) to the European Union, and Johannes den Heijer Emeritus Professor of Arabic Studies at the Catholic University of Louvain (Louvain-la-Neuve) in Belgium, were recently invited by the Dar Al Islamiyyah to address its 27th cultural season.

"It was a big honor to be included among the invitees. It is a very important initiative that they are bringing in scholars from all over the world to speak on role of cultural diplomacy and other relevant issues in promoting peaceful coexistence," Den Heijer a former President of the Oriental Institute of Louvain told the Kuwait news agency KUNA, in an interview. "It is very interesting to see that Dar Al Athar Al Islamiyyah gives an opportunity to scholars like myself to interact with people who have a different background like calligraphers and musicians which is a very interesting experience," said the Dutch scholar who had traveled widely in the Arab and Muslim world but visited Kuwait for the first time.

"Learning about other people's culture and civilizations is crucial in trying to overcome these boundaries that lead to conflicts. So such initiatives by Dar Al Athar are extremely important," said Den Heijer who also has taught Arabic language and culture at various institutions in Europe for over four decades. "The audience was quite a mix of Kuwaiti people of various ages, very young to quite old and also expatriates. A country like Kuwait has a lot of expatriates including in the cultural sector and in the universities," he noted.

Johannes den Heijer also served as Director of the Netherlands-Flemish Institute in Cairo from

1995 to 2003. He spoke on the topic "the impact of language and Script in the Arab World and Beyond" at the cultural season organised by the Dar Al Athar end of October. From the point of view of linguistic, ethnic, religious and cultural diversity and transformation, Arab culture developed into one of the great civilizations this world has known, he noted.

On her part, Ismat Jahan told KUNA that the museum and the protection of the Islamic art and heritage in the Dar Al Athar Al Islamiyyah "is very impressive and for me it was a big learning experience." Ismat, who also served as Bangladesh's ambassador to Belgium and the EU, praised the director general of Dar Al Athar Al Islamiyyah, Sheikha Hussa Sabah Al-Salem al-Sabah, for her "untiring devotion, her deep interest and insight" in promoting Islamic culture globally.

"Sheikha Hussa was present in both the lectures and also in other meetings which show her deep interest and insight," said Ismat Jahan. She noted that the event was "extremely well organised and very professional." The widely-experienced diplomat made her presentation on the topic "Cultural Diplomacy as a Means to Foster Global Peace and Peaceful Coexistence between Communities." Cultural diplomacy as a major component of a country's broader public diplomacy has been significant since the emergence of modern nation states.

Over the years, cultural diplomacy has gained recognition as "soft power," she explained. Cultural diplomacy also has an important role in the projection of shared heritage and collective identity connected to religion, ethnicity, tradition, as well as in some cases to joint political affiliations or positions held by a group or groupings. Such an understanding of cultural diplomacy is sustained not only by groups of countries but also promoted by international organizations such as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC).

She added that the OIC since its inception in 1969 has consistently voiced its support for inter-religious and intercultural dialogue for the promotion of cultural pluralism, mutual understanding between world faiths and respect for diversity. Finally, both speakers stressed the vast knowledge and high degree of professionalism of Sheikha Hussa and all staff at DAI and other institutions they visited during their visit to Kuwait. — KUNA

Kuwaiti products lure visitors at Egypt's fair

CAIRO: Kuwait products and commodities on display at the Food Africa 2022 Fair have lured many visitors who admired the goods' quality. Mohammad Al-Qadhi, sales manager at Al-Dana fisheries company, said in remarks to KUNA that he is proud that his company was chosen to partake in the Cairo exhibition, noting that the company sells up to 55 products in the Kuwaiti market.

The company is currently pondering

prospects of entering the Egyptian market, he said. Meanwhile, the assistant chief of exported sales at Kuwait Flour Mills and Bakeries Company Badria Al-Rashed said the fair is an excellent opportunity to exchange expertise with peers from other countries. Al-Rashed revealed that the Kuwaiti company's products would soon be available in the Egyptian market.

Imad Al-Fakhrani of the Kuwaiti food company KIFCO expressed satisfaction for the high turn up of visitors to his stand. He noted that his company sells high quality products at reasonable prices. The Kuwaiti pavilion at the fair displays various food products, dates, honey, diary products, spices, snacks, fish, packaging and hygienic materials. The fair, due on December 5-7, involves more than 700 companies from 32 states. — KUNA



Imad Al-Fakhrani of the Kuwaiti food company KIFCO.



The assistant chief of exported sales at Kuwait Flour Mills and Bakeries Company Badria Al-Rashed

Local



Crown Prince receives innovative surgeon

KUWAIT: His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received at Bayan Palace on Wednesday orthopedic surgeon Dr. Muthana Sartawi. Dr. Sartawi presented His Highness the Crown Prince with his patent "Kuwait Stitch" invention used in sewing superficial wounds. His Highness the Crown Prince commended the surgeon on his effort, which contributed to the development of medical sciences in Kuwait and abroad. His Highness Sheikh Mishal affirmed that the Kuwaiti leadership would continue to support Kuwaiti youth in all fields to achieve more development for the country. — KUNA

Private oil sector workers call for peaceful protest

KUWAIT: The head of the volunteer team for workers in the private oil sector, Salem Al-Ajmi, announced that a peaceful protest will be organized on Monday morning in front of Kuwait Petroleum Corporation in Shuwaik, with wide parliamentary and union participation. "The volunteer team of workers in the private oil sector had previously organized a sit-in and several demonstrations to demand the rights of 14,000 Kuwaitis working in the private oil sector, and the longest petition in the world was signed, with a length of 150 meters," Al-Ajmi said.

"The peaceful protest on Monday aims to deliver a message to HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Ahmad Al-Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, whom we respect and appreciate, that the new

era inaugurated by HH the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad and HH the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad is based on justice and fairness, which refuses to ignore the rights of Kuwaiti citizens," Ajmi explained. Ajmi stressed more than 14,000 Kuwaiti citizens work in the private oil sector and they do not get any rights or privileges like their counterparts in the government oil sector, explaining at the same time that the labor law in the oil sector is equal for all workers in terms of rights and duties.

Ajmi appealed to the prime minister to intervene quickly to restore the rights of the 14,000 Kuwaitis in the private oil sector, so that this sector does not turn away from the national competencies of Kuwaiti youth. Ajmi concluded by emphasizing that the demonstration by workers in the private oil sector is a peaceful message to convey their voice and confirm they will never neglect their rights, which are protected by the Kuwaiti constitution and labor laws in the oil sector.



Kuwait's Deputy PM and Oil Minister Dr. Bader Al-Mulla visits the Equate Petrochemical Company's pavilion. — KUNA photos



Saudi Energy Minister Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman visits the Equate Petrochemical Company pavilion.

16th GPCA Forum kicks off in Riyadh

RIYADH: The 16th Gulf Petrochemicals and Chemicals Association (GPCA) Forum commenced in Riyadh Tuesday with the participation of a Kuwaiti delegation headed by Deputy Prime Minister and Oil Minister Dr. Bader Al-Mulla. This greatly significant forum tackles issues related to petrochemical industry to which Kuwait and many other countries attach great importance. Minister Al-Mulla told KUNA and Kuwait TV on the sidelines of the forum.

He added that the Kuwaiti government's plan of action is going to prioritize this industry. For his part, CEO of the EQUATE Petrochemicals, a subsidiary of the state-owned Kuwait Petroleum Corporation, Nasser Al-Dosari told KUNA and Kuwait TV that the EQUATE is a founding member of the association.

The forum serves as platform for exchanging expertise and discussing the challenges facing the industry and how to overcome them, he noted. Hosted by the Saudi Basic Industries

Corporation (SABIC), this year's forum is held under the theme 'Chemistry in Action: Shaping a Sustainable Future.' Earlier, Saudi Minister of Energy Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman Al-Saud inaugurated the forum, taking place from 6-8 December in the Saudi capital.

"The GCC is the land of opportunity, the land of the ambitious and the home of the determined," he told delegates in his inaugural address. The Gulf Petrochemicals and Chemicals Association (GPCA) represents the downstream hydrocarbon industry in the Arabian Gulf. Established in 2006, the association voices the common interests of more than 250 member companies from the chemical and allied industries, accounting for over 95 percent of chemical output in the Arabian Gulf region.

The industry makes up the second largest manufacturing sector in the region, producing over \$108 billion worth of products a year. The association supports the region's petrochemical and chemical industry through advocacy, networking and thought leadership initiatives that help member companies to connect, share and advance knowledge, contribute to international dialogue, and become prime influencers in shaping the future of the global petrochemicals industry. — KUNA

Kuwait gears for emergency response amid heavy rains

Farmers urged to build up soil with microbes

By Faten Omar

KUWAIT: A major emergency response effort in Kuwait is underway after several areas around Kuwait were flooded following heavy rains that hit the country on Tuesday. Meanwhile, citizens and residents are preparing for more heavy rains in the coming days. Abdulrahman Al-Fraih, Manager of Organic Agriculture Department, told Kuwait Times the best thing farmers can do is try to build up their soil with microbes and strength the bond, but once the rain hits and finds its way, it's hard to stop it.

He pointed out that as a farmer, he lost lots of crops during heavy rains in past years. "Heavy rains can be bad because our soil is not strong, so mudslides and erosion can happen. One year it rained really hard and many farmers lost their potatoes. Although rain is good for crops, a large amount can cause problems. Also, some farmers have a hardpan that is very shallow. Hardpan is a very hard layer and you need a machine or drill to break it, so areas can have stagnant water, which can cause fungus to form," Fraih explained.

In 2018, the Kuwaiti compensation committee revealed completed claims by people that heavy rains destroyed their belongings reached 761, including 181 for property damage, 444 for vehicle damage and 282 for furniture damage. Heavy rain is a bad memory for citizen Saud Al-Enzi, who suffered last winter when his house and car were ruined. "I live in the house that has a ground entrance. The low entrance allowed rainwater in our lobby and ruined all of our furniture, along with



KUWAIT: Motorists navigate amid heavy rainfall on Tuesday. A major emergency response effort in Kuwait is underway after several areas around Kuwait were flooded following heavy rains that hit the country on Tuesday. — Photo by Fouad Al-Shaikh

destroying my car's engine, which cost a lot of money to repair," he said.

Enzi wasn't the only one who suffered and lost things due to heavy rains. Many citizens and expatriates lost belongings, and their homes were flooded due to the rain. In January, 58.61 mm of rain fell, flooded streets and trapped people inside homes and cars. It led to the flooding of some buildings, schools, universities and facilities, and many roads were closed.

Alaa Nofal, who lost some furniture last year due to heavy rains, affirmed he prepared well this year in order to pro-

tect his properties and family. "I secured and sealed the gaps beneath doors and windows with foam blocks. I did the basic preventive maintenance to prevent leaks and protect my home from rain throughout the upcoming months," he said.

In 1997, heavy rain in Kuwait led to the inundation of many residential areas as a result of a mistake made by the ministry of public works in connecting the sewage network, which led to the death of more than seven people, and work stopped in Kuwait City and suburbs for several days.

Kuwaiti-funded school opens in Venezuela

WASHINGTON: The Venezuelan Islamic School which falls under the Venezuelan Islamic Center opened at Venezuela's capital, Caracas, funded by a Kuwaiti businessman under the supervision of Kuwait's Zakat House. The school will teach the Arabic language, Islamic education and the Venezuelan curriculum, and it is the first Kuwaiti charitable work in Venezuela.

The inauguration was attended by the Ambassador of the State of Kuwait to Venezuela, Nasser Al-Enezi, Head of the Venezuelan Islamic Center, Baligh Saeed, Vice President Omar Darwish, Director of the Administrative Board of the Venezuelan Islamic School, Kamel Muhammad, and School Principal Daniel Abdel-Hadi, in addition to a large number of students and members of the school's educational staff. In a speech he delivered on the occasion of the inauguration, Ambassador Al-Enezi appreciated the role played by the Kuwaiti Zakat House in sponsoring these valuable projects to serve the Arab community in Caracas.

Al-Enezi expressed his great apprecia-



Ambassador of Kuwait to Venezuela Nasser Al-Enezi takes a group photo with some of the officials during the inauguration ceremony. — KUNA

tion for the donation of a Kuwaiti businessman to this project, which is the first Kuwaiti charitable work in Venezuela. For his part, the Director of the Administrative Authority, Kamel Muhammad, extended his thanks and gratitude to the State of Kuwait's leadership, government and people, as well as to all workers in the Kuwaiti Zakat House for achieving this great achievement in service to the people of the Arab and Islamic community.

The Venezuelan Islamic School is concerned with teaching the Arabic language, Islamic education and the Venezuelan curriculum for more than 180 students in the kindergarten, primary and secondary stages. It is recognized by the Venezuelan Ministry of Education and has a major role in preserving the Arabic language and Islamic values for the children of the Arab and Islamic community in the capital, Caracas. — KUNA

Kuwait's support for Somalia 'in line with foreign policy'

CAIRO: Kuwait's continued support for Somalia is in line with the country's foreign policy, which largely revolves around the backing of humanitarian endeavors, its ambassador to Egypt and permanent envoy to the Arab League said on Tuesday. Kuwait will "maintain" a steady flow of aid for Somalia, which includes loans and grants that aim to prop up development projects in the Horn of Africa nation, Ghanim Al-Ghanim told high-level talks co-organized by the Cairo-based bloc and the United Nations.

Kuwaiti aid given to Mogadishu in recent years was worth nearly \$72 million, which is in addition to its debt relief efforts under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative, added the diplomat. On the talks in the Egyptian capital, the Kuwaiti envoy underlined the objective of "coordinating regional and international efforts" in a bid to address the worsening food crisis in Somalia, describing the matter as an "unprecedented" crisis.

Citing UN reports, which show the grim reality that the situation in Somalia is likely to get worse, he said it was imperative to ramp up global cooperation in order to ensure the impoverished nation receives "short-term and urgent" aid. He went on to express hope that the talks would yield positive results on the ground, which will be instrumental in alleviating the plight of the Somalia people, the diplomat emphasized.

Famine looming

Meanwhile, the Arab League chief, the UN officials and representative of Somali

President warned on Tuesday that five successive dry seasons raised the specter of famine in Somalia. The Horn of Africa country is on the verge of a sixth dry season, said Deputy Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General and Resident Humanitarian Coordinator for Somalia Adam Abdelmoula.

The successive dry seasons and climate change risk exacerbating the suffering of the Somali people, he told a high-level conference on draught and famine in Somalia, co-organized by the Arab League and the United Nations in Cairo and chaired by the League's Secretary General Ahmad Aboul-Gheit. The UN official urged immediate intervention to save lives before declaring a famine disaster in the country, noting that nearly 7.6 million people were affected by draught and some 2.4 million suffer disastrous levels of food insecurity.

In 2011, Somalia underwent a famine disaster which claimed nearly half a million lives. Abdelmoula recalled, noting that recurrence of such crisis now could raise the death toll due to the growth of population over the last decade. Humanitarian response requires \$2.7 billion, he said, adding that just 65 percent of the funds were available. On November 3, Abdelmoula appealed for allocation of \$17 million from the Somalia Humanitarian Fund (SHF) to provide immediate assistance to communities in areas at highest risk of famine.

On her part, Valerie N Guarnieri, the WFP Deputy Executive Director for Program and Policy Development, stressed the need of ensuring easy access to food, clean water, sanitation and primary health services. She praised the efforts of the Somali government to facilitate the humanitarian action in collaboration with the World Food Program and other local, regional and international aid agencies. Nearly 500,000 people

depend on food assistance as part of aid package for remote areas in Somalia, Guarnieri pointed out, reiterating the call for more investment in agriculture to ensure sustainable solutions to the food insecurity crisis.

On a similar note, Abdul-Hakim El-Waer, FAO Assistant Director-General and Regional Representative for the Near East and North Africa, said Somalia is one of the countries that bore the brunt of climate change. As of August 2022, 7.1 million people cannot meet their daily food requirements and require urgent humanitarian assistance, he said, noting that more than 200,000 face catastrophic hunger. According to estimates of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, 1.5 million children under five years suffer from acute malnutrition, of who 386,000 face a high risk of disease and death.

Meanwhile, Special Representative of the Somali President for Humanitarian Affairs and Draught Abdul-Rahman Abdul-Shakour appealed for immediate intervention to address the catastrophic situation. The worsening famine and draught crises could trigger a humanitarian disaster of a larger scale in Somalia, he cautioned. Abdul-Shakour thanked the Arab League for its quick response and hosting the current conference pursuant to the last month summit hosted by Algeria. The League's Secretary General Ahmad Aboul-Gheit suggested "a new approach to addressing the humanitarian crisis in Somalia in the coming decade."

"Such kind of complicated disasters requires unconventional way of thinking, and effective and sustainable solutions, not just sending food relief," he said. Aboul-Gheit highlighted the need of a comprehensive strategy focusing on investment in the infrastructure to alleviate the impacts of climate change and provide essential services to the people in Somalia in the short and long terms. —KUNA

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ABD AL-RAHMAN AL-ALYAN

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COMMERCIAL : 24835618
P.O. Box 1301 Safat, 13014 Kuwait.
Email: info@kuwaittimes.com
Website: www.kuwaittimes.com

News in brief

Arab cooperation 'vital'

CAIRO: Increasing and boosting Arab commercial cooperation is a vital step for the welfare of the region, said a Kuwaiti official on Wednesday. At the conclusion of the 54th meeting for the executive committee of the Arab grand free-trade zone, head of Arab affairs at the Kuwaiti Ministry of Finance Arwa Al-Msallam told KUNA that it was important to implement all measures to create the free-trade zone to enable Arab states to reap its benefits. Kuwait, as chair of the committee, was keen on following up resolutions aimed at bolstering Arab joint cooperation, finding means to eliminate all obstacles in this aspect, she added. The committee sent its final findings to the 111st meeting of Arab Finance and Economic Ministers due next February for approval.

Minister, envoys discuss ties

KUWAIT: Kuwait's Minister of Defense Sheikh Abdullah Ali Abdullah Al-Sabah and some ambassadors of the sisterly and friendly countries discussed some topics of common concerns and means of enhancing ties with those states. The minister met with each ambassador separately, the Ministry said in a press statement, adding that the meetings covered also the latest developments regionally and internationally. The minister met at his office South Korea and Japan's Ambassadors Chung Byung-ha and Morino Yasunari respectively, it added. He also welcomed the ambassadors of Canada, China and Jordan: Aliya Mawani, Zhang Jianwei and Saqr Abu Shatal respectively. The gatherings were attended by Chief of the General Staff of the Kuwaiti Army Lieutenant General Khaled Saleh Al-Sabah. Advisor in the Americas Department at the Foreign Ministry Khaled Al-Zaabi was present in the minister's meeting with Mawani. — From KUNA

Photo of the Day



KUWAIT: This picture taken on December 7, 2022 shows a view of fog covering roads in Kuwait City. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

CBK raises discount rate by half percentage point

US dollar climbs by 0.05% to KD 0.307

KUWAIT: The Board of Directors of the Central Bank of Kuwait (CBK) decided to raise the discount rate by 0.50 percent from 3.00 percent to 3.50 percent effective from Wednesday. "The decision came in line with the CBK's balanced and progressive approach that aims to reinforce an environment inducing to economic growth, and maintain the financial and monetary stability and attractiveness of the national currency as a store of the local savings," a CBK press release quoted Governor of the Bank Basal Al-Haroon as saying.

Al-Haroon explained that the decisions of CBK regarding moving the discount rate to affect the levels of interest rates on the Kuwaiti Dinar, are all based on thorough reviews of the recent local and international

data including the economic performance ratios, e.g. growth and inflation levels, domestic liquidity indicators, deposit movements, and Kuwaiti Dinar and foreign currency interest rates. The CBK interventions in the monetary market are in keeping with its monetary policy by using various instruments to regulate the levels of liquidity in the banking sector.

