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Qatar Amir says ‘exceptional’ World Cup delivered to fans

After hosting global football showpiece, Doha seeks Olympic gold



DOHA: Qatar's Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani stands next to the World Cup trophy during the award ceremony after the final match between Argentina and France at Lusail Stadium on Dec 18, 2022. — AFP

DOHA: Qatar's ruler said Sunday that the Gulf state had delivered on a vow to hold an "exceptional" World Cup. Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, who gave Argentina captain Lionel Messi a bisht, a traditional Arab cloak after his side won the trophy, paid tribute to the finalists and fans in a Twitter statement after the match.

"We have fulfilled our promise to organize an exceptional championship by Arab countries, which provided an opportunity for the people of the world to learn about the richness of our culture and the originality of our values," the Amir said. Qatar spent more than \$200 billion on stadiums and new infrastructure ahead of the first World Cup in an Arab nation, which FIFA leader Gianni Infantino has repeatedly said was the "best ever". Messi was prominently pictured wearing the bisht before he lifted the World Cup trophy.

After the World Cup earned Qatar both plaudits and censure, the energy-rich Gulf state is now starting a marathon to secure the 2036 Olympics and a place as a pillar of world sport. Even as Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo scored goals and shed tears in Qatar's multibillion-dollar stadiums, its sports administrators were booking new victories off the pitch.

During the tournament, Qatar was awarded the 2025 world table tennis championships and the opening race of the world endurance championship in 2024, adding to its packed sports calendar. Formula One returns in 2023, and a major renovation of Qatar's race track went ahead during the World Cup shutdown. Qatar also stepped in when China withdrew from holding the 2023 Asian Cup football and is to stage the world swimming championships in 2024.

Its beln Sports channel with its growing viewership and rights portfolio only adds to Qatar's sports muscle. Hosting events is "a very powerful game-changing tool", said Michael Payne, a former head of marketing for the International Olympic Committee. Qatar is ploughing ahead with its sporting ambitions, and other federations have also welcomed Qatar's largesse.

An official with the International Table Tennis Federation said: "Qatar stepped in to help organize events when COVID devastated the calendar, and its facilities are all in place". Qatar won an overwhelming majority in the ITTF vote against Spain for the 2025 championships. The 2036 Olympics - which will not be awarded before 2025 - is the next big prize. Sheikh Tamim is an IOC member and Qatar has already bid for the 2016, 2020 and 2032 Games.

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News in brief

Ex-MP Dumaitheer passes away

KUWAIT: Former MP Khalaf Dumaitheer Al-Enezi passed away on Monday after a battle with illness. He was 76. Enezi was a longtime lawmaker, serving in the National Assembly from 1981 till 2016.



Bill to legalize groups rejected

KUWAIT: The National Assembly's interior and defense committee has rejected a draft law calling to allow the establishment of political groups to contest parliamentary elections like political parties. The committee said that the bill is complicated and will be very difficult to implement, adding that it will also legalize political parties, which are not yet legal in the country.

Heard settles case with Depp

WASHINGTON: Actress Amber Heard announced Monday that she had reached a settlement in the multimillion-dollar defamation case filed against her by her former husband Johnny Depp. Heard, in a post on Instagram, did not reveal the terms of the settlement, which comes after a Virginia jury ordered her to pay \$10 million to the "Pirates of the Caribbean" star. Heard, who had countersued, was awarded \$2 million. Heard said she was dropping her appeal and settling the case because she "simply cannot go through" another trial. — AFP

Three Jordan police, suspect killed in raid

AMMAN: A gun battle in Jordan on Monday left dead three security force members and a man wanted for the killing of a senior police officer during protests last week, authorities said. Strikes and protests against rising fuel prices have rocked several southern provinces in recent days and led to clashes with security forces. The deputy police chief of Maan province, Colonel Abdul Razzaq Dalabeh, died Thursday of a gunshot to the head during what authorities called "riots" in the town of Al-Husseiniya.



AMMAN: Jordanian military personnel carry the coffin of Captain Ghaith Al-Rahahleh, who was killed in riots last week, in the capital's Sweileh district on Dec 19, 2022. — AFP

Global 'peace pact' signed to protect nature

MONTREAL: Countries reached a historic deal on Monday to reverse decades of environmental destruction threatening the world's species and ecosystems, in what the UN chief hailed as "a peace pact with nature". After the marathon COP15 biodiversity summit in Montreal ran into the small hours, chair Chinese Environment Minister Huang Runqiu, declared the deal adopted and banged his gavel, sparking loud applause.



MONTREAL: Chinese Ecology and Environment Minister Huang Runqiu bangs the gavel at the United Nations Biodiversity Conference (COP15) on Dec 19, 2022. — AFP

Dutch PM says sorry for 250 yrs of slavery

THE HAGUE: Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte on Monday officially apologized for 250 years of the Netherlands' involvement in slavery, calling it a "crime against humanity". The apology comes almost 150 years after the end of slavery in the European country's overseas colonies, which included Suriname and islands like Curacao and Aruba in the Caribbean and Indonesia in the East.

colonies in South America and the Caribbean for the event. Sigrid Kaag, the Dutch finance minister and deputy prime minister, said on an official visit to Suriname last week that a "process" would begin leading up to "another incredibly important moment on July 1 next year". Descendants of Dutch slavery will then celebrate 150 years of liberation from slavery in an annual celebration called "Keti Koti" (Breaking the Chains) in Surinamese.

Continued on Page 6

Social, biological factors might play a role in addiction: Expert

12-step program aimed at helping addicts

KUWAIT: Social and biological factors might contribute to addiction of narcotics and alcohol, said a Kuwaiti specialist on Tuesday. Speaking to KUNA, head of the team to support addicts at the Najahat psychiatric and social consultancy center Ghanima Karam affirmed that addiction could be beaten by various methods including the 12-step program.

Developed in the 1930s, the classic 12-step program was aimed at riding individuals from addiction, namely alcohol. It is a lifestyle based on spiri-

tual principles simply written in a digital mode from one to 12. Some alcohol addicts have begun to use this program in addiction treatment and have even formed a group of addicts using it, she said. The 12-step program is a set of self-supporting people who share the same type of addiction and meet with Society specialists from twice to thrice weekly to reveal how they became addicted and why they sought help for treatment, she elaborated.

Karam revealed that hundreds of millions around the world suffered from narcotics addiction, which

could be attributed to several factors including chemical imbalances in the brain according to the World Health Organization (WHO). Some claim that genetics play a part in addiction with a number of scientific research alluding to this factor, noted Karam, adding that social experiences would surely play a factor in leading one to addiction.

There are various schools focusing on addiction treatment, she affirmed, saying that the 12-step program was one of them. The 12-step focuses on the individual acknowledging the problem of

addiction within themselves and seeking proper support from the circle of family and those on the road to battle addiction.

Karam said that treatment programs mixing the 12-step and psychiatric consultancy had rate of success equal to 65 percent. Treatment of an addict mostly runs through several phases including a stay at a medical or psychiatric center to aid a person in the initial treatment followed by battling withdrawal symptoms and finally continued support from everyone involved, she said. — KUNA

In my view

The nation of waiting



By Dr Khalid Al-Saleh

Local@kuwaittimes.com

There are in the history of man's fight with disease important events, maybe the most important of which is when scientists discovered the causes of fever. Before that fever was the disease - man did not know that the rise in body temperature is only a symptom that hides many causes, some simple and others dangerous.

When scientists discovered germs and recognized bacteria and viruses, they made antibiotics for bacteria and vaccines for viruses, and this means the battle of man against germs is similar to military wars, using arms and strengthening internal defenses. Today man uses the same old methods for cancer, whose numbers are increasing with the rise in life expectancy.

Studies are rising with regards to cancer vaccines, s scientists are seeking to stimulate the body's immunity and make it a partner in getting rid of the disease. The idea is similar to viral vaccines, but it different in that it is given after contracting the disease. If cancer vaccines are developed and become popular, cancer will become like a fever, and its old name will be replaced with tens of names that reflect the truth of the disease. All what we have to do is wait.

We will not participate in these great experiments, we as we are accustomed to - a nation of waiting in the era of pride. We talk and be proud, but we are good at waiting. I had a dream earlier that the Gulf Cooperation Council decided to build a center for cancer research in a Gulf city, and what spoiled the dream were ugly faces screaming repeated sentences - where are the scientists?

What is the share of each state? Why not have it in Bahrain or Kuwait? The same voices that spoiled our scientific and cultural life. Voices that are good at imitating and do not believe in the abilities of Arabs and Muslims. If they had kept silent, we would have left the waiting queue. The dream is not difficult to materialize - all we need is self-confidence and confidence in our scientists. Gentlemen, we are fed up with waiting.

KUWAIT: The Ministry of Defense has officially announced that Fahad Al-Mutairi has been assigned as the New Speaker of the Ministry. This comes within its keenness to pass correct information to the media.



Customs officials seize illicit drugs

KUWAIT: The head of the airport customs said three mailboxes containing illegal substances have been seized. Officers found one mailbox with 900 Lyrica pills, 300 gm of Kratom in the second mailbox and 1.5 kg of Kratom in the third mailbox. The suspects have been referred to concerned authorities.







KUWAIT: The Municipal Council holds a session on Dec 19, 2022. —Photos by Fouad Al-Shaikh

MPs to examine conflict of interests and penal code

KUWAIT: Kuwait's National Assembly upcoming sessions due on Tuesday and Wednesday are set to examine tabled items, namely voting on conflict of interest draft laws, and amendments to the penal code. The conflict of interests' bill, to be voted on in second deliberation, serves the reinforcement of transparency. Then, the session is set to move on to voting on a draft law amending the penal code specifying penal responsibility for the judicial person in corruption cases.

Further on the session's agenda are a slew of parliamentary committee reports including the residential committee, the health and social affairs committee, and the interior and defense committee report on constituency amendments, and another on the parliament's elections. Suggestion by MP Abdulkareem Al-Kandari on Kuwaitization of National Assembly jobs, is also

scheduled to be discussed in the upcoming session along with Audit Bureau reports, including report on Eurofighter deal, as well as a number of other items.