They take stock of the expected trends of foreign exchange rates to respond to any possible adverse conditions that might affect the national economy, Al-Haroon noted. Today's decision considered the consumer price index and related pressures, given the open nature of the Kuwaiti economy. The Governor concluded that CBK shall continue its monitoring of the economic and monetary develop-

ments, and take the necessary actions, whenever needed, to shield the local monetary stability.

Dollar rises

Meanwhile, the US dollar on Wednesday climbed by 0.05 percent to KD 0.307 but the euro dropped by 0.27 percent to KD 0.321, compared with Tuesday's prices, the Central Bank of Kuwait (CBK) said in its daily bulletin. The sterling pound fell by 0.55 percent to KD 0.372, but the Swiss franc firmed at KD 0.325, as well as the Japanese yen, trading at the unchanged rate of KD 0.002. The CBK publishes daily average exchange rates that do not necessarily reflect actual prices of currencies for the day. — KUNA



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UNCAC at 20

By Yasmeen Abalqoloub

KUWAIT: It has been 20 years since countries from all over the world signed the United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC). Ever since, the UNCAC has been considered "the only legally binding universal anti-corruption instrument." It criminalizes corruption crimes and sets a wide range of measures and mechanisms that countries can implement to prevent and combat corruption.

The UNCAC is divided into several chapters that tackle corruption from different perspectives. Its key chapters discuss preventative measures, criminalization and law enforcement, international cooperation, asset recovery, and technical assistance and information exchange. It also establishes a Review Mechanism that encourages State Parties to implement its provision in the most optimal manner.

Furthermore, countries have been encouraged to implement the UNCAC through a variety of ways. In fact, the United Nations marked the 9th of December of every year as the International Anti-Corruption Day (IACD). It is seen as an

opportunity for countries to raise awareness about corruption and its dangers. Conferences, lectures, and seminars are held on that day to discuss the effects of corruption on individuals, communities, and countries. Many events are held on an international level, as corruption is a global concern.

This year, Kuwait Anti-Corruption Authority (Nazaha) is celebrating the IACD by organizing its second annual forum, entitled: "Digital Transformation and its Role in Promoting Integrity and Combating Corruption." The forum aims to raise awareness about corruption and highlight the importance of using technology to instill integrity, transparency, and anticorruption. The forum will host speakers from the public and private sectors, academia, and civil society organizations. It will also discuss e-government, digitization of education and research, and the main challenges facing digital transformation. The second annual forum will conclude with a set of recommendations to further encourage digital transformation due to its important role in promoting integrity and anticorruption.

NOTE: Yasmeen Abalqoloub is the Administrative Officer, International Cooperation Department, Kuwait Anti-Corruption Authority (Nazaha).

Jordan, Egypt, Iraq stress importance of Baghdad conf

AMMAN: Jordan, Egypt and Iraq stressed on Wednesday, the importance of the Baghdad Conference, second edition of which is due to be held in Amman, to support Iraq's efforts in maintaining its stability, security, territorial integrity, and fighting "terrorist" organizations'. This came in a statement issued after a joint meeting by the foreign ministers of Jordan, Egypt, and Iraq on ways to enhance cooperation among the three countries in the fields of trade, industry, transportation and energy.

Iraqi Foreign Minister Fouad Hussein said that Baghdad conference will be held primarily to affirm the continuous support by the participating countries of Iraq's sovereignty. In this context, Hussein predicted the participation of Turkey and Iran in the second edition of the conference, stressing his country's refusal to "allow any organization to use Iraqi lands to attack neighboring countries or allow these countries to attack its lands."

Other issues were discussed during the meeting,

Hussain said, including the joint economic projects, and the upcoming Arab-Chinese summit, stressing the importance of the cooperation mechanism "to create balanced relations with neighboring countries and strengthen relations with these countries." For his part, Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry said that the next conference is devoted to supporting Iraq to restore its stability, policy, and territorial integrity, and overcome the effects of the war launched by "terrorist" organizations.

Shoukry noted that Egypt supports what Iraq's achievement in the field of the political process as being a major component of joint Arab action and a factor of stability for the region. On his part, Jordanian Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi said that work is underway to prepare for hosting the second edition of the (Baghdad Conference), is due to be held in the Jordanian capital Amman on December 20.

The conference will be held in light of the political and economic challenges facing the region and the world, "we are working through the mechanism of a trio cooperation to ease its impact on our countries", Safadi noted. According to official Jordanian data, the tripartite cooperation mechanism between Jordan, Egypt and Iraq aims to increase cooperation between the three countries in the sectors of trade, industry, economy, road transport, electrical connection and energy. — KUNA



Iran ex-president Khatami voices support for protests

India at 75: Rising nuclear power finding its place on global stage

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SHANGHAI, China: Health workers wait to test passengers for the COVID-19 after their arrival at Hongqiao railway station in Shanghai. —AFP

China to loosen COVID restrictions

Xi has not abandoned travel curbs and heavy testing completely

BEIJING: China announced Wednesday a nationwide loosening of its headline COVID restrictions that had hammered the world's second biggest economy and ignited rare protests against the ruling Communist Party. The new rules are a major relaxation of President Xi Jinping's signature zero-COVID policy, three years into the pandemic and long after the rest of the world had largely learnt to live with the virus.

However, with vaccination rates remaining low among China's elderly and a health system still regarded as ill-prepared for a wave of infections, Xi has not abandoned travel curbs and heavy testing completely. Under the new guidelines announced by the National Health Commission, the frequency and scope of PCR testing—long a tedious mainstay of life in zero-COVID China—will be reduced.

Lockdowns—a major source of public anger—will also be limited to as small a scope as is feasible, and authorities are required to free areas that show no positive cases after five days. People with non-severe COVID infections can isolate at home instead of centralised government facilities.

And people will no longer be required to show a

green health code on their phone to enter public buildings and spaces, except for "nursing homes, medical institutions, kindergartens, middle and high schools".

China will also accelerate vaccination of the elderly, the health commission said, long seen as a major obstacle to the relaxation of zero-COVID. Beijing said the new rules would serve to "correct pronounced problems faced by pandemic prevention and control currently".

Past policy had "received strong response from the public", National Health Commission expert Li Bin told a press conference Wednesday.

'It's about time'

Until recently, Xi and the Chinese propaganda apparatus had hailed zero-COVID as a triumph of communist rule that had kept deaths low compared with democratic countries such as the United States.

But rare demonstrations against the strategy broke out across China late last month, with people railing against the restrictions. The protests expanded into calls for more political freedoms, with some even calling for Xi to resign, turning into the most

widespread opposition to communist rule since the 1989 democracy uprising that the military crushed.

All the while, a stream of data showed the massive impacts of zero-COVID on China's economy—with spill on effects for the world. The government released data just before Wednesday's announcement stating imports in November had fallen 10.6 percent year-on-year, the biggest drop since May 2020. Exports fell 8.7 percent over the same period.

Authorities quickly cracked down on the demonstrations, sending security forces into the streets and deploying its high-tech surveillance system against protesters. However they also began easing restrictions, with some Chinese cities tentatively rolling back mass testing and curbs on movement.

And once dominated by coverage of the dangers of the virus and scenes of pandemic chaos abroad, China's state-run media dramatically shifted tone to support a moving away from zero-COVID.

There were immediate signs of relief in China following Wednesday's announcement. "It's about time to open up, it's been three years already, we should open up fully," one Beijing resident who asked to

remain anonymous told AFP.

"People need to work and eat, you can't just tell people not to leave their homes anymore," they added. "If people are worried now, they should stay home and avoid coming out, other people need to work and get on with life."

Others were more nervous about an outbreak. "We are very worried, now we fully open up, the government doesn't care anymore, what should we do if the epidemic situation becomes more serious?" migrant worker Meng Qingcheng, 60, told AFP.

"It will make it harder for us to find a job," he added. "We are also afraid, we don't want to be infected." Searches on the country's biggest travel app, Ctrip, for flight tickets ahead of Chinese New Year hit a three-year-high, state-run media outlet The Paper reported.

Analysts at Japanese firm Nomura said they projected China's GDP would rebound next year in the wake of the relaxations. But, they warned, China "does not appear to be well prepared for a massive wave of COVID infections". "It may have to pay for its procrastination on embracing a 'living with COVID' approach," they said in an email. —AFP



WASHINGTON: Australian Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Defence Richard Marles (L), Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong (2nd L), US Secretary of State Antony Blinken (2nd R) and US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin III hold a press conference during the 32nd annual Australia - US Ministerial (AUSMIN) consultations at the State Department in Washington. —AFP

US, Australia invite Japan to step up troop rotations

WASHINGTON: The United States and Australia said Tuesday they would welcome Japanese troops into three-way rotations, vowing a united front in the face of China's rapid military advances. Australia's defense and foreign ministers said they agreed to step up the pace of military interactions with the United States during talks with their counterparts in Washington, after which they will fly to Tokyo.

"It's really important that we are doing this from the point of view of providing balance within our region and involving other countries within our region and we look forward to being able to have more engagement with Japan," Australian Defense Minister Richard Marles told a four-way news conference.

"We can go to Japan at the end of this week with an invitation for Japan to be participating in more exercises with Australia and the United States," said Marles, in the first such talks since Australia's Labor government took office six months ago.

US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said the allies would seek Japanese participation in joint operations in Australia, where the United States has been rotating Marines since 2011 through Darwin, the strategic northern city struck by imperial Japan in World War II.

Austin said the United States and Australia agreed to increase rotations of bomber task forces, fighter jets and the US Army and Navy. "We agreed to enhance trilateral defense cooperation and to invite Japan to integrate into our force posture initiatives in Australia," Austin said.

Japan, a treaty-bound ally of the United States, has in recent years sought growing diplomatic cooperation with

Australia, but defense ties have been more sensitive due to Tokyo's official pacifism since defeat in World War II.

But Japan has participated in exercises including three-way drills in May off Australia's northeast coast that included infantry live fire and tank integration.

Warning on China

The three countries have increasingly seen common cause due to the growing assertiveness of China under President Xi Jinping. "China's dangerous and coercive actions throughout the Indo-Pacific, including around Taiwan, toward the Pacific Island countries, and in the East and South China Seas, threaten regional peace and stability," Austin said. With an eye on China, Australia last year entered a three-way security pact with the United States and Britain to acquire nuclear-powered submarines, angering France whose sale of conventional submarines was scrapped.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken told the Australians that the United States was committed to "delivering on that promise at the earliest possible time." The defense ties comes despite a relative easing of tensions between the United States and China, with Blinken set early next year to pay the first visit by a top US diplomat to Beijing in more than four years.

His trip comes after President Joe Biden met Xi in Bali in November and the two pledged to talk through key differences. Key among them is Taiwan, the self-ruling democracy claimed by China, which responded furiously in August when US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi visited.

Earlier Tuesday, a bipartisan group of Australian lawmakers visited the island despite warnings from Beijing. Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong said in Washington that there should be "no unilateral change to the status quo" over Taiwan and that Canberra valued "our longstanding unofficial relationship with Taiwan."

The United States, Japan and Australia have also worked together in recent years through the so-called Quad with India, which has been more hesitant than the other three about appearing to form an alliance aimed at China. —AFP

Mozambique ex-prez's son, ex-spy bosses jailed for 12 years

MAPUTO: A Mozambican court on Wednesday sentenced two ex-spy bosses and the son of a former president to 12 years each for their part in a corruption scandal in which the government sought to conceal huge debts, triggering financial havoc. The former head of security and intelligence, Gregorio Leao; the head of the economic intelligence division, Antonio do Rosario; and ex-president Armando Guebuza's son, Ndambi Guebuza, were among 19 defendants accused in the country's biggest graft scandal.

Eight defendants were acquitted while the rest were handed terms ranging between 10 and 12 years in a verdict that took the judge a week to read out. "The crimes committed have brought consequences whose effects will last for generations," said Judge Efigenio Baptista, addressing a packed courtroom located in the grounds of a high-security jail in the capital Maputo. The scandal arose after state-owned companies in the impoverished country illicitly borrowed \$2 billion (1.9 billion euros) in 2013 and 2014 from international banks to buy a tuna-fishing fleet and surveillance vessels.

The government masked the loans from parliament and the public. When the "hidden debt" finally surfaced in 2016, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and other donors cut off financial support, triggering a sovereign debt default and currency collapse. An independent audit found \$500 million of the loans had been diverted. The money remains unaccounted for.

'Desire for luxury'

Handing down the sentences Baptista said the scam had "aggravated the impoverishment of thousands of Mozambicans." "The country became famous for the worst reasons," he said. "As high officials of the state they should have been (its) guardians."

Leao and do Rosario were found guilty of embezzlement and abuse of power, while Guebuza was convicted for embezzlement, money laundering and criminal association, among other charges.

Former president Guebuza, who had been in office when the loans were contracted, testified at the trial, but was not seen in court on Wednesday. Wearing a black sweater over an orange prisoner jumpsuit, his son stood up as the judge handed out the verdict.

During the proceedings, Baptista said Ndambi Guebuza acted deliberately "to exert influence on his father" and get the government to approve the purchase of the vessels.



MAPUTO: Ndambi Guebuza (L), son of the former president of Mozambique Armando Guebuza, is seen with a lawyer during court proceedings at the Maputo Central Prison. —AFP

He took a \$33-million bribe that went to satisfy his "desire for luxury" the judge said, listing some of the assets the former president's son acquired with the money. They included luxury cars and a 10-million rand (\$590,000) mansion in neighbouring South Africa. Besides being sentenced to jail, the younger Guebuza was ordered to pay a fine of 162,000 meticais (\$2,500). Former presidential advisor Renato Matusse was also sentenced to 12 years in jail.

Global scale

The trial started in August last year and ran until March. It was broadcast live on local TV and radio stations. Dozens of people, including anti-corruption activists and civil campaigners, sat in the courtroom, a makeshift facility set up in a white marquee to accommodate defendants, their lawyers and other parties.

The debt scandal exposed corruption on a global scale and sparked legal cases across three continents. Swiss bank Credit Suisse was fined \$475 million last year over its part in issuing the loans.

Former finance minister Manuel Chang—who signed off the loans—has been held in South Africa since 2018, pending extradition to the US for allegedly using the US financial system to carry out the fraudulent scheme.

When the loans were taken out, Mozambique's star was rising after two decades of democratic and market-led reforms and the discovery of huge gas reserves off its Indian Ocean coast. But the scandal—which involved money equivalent to about 12 percent of the gross domestic product of one of the poorest countries in the world—tipped the nation into the worst economic crisis in its history.

In March, the IMF awarded \$456 million in credit to Mozambique, the first such aid awarded since the scandal erupted. The funds are to help support economic recovery and policies to reduce public debt. —AFP

International

Guilty of corruption, Argentina's Kirchner banned from seeking office

Ruling places a giant question mark over her future

BUENOS AIRES: An Argentine court on Tuesday sentenced Vice President Cristina Kirchner to six years in jail for corruption, banning the country's best-known politician from seeking public office after a trial she dismissed as a political witch hunt.

Adored and reviled in equal measure by millions of Argentines, the divisive former president was declared guilty of "fraudulent administration" over irregular public works contracts awarded during her time as president between 2007 and 2015.

Kirchner wrote on social media that "none of the lies were proven" and that she had been convicted by a "legal mafia." "I won't be a candidate for anything, not a senator, or a deputy or president of the nation," in 2023 general elections, she wrote on social media after the ruling.

Analysts say it is unlikely that Kirchner will head to jail anytime soon, as she holds congressional immunity through her current role, and still has several avenues for appeal, but the ruling places a giant question mark over her future.

"The verdict will have a strong political impact," said political analyst Rosendo Fraga of the University of Buenos Aires, although "the chances of her being arrested for the sentence are non-existent."

Kirchner was charged alongside 12 others for alleged involvement in the illicit attribution of public works contracts in the southern Santa Cruz province in favor of businessman Lazaro Baez. The period investigated includes Kirchner's eight years in office and the preceding four years when her late husband Nestor Kirchner, who died in 2010, was president.

The public prosecutor denounced what he called "a system of institutional corruption" and "probably the largest corruption operation" in the country, with "systematic irregularities in 51 calls for tenders" over 12 years. Eight of Kirchner's co-accused were found

guilty and sentenced to between three and six and a half years in jail. Three were released and another had their case dismissed as it had passed the statute of limitations.

Uncertain future

Kirchner said the charges were a lie made up by her political enemies. "This court has been a true firing squad," the veteran politician said during her final address to the court, accusing prosecutors of having "dedicated themselves to disrespecting and insulting me."

As vice president, Kirchner is head of the country's Senate and enjoys immunity as a lawmaker, something she would lose if she does not run again. Fraga said potential appeals could take up to six years or more.

All eyes will be on potential protests after the verdict. When prosecutors announced they were seeking a 12-year jail term in late August, mass daily demonstrations took place outside Kirchner's apartment building in the upmarket suburb of Recoleta.

During one of these protests on September 1, a man shoved a revolver in her face and pulled the trigger-but the gun did not fire. Four people have been charged with involvement in the attack.

Adored and hated

Several hundred Kirchner supporters gathered outside the courthouse before the verdict was read. "I am here to defend Cristina. We defend her for what she has done and what we know she can continue to give," said 50-year-old Marcelo Graziano, outside the courthouse.

Argentina's President Alberto Fernandez took to Twitter to say that "Today, in Argentina, an innocent person has been convicted (...) when politics enters the courts, justice goes out the window." In Mexico,



BUENOS AIRES: A supporter of Argentina's Vice-President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner sticks a sign outside the Courthouse Comodoro Py in Buenos Aires. —AFP

leftist President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador expressed his solidarity with Kirchner, calling her a victim "of political vengeance and an undemocratic baseness of conservatism."

Kirchner came to prominence as part of the ultimate political power couple, with she and her late husband Nestor Kirchner serving a collective 12 years in the Casa Rosada, the pink presidential palace.

To her working-class base, the Kirchners were the saviors after Argentina's 2001 economic meltdown and social unrest that followed the largest debt default in history, standing up for the little guy against bullies both foreign and domestic.

Her detractors see her as a corrupt, overbearing interventionist who steered the country back towards economic ruin through debt-fueled spending sprees. —AFP

New landmark puts world at center of Kabul

KABUL: Afghanistan's capital has a bold new landmark that puts it at the center of the world - or rather the world at the center of Kabul. Municipal authorities have unveiled a giant hand-painted globe of planet Earth in Dahan-e-bagh square - complete with an oversized Afghanistan - and the eye-catching structure is already turning heads. "It's something creative," a local resident who gave his name only as Hafiz told AFP. "Before it was just a useless square... this map shows that we are also present on the globe."

The sphere, with a diameter of around eight meters, sits atop a mechanism that will rotate five times a minute - somewhat faster than the notorious Kabul traffic that will circumnavigate it. Passers-by can be forgiven for thinking that the Afghanistan on the globe is somewhat bigger than official maps suggest - taking up space usually allocated to neighbors Pakistan and Iran.

But the chief engineer and artist involved in the construction - clearly used to the jokes already circulating about the size difference - said it was merely to give the country "prominence." "We have zoomed in on it so the people could recognize their country," said chief engineer Esmatullah Habibi. "We hope that the world will also recognize it."

Artist Abid Wardak said it took him four days to paint the globe - working entirely by hand while perched on a



KABUL: In this photograph taken on Dec 6, 2022, a painter gives final touches to a large hand-painted globe installed by municipal authorities at the Dahan-e-Bagh square. — AFP

rickety bamboo ladder. "I got help from a map, although it was in English," he said. Afghanistan is painted to resemble the Taliban flag, inscribed with the Islamic declaration of faith, and not everyone is enamored with the symbolism.