OIC meeting

In another development, Kuwait Minister of Justice, Minister of Awqaf (endowment) and Islamic Affairs, and Minister of State for Integrity Promotion Affairs Abdulaziz Al-Majed will head to Jeddah, Saudi Arabia to partake in an OIC meeting on anti-corruption. In a press statement, Al-Majed, heading the Kuwaiti delegation, said that he would convey the efforts of Kuwait within countering corruption during his participation in the First Ministerial Meeting of Anti-Corruption Law Enforcement Authorities in OIC Member States.

He expressed gratitude for the OIC Secretariat and experts involved in the formalization of the Makkah Agreement for anti-corruption law enforcement agencies, saying the draft agreement would be sent to the OIC Foreign Ministers council to begin the signing process. Minister Al-Majed also affirmed that dialogue forums and other meetings would be held on the sideline of the event. — KUNA

Egyptian who killed 2 sentenced to life

KUWAIT: The criminal court, headed by Faisal Al-Harbi, sentenced an Egyptian to life imprisonment on charges of killing two Syrians inside a restaurant in Fintas, after amending the charge of premeditation in the murders. The accused had admitted he had committed the crime because the victims used to insult and undermine him, but he denied planning to commit the crime, stressing there was a dispute at work that developed into an altercation.

"Subconsciously, I found myself getting a knife and stabbing the two victims," he said, which led to the death of one of the victims after he was transferred to the hospital, and the death of the second man after 18 hours in the ICU. In other news, the Criminal Department at the court of first instance postponed hearing the case of a Municipal Council member and a businessman accused of bribery till Jan 9, rejecting their request for release. The two suspects are accused of bribery of KD 100,000 to vote on transactions in the Municipal Council. They deny the charge.



Kuwait's Construction Exhibition '23 kicks off

KUWAIT: 'Baytak' Construction Exhibition 2023 kicked off Monday at Kuwait International Fair Grounds in Mishref with 120 companies participating. Marketing and Merchandise CEO of Kuwait International Fair Company Basma Al-Duhaim, in a press release, said the six-day event will be at halls 5 and 6, as the latest in construction mechanisms will be displayed in an opportunity for decision-makers and construction experts to be informed with demands of the local market.

Al-Duhaim added companies partaking in the event will be showcasing building materials, carpentry, general contracting ventures, iron and aluminum works, interior design, marble, granite, ceramic and interlocking tiles, as well as paint and electrical wiring amongst other products. The event is expected to draw thousands of visitors and people searching for options and solutions for their construction projects. —KUNA



KUWAIT: Participants are pictured during the 'Baytak' Construction Exhibition 2023 on Monday at Kuwait International Fair Grounds in Mishref. —KUNA photos

Local

Kuwait envoy stresses importance of Baghdad Conference for Cooperation

Arab league rejects European Parliament resolution

AMMAN: Kuwait's Ambassador to Jordan Aziz Al-Daihani stressed on Monday the importance of Baghdad's Conference for Cooperation and Partnership hosted by Jordan, to discuss challenges facing Iraq and the region. In a statement to KUNA, Al-Daihani said that a Kuwaiti delegation will participate in the conference, affirming the country's keenness to contribute to supporting the efforts of Iraq and their active role regionally and internationally.

Al-Daihani also emphasized the importance of the conference to enhance the region's stability and security against the challenges that require cooperation and joint action. He also praised Jordan's role in hosting the conference and its keenness to support Iraq and maintain the region's safety and stability.

Jordan will on Tuesday, host the second edition of the Baghdad Conference for Cooperation

and Partnership to discuss challenges facing Iraq and the region's countries, with the participation of over 10 countries, including Kuwait. The conference, which will be held in the Dead Sea region, is an opportunity to tackle ways to mobilize efforts to achieve stability in the region, which faces common challenges that require dealing with it on the basis of mutual interests and security in accordance with the principles of good neighborliness, non-interference in the internal affairs of states and respect for national sovereignty.

The conferees will also address challenges in connection to food, medicine and energy security in the region and the world. Iraqi Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein, during his stay in the Jordanian capital, Amman, said that the great challenges faced in his country are related to food, drug, and energy security, and since they

go beyond the country's borders, regional and international relations are needed to face them.

The conference is a crucial event, not only for Iraq but for the entire region, amid challenges that everyone must cooperate and unite in solving them, he underscored. The previous edition was held in the Iraqi capital of Baghdad in August 2021 where it discussed the concepts of economic reform, international decision-making and reducing tensions. Kuwait, Jordan, Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Qatar, the UAE, France, the League of Arab States, the Gulf Cooperation Council and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation participated in the conference's first edition.

European resolution

In another development, the General Secretariat of the League Arab of States has

announced its solidarity with the Kingdom of Bahrain, and its rejection of European Parliament latest resolution on human rights in the Gulf state. In a statement, the secretariat mentioned that it has monitoring the development of human rights situation in Bahrain over the past few years and it has registered much improvement.