"When I saw the map of Afghanistan on the sphere I became depressed," said a woman who asked to be identified only as Elaha. Women are increasingly being squeezed out of public life since the Taliban's return last year despite the headline Islamists promising a softer version of the harsh rule that characterised their first stint in power that ended in 2001. Most female government workers have lost their jobs - or are being paid a pittance to stay at home - while women are also barred from travelling without a male relative, and must cover up with a burqa or hijab when out of the home. —AFP

Iraqi jailed over tweet

BAGHDAD: An Iraqi activist has been sentenced to three years in prison over a disputed tweet deemed insulting to a pro-Iran paramilitary force, court documents seen by AFP Wednesday showed. Haidar al-Zaidi, 20, had written on Facebook Sunday that he faced charges of "insulting state institutions".

On Monday, the court delivered its verdict, which Zaidi can appeal. New York-based advocacy group Human Rights Watch called on the Iraqi authorities not to use the courts as a "tool to suppress peaceful criticism" and called for the activist's immediate release.

Zaidi was prosecuted over a post, long since deleted from his Twitter account, criticising the slain deputy commander of the paramilitary Hashed al-Shaabi force, Abu Mahdi al-Mohandis. Screen grabs of the disputed tweet were shared by accounts close to the Hashed.

Mohandis was killed in a US drone strike in Baghdad in January 2020 alongside Iranian foreign operations commander General Qassem Suleimani. He is revered as a martyr by the Hashed, a paramilitary group integrated into Iraq's security forces whose political wing forms

part of Iraq's ruling coalition.

The court granted the Hashed permission to seek financial damages from Zaidi for the alleged insult. Zaidi has denied he posted the tweet, claiming his account was hacked, according to HRW. "Regardless of who posted the Twitter message, the Iraqi justice system should not be used as a tool to suppress peaceful criticism of the authorities or armed actors," said HRW's deputy Middle East director, Adam Coogler.

"It is a sad reflection on the rule of law in Iraq that an activist like Zaidi gets three years in prison for a Twitter post he says he didn't write while dozens of officials and armed groups enjoy impunity for killing activists and protesters."

Iraq was hit by a wave of protests in late 2019 that were crushed by the security forces in a bloody crackdown that killed more than 600 people. In June, the UN mission in Iraq spoke of an "environment of fear and intimidation" created by assaults and bombings carried out by unidentified armed elements and "aimed at suppressing dissent and criticism".

On social media, users contrasted the three-year jail term handed down against Zaidi with the recent release on bail of businessman Nour Zuhair Jassem, who is accused of fraudulently withdrawing a significant part of \$2.5 billion in public funds that were stolen from a government account. —AFP

Xi arrives in Saudi Arabia for...

Continued from Page 1

On Sunday, the OPEC+ oil cartel led jointly by Saudi Arabia and Russia opted to keep in place production cuts of two million barrels per day approved in October.

Saudi and Chinese officials have provided scant information about the agenda, though Ali Shihabi, a Saudi analyst close to the government, said he expected "a number of agreements to be signed". Beyond energy, analysts say leaders from the two countries

will likely discuss potential deals that could see Chinese firms become more deeply involved in mega-projects that are central to Prince Mohammed's vision of diversifying the Saudi economy away from oil. They include a futuristic \$500 billion megacity known as NEOM, a cognitive city that will depend heavily on facial recognition and surveillance technology.

Xi's visit is expected to be closely watched in Washington, which entered into what is often described as an oil-for-security partnership with Saudi Arabia towards the end of World War II. China and Saudi Arabia already work together on arms sales and production. Yet analysts say Beijing cannot provide the same security assurances Washington does - nor does it wish to. The GCC-China summit will be held in Riyadh on Friday, the bloc said in a statement. — Agencies

Germany busts cell plotting to...

Continued from Page 1

latest, which had set itself the goal of overcoming the existing state order in Germany and replacing it with their own kind of state", they said.

Two of the 25 arrests were made abroad, in Austria and Italy. The prosecutors in Karlsruhe said they had identified a further 27 people as suspected members or supporters of the terror network. "The accused are united by a deep rejection of state institutions and the free, democratic basic order of the Federal Republic of Germany," they said. The Reichsbuerger movement includes neo-Nazis, conspiracy theorists and gun enthusiasts who reject the legitimacy of the modern German republic.

Its followers generally believe in the continued existence of the pre-World War I German Reich, or empire, under a monarchy and several groups have declared their own states. Long dismissed as malcontents and oddballs, the Reichsbuerger have become increasingly radicalized in recent years and are seen as a growing security threat. The investigation gave "a look into the abyss" of far-right terror from the movement, Interior Minister Nancy Faeser said in a statement.

According to prosecutors, the terror cell suspects

believe in Reichsbuerger and QAnon conspiracy theories and are "strongly convinced" that Germany is run by a "deep state" that needs to be toppled. The suspects were aware that their plan "could only be realized by using military means and violence against state representatives," prosecutors said.

They allegedly planned to appoint one of the arrested suspects, identified by local media as aristocrat and businessman Prince Heinrich XIII Reuss, as Germany's new leader after the coup. Heinrich XIII had already sought to make contact with Russian officials to discuss Germany's "new state order" after the coup, prosecutors said. There was however "no indication that the contact persons responded positively to his request".

A Russian woman named only as Vitalia B, who was among those arrested on Wednesday, is suspected of having facilitated those contacts, prosecutors added. The Russian embassy in Berlin said it did "not maintain contacts with representatives of terrorist groups or other illegal entities", according to a statement carried by Russian news agencies.

As part of the preparations for the coup, members of the alleged terror cell acquired weapons, organized shooting practice and tried to recruit new followers, particularly among the military and police, according to prosecutors. Former soldiers are believed to be among the members of the recently established terror group, they said. An ex-MP for the far-right AfD party was also among those accused of being part of the plot, according to German media reports. — AFP

Panel approves govt purchase of...

Continued from Page 1

public authority for management of crises and catastrophes.

In a related development, MP Khalil Al-Saleh asked the finance minister about the ministry's plans to boost the standard of living of Kuwaiti low- and middle-income families to help them face the rising cost of living, high prices and high inflation. In a series of questions, the lawmaker asked the minister

if the ministry of finance has conducted studies or is in the process of studying the impact of consumer loans on citizens, and accordingly support them financially.

Saleh asked about the average salary of families classified under low- and middle-income categories, their numbers and the amount of consumer loans they have. He also inquired about the total value of consumer loans taken by Kuwaitis until now. The lawmaker also asked the minister about the number of Kuwaitis who draw a monthly salary below KD 1,300 and 30 percent or more of whose salaries are deducted as a result of consumer loans. He also asked about the number of Kuwaiti debtors facing problems repaying their debt and those facing court actions because of failing to pay back bank loans.

Dems capture Senate seat in...

Continued from Page 1

greater control in committees and curbs the power of any individual Democratic senator to sink Biden initiatives. "After a hard-fought campaign - or should I say campaigns - it is my honor to utter the four most powerful words ever spoken in a democracy: The people have spoken," Warnock said in a victory speech. "I often say that a vote is a kind of prayer for the world we desire for ourselves and for our children," he told a packed Atlanta ballroom. "You have put in the hard work and here we are standing together."

The Republicans took back the House last month but with a much smaller majority than expected. Warnock, 53, and Walker, 60, both African American, faced voters after neither earned more than 50 percent in the Nov 8 midterm vote. Democrats retained control of the Senate in that vote with 50 seats, Vice President Kamala Harris's tie-breaking vote giving them the edge in the 100-seat chamber.

Warnock's win significantly curbs the power of centrist Democratic Senator Joe Manchin, who has already blocked several major Biden initiatives in the first two years of the president's term. With 700 days to go before the 2024 presidential election, Republicans hope to stymie Biden's momentum after his party performed much better than expected in

November.

Determined to win the race, Democrats called on their top gun: Charismatic former president Barack Obama, who campaigned alongside Warnock in Atlanta last week. And in yet another sign of how high the stakes were, \$400 million was spent on the Georgia race to make it the most expensive campaign of the midterms. Some 1.9 million people voted early, many of them likely Democratic voters, while Republicans were expected to turn out in force on Tuesday.

Polls had the race too close to call. Georgia, historically a Republican state, took America by surprise when voters chose Biden over Trump in the 2020 presidential election and then sent two Democrats to the Senate two months later in another runoff. Both the candidates this time are natives of Georgia but the men are polar opposites. Warnock grew up in poverty, born the eleventh of 12 children to a former soldier and preacher father and a mother who worked in the cotton fields. He remained as a senior pastor at Martin Luther King's Ebenezer Baptist Church even after his election and holds a doctorate in theology.

Walker is a latecomer to politics with his 2022 Senate run. The 60-year-old conservative is considered one of the best players in the history of American college football - a near-religious institution in the South - and went on to have a stellar career in the National Football League. Walker, who is staunchly anti-abortion even in cases of rape, has been the subject of several recent scandals, having been accused of paying for abortions for two women he had relationships with. — AFP

International

India at 75: Rising nuclear power finding its place on global stage

New Delhi wants a permanent seat on the UN Security Council

NEW DELHI: Three-quarters of a century after independence, India is a nuclear power about to become the world's most populous country, and its economy has overtaken its former coloniser's to become the globe's fifth biggest. But New Delhi has challenges to overcome if it is to secure a more central place on the world's diplomatic stage, analysts say. India wants a permanent seat on the UN Security Council, like the five victors of World War II, including its former colonial power Britain.



'Are we ready to bear the responsibility?'

A democracy of 1.4 billion people, India stands as a potential counterweight to Xi Jinping's increasingly assertive China and at the intersection of multiple geopolitical issues. India is the only country to be a member of both the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation driven by Moscow and Beijing, and the US-led Quad initiative of democracies aimed at containing China. It also co-founded the BRICS grouping that brings it together with Brazil, Russia, China and South Africa to challenge the dominant US- and European-led global governance structures. For decades, India marginalised itself diplomatically, content with a role within the Non-Aligned Movement, which professed equal distance from both Cold War superpowers, while India shared close ties with Moscow—still its biggest arms supplier.

Now, a series of heads of government and foreign ministers have visited in recent months. In the 21st century's changing strategic landscape, India's "ambition to be present, to be heard, to shape and to lead is getting

stronger", said Samir Saran, president of New Delhi-based Observer Research Foundation. But he said the question remained: "Are we ready to bear the responsibility of being such an important actor?"

India first

India has a mixed record on the world stage and some compare a non-committal New Delhi to Beijing's actions during the Cold War, when China played both Washington and Moscow to its advantage. India is the world's second-biggest coal user and third-largest carbon emitter, and was blamed along with China for blocking an international commitment to "phase out" coal last year. New Delhi insists the dirty fuel is essential for an economy attempting to lift millions out of extreme poverty, and it plans to increase domestic production by 50 percent in the next two years. Meanwhile, India says it will only aim to reach net-zero emissions by 2070 — 20 years later than a key global goal.

Three months after visiting Russian President Vladimir Putin lauded India as "a great power, a friendly nation and a time-tested friend", his forces invaded Ukraine. For months, New Delhi refused to criticise Moscow's actions, abstaining from key UN votes, and as Europe turned away from Russian energy, paying a huge economic price, India upped its purchases six-fold, taking its two-way trade to an all-time high, according to official figures.

Window of opportunity

Several factors have come together to present India with a window of opportunity, said Tanvi Madan, Washington-based senior fellow with the Brookings Institution. Among them are the increasingly fractious economic relationship between the United States and China, and Beijing's decision to remain in self-imposed Covid isolation. "Countries like the US, some in Europe, others in the Indo-Pacific see India as a geopolitical



TOKYO: File photo shows, US President Joe Biden (2L), Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida (R), Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi (2R) and Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese (L) arrive for their meeting during the Quad Leaders Summit at Kantei in Tokyo. Three-quarters of a century after independence, India is a nuclear power about to become the world's most populous country. — AFP

counterbalance to China and an economic alternative or a democratic contrast." Madan said. "The big question" for India, she added, was whether it could "take advantage of this window before it closes".

The International Monetary Fund projects that India's economy will expand 6.8 percent this year, more than double the rate of China, and that it will be the world's fastest-growing major economy in 2023. But so far Vietnam, Taiwan and Thailand have proven more attractive than India as alternative investment destinations to China, despite its vast domestic market, young and growing population, and widely spoken English. It also has a convoluted bureaucracy and tax regime, a legal system where cases can last for decades, and widespread corruption.

The relationship between India and China themselves is strained by border, trade and technology disputes, and was sent into a deep freeze by a deadly frontier military clash in 2020. Xi and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi have not met since, merely "exchanging courtesies" at the G20 meeting in Indonesia in November.

New Delhi has been building up its military, including its border defences and armaments industry, with a nuclear-powered submarine of its own, and recently unveiled its first locally made aircraft carrier. Its low-cost space programme made it only the fourth nation to send an orbiter to Mars, and it has plans for a manned mission into orbit. But it remains well behind China, which has it outmanned and outgunned, having reached those milestones years ago.—AFP



DHAKA, Bangladesh: Police fire tear gas to disperse Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) activists gathered in front of the party's central office in Dhaka on December 7, 2022, ahead of a BNP rally called for December 10 in an effort to force Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to resign. — AFP

One killed as Bangladesh police fire at oppn rally

DHAKA, Bangladesh: At least one person died Wednesday and scores were injured in the Bangladesh capital Dhaka as police fired rubber bullets and tear gas at thousands of opposition supporters, police and witnesses said.

Tension has been building this week after the main opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) called a massive rally for Saturday in an effort to force Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to resign. Opposition spokesman Shahiduddin Chowdhury Annie said police fired at around 5,000 opposition supporters who peacefully gathered outside the BNP main office in central Dhaka on Wednesday.

"We allowed traffic to move. But police suddenly attacked us, firing at our activists and supporters. At least 100 people were injured," Annie said. The BNP said at least two of their activists, including a student leader, were killed by police fire.

Live Facebook footage shared by the BNP—which could not be independently verified—showed apparently injured party activists lying on the stairs of the office. Abdul Hye, a police constable posted at Dhaka Medical College Hospital, told AFP that the dead body of one person and at least eight injured people were brought to the hospital.

He could not say whether the body was hit by live or rubber bullets. Dhaka Metropolitan Police spokesman Faruq Ahmed blamed the BNP for the clashes, saying they were trying to clear roads for traffic when party activists attacked law enforcement officers with rocks and molotov cocktails.

"We fired rubber bullets and tear gas to evacuate the people from the road," he said, adding that thousands of BNP activists were at the scene at the time of the clashes. The clashes came after BNP officials expressed fears that the police would trigger violence to scuttle Saturday's rally, which the party expects will draw hundreds of thousands of people.

Rizvi Ahmed, another party spokesman, said at least 1,430 BNP activists and supporters had been arrested since November 30 in an attempt to stop the rally taking place. The BNP want Hasina to resign and for a caretaker administration to govern until fresh elections are held. The BNP was decimated in the past two general elections, which independent observers said were heavily rigged by Hasina's government. Fifteen Western embassies issued a joint statement ahead of the rally late Tuesday, calling for the country to allow free expression, peaceful assembly and elections. — AFP

Nepal ruling coalition loses majority

KATHMANDU, Nepal: Nepal's ruling coalition has lost its majority in parliament, results from last month's election showed on Wednesday in a rebuke by voters to the Himalayan republic's ageing political elite.

The Nepali Congress of incumbent Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba, 76, emerged as the largest party but his five-party ruling alliance fell short of a majority with 136 seats in the 275-member parliament, according to the Election Commission. "Our party has emerged as the largest party. Still, it's not the result in line with our expectation. We had expected more," Prakash Sharan Mahat, a spokesperson for the Nepali Congress, told AFP. As a result, Congress will have to seek support from some of the 34 independent and minor party candidates who entered the assembly for the first time in a wave of voter discontent.

Prominent among them is bombastic television host Rabi Lamichhane, 48, a long-time campaigner against government corruption, who will play a key role in any negotiations. His National Independent Party, contesting

its first election, won 20 seats and became the fourth-largest in the assembly. "We will meet the shortfall for the majority by bringing other parties into the fold. Some of them have shown their interest for a partnership with the coalition," Mahat said. The November 20 election was just the second held under the current constitution, which ushered in a new political order after the conclusion of Nepal's traumatic Maoist insurgency.

The decade-old civil war ended in 2006, having claimed more than 17,000 lives and prompting the abolition of the monarchy, bringing former rebels into the government fold. Since then the ex-guerrillas have alternated in power with another communist party and Congress in various coalitions. Deuba has already served as premier five times, while the two other main party leaders, aged 70 and 67, have both held the office twice. This revolving door of prime ministers—most serving less than a year—and a culture of parliamentary horse trading has frustrated the public at a time when many households are struggling with rising living costs.

Nepal's economy is still in the doldrums from the pandemic, which devastated the vital tourism industry and dried up remittances from the huge number of Nepalis working abroad. In the election, many voters eagerly supported new candidates who sprang up in response to public discontent with established politicians in the country of around 29 million people.—AFP



BANDUNG, Indonesia: Bystanders look on as police secure the site of a suicide bombing outside a police station at Astanaanyar in Bandung, West Java province, on December 7, 2022. — AFP

Suicide bombing kills Indonesian police officer, wounds 10

BANDUNG, Indonesia: A suspected Islamic militant suicide bomber killed a police officer and wounded 10 other people in an attack on a police station in the Indonesian city of Bandung on Wednesday, police said. Police identified the attacker as 34-year-old Agus Sujatno, who was linked to the pro-Islamic State group Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD) and had already served four years in a maximum security prison for his involvement in a 2017 bombing.

"The fingerprint test and the facial recognition identified the perpetrator as Agus Sujatno, or Abu Muslim," national police chief Listyo Sigit told a press conference in Bandung, capital of West Java province.

He was released in September 2021 after serving his sentence for a previous bombing in Bandung, Sigit added. Wednesday's blast occurred at about 8:00 am at the Astana Anyar police office in Bandung.

"When our officers were doing the morning roll call, a man tried to enter the office forcibly and officers tried to stop him," said West Java police chief Suntana, who like many Indonesians goes by one name. "The perpetrator insisted on getting closer to our officers while wielding a knife and suddenly an explosion happened," he told reporters. A witness who was near the

police station said he heard a very loud explosion.

"I heard a bang, it was so loud. I took a peak inside the police office and I saw thick smoke billowing," Didin Khaerudin, who runs a nearby kiosk, told AFP, adding police ordered shops to close after the blast. A second device was later found nearby and safely detonated by the police bomb squad, Suntana said.

A civilian passerby was among the injured, who were mostly hit by shattered glass and debris, he said. Police said they had found paper messages attached to the blue motorbike ridden by the attacker. The messages denounced the Indonesian criminal code as a product of "infidels" and urged people to wage a war against law enforcers, police said.

Police also found a stack of papers at the scene rejecting a newly passed amendment to the criminal code. Some Islamist extremists have called for the implementation of sharia law in Indonesia, which officially recognises five religions in addition to Islam.

Members of JAD have staged other attacks, including a series of suicide bombings in May 2018 against several churches and a police headquarters in Surabaya, Indonesia's second-biggest city. Those attacks, carried out by families including children, killed a dozen people.

Indonesia, the world's biggest Muslim-majority nation, has long struggled with Islamist militancy. The Indonesian resort island of Bali was the scene of Southeast Asia's worst militant attack when Al-Qaeda-linked militants detonated bombs at a bar and nightclub that killed more than 200 people in October 2002. — AFP

Rohingya refugees embrace family planning

KUTUPALONG, Bangladesh: Rohingya cleric Abdur Rashid still believes children are divine gifts, but life in a Bangladeshi refugee camp with six little mouths to feed has left him and his wife unwilling to accept another heavenly blessing. Earlier this year, his wife Nosmin asked doctors to fit her with a contraceptive implant, a decision that cultural norms among the persecuted and largely Muslim minority would have rendered unthinkable a few years ago.

But since fleeing a military crackdown in Myanmar five years ago, life in the overcrowded refugee settlements of their reluctant hosts has prompted the couple and many other families to limit the size of their households. Roughly two-thirds of Rohingya couples are now using some form of birth control—up from virtually none five years ago, according to figures from the UN refugee agency. "Children are blessings from God and he's the one who arranges necessities for them—but we have been stuck in this squalid camp for years now," Rashid told AFP.

"I prefer not to bring in any more life in the face of this hardship." Islam takes no uniform view of birth control—a practice endorsed by some Muslim communities and abhorred by others. A few short years ago, many Rohingya believed birth control was against the tenets of their faith. That taboo has withered, with Rashid among hundreds of religious leaders within the refugee community delivering sermons in mosques in support of contraceptive use. He and others have volunteered for a dedicated public health campaign that aid workers and Bangladeshi authorities say has brought a sweeping change in attitudes towards family planning.

Around 190,000 family planning visits were made in the first six months of the year from among the million or so Rohingya refugees living in the Bangladeshi camps, including many women seeking abortions. "Eventually, I may want one more baby. But not right now," said mother-of-two Noorjahan Begum, 25. Begum spoke to AFP after walking through the day to her nearest clinic, carrying her six-month-old son, to ask doctors to terminate her latest pregnancy.

Dependent on humanitarian aid to survive, Begum said she lacked the resources to adequately feed and shelter another baby. "God willing, I will take permanent birth control measures after my third child," she added. Family planning has a fraught history for the Rohingya, about 750,000 of whom fled their homes in Myanmar five years ago after a crackdown by security forces now subject to a UN genocide investigation. Before that exodus, the Rohingya were subject to decades of discriminatory policies by Myanmar authorities who considered them illegal immigrants from Bangladesh, despite their long-established presence. Myanmar's government denied them citizenship and prevented them from moving freely in an effort to confine the population to a remote corner of the country. It also attempted to forbid Rohingya women from having more than two children and made a written pledge to that effect a condition of issuing marriage licences to Rohingya couples. Since 2017, Bangladesh has struggled to support its immense refugee population, for whom the prospects of a wholesale return to Myanmar or resettlement elsewhere are vanishingly remote. Efforts to ease overcrowding in the camps have seen thousands of refugees moved to a flood-prone island—a policy criticised by rights groups, which said many had been relocated against their will.—AFP

Business

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 8, 2022

World economy faces more pain in 2023 after a gloomy year

'Polycrisis' year saw record inflation and climate-linked disasters

PARIS: This was supposed to be the comeback year for the world economy following the COVID pandemic. Instead, 2022 was marked by a new war, record inflation and climate-linked disasters. It was a "polycrisis" year, a term popularized by historian Adam Tooze. Get ready for more gloom in 2023.

"The number of crises has increased since the start of the century," said Roel Beetsma, professor of macroeconomics at the University of Amsterdam. "Since World War Two we have never seen such a complicated situation," he told AFP. After the COVID-induced economic crisis of 2020, consumer prices began to rise in 2021 as countries emerged from lockdowns or other restrictions.

Central bankers insisted that high inflation would only be temporary as economies returned to normal. But Russia's invasion of Ukraine in late February sent energy and food prices soaring. Many countries are now grappling with cost-of-living crises because wages are not keeping up with inflation, forcing households to make difficult choices in their spending. "Everything has become more expensive, from cream to wine and electricity," said Nicole Eisermann from her stand at the Frankfurt Christmas market.

Central banks played catch-up. They started to raise interest rates this year in an effort to tame galloping inflation-at the risk of tipping countries into deep recessions, since higher borrowing costs mean slower economic activity. Inflation has finally started to slow down in the United States and the eurozone.

Careful spending

Consumer prices in the Group of 20 developed and emerging nations are expected to reach eight percent in the fourth quarter before falling to 5.5 percent next year, according to the Organization for



2022 was marked by a new war, record inflation and climate-linked disasters.

Economic Cooperation and Development. The OECD encourages governments to provide aid to bring relief to households.

In the 27-nation European Union, €674 billion (\$704 billion) have been earmarked so far to shield consumers from high energy prices, according to the Bruegel think tank. Germany, Europe's biggest economy and the most dependent on Russia energy supplies, accounts for 264 billion euros of that total.

One in two Germans say they now only spend on essential items, according to a survey by EY con-

sultancy. "I am very careful but I have a lot of children and grandchildren," said Guenther Blum, a shopper at the Frankfurt Christmas market.

Rising interest rates have also hurt consumers and businesses, though US Federal Reserve chairman Jerome Powell signalled last week that the pace of hikes could ease "as soon as" December.

He warned, however, that policy will probably have to remain tight for some time to restore price stability. For her part, European Central Bank president Christine Lagarde sent a clear signal that the

ECB would maintain its tightening policy, saying that eurozone inflation had yet to peak.

Economists expect Germany and another major eurozone economy, Italy, to fall into recession. Britain's economy is already shrinking. Rating agency S&P Global foresees stagnation for the eurozone in 2023. But the International Monetary Fund still expects the world economy to expand in 2023, with growth of 2.7 percent. The OECD is forecasting 2.2-percent growth.

The coronavirus pandemic, meanwhile, remains a wildcard for the global economy. China's zero-COVID policy restrained growth in the world's second biggest economy, but the authorities have started to relax restrictions following nationwide protests.

Climate costs

But for Beetsma, the biggest crisis is climate change, which is "happening in slow motion". Natural and man-made catastrophes have caused \$268 billion in economic losses so far in 2022, according to reinsurance giant Swiss Re. Hurricane Ian alone cost an estimated insured loss of \$50-65 billion.

Floods in Pakistan resulted in \$30 billion in damage and economic loss this year. Governments agreed at United Nations climate talks (COP27) in Egypt in November to create a fund to cover the losses suffered by vulnerable developing countries devastated by natural disasters. But the COP27 summit ended without new commitments to phase out the use of fossil fuels, despite the need to cut greenhouse gas emissions and slow global warming. "It is not an acute crisis but a very long-term crisis, protracted," Beetsma said. "If we don't do enough this will hit us in unprecedented scale." —AFP

KNET appoints Al-Khashnam as CEO

KUWAIT: The Shared Electronic Banking Services Company (KNET) announced the appointment of Essam Al-Khashnam as a Chief Executive Officer, starting 11th of December, 2022. The Chairman of KNET, Mohammed Al-Othman stated that all regulatory approvals to appoint Al-Khashnam have been obtained. Al-Khashnam is a well-known, competent, and distinguished executive, who is going to lead KNET's future strategy to elevate its services offered to the Kuwaiti banking sector as well as the commercial and governmental sectors.

Al-Khashnam brings over 30 years of experience in information technology and financial services industry. He holds a bachelor's degree in computer engineering from University of the

Pacific (USA) as well as a General Management Program from Harvard Business School. Since 2017, Al-Khashnam held the position of Chief Executive Officer at ITS. Prior to that he held a number of leading posts in various institutions such as the IT Strategic Department Manager at the Central Bank of Kuwait, and the EVP of Sales & COO at Path Solutions, the Sales Director for Rekaz Systems, the Business Development Manager of Financial Services Industry at Hasibat Information Technologies, and the Business Development Manager at Gulf Business Machines. Al-Khashnam also served on the board of directors of the Industrial Bank of Kuwait.

Al-Khashnam expressed his gratitude to KNET's Board of Directors for the opportunity to lead KNET and enrich its strategy going forward. He also expressed confidence that cooperating with the team at KNET is going to be the mantra for the period ahead which will be filled with exceptional projects. The Shared Electronic Banking Services Company (KNET) is the pioneer in electronic payments in Kuwait. KNET



Essam Al-Khashnam



Mohammed Al-Othman

was established in 1992 with the partnership of the local banks to connect all local bank's systems and enable wide range of banking services through an advanced network. KNET is committed to pursuing and adopting state-of-the-art technologies in various fields of electronic banking and payments to the highest standards available globally. Amongst the targeted sectors are the commercial, banking, and governmental sectors in Kuwait.

Metaverse could add \$15bn annually to GCC economies: Study

DUBAI: The metaverse is projected to contribute about \$15 billion to GCC economies annually by 2030, led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, as governments continue to introduce measures to tap into the potential of the emerging technology, according to a study.

The kingdom is expected to account for more than half of the figure, or \$7.6 billion, while the Emirates stands to receive almost a quarter, or \$3.3 billion, reflecting the aggressive programs the Arab world's two biggest economies have in place to leverage the metaverse, Strategy&, a subsidiary of global consultancy PwC, said in a statement on Wednesday.

Qatar is next with \$1.6 billion, followed by Kuwait (\$1 billion), Oman (\$800 million) and Bahrain (\$400 million). The travel and tourism industry is seen benefiting the most, with an estimated \$3.2 billion economic gain each year, the study said.

"The metaverse holds a world of possibilities that extends beyond next-generation gaming and internet-based home buying or shopping. It will change how we work, transact, plan, design, build, shop, recreate, travel and live," Dany Karam, a partner at Strategy& Middle East, said.

The metaverse is the virtual space where people, represented by avatars or three-dimensional representations, can interact. It is also poised to reshape workplaces and businesses by using new techniques to streamline operations. The technology is seen as an economic opportunity worth between \$8 trillion and \$13 trillion, heavily dependent on how much companies are willing to invest in the emerging innovation, PwC has earlier said.

The metaverse's potential to energize and transform key sectors in the GCC countries is enormous. The region is already seizing the opportunity, with important metaverse initiatives in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The metaverse's potential contribution to GCC economies could be around \$15 billion by 2030. Metaverse elements and applications are developing swiftly. Business leaders should immediately begin preparing strategically and technologically to take advantage of the metaverse's transformative possibilities.

Neom, the kingdom's \$500 billion high-tech city on the Red Sea, is using the metaverse to provide information on construction operations. A metaverse for Neom has also been created to allow people to simultaneously experience the city in both the real and virtual worlds. The UAE, meanwhile, has taken a number of steps to integrate the metaverse and its related technology, including cryptocurrencies, into the economy, government and society.

In July, Dubai unveiled its Dubai Metaverse Strategy, which aims to create 40,000 jobs and add \$4 billion to the emirate's economy. In May, the emirate's Virtual Assets Regulatory Authority also established its Metaverse HQ, making it the first regulator to have a presence there. —Agencies

India CB hikes interest rate but at slower pace

MUMBAI: India's central bank on Wednesday raised its main interest rate for the fifth time this year, but by a smaller margin as inflation eases and other countries look to slow the pace of hikes. The move by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) comes after US Federal Reserve chairman Jerome Powell signalled last week that officials would begin to take their foot off the pedal.

"GDP growth in India remains resilient and inflation is expected to moderate," RBI governor Shaktikanta Das said in a webcast. However, he added: "But the battle against inflation is not over. Pressure points from high and sticky core inflation, and exposure of food inflation to interna-

tional factors and weather-related events, do remain."

Das said the benchmark repurchase rate would rise 35 basis points to 6.25 percent, following three straight rises of half a percentage point since June and one of 40 points in May.

The move was in line with market expectations. Consumer inflation has this year hovered above the RBI's upper band of six percent, hitting a high of 7.79 percent in April, though it eased to 6.77 percent in October. The bank retained its inflation forecast of 6.7 percent for the fiscal year to March but trimmed its economic growth projection to 6.8 percent from 7.0 percent.

India imports more than 80 percent of its crude oil needs and rising petrol costs-caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine-have had a ripple effect on prices for the country's 1.4 billion people. Elevated commodity prices and a falling rupee have left India struggling with a deteriorating trade balance, with net imports in the September quarter nearly doubling year-on-year.

after a meeting with officials at the commerce ministry. The bakery owners are demanding payment of 14 months of overdue subsidies, which the union estimates at 260 million dinars (\$80 million).

Subsidies on basic goods are a highly sensitive political issue in Tunisia, where a public finance crisis has caused repeated shortages of subsidized flour, sugar and other basic goods. Bouanane said the government, which had promised but failed to cover four months of the unpaid subsidies, has indicated it would only being gradual payment of the overdue compensation in January.

A government press service contacted by AFP did not respond to a request for comment. One striking baker said he was struggling to maintain his business. "We can no longer continue to work, we are unable to pay our workers and all our



Shaktikanta Das

Exports plunged to a 20-month low of \$29.78 billion in October, as high inflation and recession fears hit demand in key overseas markets.

The Indian rupee hit record low against the dollar in October as the US unit was boosted by sharp rate hikes by the Fed. However it has recovered slightly since then, thanks to interventions by the RBI.

Data last week showed Indian economic growth slowed to 6.3 percent on-year in July-September. That was well down from 13.5 percent recorded in the previous three months, which was boosted by the recovery from the depths of the pandemic in 2021. —AFP

costs," he told AFP by telephone. "The government must pay us."

A strike in October was suspended the day it began following state promises to pay bakers around \$24 million, which Bouanane said had not happened. Nearly 1,200 bakeries unaffected by the compensation system continued to operate normally on Wednesday. Tunisia is in the grip of a grinding economic downturn exacerbated by inflation that hit 9.8 percent year-on-year in December, according to official figures.

A \$1.9-billion loan deal with the International Monetary Fund agreed in principle in mid-October stipulates that the cash-strapped country gradually scrap its subsidy program. The North African country, due to hold legislative elections on December 17, has also been mired in a political crisis since July 2021, when President Kais Saied seized full executive powers. —AFP

Tunisian bakers strike again over unpaid subsidies

TUNIS: Thousands of bakeries across Tunisia closed on Wednesday, less than two months after a similar strike demanding the government pay up overdue subsidies. The national bakery owners' union said more than 3,100 bakeries, representing 90 percent of the North African country's state-subsidized bread-makers, have joined the open-ended strike.

"We will continue our strike since we have not received any positive response from the government", union head Mohamed Bouanane told AFP

Business

China's imports and exports plunge due to COVID rules

Snap lockdowns, travel curbs and mass testing stifle business activity

BEIJING: China's imports and exports plunged in November to levels not seen since early 2020, official figures showed Wednesday, as severe COVID restrictions hit the economy hard. The last major economy still wedded to a zero-tolerance virus policy, Beijing's snap lockdowns, travel curbs and mass testing have stifled business activity, disrupted supply chains and dampened consumption.

Imports in November fell 10.6 percent year-on-year, the biggest drop since May 2020, according to the General Administration of Customs. Meanwhile, exports fell 8.7 percent over the same period—the steepest decline since February 2020, when the country was mired in the early stages of the pandemic.

"Weakening domestic and foreign demand, COVID disruptions and a rising comparison base lead to a perfect but well-expected storm to China's exports and imports," Bruce Pang, chief economist at Jones Lang LaSalle, told Bloomberg News.

The figures are the latest in a string of gloomy economic indicators as the world's number two economy charts a faltering path out of zero-COVID. Official data last week showed China's factory activity shrank for a second straight month in November, as large swathes of the country were hit by lockdowns and transport disruptions. The Purchasing Managers' Index—a key gauge of manufacturing—fell to 48.0 from 49.2 the month prior, well below the 50-point mark separating growth from contraction, according to the National Bureau of Statistics.

"In November, the pandemic had a negative impact on the production and operation of some enterprises, production somewhat slowed, and product order volumes decreased," the bureau's senior statistician Zhao Qinghe said. Some suppliers had complained of transport and logistics problems, while demand from both the domestic and overseas markets fell, he added.

'Bumpy reopening'
China's ruling Communist Party has signaled a shift in COVID messaging since the country's largest protests in decades took aim last week at lockdowns and other measures. Local authorities have begun easing testing requirements and other restrictions, but travel between provinces remains complicated and

health measures continue to vary from place to place. "The zero-COVID policy has been loosened, but mobility has not recovered much on the national level," said Zhiwei Zhang, chief economist of Pinpoint Asset Management. "I expect exports will stay weak in the next few months as China goes through a bumpy reopening process," he added.

"As global demand weakens in 2023, China will have to rely more on domestic demand." Chinese leaders have set an annual economic growth target of about 5.5 percent, but many observers think the country will struggle to hit it, despite announcing a better-than-expected 3.9 percent expansion in the third quarter. —AFP



LIANYUNGANG, China: This photo taken on December 7, 2022 shows cranes and shipping containers at a port in Lianyungang in China's eastern Jiangsu province. — AFP

As AI rises, lawmakers try to catch up

PARIS: From "intelligent" vacuum cleaners and driverless cars to advanced techniques for diagnosing diseases, artificial intelligence has burrowed its way into every arena of modern life. Its promoters reckon it is revolutionizing human experience, but critics stress that the technology risks putting machines in charge of life-changing decisions. Regulators in Europe and North America are worried. The European Union is likely to pass legislation next year—the AI Act—aimed at reigning in the age of the algorithm.

The United States recently published a blueprint for an AI Bill of Rights and Canada is also mulling legislation. Looming large in the debates has been China's use of biometric data, facial recognition and other technology to build a powerful system of control.

Gry Hasselbalch, a Danish academic who advises the EU on the controversial technology, argued that the West was also in danger of creating "totalitarian infrastructures". "I see that as a huge threat, no matter the benefits," she told AFP. But before regulators can act, they face the daunting task of defining what AI actually is.

'Mug's game'

Suresh Venkatasubramanian of Brown University, who co-authored the AI Bill of Rights, said trying to define AI was "a mug's game". Any technology that affects people's rights should be within the scope of the bill, he tweeted. The 27-nation EU is taking the more tortuous route of attempting to define the sprawling field. Its draft law lists the kinds of approaches defined as AI, and it includes pretty much any computer system that involves automation.

The problem stems from the changing use of the term AI. For decades, it described attempts to create machines that simulated human thinking. But funding largely dried up for this research—known as symbolic AI—in the early 2000s. The rise of the Silicon Valley titans saw AI reborn as a catch-all label for their number-crunching programs and the algorithms they generated. This automation allowed them to target users with advertising and content, helping them to make hundreds of billions of dollars.

"AI was a way for them to make more use of this surveillance data and to mystify what was happening," Meredith Whittaker, a former Google worker who co-founded New York University's AI Now Institute, told AFP. So the EU and US have both concluded that any definition of AI needs to be as broad as possible.

'Too challenging'

But from that point, the two Western powerhouses have largely gone their separate ways. The EU's draft AI Act runs to more than 100 pages. Among its most eye-catching proposals are the complete prohibition of certain "high-risk" technologies—the kind of biometric surveillance tools used in China. It also drastically limits the use of AI tools by migration officials, police and judges. Hasselbalch said some technologies were "simply too challenging to fundamental rights".

The AI Bill of Rights, on the other hand, is a brief set of principles framed in aspirational language, with exhortations like "you should be protected from unsafe or ineffective systems". The bill was issued by the White House and relies on existing law. Experts reckon no dedicated AI legislation is likely in the United States until 2024 at the earliest because Congress is deadlocked.

'Flesh wound'

Opinions differ on the merits of each approach. "We desperately need regulation," Gary Marcus of New York University told AFP. He points out that "large language models"—the AI behind chatbots, translation tools, predictive text software and much else—can be used to generate harmful disinformation.

Whittaker questioned the value of laws aimed at tackling AI rather than the "surveillance business models" that underpin it. "If you're not addressing that at a fundamental level, I think you're putting a band-aid over a flesh wound," she said.

But other experts have broadly welcomed the US approach. AI was a better target for regulators than the more abstract concept of privacy, said Sean McGregor, a researcher who chronicles tech failures for the AI Incident Database. But he said there could be a risk of over-regulation.

"The authorities that exist can regulate AI," he told AFP, pointing to the likes of the US Federal Trade Commission and the housing regulator HUD. But where experts broadly agree is the need to remove the hype and mysticism that surrounds AI technology. "It's not magical," McGregor said, likening AI to a highly sophisticated Excel spreadsheet. —AFP

Philippine lawmakers to revise wealth fund bill after outcry

MANILA: Philippine lawmakers said Wednesday that they would revise a proposed law creating a \$4.9 billion sovereign wealth fund after concerns were raised over potential corruption and risks to workers' pensions. Congressman Sandro Marcos and Martin Romualdez-President Ferdinand Marcos Jr's son and cousin respectively—are among the authors of the bill establishing the "Maharlika Investments Fund", which was to have been seeded by government-run banks and pension funds.