Bahrain has supported the establishment of an Arab court of human rights, ratified Arab charter for human rights, and supported many more initiatives on the political and humanitarian levels, it added. The secretariat asserted its rejection of politicizing of humanitarian cases, and the adoption of a biased approach towards these issues. It also implied that the resolution relies on inaccurate information without taking into consideration the latest developments or the complex context behind the political scene in Bahrain or other Arab states. — KUNA

Kuwaiti Consul General in Shanghai visits Kuwait Times, Kuwait News



KUWAIT: Consul General of Kuwait in Shanghai Mishal Al-Shamali paid a courtesy visit to Kuwait Times and Kuwait News on Monday, where he was received by Kuwait Times Deputy Editor-in-Chief Abdullah Bofain. Shamali praised the support and cooperation of Kuwait Times during the visit. The senior diplomat was given a tour of the newspaper's offices, archives and printing press.



KUWAIT: Undersecretary of the Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs Bader Al-Otaibi visits the Grand Mosque.

Grand Mosque ready for prayers in Ramadan

KUWAIT: Undersecretary of the Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs Bader Al-Otaibi visited the Grand Mosque on Sunday to review the latest preparations for the resumption of prayers during the blessed month of Ramadan. "The visit to the

mosque comes on the instruction of Minister Abdulaziz Al-Majed and the keenness of the ministry to organize matters for the advent of the holy month and prepare the best atmosphere to perform tarawih and qiyam prayers," Otaibi said during a press conference.

"This year will be different due to the return of regular prayers in mosques after the COVID pandemic, which increases the responsibility on us, and hopefully we will be ready to provide all the needs of worshippers," he added. Otaibi reiterated all efforts are being exerted to ensure the safety and readiness of the mosque to welcome the holy month.

FM and Canada Defence Minister discuss boosting ties

KUWAIT: Kuwait Foreign Minister Sheikh Salem Abdullah Al-Jaber Al-Sabah met Sunday visiting Canadian Defense Minister Anita Anand and her accompanying delegation. During the meeting, the two sides discussed cooperation fields between the two countries in the context of preserving security and stability in the region, and logistic collaboration and training. They further dealt with combating terrorism, common coordination in this regard, the most important developments on the regional and international arenas and joint coordination.

Meanwhile, Anand expressed her country's thanks and appreciation to Kuwait for hosting the Canadian armed forces on its territory and providing them all facilities available. She also voiced her country's gratitude for Kuwait's efforts and support to facilitate the evacuation of Canadian and other nationals from Afghanistan, and to secure their safe arrival to their countries. Anand said she looks forward to continuing strong cooperation



KUWAIT: Kuwait Foreign Minister Sheikh Salem Abdullah Al-Jaber Al-Sabah receives visiting Canadian Defense Minister Anita Anand. — KUNA

between the two friendly countries in various fields, commending Kuwait's wisdom, balanced foreign policy and efforts to maintain security and peace in the region.

Moreover, Sheikh Salem extolled the prosperity and progress of cooperation between Kuwait and

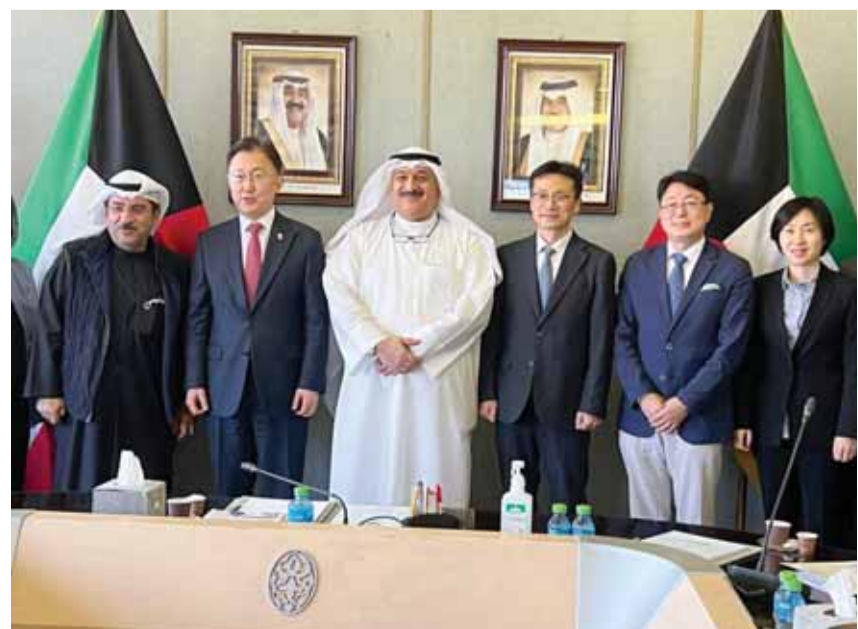
Canada on all levels, and the close partnership between them. This represents a message of solidarity and support for preserving Kuwait's security and stability in the region, he said, expressing his full support to promote and strengthen joint action to establish security in the region. —KUNA

New regulations for assigning authorities

KUWAIT: The Cabinet assigned the Civil Service Commission to prepare laws regulating the assignment of leadership positions according to specific criteria based on competence and merit, which is expected to be referred to the National Assembly in the new year. "The government complies with parliamentary requests by regulating the appointment of leaders in ministries and government institutions, as well as defining conditions that prevent random or undeserved appointments with the intention of buying loyalties from deputies or influential people," sources told Kuwait Times.