But Stella Quimbo, another of the bill's co-authors, said congressional leaders decided Wednesday to exclude the pension funds as contributors and instead seed the initiative with Philippine central bank profits. "It's good that we conducted a series of consultations about the bill," Quimbo told reporters.

"It validated the concerns of our people, especially the industrious Filipino workers who remit their contributions every month to the GSIS and SSS," she said, referring to the pension funds by their acronyms. The proposed law, aimed at raising capital for big-ticket development projects, had stoked anger among activists and opposition figures, as well as concern from business groups. Conventional sovereign wealth funds are seeded by windfall government profits from natural resources, such as oil or minerals, rather than money from pension funds.

Business groups said the government was already running huge budget deficits and the proposed law risked downgrading its credit rating. Critics also questioned the plan to designate the president as head of the fund's board. Marcos Jr's late father and namesake was accused of embezzling billions of dollars from the national treasury during his 20-year rule. His estate was also accused of failing to pay \$3.6 billion in taxes.

House leaders have discussed a new version of the bill that was drafted by the president's economic advisers, which will be tackled by the House appropriations committee on Friday, Quimbo said.

Lawmakers will "put in place safety nets" to ensure government funds are safeguarded, she added. The word "maharlika", meaning "nobility", is widely associated with Marcos Sr, who presided over widespread human rights abuses and corruption during his two decades in power. He was ousted in 1986 but no one in the clan has been jailed. Marcos Sr claimed to have led an anti-Japanese guerrilla unit called Ang Mga Maharlika during World War II, but he has been accused of lying about his war record. —AFP

Stocks fall as recession fears grow

LONDON: Major stock markets suffered more selling Wednesday on growing fears that Federal Reserve monetary tightening will tip the US economy into recession. The drop followed more steep losses on Wall Street Tuesday after the heads of leading US banks warned of tough times ahead in 2023. JPMorgan Chase chief Jamie Dimon tipped a "mild to hard recession" and Goldman Sachs' David Solomon said jobs and pay would be hit, while Morgan Stanley and Bank of America were also uneasy about the outlook.

The comments added to the downbeat mood that has coursed through trading floors at the start of the week, after forecast-beating reports on jobs and the giant US services sector fanned worries the Fed would have to push interest rates higher than hoped. Markets had been rising healthily after a weaker-than-expected inflation reading for October suggested the almost year-long tightening campaign was finally affecting prices. "Any hopes that the Fed would turn more dovish in the months ahead have been dashed significantly as the vast US services industry is where sticky inflation hangs out," said SPI Asset Management's Stephen Innes.

He added that the latest readings suggest rates would go above five percent before the Fed stops hiking, while several observers have suggested they will not be reduced until 2024.

The somber outlook overshadowed China's moves to wind back some of its harsh COVID rules that traders hope will kickstart the world's number two economy, which has been battered this year by months of lockdowns and other containment measures. In a sign of the impact the zero-COVID strategy has had, data Wednesday showed that imports and exports plunged far more than expected in November. On Wednesday, officials announced for the first time a nationwide loosening of restrictions, including a reduction in mandatory PCR tests and allowing some positive cases to quarantine at home. But while the country edges back to normality, Zhiwei Zhang, of Pinpoint Asset Management, warned that it would take time. "The zero-COVID policy has been loosened, but mobility has not recovered much on the national level," he said. —AFP



AI promoters reckon it is revolutionising human experience, but critics stress that the technology risks putting machines in charge of life-changing decisions. —AFP

Meta expected to face new fines after EU ruling

PARIS: Meta is expected to face another large fine after Europe's data watchdog on Tuesday imposed binding decisions concerning the treatment of personal data by the owner of Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp. The European Data Protection Supervisor (EDPS) said in a statement that the rulings concerned Meta's use of data for targeted advertising, but did not give details or recommend fines.

Authorities in Ireland, where Meta has its European headquarters, have a month to impose the ruling.

Previous interventions by the EDPS have led to large fines on tech platforms, including a 405-million-euro fine on Instagram in September over a breach in the handling of children's data. The latest case follows complaints by privacy campaigning group Noyb that Meta's three apps fail to meet Europe's strict rules on data protection. Noyb says they flouted the landmark General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) that came into force in May 2018 by failing to give users the option of holding

back their personal data and blocking targeted advertising. Facebook argues these are vital to its functioning.

"This is not the final decision and it is too early to speculate," said a Meta spokesman, adding that EU law left open a possibility for targeted ads. In October 2021, the Irish Data Protection Authority (DPA) recommended a fine of just 28 to 36 million euros for lack of transparency. But this was rejected as far too low by France's CNIL (the National Commission for Technology and Freedoms) and other national watchdogs, who asked the EDPS to investigate the case. "The EU regulators' decision, if it is upheld, would have a dramatic impact on Meta's revenue in Europe," said Debra Aho Williamson, an analyst at Insider Intelligence.

The decision would be a "kneecapping" of Meta's ability to sell targeted advertising and given the stakes, Meta will "fight vigorously to defend its business", she said. According to the Politico news site, internal documents show that Meta earmarked three billion euros for possible European fines in 2022 and 2023. As well as the Instagram fine in September, Meta was fined a further 265 million euros last month over a data leak that saw half a billion users' details published on a hacking website. That adds to a 60-million-euro fine in France in January over its use of "cookies", the digital trackers used to target advertising. —AFP

Business

Biden celebrates US manufacturing comeback at semiconductor project

TSMC to build a second Phoenix plant by 2026

PHOENIX, US: President Joe Biden declared the comeback of US manufacturing Tuesday at the site of a mammoth expansion to a Taiwanese-owned semiconductor plant aimed at breaking risky US dependency on foreign-based producers for the vital component. "American manufacturing is back, folks. American manufacturing is back," Biden said at the plant in Phoenix, Arizona, accompanied by senior political allies and titans of the corporate world, including Apple CEO Tim Cook and Micron CEO Sanjay Mehrotra.

The project by TSMC, the world's biggest maker of leading-edge chips, would go a long way to meeting the US goal of ending reliance on foreign-located factories—particularly in Taiwan, which is under constant threat of being absorbed or even invaded by China. TSMC, or Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company, announced it is building a second Phoenix plant by 2026, ballooning its investment in Arizona from \$12 billion to \$40 billion, with a target of producing some 600,000 microchips a year. About 10,000 high-tech jobs will be created once both plants are working, the company said. White House National Economic Council Director Brian Deese said the "major milestone" is one of the largest foreign direct investments in US history, while TSMC chairman Mark Liu heralded "a giant step forward to help build a vibrant semiconductor ecosystem in the United States." Biden clearly hoped to get political credit for the investment influx, pointing to the effect of his signature CHIPS Act, which sets aside almost \$53 billion for subsidies and research in the semiconductors sector.

It's a message he'll want to spread in Arizona, which was long a Republican-dominated state but has turned into a battleground where the president's Democrats do increasingly well.

Size matters

Most of the current US supply of microchips comes from overseas. Although the companies are largely based in reliable US allies in Asia, the sheer distance and, especially, the geopolitical tensions around Taiwan, have the US government and companies like Apple nervous. "Virtually every large tech firm, including automotive firms and any company that uses technology is sweating bullets that something's going to happen between Taiwan and China. And so there's a massive rush to shift manufacturing out of both countries," technology analyst Rob Enderle said.

The minuscule, hard-to-make gadgets are at the heart of almost every modern appliance, vehicle and advanced weapon. While sheer quantity matters, quality-sophistication and small size is also increasingly important. Even typical smartphones require the higher-end semiconductors.

The new TSMC plant will produce state-of-the-art 3-nanometer chips, while the existing facility will start reducing the size of its current 5-nanometer chips to a more sophisticated 4 nanometers.

The twin plants "could meet the entire US demand for advanced chips when they're completed. That's the definition of supply chain resilience," Ronnie Chatterji, National Economic Council deputy director for industrial policy, told reporters.

Biden framed the TSMC investment in a broader context of revitalizing US-based manufacturing—one of his presidency's key themes. "Over 30 years ago, America had more than 30 percent of the global chip production. Then something happened," he said.

"American manufacturing, the backbone of our economy, began to get hollowed out. Companies



PHOENIX, US: US President Joe Biden (left) tours the TSMC Semiconductor Manufacturing Facility in Phoenix, Arizona, on December 6, 2022. —AFP

moved jobs overseas. Today we're down to producing only around 10 percent of the world's chips, despite leading the world in research and design," Deese, one of Biden's most senior advisors, said Biden's signature public investment policies—the CHIPS Act and the giant Inflation Reduction Act—revolutionizing the way the government works with private companies.

For almost four decades, the idea was "trickle down," where government would "get out the way" and cut taxes for big companies to attract investment, he said. Now the goal is to use the public money to kickstart activity and "crowd in" investors. The goal is not to exclude "private companies, but in fact, encouraging private investment at historic scale," Deese said. —AFP

WB says developing economies' debt more than doubled

WASHINGTON: The external debt of developing economies has more than doubled from a decade ago to \$9 trillion in 2021, the World Bank said Tuesday, warning the debt crisis facing these countries has intensified. The pandemic has forced many countries to take on more borrowing, and World Bank President David Malpass has warned that the world is facing a fifth wave of debt crisis.

Many countries are already facing or at risk of debt distress with surging global inflation and rising interest rates. And global growth is slowing sharply this year, with an increased risk of world recession in 2023 amid "one of the most internationally synchronous episodes of... policy tightening" in 50

years, the World Bank said.

"A comprehensive approach is needed to reduce debt, increase transparency, and facilitate swifter restructuring—so countries can focus on spending that supports growth and reduces poverty," Malpass added on Tuesday. Speaking to reporters, he said the combination of high government debt levels and rising interest rates will cause greater absorption of global capital by advanced economies for a longer period.

"For developing countries, this is a grim outlook... access to electricity, fertilizer, food and capital is likely to remain limited for a prolonged period," he added. Meanwhile, under-investment in businesses is blocking future growth, Malpass said. The World Bank said in a release that the poorest countries eligible to borrow from its International Development Association (IDA) now spend more than a tenth of their export revenues to service their long-term public and publicly guaranteed external debt.

This is the highest proportion since 2000, added the Washington-based development lender.

The external debt of IDA countries also nearly

Updated figures showed that production rose more strongly than previously thought in September, up 1.1 percent instead of 0.6 percent. Despite the positive September revision and recent improvements in business confidence indicators, October's lackluster reading showed an economic downturn was closing in, analysts said. "The German economy has not fallen off a cliff but continues its long slide into recession," said Carsten Brzeski, head of macro at ING bank.

Sizeable government interventions to mitigate the impact of rapidly increasing energy costs in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine have helped, Brzeski said. Berlin has signed off on a 200-billion-euro (\$209-billion) package to mitigate the



David Malpass

tripled in the decade leading up to 2021. "On the surface, debt indicators seem to have improved in 2021," the World Bank said, adding that "this was not the case for IDA countries." Vulnerabilities underscore an urgent need to improve debt transparency, the bank said. —AFP



SANTA MONICA, US: In this file photo taken on September 14, 2022, the VF-8 electric vehicle from VinFast, a Vietnamese automaker producing electric cars and SUVs, is displayed at their showroom in Santa Monica, California. —AFP

Vietnam's VinFast files for US IPO as it eyes global market

HANOI: Vietnam's homegrown carmaker VinFast, which plans to sell the first ever Vietnamese car in the United States, said Wednesday it has filed for an initial public offering (IPO) in the country. VinFast, which is part of conglomerate Vingroup, owned by Vietnam's richest man Pham Nhat Vuong, will deliver its first electric SUVs to Americans later this month.

On Wednesday, the company said it "intends to list its ordinary shares on the Nasdaq Global Select Market under the symbol 'VFS'". No decision has been made on the number of shares to be offered and the price range for the proposed offering, it added.

The pivot to the United States is a bold move by chairman Vuong, who started out selling dried noodles in the former Soviet Union before amassing his \$5 billion fortune in a range of sectors including real estate, tourism and education. VinFast already has electric vehicles (EVs) on the streets of Hanoi, but is using an unusual battery leasing model to hook customers in the crowded and difficult US market, which is dominated by Elon Musk's Tesla. The upfront payment for the VF8 and VF9 — the two models sold in the US—will be \$42,000 and \$57,500 respectively. Tesla's SUVs start at around \$65,000.

In July, VinFast opened six showrooms in California, including a flagship store at one of the trendiest malls in upmarket Santa Monica. It said it planned for 30 in total by the end of the year, while it has also broken ground on a \$2 billion electric vehicle and battery plant in North Carolina that it says will produce 150,000 cars a year when fully up and running.

VinFast has also opened showrooms in Europe—one in Cologne, Germany, and another in Paris—and is targeting several other European cities. —AFP

German industrial output stagnates in October

BERLIN: German industrial production fell slightly in October, official figures published Wednesday showed, as analysts saw Europe's largest economy drifting towards a winter recession. Output dropped 0.1 percent in October on the previous month, according to preliminary data from federal statistics agency Destatis.

EU starts WTO action against China policies

BRUSSELS: The EU on Wednesday escalated disputes with China to the WTO, requesting panels be assembled to hear two cases, one over trade restrictions on Lithuania and the other on legal recourses for EU patent holders. "In both cases, the Chinese measures are highly damaging to European businesses" and, in the Lithuania case, "impact the functioning of the EU internal market," the European Commission said in a statement.

China is the European Union's biggest trading partner, and the litigation burdens the World Trade Organization with a thorny challenge at a time its dispute settlement system is badly weakened. The Lithuania case is over trade restrictions China has been applying to that EU member

country because of Lithuania's strengthening ties with Taiwan, which China views as part of its territory.

Beijing has denied taking coercive measures against Lithuania. But Lithuanian exports to China have dropped 80 percent over the past year, ever since Chinese authorities started rejecting many Lithuanian imports. The commission said that Chinese claims made in February that bans on Lithuanian alcohol, beef, dairy products, logs, peat and wheat were on health grounds were not justified. Consultations with China early this year failed to address that issue, the commission said.

On the patents matter, the European Union is challenging decisions made by Chinese courts in August 2020 that barred EU owners of high-tech patents from turning to EU courts to protect their intellectual property. The commission said that "Chinese manufacturers requested these anti-suit injunctions to pressure patent right holders to grant them cheaper



access to European technology".

'Litigation stage'

An EU official briefing details to journalists on condition of anonymity said: "By requesting a panel, we're essentially taking these two cases to

the litigation stage." He added that "one of the reasons that we're taking this course of action is because we see that they (Chinese authorities) take their WTO obligations seriously and we see that they have a good record of compliance". —AFP

Russia's Rosneft reports \$889m loss from assets transfer

MOSCOW: Russia's oil giant Rosneft said Wednesday its profit over the past nine months had been badly hit by the seizure of its German-based refineries by Berlin.

"In 3Q 2022, the most significant negative impact

on income came from the transfer of the company's assets in Germany... which resulted in the recognition of an additional loss of 56 billion rubles (around \$889 million)," Rosneft said in a statement. Between July and September, the company "continued to be negatively affected by external factors and illegal restrictions", including the transfer of assets in Germany, Rosneft chief executive Igor Sechin said in the statement.

Berlin in September took control of Rosneft's German subsidiaries, which account for about 12 percent of oil refining capacity in the country, and placed them under the trusteeship of the Federal

Network Agency. Germany has also pledged to end Russian oil imports by the end of the year as Europe seeks to wean itself off Russian energy supplies since the start of the Ukraine offensive.

But Rosneft said it had increased its deliveries to Asia by a third and "fully compensated for the decline in supplies to European buyers". Despite the heavy loss, Rosneft's ruble revenue in the first nine months of 2022 increased by 15.7 percent year-on-year to the equivalent of \$102.3 billion. The net profit between January and September was at 591 billion rubles, down from 696 billion rubles over the same period last year. —AFP

Lifestyle | Features



Dish-Dash DJ music artists perform during the Soundstorm 2022 music festival, organized by MDLBEAST, in Banban on the outskirts of the Saudi capital Riyadh.



Fans attend performance of Dish-Dash DJ music artists during the Diriyah JAX 2022 arts festival.— AFP photos



PUMPING 'NEW BLACK GOLD', SAUDI DJS SENSE BIG OPPORTUNITIES

Ravers sporting face paint and flashing LED sunglasses jump in time to the thudding beats of Dish Dash, a DJ act whose rise mirrors that of the Saudi music scene. The confetti-strewn dance hall in Riyadh is

forming more than 15 years ago. Among their early gigs were gender-segregated weddings in which the duo would be walled off from female guests. "They used to lock us in the room. We would stay in this room for five hours

undergoing a revamp, emerging as a regular stop for top global pop stars from Justin Bieber to Usher and Mariah Carey. At this past weekend's MDLBEAST Soundstorm festival, organizers said more than 600,000 fans took in sets by the likes of Bruno Mars and DJ Khaled, who dutifully documented his sampling of Saudi food and traditional sword-dancing for his 31 million Instagram followers.

Such events have helped advertise reforms championed by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who has overseen an easing of rules that once barred cinemas and gender-mixed concerts—albeit during a ramped-up repression of political dissent. Now, Saudi performers like Dish Dash want to take advantage of the opening-up to foster a domestic music industry that can thrive even when the spotlight veers elsewhere.



Fans attend performance of Dish-Dash DJ music artists during the Soundstorm 2022 music festival.



Fans attend performance of Dish-Dash DJ music artists during the Diriyah JAX 2022 arts festival.



Fans attend performance of Dish-Dash DJ music artists during the Soundstorm 2022 music festival.



Saudi Hassan Ghazzawi member of Dish-Dash DJ music talks on his mobile at the Diriyah JAX 2022 arts festival.

packed with young men and women, most in streetwear hoodies and jeans, a few in traditional white robes and abayas. The setting bears scant resemblance to the venues where Dish Dash—the Jeddah-born brothers Abbas and Hassan Ghazzawi—began per-

forming more than 15 years ago. "The only way you could tell if people are enjoying it is if you hear people are screaming."

Like other facets of cultural life in conservative but fast-changing Saudi Arabia, the music scene is

'New boom'
In between their sets at Soundstorm, Saudi acts told AFP they were encouraged by the progress so far, pointing to new labels, studios and performance venues that make it easier to build careers. Not long ago "people used to tell us, 'Dude, you're just wasting your time. You're not doing anything,'" Hassan said. "And now people are calling us to get (on) guest lists and stuff like that."

Noof Sufyani, a DJ who performs under the name Cosmicat, said she only began taking a music career seriously after the first edition of Soundstorm in 2019. Before that, she had been working as a dentist and DJing on the side, but the buzz around the event spurred her to pursue music

exclusively.

Today "I'm 100 percent able to live on music alone," she said. "And that should be a push also for anyone who wants to do music, and has the talent, but hesitates." It is an increasingly common story in a kingdom whose youthful population of 34 million represents a vast underserved market, said Talal Albahiti, MDLBEAST's chief operating officer. "I keep telling people this is our new black gold," he said, a reference to the oil that Saudi Arabia is primarily known for. "This is the new boom, and it's all about these creatives and what they bring to the table... I believe the next big hit or superstar will come out of this region."

'Baby steps'
But challenges remain, notably a still-developing network of

recording studios that until five or six years ago "were mainly focused on classical Arabic music" and "pretty much neglected all other genres and all other types of artists", Albahiti said. The process of setting up rules governing music rights, licensing and royalties is also "in its infancy still", he added. On top of that, Saudi Arabia's alcohol ban could slow the emergence of a club scene that can support artists beyond sporadic festivals.

But Hassan, of Dish Dash, said he believed such a scene would ultimately be viable, calling it the logical "next step". The changes to date have already captured the attention of artists elsewhere in the region, including from bigger markets like Egypt. Disco Misr, an Egyptian DJ trio known for up-tempo remixes of Arabic pop classics, first played

Saudi Arabia in 2019 and returned to perform in September at the Azimuth music festival in the northern desert city of Al-Ula.

That event, more intimate than Soundstorm, attracted around 1,000 fans to a stage nestled between sandstone mountains for two nights of dusk-to-dawn sets. "Their baby steps are surprising. I cannot call them baby steps. It's huge... I can only compare what's happening in Saudi Arabia with Tomorrowland," Disco Misr member Schady Wasfy said, referring to the Belgian electronic dance music festival. "I cannot compare (it) with anything happening in the Arab region. I'm actually surprised—I'm really surprised. And I'm hoping to see more."— AFP



Dish-Dash DJ music artists perform during the Soundstorm 2022 music festival.



Fans attend performance of Dish-Dash DJ music artists during the Diriyah JAX 2022 arts festival.



Fans attend performance of Dish-Dash DJ music artists during the Soundstorm 2022 music festival.

Gunman in Lady Gaga dog robbery jailed for 21 years

A man who shot Lady Gaga's dogwalker during an attempt to steal the singer's prize French bulldogs was sentenced to 21 years in prison Monday after pleading no contest to attempted murder. James Howard Jackson and two other men attacked Ryan Fischer on a Hollywood street in February 2021, and after a struggle made off with two of the "Poker Face" singer's three pets that were out for a walk. Fischer sustained chest injuries in the attack and said on Instagram a month later he had suffered a collapsed lung.



In this file photo US singer-songwriter Lady Gaga arrives for the 64th Annual Grammy Awards at the MGM Grand Garden Arena in Las Vegas.— AFP

Jackson, 20, entered the no-contest plea after prosecutors agreed to drop further robbery,

assault and other charges. "The plea agreement holds Mr Jackson accountable for perpetrating a cold-hearted violent act and provides justice for our victim," said a statement from the District Attorney's Office. The two other assailants have already been jailed for their parts in the crime.

Following the incident, Lady Gaga offered a \$500,000 reward for the return of dogs Koji and Gustav. A woman who handed in

the dogs in response to the reward has been charged with being an accessory after the fact and with receiving stolen goods. The singer's other bulldog, Miss Asia, was able to evade capture, and ran back to the wounded Fischer's side after the robbers left.

Jackson earlier this year was recaptured after being accidentally released from custody in what officials described as a "clerical error." Los Angeles police said at the time they did not believe the dogs were targeted because of their owner, but because of the breed's appeal on the black market. Small and friendly—and thus easy to grab—French bulldogs do not have large litters. Their relative scarcity, and their association with stars such as Lady Gaga, Reese Witherspoon, Hugh Jackman, Chrissy Teigen, Leonardo DiCaprio and Madonna, gives them added cachet and means they can change hands for thousands of dollars.—AFP

'Call of Duty' to be released on Nintendo Switch, Microsoft says

The hugely popular "Call of Duty" game franchise will become available on Nintendo's Switch console if the acquisition of its developer goes ahead, a Microsoft executive said Wednesday. The US tech giant is in the process of buying the game maker Activision Blizzard, but the huge \$69-billion purchase has yet to be finalized while it is examined by antitrust authorities. "Microsoft is committed to helping bring more games to more people—however they choose to play," Xbox head Phil Spencer tweeted, in what analysts called an attempt to show competition would not be affected by the acquisition deal. "Call of Duty" is a blazingly successful first-person shooter franchise with hordes of devotees that play it on Microsoft's Xbox consoles or Sony's PlayStation.

The games are also available on PC and mobile, as well as Nintendo's older Wii and DS consoles. Spencer said Microsoft had "entered into a 10-year commitment to bring Call of Duty to



Nintendo following the merger of Microsoft and Activision Blizzard King". New titles in the series will also continue to be sold on Steam, a platform for downloading games, as soon as they are released on Xbox "after we have closed the merger", he added.

Serkan Toto of consulting agency Kantan Games told AFP that the timing of the announcement was "clearly a publicity stunt" linked to ongoing negotiations over the Activision purchase. Nintendo's Switch, which was launched in 2017, had more than 110 million users in the past year. "So if Activision was really interested in bringing 'Call of Duty' to a Nintendo platform, to the Nintendo Switch, they could have done it three or four years ago," Toto said. Earlier this week, Microsoft president Brad Smith wrote in a Wall Street Journal article that the company had offered to strike a new contract with Sony in a similar 10-year deal. However, Spencer told Bloomberg that Sony has so far rebuffed the offer. — AFP

Lifestyle | Features



Female ducks bred for the production of foie gras are confined in a shed in Sarrant, southwestern France, to prevent the risk of contamination by avian flu.



Butchers work at the Foie gras and duck market.



A woman looks at female ducks at the Foie gras and duck market. — AFP photos

FRENCH FOIE GRAS IN SHORT SUPPLY, FORCING FARMERS TO ADAPT

Foie gras pate, the consummate delicacy of French holiday tables, might be harder to find this year and certainly pricier due to a bird flu outbreak that ravaged farms across the west and south last winter. After millions of ducks and geese were culled to halt the epidemic, some farmers say they are having to take an unprecedented step—using females to produce the luxury treat. The taste is the same, but female livers are much smaller and harder to work with, and the impact on a producer's bottom line is inescapable.

"It was double or nothing, but either we just sat and waited—which is not in our nature—or we try to offer a product that respects our consumers," said Benjamin Constant in Samatan, southwest France. President of the foie gras marketing board for the Gers

department, Constant warned that it was only a stop-gap measure, especially for higher-quality fresh foie gras. Most livers have veins that must be removed, but those of female livers are much bigger and require more effort to extract, which puts off clients seeking the smooth texture of fresh foie gras that is either seared in a pan, or used to make pate.

"A significant amount cannot be sold fresh, which penalizes the producers who sell at public markets," Constant said. Jacques Candelon, who has been raising ducks in the rolling plains of near-by Sarrant since 1998, said this is the first year the majority of his 26,000 birds are females, which are usually reserved to produce meat for export. "80 percent are females—it was either that or nothing," the 52-year-old told AFP at his farm, dressed head to toe in

protective gear to prevent any contamination of his animals.

Bigger stretch

Animal rights activists have long denounced the force-feeding of ducks and geese to make foie gras, calling it an unnecessary cruelty despite producers' claims of introducing measures to make the process more humane. France remains the world's largest producer and consumer, usually raising some 30 million ducks alone each year, even though some French cities have banned it from official functions. But two brutal bird flu outbreaks in recent years decimated flocks as authorities imposed culls, with just 21 million ducks raised in 2021, a number expected to plunge to 15 million for 2022, according to the CIFOG producers' association.

More problematic was the



Foie gras are pictured in a box before the opening of the Foie gras and duck market.

impact on breeding farms, which found themselves with only scant numbers of male chicks to offer producers this year. Labeyrie, the brand that dominates sales among mass retailers, expects a shortage of 30 to 40 percent this holiday season, by far the most important time of the year for the sector.

Spiraling energy and feed

prices, fallout from Russia's invasion of Ukraine, will also make foie gras more of a stretch for family budgets. "There will be enough for the holidays but in limited quantities," CIFOG director Marie-Pierre Pe told AFP in September. "We're hoping that people are going to be reasonable and will share what little there is."

'Big effort'

Old habits die hard, however, and at the bustling weekly duck market at Samatan, a foie gras bastion near Toulouse in the heart of Gers, much of the crowd wanted only the pale, plump male livers. "Females are much, much smaller and after force-feeding, the livers are smaller and less attractive visually," said Didier Villate, a veterinarian who has overseen the Samatan market for over 40 years.

Next to a tray of glistening male

livers, many of the female livers had red blotches with thick dark veins, "which is unfortunately something we find quite often" even though it doesn't change the taste or texture, Villate said. "Clients are surprised, so we have to make a big effort to explain to consumers that there is no danger—it's purely visual, you can buy and eat them just the same," he said. But male or female, prices have spiked to between 55 and 60 euros a kilogram (\$26 to \$29 a pound), or "15 to 20 euros more than normal," said Constant, calling 2022 "catastrophic for the sector." For Gilberte Bru, who like dozens of others rushed in at the market's opening whistle to stock up for the holidays, the decision was easy—she picked the male livers. "Yes, because they are bigger," she said. — AFP

Climate activists hurl paint at La Scala entrance in Milan

Environmental activists hurled paint at the entrance of Milan's prestigious La Scala opera house on Wednesday, part of a series of recent protests across Europe to focus attention on climate change. The early morning protest came ahead of the gala opening of the new season on Wednesday night, with a scheduled performance of "Boris Godunov". Five climate activists



An environmental activist from the "Last Generation" (Ultima Generazione) group smears with paint the facade of the La Scala theatre during a group's action in Milan.

from the Last Generation group threw buckets of paint onto the facade of the building and inside the portico shortly after 7:30 am (0630 GMT), according to an AFP photographer at the scene.

Two people unfurled banners reading "Last Generation - No Gas and No Carbon". "We decided to stain La Scala with paint to ask the politicians who will attend the performance tonight to pull their heads out of the sand and intervene to save the population," wrote Last Generation in a statement. Police quickly arrived on the

scene—where bright pink, electric blue and turquoise paint had splattered onto the sidewalk—and the activists were detained and taken away in police cars.

A team of cleaners from La Scala then began hosing off the building and the non-permanent paint appeared to have been entirely removed. Last Generation called on Italy to invest more in renewable energy and reduce carbon emissions. "In order to avert the misery of its own people and safeguard people, homes and businesses, which are at risk from increasingly frequent floods and heat waves, the government must act now," it said, referring to last month's landslide caused by torrential rains on the island of Ischia that killed 12 people.

Most recently, climate activists have targeted artworks inside museums throughout Europe in protests they say are designed not to damage the works but to focus attention on environmental disaster. They have targeted masterpieces such as the "Girl with a Pearl Earring" by Johannes Vermeer at The Hague's Mauritshuis museum, Klimt's "Death and Life" in Vienna's Leopold Museum or Van Gogh's "Sunflowers" at London's National Gallery, hurling soup or other food at the paintings behind glass.

Last month at an exhibit in Milan, they covered a car repainted by Andy Warhol with flour. La Scala's opening night gala is expected to be attended by Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, President Sergio Mattarella and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen. In light of the war in Ukraine, the choice of "Boris Godunov"—an opera by Modest Mussorgsky sung in Russian that tells the story of an autocratic ruler and his people—was controversial. Ukraine's consul in Milan had protested the choice, calling it a propaganda coup for Russia. Russian bass Ildar Abdrazakov will sing the title role. — AFP



Environmental activist from the "Last Generation" (Ultima Generazione) group smears with paint the facade of the La Scala theatre. — AFP photos



US actress Zoe Saldana poses on the red carpet upon arrival for the World Premiere of the film "Avatar: The Way of Water" in London. — AFP photos



British actress Kate Winslet



US rapper will.i.am



(From left to right) US film producer Jon Landau, British actor Jamie Flatters, US actress Bailey Bass, British-Australian actor Sam Worthington, US actress Zoe Saldana, US actress Sigourney Weaver, Canadian filmmaker James Cameron, British actress Kate Winslet, US actor Stephen Lang, US actress Trinity Jo-Li Bliss and US actor Jack Champion pose during a photocall for "Avatar: The Way of Water" in London.

Avatar's James Cameron on art, AI and outrage

From "Terminator" to "Titanic" to "Avatar", director James Cameron has pushed Hollywood's technical wizardry to new limits, but human emotion must always come first, he told AFP. In an era when special effects are much more accessible to filmmakers, and studios are willing to regularly spend hundreds of millions of dollars on blockbusters, it is the artistic talent that makes the difference, Cameron said during a visit to Paris. Whether he can still strike the balance will be tested as the world finally gets to see "Avatar: The Way of Water" next week—a sequel to his groundbreaking extraterrestrial epic that has been 13 years in the making.

"Anybody could buy a paintbrush. Not everybody can paint a picture," the Canadian director said. "The technology doesn't create art. Artists create art—that's important." It was originally hoped that a first sequel would be out in 2014, but Cameron's gargantuan ambitions led to repeated delays. He does not come across like the sort of megalomaniac director of Hollywood lore—describing his sets

as "a big hippie commune with a bunch of really great artists."

But these hippies are armed with some powerful computers. "We had over 3,200 shots, which is a lot to maintain high quality, high quality control," Cameron said. "We brought in machine deep learning and plugged AI into various stages of the process to assist us... not to take the place of the actors at all but actually to be more truthful to what they had done," he said.

'Connection to nature'

The challenge was managing to draw emotion out of performances that were largely shot in front of green screens, and where most of the scenery and props would only appear later in the effects booths. "The heart, the soul, the emotion, the conflict, creativity... all that happens first, and then all the technical work begins," he said. Cameron has always justified the vast sums he has asked of studios—"Titanic" was both the most expensive and most profitable film of all time following its release in 1997, only to

be topped by "Avatar" in 2009 — and he feels that responsibility "every day".

"I can't be whimsical or impulsive, I have to be very focused and dedicated to creating something that's both pleasing to me artistically, and that I think will be pleasing to the public and commercial enough to make some money," he said. "It can't be too intellectual, but I can make it satis-

fy to me by putting in secondary and tertiary levels of meaning that I know are there."

Clearly, much of the impulse of the Avatar series is drawing attention to humanity's impact on nature, but the sequel also focuses on Cameron's aquatic interests. Long fascinated by the sea, from 1989's "The Abyss" to "Titanic", Cameron became a deep ocean explorer for National Geographic in the 2000s and was the first solo human to visit the deepest underwater trench, the Mariana Trough, in a purpose-built submarine. He sees "Avatar" as "awakening that thing in all of us, that connection to nature. "The movie asks you to feel something for nature... It's about maybe feeling a sense of outrage," Cameron said.

"These Navi characters... they don't look like us, they're blue, they've got the ears and tails. But they represent the better angels of our nature. "Maybe for 10 minutes after the movie's over, you see the world a little differently," he added. — AFP



US actor Bailey Bass

Prime time or Netflix?

Streaming wars come to Thailand

International streaming platforms were among the biggest pandemic winners, seeing subscriber numbers soar, but US giants have turned abroad as countries re-opened-with Thailand firmly in their sights. The kingdom's high internet penetration, long-standing and highly regarded film industry-as well as roughly six million active users of streaming services, according to 2021 data-present a golden opportunity.

Big players such as Amazon Prime and Netflix, who claim 200 million and 220 million subscribers worldwide respectively, have taken note as new sign-ups have leveled off in more established markets such as North America and Europe. October saw the launch of Prime's Thai-service Prime Video at almost the same moment Netflix announced six locally produced films and series for the coming months. "The competition is everywhere," said Malobika Banerji, director of content for Southeast Asia at Netflix, which has a regional hub in Singapore.

Nowhere is that more apparent than Thailand's capital, where Prime's "Lord of the Rings" spinoff mega-production "Rings of Power" jostles for attention with Netflix's latest South Korean series on billboards. "We do believe that Thailand will be a big part of our subscriber growth



In this file illustration photo the Netflix logo is seen on a phone in Washington, DC.

in the years to come," said Prime Video's director of international development Josh McIvor.

"Our goal is really to try to be the most local of the global streaming services," he said, pointing towards their earlier expansion into Japan-where they outstrip Netflix. However, their rival's longer-term investment is apparent: Netflix saw a 20 percent growth in Asia-Pacific subscribers last year, according to a recent quarterly report by the firm.

Seeking the next 'Squid Game'

While big-ticket international series such as "Rings of Power" lead the publici-

ty, the streamers see locally produced content-such as Prime's hugely successful Indian crime-thriller "Mirzapur"-as the longer-term workhorses of their offering. The two fundamental "pillars" to success are local originals-"across scripted, unscripted and film"-and licensed locally produced series, according to Amazon Studios' director of local content Erika North.

It is the second that drew Prime to Thailand, she said: they hope to build on a long Thai film history with higher production values than elsewhere in the region. Similarly, Netflix is betting big on local content going international, dreaming of the next "Squid Game", the South Korean critical and commercial blockbuster. Netflix's Banerji said there were "more and more" examples of this, citing Thai mystery-thriller series "Girl from Nowhere".

Streaming analysts have been watching the US firms-including Disney+ — to see if they can compete with local rivals. A report from the consultancy Kantar this year found streaming had edged out traditional watching in the Philippines, Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam, Thailand, and Indonesia. But Thailand has a special appeal, said Vivek Couto, executive director and co-founder of Media Partners Asia (MPA), which monitors



In this file illustration photo shows the logo of the US Online Streaming Amazon Prime Video application on the screen of a tablet in Paris. — AFP photos

streaming platforms.

An analysis from MPA this year forecast the expected income from streaming in Thailand in 2022 at around \$809 million. Couto said the kingdom offered an established creative community, more advanced broadband infrastructure than other Southeast Asian countries-and a population with the "most propensity to pay for online video content".

Creative control

Almost a third of Thai households already subscribe to an on-demand streaming service, according to their

data, far ahead of Indonesia (12 percent) or Vietnam (four percent). "If content really works locally and (is) sustainable, then it will travel anywhere," Couto said. "I think that's why Amazon and Netflix are seeing the potential of Thai producers, Thai series." While Thai cinema has enjoyed occasional critical success-director Apichatpong Weerasethakul has won several prizes at the Cannes Film Festival, including the top award in 2010 — it has not become an established global force.

Local directors and producers are cautiously optimistic the new interest from deep-pocketed streaming giants could give the local industry a boost. "Some content, you cannot even dream of doing it with a studio, but with streaming, it is possible," said Wisit Sasanatieng, director and producer of upcoming Netflix crime film "The Murderer". Thai producer Cattleya Paosrijaroen, co-founder of the independent company 185 Films, welcomed the shift. International firms could bring in better standards, she said, offering better conditions to crews currently expected to work 16-hour shifts. But she struck a note of caution. "If your film is being produced by Netflix, they can control the content," Cattleya said. — AFP



This file photo of a composite picture released by NASA/ESA from the James Webb Space Telescope and the Hubble Space Telescope shows the heart of M74, otherwise known as the Phantom Galaxy.-AFP photos



This handout picture released by NASA shows a stellar nursery nicknamed the Tarantula Nebula captured in crisp detail by NASA's Webb telescope, revealing never-before-seen features that deepen scientific understanding, the agency said.

Webb telescope promises new age of the stars

The James Webb Space Telescope lit up 2022 with dazzling images of the early universe after the Big Bang, heralding a new era of astronomy and untold revelations about the cosmos in years to come. The most powerful observatory sent into space succeeds the Hubble telescope, which is still operating, and began transmitting its first cosmic images in July. "It essentially behaves better than expected in almost every area," said Massimo Stiavelli, head of the Webb mission office at the Space Telescope Science Institute, in Baltimore.

Already scientists say the Webb telescope, now orbiting the sun at a million miles (1.6 million kilometers) from Earth, should last 20 years, twice its guaranteed lifetime. "The instruments are more efficient, the optics are sharper and more stable. We have more fuel and we use less fuel," said Stiavelli. Stability is vital for the clarity of the images.

"Our requirement was similar to that of Hubble, in terms of pointing accuracy. And we ended up being seven times better," the mission office chief added. Public appetite for the discoveries has been fed by the coloring of the telescope's images. Light from the most distant galaxies has been stretched from the visible spectrum, viewable by the naked eye, to infrared-which Webb is equipped to observe with unprecedented resolution. This enables the telescope to detect the faintest glimmers from the distant universe at an unprecedented resolution, to see through



This file handout photo shows the Pillars of Creation that are set off in a kaleidoscope of color in NASA's James Webb Space Telescope's near-infrared-light view.

the veil of dust that masks the emergence of stars in a nebula and to analyze the atmosphere of exoplanets, which orbit stars outside our solar system.