"In principle, appointment to leadership positions will not be left to the minister's discretion to choose who he wants for the post. Rather, it must be through an announcement of the vacant position in the official gazette to open the way for deserving employees in the institution. The applicant must fulfill the conditions for filling the position, provided their educational qualification is not less than a university degree, with proficiency in English, spoken and written," sources clarified.

"The government emphasized the applicant for the job should have previous service of at least 15 years, include the last five years in the same entity. They must have an evaluation that is up to the standards specified, and they must not have any disciplinary procedures throughout their working period. An appointment from outside the entity will only be considered if they do not have a qualified worker within the same entity, provided they fulfill the conditions of appointment in terms of job progression, specialization and years of experience," sources added. Notably, appointments are for four years, renewable once for a period of four years as well.



KUWAIT: Kuwait Health Minister Dr Ahmed Al-Awadi on Monday met an official delegation from the Republic of South Korea, headed by the Assistant Minister of Health and Social Welfare for Planning and Coordination Affairs Kim Hongjo. The meeting tackled various topics including cooperation between the two friendly countries, and ways to enhance ties. They discussed the agreement between Seoul University Hospital and the Ministry of Health in managing the services of the new Jahra Hospital. This meeting comes within the framework of the Ministry of Health's keenness to provide the best international health services to the citizens.

News in brief

Iqama violators nabbed

KUWAIT: The Interior Ministry announced 13 people of various nationalities were arrested for violating iqama regulations. "Nine of those arrested were charged with absconding, while four violated the rules of iqama permits," the public relations department at the interior ministry said. All those arrested were sent to the concerned departments to proceed with legal procedures.

Driving licenses cancelled

KUWAIT: Kuwait's General Traffic Department announced on Sunday that it has cancelled about 1,000 driving licenses of expatriates in 40 days who violated rules, an average of 23 licenses per day. The driving licenses of expats are cancelled if specific conditions to obtain a license are not met, such as salary, university degree, or profession. Currently all files of expats are being checked upon the instructions of First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Interior Sheikh Talal Al-Khaled Al-Sabah, according to a newspaper report. The traffic department patrol teams have been given the instructions to arrest those expatriates who have been driving after their licenses were withdrawn and refer them to deportation.

CBK issues new bonds

KUWAIT: The Central Bank of Kuwait (CBK) announced Monday new CBK bonds and related tawarruq valued at KD 240 million (roughly \$792). The securities bear a return rate of 4.125 percent and a maturity of three months, according to a CBK statement received by KUNA. Last Monday, CBK issued bonds and tawarruq of the same worth, term and return rate values.

Kuwaiti wins dual titles

KUWAIT: Kuwait's Mohammad Al-Baz won the professional division of the Thailand-hosted Jet Ski Championship, while also bagging the Asian cup contest at the same event. Al-Baz has etched his name in the history books through this double accolade, according to Kuwaiti Sea Sports Club delegation chief Abdullah Burbea. He went on to attribute the success to the overwhelming support the Kuwaiti athletes are given at home. —From Agencies



KUWAIT: Supporters watch the Qatar 2022 World Cup football final match at an outdoor venue along the Sheikh Jaber causeway. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

Football fans witness exciting atmosphere

KUWAIT: Supporters watch the Qatar 2022 World Cup football final match between Argentina and France, at an outdoor venue along the Sheikh Jaber causeway in Kuwait City on December 18, 2022. Exciting scenes prevailed as large crowds gathered in Kuwait to witness a drama filled out-

come as Argentina beat France in the FIFA 2022 World Cup final. Fans of both sides cheered on their chosen side at Container Park, a fan zone which includes several large screens projecting the much-anticipated match, backing their favorite players until the last minute of the match which

went all the way to penalties. Argentina fans celebrated their team's third title after winning 4-2 on penalties, while supporters of defending champions, France, were left to rue their chances. The final was held at Lusail Stadium, located at Qatar's second-largest city. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

KU holds workshop on 'Way to Obtain Patent'

KUWAIT: Under the sponsorship of Acting Vice President for Research department, Dr Othman Al-Khudur, a workshop "The Way to Obtain Patents" was held for members of the academic staff and postgraduate students on Sunday in the Innovation Hall at the Khalidiya University Campus. Dr Nasser Al-Sayegh, Associate Scientific Researcher at the Kuwait Institute for Scientific Research made a presentation during the workshop.

Dr Nasser Al-Sayegh said "Most inventions are discovered by chance through research activities, but the time has come for change and discovery of inventions through more organized methods. We seek through the workshop to guide

researchers towards a successful roadmap for discovery and obtaining patents in an interesting, simple and fun way."