18 petals

"The first year (of observation) is a way to test out the tool for the small rocky

planets in the habitable zone that could potentially be like Earth," said Lisa Kaltenegger, associate professor in Astronomy at Cornell University. "And the tests are beautiful. They're spectacular." Webb blasted off aboard an Ariane 5 rocket at the end of 2021 crowning a 30-year project at the US space agency NASA. It took 10,000 people and 10 billion dollars to put the 6.2-tonne observatory into space.

En route to final orbit, Webb deployed a five-layer sunshield the size of a tennis court followed by a 6.5 meter primary mirror made up of 18 hexagonal, gold-coated segments or petals. Once calibrated to less than a millionth of a meter, the 18 petals began to collect the light pulsing stars.

Last July 12, the first images underlined Webb's capabilities unveiling thousands of galaxies, some dating back close to the birth of the Universe, and a star nursery in the Carina nebula. Jupiter has been captured in incredible detail which is expected to help understand the workings of the giant gas planet.

'Too many' galaxies

The blue, orange and grey tones of the images from the "Pillars of Creation", giant dust columns where stars are born, proved captivating. Scientists saw the revelations as a way of rethinking their models of star formation. Researchers using the new observatory have found the furthest galaxies ever observed, one

of which existed just 350 millions years after the Big Bang some 13.8 billion years ago. The galaxies appear with extreme luminosity and may have started forming 100 million years earlier than theories predicted.

"In the distant Universe, we have an excess of galaxies compared to models," David Elbaz, scientific director for astrophysics at France's Alternative Energies and Atomic Energy Commission, told AFP. Another surprise has been that where Hubble essentially observed irregular shaped galaxies, the precision of the Webb telescope produces magnificent spiral galaxies similar to our own.

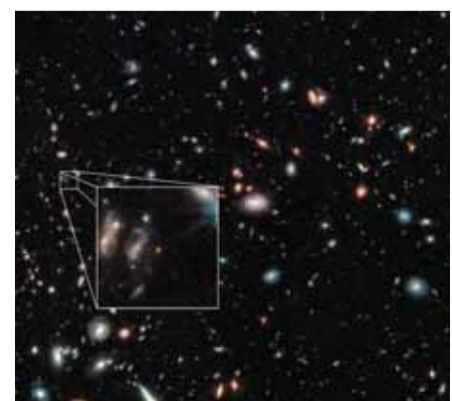
This has led to musings over a potential universal model which could be one of the keys to star formation. Webb also opened up a profusion of clusters of millions of stars leading, which could be the potential missing link between the first stars and the first galaxies. In the field of exoplanets, Webb honed in on a faraway gas giant called WASP-96 b, which was discovered in 2014. Nearly 1,150 light-years from Earth, WASP-96 b is about half the mass of Jupiter and zips around its star in just 3.4 days Webb provided the first confirmation that carbon dioxide is present in the atmosphere of Wasp 39-b. But for Stiavelli, "Some of the big things either haven't been observed yet, or haven't been revealed yet." — AFP



This handout image shows the bright star at the center of NGC 3132, while prominent when viewed by the James Webb Space Telescope (JWST) in near-infrared light, plays a supporting role in sculpting the surrounding nebula.



This handout image taken and obtained from NASA and taken by the James Webb Space Telescope, shows Jupiter's weather patterns, tiny moons, altitude levels, cloud covers and auroras at the northern and southern poles.



This file handout photo from NASA's James Webb Space Telescope Near-Infrared Camera (NIRCam) released by NASA and STScI shows one of two farthest galaxies seen to date of the outer regions of the giant galaxy cluster Abell 2744.



This handout composite image from Webb's Near-Infrared Camera (NIRCam) and Mid-Infrared Instrument (MIRI) released by NASA shows the Cartwheel and its companion galaxies, revealing details that are difficult to see in the individual images alone.

Heat will stay on in Europe this winter, but after?

Europe is likely to scrape through this winter without cutting off gas customers despite reduced Russian supplies, but even adjusting to colder homes and paying more may not be enough in coming years, analysts say. "I like a hot house, I have to admit... I really used a lot of gas," said Sofie de Rous, who until this year kept her home on the Belgian coast at a toasty 21 degrees Celsius (70F). But like millions of other Europeans, the 41-year-old employee at an architectural firm has had to turn down the thermostat after energy prices surged following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February. Russia's progressive reduction of gas supplies to Europe via pipeline triggered a bidding war for liquefied natural gas (LNG), sending prices sharply higher.

If certain countries like France and Spain froze prices for consumers, others like Belgium let suppliers more or less pass along the higher costs. "I was a little panicked in the beginning," said de Rous, who saw the gas bill to heat her 90-square-metre (970-square-foot) house in Oostduinkerke jump from 120 euros (\$126) per month to 330 euros. She has lowered her thermostat to 18 degrees and is looking into installing double-pane windows and a solar panel. Like de Rous, the lack of concern about energy consumption of a whole generation of Europeans ended abruptly in 2022, and everyone is mindful of where their thermostat is set. If previously natural gas was cheap and plentiful, it is now scarce and expensive.

The European wholesale reference price used to fluctuate little, hovering around 20 euros per megawatt hour. This year, it shot as high as 300 euros before dropping back to around 100 euros. "It's the most chaotic time I've witnessed in all of those years," Graham Freedman, a European gas analyst at energy consultancy Wood Mackenzie, told AFP.

Big drops in consumption

Sky-high energy prices have caused numerous factories, particularly in Germany's chemicals sector which was highly dependent upon cheap Russian gas, to halt operations. But European nations were able to fill their gas reservoirs and no one has been cut off yet. "Until February, the very idea of Europe without Russian energy was seen as impossible," said Simone Tagliapietra, a senior fellow at the Bruegel think tank in Brussels.

"What was impossible became possible." A warm autumn that allowed many consumers to put off turning on their heating also helped put Europe in better position for the winter. Overall, the reduction in EU gas consumption by consumers and industry was around 25 percent in October compared to the 2019-2021 average for the month, according to calculations by Bruegel. In Germany, where half the households use gas for heat, data shows consumption down by 20 to 35 percent depending on the week. — AFP

Sports

Cavaliers trounce Lakers as ailing Davis sidelined

Mitchell scores 43 points to lift Cleveland Cavaliers

LOS ANGELES: Donovan Mitchell scored 43 points to lead the Cleveland Cavaliers to a 116-102 NBA victory on Tuesday over a Los Angeles Lakers team that clearly missed the firepower of ailing Anthony Davis. Star center Davis had scored 99 points in the Lakers' last two games, including a 55-point outburst in a victory over the Wizards in Washington on Sunday.

However, he played just eight minutes in Cleveland before calling it a night with flu-like symptoms, and Mitchell and the Cavs took full advantage to improve their impressive home record to 11-1. LeBron James scored 21 points and pulled down 17 rebounds, but it wasn't enough against the team where he started his NBA career in 2003, and that he led to a championship in 2016 when he returned after winning two titles with Miami.

James was cheered when the Cavaliers played a tribute video during an early time out and Mitchell, who arrived in Cleveland via a trade from Utah in September, was struck by the moment. "It's well-deserved," Mitchell said. "He's one of the greatest players of all time." But James' return trip to his native Ohio was overshadowed by the loss of Davis, who had averaged 34.2 points and 15.4 rebounds over his past 10 games as the Lakers began to turn their season around.

Lakers coach Darvin Ham said Davis wanted to "give it a go," even as his symptoms, including a fever, worsened during the evening. Even without him, the Lakers managed to keep it close, trailing by five with less than five minutes to play. But Mitchell converted a three-point play to launch a

10-0 Cavaliers scoring run. He came up with a steal and made a pair of free throws and Jarrett Allen's steal on the Lakers' next possession led to Caris LeVert's fastbreak layup.

Mitchell capped the run with a step-back three-pointer. By the end of the game the cheers of Cleveland fans were for him, not James. And despite his admiration for the Lakers star, Mitchell admitted he was happy to "spoil the homecoming." Allen returned for Cleveland after missing five games with a low back contusion and made a quick impact, scoring 22 of his 24 points in the first half. Darius Garland added 21 points and handed out 11 assists for the Cavs.

Mavs edge Nuggets

In Denver, 17 three-pointers and another triple-double gem from Luka Doncic were enough to lift the Dallas Mavericks to a 116-115 victory over the Nuggets. Doncic scored 22 points with 10 rebounds and 12 assists and Tim Hardaway Jr. added 29 points, connecting on six of his eight three-point attempts. Hardaway's layup with 4:07 remaining put the Mavs up 111-101, but the Nuggets erased the 10-point deficit and took a one-point lead on Bruce Brown's off-balance three-pointer with 37.9 seconds remaining.

Dorian Finney-Smith responded with a three-pointer off a feed from Doncic that put the Mavericks up for good with 17.3 seconds left. In Miami, Detroit forward Bojan Bogdanovic scored 28 of his 31 points in the second half as the Pistons thumped the Heat 116-96. Heat guard



CHARLOTTESVILLE: Armaan Franklin #4 of the Virginia Cavaliers defends Tyree Ihenacho #2 of the James Madison Dukes in the second half during a game on December 6, 2022. —AFP

Tyler Herro led all scorers with 34 points, but 21 of those came in the first half and the Heat - with Jimmy Butler sidelined on the second night of a

back-to-back as he manages a right knee injury - couldn't find an answer as the Pistons pulled away late. —AFP

Kuwait's shooting tournament starts

By Abdellatif Sharaa

KUWAIT: The Late Sheikh Ali Sabah Al-Salem Al-Sabah Shooting Tournament will kick off on Thursday at Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Olympic Shooting Complex. Shooters from the Club, National Guard, Bahrain and Kazakh federations are participating in the Cup tournament. Kuwait Shooting Sport Club Assistant Secretary Eng Mohammad Al-Ghurba lauded the role of the Late Sheikh Ali Sabah Al-Salem in supporting the shooting community.



Engineer Mohammad Al-Ghurba

Battered Pakistan seek livelier pitch in the second Test

MULTAN: Pakistan hope to get more life from the pitch when they take on England in the second Test in Multan starting Friday. England took full advantage of winning the toss - and their batting depth - to win the first Test by 74 runs Monday on a dead Rawalpindi wicket that offered nothing to the bowlers. Multan, however, despite not hosting a Test match for 16 years, could provide more spin if recent domestic matches are anything to go by. Pakistan skipper Babar Azam, who scored a century in Pakistan's first innings in Rawalpindi, said he wanted something more lively. "We wanted a spin pitch (in Rawalpindi)," he told reporters. "I gave my input ... but unfortunately it was not what we planned." Rawalpindi yielded 1,768 runs in four innings - the third most in Test history - with seven individual centuries and five 50s. But Multan helped spinners in the last first class match played there, with former Test spinner Yasir Shah taking five wickets in each innings.

Still, leg-spinner Zahid Mahmood - who conceded a whopping 319 runs for his six wickets in the first test - may get the axe from the Pakistan selectors. Mohammad Nawaz and the uncapped Abrar Ahmed are vying for his spot. Fast bowler Hasan Ali will likely fill in for the injured Haris Rauf, himself a replacement for world-class pacer Shaheen Shah Afridi, who is out of the series. England will also make an injury change, with wicketkeeper-batter Ben Foakes likely coming in for Liam Livingstone, who is heading home for treatment on his knee.

Regardless of the Multan surface, England skipper Ben Stokes has promised no end to "Bazball", the brand of aggressive cricket coined from the nickname of head coach Brendon McCullum. "We're going to play to win every game," he said after Monday's win - the seventh in eight Tests since the McCullum-Stokes partnership took over in May. "It's not always going to work, but if you're brave enough and willing enough to go out and play in that way, if you lose a game, it's still going to be entertaining." The weather could also be a factor. Provincial authorities have issued a fog alert for the next few days, which could eat into playing time.

Teams (from Pakistan: Babar Azam (captain), Mohammad Rizwan, Imam-ul-Haq, Abdullah Shafique, Azhar Ali, Mohammad Ali, Faheem Ashraf, Mohammad Nawaz, Nauman Ali, Saud Shakeel, Zahid Mahmood, Mohammad Wasim Junior, Naseem Shah, Agha Salman, Sarfaraz Ahmed, Abrar Ahmed, Shan Masood. - England: Ben Stokes (captain), James Anderson, Harry Brook, Zak Crawley, Ben Duckett, Ben Foakes, Will Jacks, Keaton Jennings, Jack Leach, Jamie Overton, Ollie Pope, Ollie Robinson, Joe Root, Mark Wood, Rehan Ahmed. - Umpires: Marais Erasmus (RSA) and Aleem Dar (PAK); Tv umpire: Joel Wilson (WIS). - Match referee: Andy Pycroft (ZIM). —AFP

Ruthless England sack Jones ahead of Rugby WCup

LONDON: England were left looking for a new head coach nine months out from next year's World Cup after the Rugby Football Union announced Tuesday that Eddie Jones had been sacked. Veteran Australian boss Jones paid the price for presiding over England's worst year since 2008, the team losing six out of 12 Tests, with five wins and a draw. He was the second head coach to be fired in 24 hours after Wales replaced Wayne Pivac with predecessor Warren Gatland.

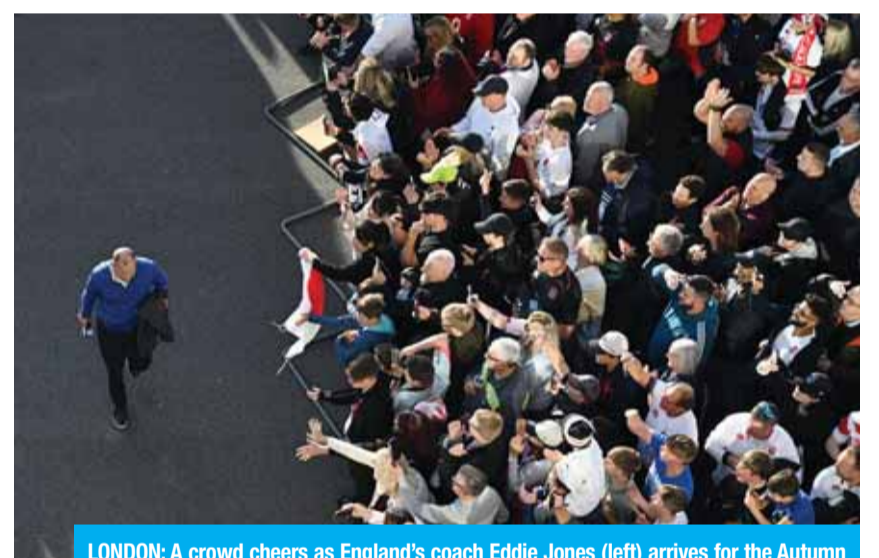
Jones was contracted to take England through until the end of the 2023 World Cup in France - he guided them to the 2019 final where they were beaten by South Africa - but the RFU has curtailed his seven-year reign. Steve Borthwick, the former England captain turned boss of Premiership champions Leicester, is the favorite to succeed Jones full time, having been a

long-serving deputy to the 62-year-old at both Japan and England. But the RFU said Tuesday forwards coach Richard Cockerill would take charge of England on an interim basis.

'Hard driving taskmaster'

Jones was proud of England's achievements during his tenure, saying: "I am pleased with much that we have achieved as an England team and I look forward to watching the team's performance in the future." RFU chief executive Bill Sweeney said: "It's important to recognise the huge contribution Eddie has made to English rugby, winning three Six Nations, one Grand Slam and taking us to a World Cup final."

Jones' future was in the balance following a recent Autumn series where a lone win over Japan and fortunate draw with New Zealand were bookended by defeats by Argentina and South Africa. The RFU then called in an anonymous panel to review the Autumn campaign - standard procedure after all major series - but it was clear Jones' job was on the line despite a 73 percent win rate as England coach. The panel's findings paved the way for the RFU board to



LONDON: A crowd cheers as England's coach Eddie Jones (left) arrives for the Autumn International rugby union match between England and Japan in file photo. —AFP

confirm Jones' exit on Tuesday.

But the governing body were tight-lipped about Jones' permanent replacement ahead of England's Six Nations opener at home to Scotland on February 4, saying only that changes would be announced in the "near future".

Their options have been reduced

in recent days, with La Rochelle coach Ronan O'Gara, the former Ireland fly-half, ruling himself out of the England running and Gatland rejoining Wales. Crusaders chief Scott Robertson is an alternative, but a lack of international experience and knowledge of the English game could count against the New Zealander. —AFP

'Quadgod', others hunt Uno in ISU Grand Prix final

TURIN: US teenager Ilia Malinin, who made history after landing the first quad axel jump in competition, will be among a group of newcomers aiming to upset Japanese world figure skating champion Shoma Uno in the ISU Grand Prix final in Turin starting Thursday. Malinin, the 18-year-old reigning men's world junior champion, pulled off the four-and-one-half revolution leap-the most difficult quad jump-in the free skate at September's US International Classic at Lake Placid, New York.

Malinin, dubbed the 'QuadGod', went on to win Skate America, again with a quad axel jump, and topped the Finland leg of the Grand Prix series despite a niggling foot injury, to qualify for the elite six-skater Final with the highest score this season. The Grand Prix Final returns to Turin where it was staged in 2019. The two subsequent editions were cancelled because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The stakes are high for Uno who won his first world title in March having spent years in the shadows of stars Yuzuru Hanyu and Nathan Chen, who both bowed out after the Olympics.

Uno finds himself in the unfamiliar role of being

hunted as he seeks his first Grand Prix final gold after medaling four times. "Nathan Chen, Hanyu Yuzuru, I chased those guys for years," said Uno. "It's been a little awkward for me to be the world champion, being the target for everyone else. "I knew the time would come one day. But at the Japan Open, I went up against Ilia Malinin. And he was far more skilled than what I imagined. That thrilled me. "Someone like him drives me to work day in, day out. "He's seven years younger than me but in sport, in competition, age doesn't matter."

Uno, who turns 25 next week, is the only one of the six-man men's field to have competed in the Grand Prix final before. The Olympic silver medalist's rivals also include three compatriots Sota Yamamoto, Shun Sato and Kao Miura, and Italy's Daniel Grassl. In the women's event, world champion Kaori Sakamoto of Japan is also up against five newcomers with the dominant Russians banned from competing in ISU events because of the war in Ukraine.

Both Uno and Sakamoto will seek to lay the groundwork in Turin's Palavela for their world title defenses at home in Saitama next year. Sakamoto, the Olympic bronze medalist, will be up against world silver medalist Loena Hendrickx of Belgium, fellow Japanese Mai Mihara, who won both Grand Prix events she entered this season, and Rinka Watanabe, winner of Skate Canada. World junior champion Isabeau Levito, a 15-year-old American, and South Korea's Kim Yelmin, 19, complete the women's lineup.



Ilia Malinin of the USA

In pairs, all the teams will be first timers in the Grand Prix event, in the absence of the Russians and also the Chinese, who did not compete in the Grand Prix Series this year. World champions Alexa Knierim and Brandon Frazier face a tough challenge from Japan's Riku Miura and Ryuichi Kihara. In ice dancing none of the Olympic medalists from February are competing this season. —AFP

Nike splits with NBA star Irving

LOS ANGELES: Kyrie Irving's multi-million dollar sponsorship deal with Nike is finished, the sportswear company said Monday, after the basketball megastar became embroiled in an anti-Semitism row. The tie-up, reportedly worth around \$11 million to the athlete, was one of the largest in the sporting world, and its dissolution comes as companies increasingly face pressure over the views of their star signings. "Kyrie Irving is no longer a Nike athlete," a spokesman for the company told AFP in a one-line email.

The sponsorship deal was thrown into doubt in October after the Brooklyn Nets' point guard posted a

link to the film "Hebrews to Negroes: Wake up Black America"-a 2018 film widely condemned for containing a range of anti-Semitic tropes. Despite pressure applied on him publicly by the NBA outfit, Irving refused to apologize, and was suspended for eight games, forfeiting millions of dollars in salary. In early November, Nike said it was suspending its relationship with Irving, and was pulling the "Kyrie 8" shoe that had been due for release last month.

Irving took to Twitter on Monday, replying to a journalist who wrote about the Nike rupture with a GIF of the words "Let the party begin". Hours later, he also posted: "Anyone who has even spent their hard earned money on anything I have ever released, I consider you FAMILY and we are forever connected. It's time to show how powerful we are as a community." In the wake of his initial post, Irving was

pulled from the Nets roster, with the team citing his "failure to disavow anti-Semitism" either on social media or in meetings with reporters.

In an interview several weeks later, he insisted he was not anti-Semitic. "I just really want to focus on the hurt that I caused or the impact that I made within the Jewish community, putting some type of threat, or assumed threat, on the Jewish community," Irving told SportsNet New York. "I just want to apologize deeply for all my actions for the time that it has been since the post was first put up." Irving, whose deal with the Nets is worth \$37 million a year, did not play home games with the team for the first few months of 2022 because he is not vaccinated against COVID-19.

New York City workplace rules at the time mandated vaccines for employees. The Nets initially said he would not be allowed back into the squad until he

could play full time, but later relented and he was selected for road games. News of Irving's split with Nike comes days after Kanye West doubled down on his fierce anti-Semitism, using a three-hour appearance on the InfoWars stream to proclaim his "love" of Nazis and his admiration for Adolf Hitler.

West has seen several multi-million dollar sponsorship deals-including one with Adidas-evaporate as his comments on Jewish people have become ever-more outlandish. West was accompanied on the show by Nick Fuentes, the white nationalist with whom he was hosted for dinner at Mar-A-Lago by former president Donald Trump a week earlier. Trump's tenure in the White House was marked by an increase in reports of racist attacks, and the open display of symbols of racial hatred, including amongst his own supporters. —AFP

How do you stop Mbappe? England wrestle with World Cup conundrum

Southgate wrestling with the biggest dilemma of his reign

DOHA: England manager Gareth Southgate is wrestling with the biggest dilemma of his reign as he tries to plot a way to stop the "sensational" Kylian Mbappe in Saturday's World Cup quarter-final. Southgate's hopes of leading England to a third successive semi-final at major tournaments hinge on finding a solution to a problem that has proved impossible for any team to solve in Qatar. Just how do you subdue a player with Mbappe's lethal combination of electric pace, balletic skill and clinical finishing?

Australia, Denmark and Poland failed to come up with an appropriate answer as Mbappe scored in his three starts on route to the quarter-finals. Poland defender Matty Cash summed up the conundrum posed by Mbappe after the Paris Saint-Germain forward's brilliant two goals in France's 3-1 last-16 victory on Sunday.

"I didn't know whether to drop off or go tight," Cash said. "When I went tight he just spun in behind. When he gets the ball, stops and moves, he's the quickest thing I've ever seen. He's a different level. Speed, movement, look at his finishing. He's got everything." Four years after playing a key role in France's World Cup triumph in Russia, Mbappe is the tournament's most feared player. The 23-year-old already has five goals in four games in Qatar, while his haul of nine career World Cup goals puts him level with Argentina's Lionel Messi and one ahead of Portugal star Cristiano Ronaldo.

Now it is Southgate's turn to sit the daunting Mbappe exam. "Look, he is a world-class player who is always producing the moments when they are needed. That is what those top players do. That is the challenge we face," Southgate said. So what will

Southgate do to combat Mbappe's threat? One answer would be to switch England's 4-3-3 formation to a 3-4-3 or 3-5-2 system, which would allow Kyle Walker to move from right back to supplement the central defense. Southgate's concern is to avoid a situation in which the pacy Mbappe and Ousmane Dembele can run at defender Harry Maguire and exploit his lack of speed.

'Burning my legs'

Moving Walker would give Maguire help but it would also leave Southgate open to fresh claims he is a negative coach more concerned with stifling the opposition than letting his own stars express themselves. Southgate was heavily criticized after his return to a 3-4-3 formation in the Euro 2020 final against Italy produced a tepid display that ended in a penalty shoot-out defeat. Instead of changing his formation, Southgate may take inspiration from Walker's role in Manchester City's Champions League semi-final first-leg win over Mbappe's PSG last year.

City boss Pep Guardiola asked Walker to muzzle Mbappe from right-back and he responded with a disciplined display that kept the star from scoring. "I can't think of another right-back in the world that I'd want to put up against him," former England defender Gary Neville said of Walker's chances of subduing Mbappe. "Kyle will go closer to him, he has more pace than the Polish defenders. That's not to say Kyle will mark him out of the game. This is a sensational player, the new best player in the world."

As well as Walker winning his one-on-one duels with Mbappe, Neville believes it is essential to reduce his service from Olivier Giroud and Antoine



France's forward #10 Kylian Mbappe

Griezmann. "If they can stop the service to Giroud and Griezmann in that central area, it means Mbappe's receiving far less dangerous passes," Neville said. But no matter how much England plan for Mbappe, Cash knows from painful experience

that nothing can truly prepare them to face such a unique talent. "I spent the afternoon watching his clips, but I'm watching the videos while lying in bed. In real life, he's burning my legs, that's the difference, he said. —AFP

England's past World Cup woes weigh heavily

DOHA: England will have to end 56 years of failure against elite opposition in the World Cup knockout stages if they are to end France's reign as champions in Saturday's blockbuster quarter-final. As if facing Kylian Mbappe and company wasn't a daunting enough prospect for Gareth Southgate's side, they also have decades of history stacked against them at the Al Bayt Stadium. Since beating West Germany in the 1966 World Cup final to clinch the only major prize in their history, England have lost every World Cup knockout stage encounter with countries that have lifted the famous gold trophy.

The Germans started the streak of futility when they gained revenge in the 1970 World Cup quarter-finals, while Diego Maradona's 'Hand of God' goal and his sublime solo strike condemned England to defeat in the last eight in 1986. It was West Germany delivering the knockout blow again in 1990, this time in a semi-final shoot-out that sparked decades of English angst about penalties.

Argentina compounded England's penalty pain in 1998 with a shoot-out victory in the last 16. In 2002, Brazil's Ronaldo memorably caught David Seaman off his line with a long-range goal that sealed a 2-1 quarter-final win. Germany were back to haunt England in 2010 as a Frank Lampard shot that appeared to cross the line was controversially not given as a goal in a 4-1 last 16 defeat. England's struggles when faced with a quality rival have shown no signs of abating in the Southgate era.

After uplifting knockout stages wins over Colombia and Sweden, England's surprise run to the 2018 World Cup semi-finals came to a frustrating conclusion as eventual runners-up Croatia came from behind to win 2-1 in Moscow. At



England's coach Gareth Southgate

the delayed Euro 2020, England enjoyed a rare cathartic moment against a highly-ranked opponent when they beat Germany 2-0 in the last 16. But that German team was far from a superior vintage as their limp group stage exit at this World Cup has proved. —AFP

Spain fail World Cup test, face identity crisis

DOHA: Spain arrived in Qatar with grand dreams of winning a second World Cup, fully convinced in their style of play, but departed early Wednesday, ruminating on an identity crisis. La Roja last lifted a major trophy a decade ago at Euro 2012, while they have not won a single knockout game at the World Cup since triumphing in South Africa in 2010. Luis Enrique's side huffed and puffed but could not blow Morocco's sturdy house down in the last 16 on Tuesday, falling 3-0 on penalties after 120 goalless minutes.

The north African side made history by reaching the quarter-finals for the first time, while Spain gazed forlornly back at theirs and must now wonder if it is time to move on. They attempted over 1,000 passes against Morocco but ended up with nothing to show for it, forcing Yassine Bounou into only one save before the shoot-out. There he made two more and Spain were eliminated in the last 16 again, just as they were in Russia four years ago.

"We dominated the game but we lacked a goal," lamented Luis Enrique. "We could have been more effective in the final third, but I am more than satisfied with what my players did. They represented perfectly what my idea of football is." When Xavi and Andres Iniesta ruled the world, opponents were largely still too naive to know to stop them, and they had too much quality to be fended off for long. Now only truly elite club sides like Pep Guardiola's Manchester City can succeed by domi-



AL-RAYYAN: Morocco's goalkeeper #01 Yassine Bounou deflects the ball during the Qatar 2022 World Cup round of 16 football match between Morocco and Spain on December 6, 2022. —AFP

nating the ball entirely—with perhaps the world's best striker, Erling Haaland, as the spearhead.

Against Morocco, Luis Enrique left his top scorer Alvaro Morata on the bench, opting instead for Marco Asensio, whom he trusts more not to lose the ball. The coach buys "the complete pack" when it comes to possession football, for better or for worse. That means there is no Plan B, with Nico Williams's pace and directness on the right flank as much of a nod as Luis Enrique will give to other ideas. Players he left at home like strikers Iago Aspas and Borja Iglesias might have been able to offer more of a challenge to Morocco's excellent rearguard.

No stars

An element of Spain's plan may be borne of necessity. As good as midfielders Pedri and Gavi are, they still lack a decisive, regular match-winner. In the absence of a Kylian Mbappe, a Lionel Messi, a Neymar, or even a Harry Kane, the coach might believe ball domination and associative play is his team's best weapon, even if it misfired in the desert. Luis Enrique showed at Barcelona that when he had two of those forwards, plus Uruguay's Luis Suarez, he was willing to play in a different way, relinquishing control and allowing the forwards to wreak havoc as his side rolled with the punches. —AFP

Hamstring injuries double in Europe

LONDON: The number of hamstring injuries suffered by male professional footballers has doubled in Europe over the last 21 years, a study published on Wednesday has found. The research at Linköping University in Sweden, funded by European governing body UEFA and published in the British Journal of Sports Medicine, found that the number of matches professional players miss with hamstring problems has also doubled.

Nearly 20 per cent of the hamstring injuries are recurrences; of which more than two-thirds occur within two months of a player returning to play. The study collected data from medical teams who reported 2,636 hamstring injuries over 21 seasons. It found that the risk was 10 times higher in games than in training. Of the total of injuries, and 1,714 (or 66 per cent) occurred in 343,738 hours of match play hours and 922 (34 per cent) in 1,787,823 hours of training.

Hamstring injuries caused an average lay-off of 13 days. Over the 21 years, more and more of the injuries suffered by players were to the hamstring. In the first year, they were 12 per cent of all injuries but rose to 24 per cent by the last. Over the same period, days lost to hamstring injuries doubled from 10 per cent to 20 per cent. A 25-player squad can expect about eight hamstring injuries every season. The researchers said they did not set out to find causes but suggested that a more physical play, demanding tactics and a crowded fixtures calendar may be to blame.

"The intensity of elite men's football has increased," the researchers told the British Journal of Sports Medicine. "Professional players now undertake more high-intensity activities per match than they did previously and they also run faster than their predecessors." "Professional players now work year-round apart from a 4-6 week break between seasons. Even during the traditional break between seasons, players are often required to undertake pre-season tours which require intercontinental travel," the researchers added. —AFP

Classifieds

Hospitals & Clinics

Sabah Hospital	24812000
Amiri Hospital	22450005
Maternity Hospital	24843100
Mubarak Al-Kabir Hospital	25312700
Chest Hospital	24849400
Farwaniya Hospital	24892010
Adan Hospital	23940620
Ibn Sina Hospital	24840300
Al-Razi Hospital	24846000
Physiotherapy Hospital	24874330/9

Clinics

Kaizen center	25716707
Rawda	22517733
Adaliya	22517144
Khaldiya	24848075
Kaifan	24849807
Shamiya	24848913
Shuwaikh	24814507
Abdullah Salem	22549134
Nuzha	22526804

Industrial Shuwaikh	24814764
Qadsiya	22515088
Dasmah	22532265
Bneid Al-Gar	22531908
Shaab	22518752
Qibla	22459381
Ayoun Al-Qibla	22451082
Mirqab	22456536
Sharq	22465401
Salmiya	25746401

FOR RENT

Ground Floor (Al-Zahra Area)

- (3) • Main Entrance
- (1) • Laundry room + storage
- (2) • Living room
- (4) • Master bedroom
- (1) • Maid room + toilet
- (2) • Car park shaded
- Guest bathroom
- Shatter
- Lift
- Deposit 500 KD
- Rent (1250 KD)

Contact: 94167027

Portugal demolish Swiss 6-1 to book World Cup quarters

Ramos bags hat-trick, becomes youngest player to strike 3 times



LUSAIL: Portugal's defender #03 Pepe celebrates scoring his team's second goal during the Qatar 2022 World Cup round of 16 football match between Portugal and Switzerland on December 6, 2022. — AFP

DOHA: Goncalo Ramos justified the shock decision to drop Cristiano Ronaldo by scoring a hat-trick on his full debut as Portugal demolished Switzerland 6-1 on Tuesday to power into the World Cup quarter-finals. The 21-year-old Ramos, who started instead of Ronaldo, became the youngest player to strike three times in a World Cup knockout match since Pele in 1958.

Pepe, Raphael Guerreiro and Rafael Leao were also on target for a rampant Portugal, who booked a showdown with Morocco on Saturday for a place in the last four in Qatar. "I think not even in my wildest dreams had I thought about being part of the starting XI for the knockout phase," said Ramos, who only made his Portugal debut in a pre-tournament friendly last month.

Switzerland, who had been hoping to reach a first quarter-final since hosting the 1954 World Cup, exited in the last 16 for the third time in a row. "Defeat is painful. We are sad about how we played, about the result. We wanted to make our country happy but we didn't manage to achieve that," said Switzerland coach Murat Yakin. Ronaldo, 37 and now without a club after his departure from Manchester United, has hogged the headlines during the tournament while looking a

shadow of his former self.

The only man to score at five World Cups, Ronaldo was left out by coach Fernando Santos against the Swiss following his angry response to being substituted in the last group game. Santos later said the decision to bench the Portugal star had been "strategic and nothing more", unrelated to his substitution against South Korea. "I said that it was closed and it was closed," Santos said. It was a bold call to omit a player with a record 118 international goals in favour of giving a first start to Ramos, the Benfica striker who had played just 33 minutes across three previous appearances.

Instant impact

But it took just 17 minutes for Ramos to reward Santos' faith, and to achieve something Ronaldo has never done - score in a World Cup knockout game. Joao Felix clipped delicately into the feet of Ramos, who quickly swiveled past Fabian Schaar and rifled into the roof of the net past a stunned Yann Sommer.

Otavio, who returned to the Portugal midfield after injury in their opening match, shot straight at Sommer before Ramos did likewise moments later. Xherdan Shaqiri drew a fingertip stop from Diogo

Costa with a dipping free-kick from distance, but Portugal soon had their second.

Bruno Fernandes whipped in a corner and the 39-year-old Pepe towered above the Swiss defense to powerfully head home. Diogo Dalot hacked Remo Freuler's header off the line after Diogo Costa failed to properly deal with a cross, but the Swiss simply had no answers against an irresistible Portugal. Ramos turned in his second from close range six minutes into the second half from Dalot's cross down the right. He then turned provider by playing in Guerreiro to lash in another just four minutes later as the Swiss defense was ruthlessly ripped apart.

It was also Ramos who inadvertently glanced a corner towards Manuel Akanji at the far post as the Manchester City centre-back pulled one back for Switzerland. Ramos completed his treble after more outstanding work from Felix, nonchalantly dinking over Sommer with one of his final touches before making way for Ronaldo. The five-time Ballon d'Or winner's introduction elicited the biggest roar of the night. Ronaldo did have the ball in the back of the net but it was ruled out for a clear offside. Leao capped off a sensational Portugal performance with a terrific curling strike in stoppage time. — AFP



Portugal's defender #02 Diogo Dalot (left) fights for the ball with Switzerland's forward #07 Brel Embolo during the Qatar 2022 World Cup round of 16 football match on December 6, 2022. — AFP photos



A supporter of Portugal cheers on the stands during the Qatar 2022 World Cup round of 16 football match between Portugal and Switzerland.



Portugal's defender #02 Diogo Dalot falls during the Qatar 2022 World Cup round of 16 football match between Portugal and Switzerland on December 6, 2022.



Portugal's forward #07 Cristiano Ronaldo gets the ball from a ballgirl during the Qatar 2022 World Cup round of 16 football match between Portugal and Switzerland.

Morocco 'the pride of Arabs'

DOHA: Thousands of Morocco fans descended on the streets of Doha to celebrate their country becoming the first Arab nation to reach the World Cup quarter-finals on Tuesday. Despite some minor trouble outside the stadium, the victory over Spain became a celebration of "Arab pride" for supporters from across the region. Walid Regragui's side won 3-0 in a penalty shootout after the match finished goalless following extra-time.

So many people packed Doha's central Souq Waqif market - a traditional gathering point for World Cup fans - that police sealed it off just before midnight, with thousands waiting in groups at different entrances. Copying the celebration of Moroccan players inside Doha's Education City Stadium, many fans waved Palestinian flags, stepping up a political show of solidarity that has marked this World Cup. "This is the first World Cup on Arab territory and we are carrying the Arab flag in this tournament," said Yussuf Akram, who waved Moroccan and Palestinian emblems in the crowded Souq alleys.

Saudis, Qataris and Egyptians joined the celebrations, waving their countries' flags in the traditional market as police gathered around the edge. "This is a matter of pride, we are all happy for Morocco," said Aysha Bedawi, who came from Cairo to watch World Cup matches. "It does not matter which team reached this stage, as long as there is one Arab team there we still have hope." Arab teams have previously reached the last 16 at a World Cup three times - Morocco (1986), Saudi Arabia (1994) and Algeria (2014).

The prospect of playing Portugal in a quarter-final



RABAT: Moroccans celebrate after their team won the Qatar 2022 World Cup round 16 football match between Morocco and Spain on December 6, 2022. — AFP

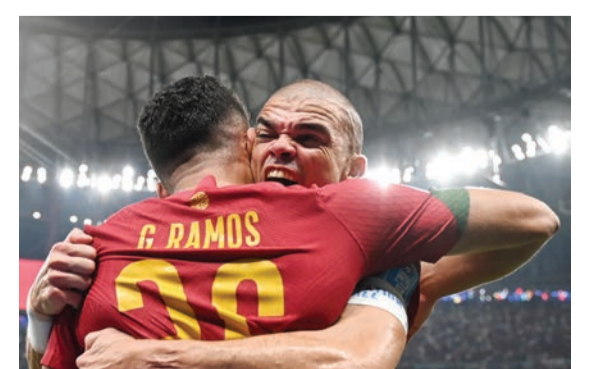
did not worry supporters who chanted "bring on Ronaldo" outside a TV studio set up in the Souq. "If Morocco can beat Spain, who have been world champions, then they can handle Cristiano Ronaldo," said Mohamed Benyoub, a Moroccan living in Qatar. "I cried when the game finished, I never thought I would see something like this." Organizers said police had to move in to stop "unticketed fans" beating down a stadium boundary fence to gain entry. No injuries were reported.

Meanwhile, Morocco's players unfurled a

Palestinian flag during their on-pitch celebrations after the team's stunning World Cup upset victory against Spain on Tuesday. The Palestinian flag - which has been fluttering widely across Qatar during the finals - was seen being held aloft by Moroccan players following the dramatic penalty shoot-out win over the Spaniards. FIFA regulations prohibit the display of banners, flags and fliers that are deemed to be "political, offensive and/or discriminatory nature." In the past, football's governing bodies have issued fines for displays of the Palestinian flag inside stadia. — AFP



Supporters of Portugal wait on the stands ahead of the Qatar 2022 World Cup round of 16 football match between Portugal and Switzerland.



Portugal's forward #26 Goncalo Ramos (left) celebrates with Portugal's defender #03 Pepe after he scored his team's first goal during the Qatar 2022 World Cup round of 16 football match between Portugal and Switzerland.