"The workshop is aimed at helping researchers to identify and discover potential inventions from challenges they face in their daily lives, by introducing them to patents, providing steps to develop ideas into patents, and how to think like an inventor, in addition to introducing them to the various search engines specialized in patents. Moreover, the workshop also offered how to write the application form for patents, and on the evaluation process to obtain patents, as working groups were finally formed to develop potential patents to be added to the scientific archive of Kuwait University," he clarified.

Assistant Vice director for External Research Cooperation and Consultations, Dr Haneen Al-Ghabra, said: "Within the framework of continuing research cooperation between Kuwait University and scientific institutions to support inventions and inventors, cooperation took place with Dr Nasser Al-Sayegh from the Kuwait Institute for Scientific Research to present a workshop entitled "The way to obtaining patents" for the students of Kuwait University."



"We seek to raise the academic and scientific level of Kuwait University, and to work towards improving its global classification and increasing the number of researchers who obtain patents, distinguished in the field of higher education and scientific research," she added.



KUWAIT: Photo shows participants during the workshop.

Chinese ambassador stresses importance of cultural exchange

KUWAIT: Chinese Ambassador to Kuwait Zhang Jianwei stressed the importance of cultural exchange between the countries, stressing Chinese President Xi Jinping expressed during the Gulf-China summit. China's readiness to enhance cultural cooperation through its cooperation with 300 universities and middle and primary schools in Gulf Cooperation Council countries to teach the Chinese language, as the opening of the first Chinese cultural center is expected after the new year.

"China aims to create new milestones for linguistic and cultural cooperation with GCC coun-

tries and offered to cooperate through smart classrooms in GCC educational institutions to teach the Chinese language and conduct online examinations in cooperation with a Chinese educational center," Zhang revealed.

Regarding Kuwait's share of the 300 media institutions, he said: "This specific number is for all the countries of the GCC, each according to their needs and desires, and this number can increase, as Kuwait preceded the rest of the GCC countries in initiating diplomatic relations with China, in addition to being the first country in the region to take the initiative to open a Chinese cultural center at the beginning of the new year."

Zhang revealed the center will teach the art of Chinese writing and calligraphy, as well as cultural activities, including introducing Chinese food and teaching kung-fu. A proposal to establish a Chinese-Gulf library with the most famous books from both sides was also made.



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Malaysia's PM Anwar wins confidence vote

Parents 'beg' Iran judiciary to spare their son's life

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MINSK: Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko (L) greets Russian President Vladimir Putin upon his arrival at the Minsk National Airport on December 19, 2022. —AFP

Putin visits Belarus as drones hit Kyiv

Infrastructure facilities damaged but there was no known casualties

KYIV: Russia launched a swarm of attack drones at critical infrastructure in Kyiv on Monday in strikes that Ukraine said provoked emergency blackouts in a dozen regions. The attacks came as Russia said it had shot down several US-made missiles over its airspace near Ukraine and President Vladimir Putin was due to visit neighbouring Belarus, used as a staging ground for the invasion of Ukraine.

"I first heard the air raid siren howling from the street... I thought there is going to be a drone attack. For the first time, it scared me," Natalia Dobrovolska, a 68-year-old resident of Kyiv told AFP.

She described hearing multiple explosions before power shut off in her building in western Kyiv. Officials said Russia had dispatched 35 attack drones nationwide, including 23 over Kyiv. Ukraine said it had downed 30 of the aerial weapons, including Iranian-made "Shaheds", which have pummeled the capital in recent weeks.

Mayor Vitali Klitschko said critical infrastructure facilities were "damaged" but there were no known casualties. Energy operator Ukrenergo said emergency elec-

tricity outages were scheduled in the capital and nearly a dozen regions.

Moscow said its air defence systems had shot down four US-made missiles over Belgorod, a Russian region bordering Ukraine, in one of its first such claims in nearly 10 months of fighting.

Border situation a 'priority'

"Four American 'HARM' anti-radar missiles were shot down in the airspace over the Belgorod region," the defence ministry said on social media. Ukraine has experienced frequent and deadly aerial attacks in the 10 months since Russia invaded in late February.

After a series of battlefield setbacks and lost territory this summer and autumn, Moscow stepped up its aerial campaign to target the country's energy grid. With winter setting in, missile and drone attacks have plunged cities around the country into darkness, and severed water and heat supplies to millions of Ukrainians.

After a major Russian assault aiming more than 70 missiles on cities last Friday, the national electricity oper-

ator was forced to impose emergency rolling blackouts as it raced to repair the battered energy grid. President Volodymyr Zelensky said as of Sunday evening, nine million people have had their energy restored. Ukraine has an estimated population of 40 million. Zelensky also described the situation on Ukraine's border with Russia and Belarus as a "constant priority".

"We are preparing for all possible defence scenarios," Zelensky said, adding that he had recently discussed border regions with military commanders. Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko, who has been in power since 1994, is a long-time Kremlin ally and allowed Russian troops to use Belarusian territory as a launchpad for Moscow's invasion.

Putin visit Belarus

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov was already in Minsk on Monday alongside Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu. With Putin also expected to arrive, Russia announced its forces were running military drills with Belarusian forces.

The defence ministry released footage of drills in Belarus, showing soldiers conducting tank manoeuvres, and practising artillery and sniper fire at a snow-dusted training ground. "From the morning until the evening twilight—there is not a single second of silence at the training grounds of Belarus," the ministry said.

In October, Belarus announced the formation of a joint regional force with Moscow with several thousand Russian servicemen arriving in the ex-Soviet country. It did not say where the drills were taking place or how long they will last.

The deployment of Russian troops in Belarus had raised fears that Belarusian troops could join them in their offensive in Ukraine. In fighting that has spilled over into Russian regions bordering Ukraine, one person was killed, and others were wounded Sunday in Belgorod following attacks that the local authorities blamed on Kyiv.

Governor Vyacheslav Gladkov said Ukrainian strikes left around 14,000 people without power in a district of the Belgorod region. —AFP

ANC re-elects Ramaphosa as party chief

JOHANNESBURG: South Africa's ruling ANC party on Monday re-elected President Cyril Ramaphosa as its leader for a second five-year term, despite a brewing scandal over a huge cash theft at his farm. Ramaphosa garnered 2,476 votes for the post of party president against 1,897 for former health minister Zweli Mkhize, the African National Congress' elections chief, Kgalema Motlanthe, announced.

"It's a good outcome not only for the governing party... it's a good outcome for the country," Ramaphosa's spokesman Vincent Magwenya told reporters. "The president is quite energised," he added.

Ramaphosa's comfortable victory opens the way for him to a second term as South African president if the ANC win the next general elections, due in 2024. Under the constitution, the head of state is chosen by parliament.

More than 4,300 delegates, gathered at a conference near Johannesburg, cast their ballots on Sunday to appoint top officials, including party president, deputy president, chair and secretary general. The party's former treasurer, Paul Mashatile, emerged deputy president.

Most of the delegates erupted in celebration, standing on chairs, chanting and clapping hands when the results were announced. Ramaphosa's opponent Mkhize, walked up to the stage and took off his cap to congratulate Ramaphosa. The pair hugged and shook hands.

Burglary scandal

Ramaphosa, 70, won the contest despite being mired in accusations that he concealed the burglary of a huge amount of cash at his upmarket cattle farm. As the nation's vice president, he ascended to the ANC's top job in December 2017 as his boss Jacob Zuma battled a mounting corruption scandal.

The following February, Zuma was forced out by the ANC. Ramaphosa took office vowing to weed out endemic corruption and renew the party. But his clean-hands image has been dented by the burglary scandal.

The affair has raised questions as to why he was in the possession of so much cash, and why he failed to report the theft to the authorities. He won a reprieve ahead of the conference when the ANC used its majority in parliament to block a possible impeachment inquiry. —AFP

Five killed in Toronto apartment shooting

MONTREAL: Five people were killed and another wounded late Sunday in a shooting in the suburbs of the Canadian city of Toronto, police said. The suspect also died after an exchange of fire with law enforcement, local police chief Jim MacSween told reporters, saying the shooting took place in an apartment building.

The injured person was taken to hospital in "serious condition," according to a statement, but their life is not

in danger. Police were called to the site Sunday evening at approximately 7:20 pm (0020 GMT) local time. "Once the officers arrived, they were met with... a horrendous scene where numerous victims were deceased," MacSween told reporters, according to Canadian media.

"They (police) went right into the building and dealt with the situation. One of our officers did discharge a firearm, I can confirm that. And as a result the suspect is deceased," he added.

Police were investigating the motive and whether there was a connection between the victims and the male suspect, who has not been named but, according to the Special Investigative Unit, was 73 years old. The suspect allegedly acted alone.

The victims were reportedly found in different apartments in the building, which is located in Vaughan,

in the suburbs about 30 kilometers (20 miles) north of Toronto. Residents were evacuated immediately and dozens of ambulances and police officers were at the scene in the evening and into Monday morning. While it suffers far fewer mass shootings than its American neighbor, Canada has experienced an upsurge in gun violence, which has prompted it to recently legislate to ban handguns. In April 2020, a gunman disguised as a policeman killed 22 people in the eastern province of Nova Scotia, Canada's worst mass shooting.

In September this year, a man killed 11 people and stabbed 18 others, mainly in an isolated Indigenous community in Saskatchewan province.

Firearms-related violent crimes account for less than three percent of all violent crimes in Canada—but since 2009 the per capita rate of guns being fired with intent to kill or wound has increased fivefold. —AFP



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International

Parents ‘beg’ Iran judiciary to spare their son’s life over his involvement in protests

Islamic republic has announced 11 death sentences in connection with demonstrations

PARIS: The parents of a young man who rights group warn is at imminent risk of execution over his involvement in Iran’s protest movement issued a video pleading with the judiciary to spare their son’s life. Their appeal for the life of Mehdi Mohammad Karami comes as Amnesty International warns that at last 26 people are at risk of execution over the protests, the biggest challenge to the authorities since Iran’s 1979 Islamic revolution.

Iran sparked global outrage by executing two protesters earlier this month. The Islamic republic has announced 11 death sentences in connection with the demonstrations, which it calls “riots” and blames on “foreign enemies” in the West. Authorities issued the capital sentences over sometimes-deadly violence, including against security force members.

Rights groups say the legal processes have been rushed. They are concerned detainees have been tortured and forced to confess. “I am Mashallah Karami, father of Mohammad Mehdi Karami,” said the father in the video circulated on social media, sitting cross-legged on a carpet and flanked by his wife.

He described his son as a “karate champion” who had won national competitions and been a member of the national team. “I respectfully ask the judiciary, I beg you please, I ask you.. to remove the death penalty from my son’s case.”

His wife, her arms folded as if cradling a baby, then speaks to also ask for the death penalty to be revoked.

Deprived of lawyer

According to Amnesty, Karami is one of five people sentenced to death over the fatal assault on a member of the Basij militia during a funeral ceremony for a protester in the city of Karaj near Tehran. It said he was convicted less than a week “after the beginning of a fast-tracked unfair group trial which bore no resemblance to a meaningful judicial proceeding.”

Mashallah Karami had told Iranian media that a family lawyer was not allowed to access his son’s case, and a court-appointed lawyer failed to respond to the family’s repeated calls. Karami’s age has not been given but reports on pro-protest social media channels suggested he is in his early 20s like the two men already executed.

The social media reports said Karami’s father found out about the death sentence in a telephone call from his son who had asked his mother not be told. Rights groups have accused Iran of using the death penalty as a weapon to intimidate the population and quell the protests that erupted three months ago over the death in custody of Mahsa Amini.

She had been arrested by the morality police for allegedly violating the country’s strict female dress code. Iran has unleashed a crackdown arresting around 14,000 people, according to the UN, and killing 469 protesters according to Norway-based Iran Human Rights (IHR).

The country’s top security body in early December gave a toll of more than 200 people



NEW YORK: People protest against executions and detentions in Iran, in front of the Iranian Permanent Mission to the UN in New York City on December 17, 2022. —AFP

killed, including security officers. The two Iranian journalists Niloufar Hamed and Elahe Mohammadi who helped expose the case of Amini by respectively reporting from the hospital and her funeral, have been held since September.

The two women have now been moved from Tehran’s Evin prison to Qarchak prison outside the capital where conditions have regularly aroused concern among rights activists, their families announced at the weekend. —AFP

Women lack basics in crisis-hit Lebanon’s prisons

BAABDA: Nour is raising her four-month-old daughter in Lebanon’s most overpopulated women’s prison, struggling to get formula and nappies for her baby as the country’s economy lies in tatters.

“I don’t have enough milk to breastfeed, and baby formula isn’t readily available,” said the 25-year-old, who was detained eight months ago on drug-related accusations. “Sometimes my daughter doesn’t have formula for three days,” she added, as green-eyed Amar wriggled on her lap.

Lebanese authorities have long struggled to care for the more than 8,000 people stuck in the country’s jails. But three years of an unprecedented economic crisis mean even basics like medicines are lacking, while cash-strapped families struggle to support their jailed relatives.

Essentials like baby formula have become luxuries for many Lebanese, as the financial collapse-dubbed by the World Bank as one of the worst in recent world history-has pushed most of the population into poverty.

A months-long judges’ strike has exacerbated the situation in prisons, contributing to overcrowding. Nour said she and her daughter shared a cell at the Baabda women’s prison with another 23 people, including two other babies.

She said she sometimes kept Amar in the same nappy overnight while waiting for her parents to bring fresh supplies, but said even they can “barely help with one percent of my baby’s needs”. In a hushed voice, she said the shower water gave her and her daughter

rashes, but that Amar had never been examined by a prison doctor. “We all make mistakes, but the punishment we get here is double,” Nour said.

‘We need basics’

Inmates at the prison, located outside the capital Beirut, spoke to AFP in the presence of the prison director and declined to provide their surnames. Around them, in the facility’s breakroom, paint peeled off the walls and water dripped from the ceiling.

Rampant inflation and higher fuel prices have also prevented families from visiting their jailed relatives regularly. Bushra, another inmate, said she had not seen her teenage daughter for nine months because her family could not afford transportation.

She was detained earlier this year on slander allegations and has been in jail ever since. “I miss my daughter,” said the tattooed 28-year-old, as her eyes welled up with tears. “So many mothers here cannot even see their children,” she added.

Interior Minister Bassam Mawlawi said in September that Lebanon’s economic crisis had “multiplied the suffering of inmates”. His ministry has appealed for more international support for the prison system, citing overcrowding, poor maintenance and shortages of food and medications.

Inmate Tatiana, 32, expressed helplessness at her and her family’s situation. She said her mother had slipped into poverty and was living on just \$1 a day. Prisoners “need basics: shampoo, deodorant, clothes,” said Tatiana, who has been waiting for a court hearing for nearly three years. “But our parents cannot afford them for themselves, how can they buy those things for us?” she added, dark circles lining her eyes.

‘Absent state’

Tatiana is among the nearly 80 percent of Lebanon’s prison population languishing in pre-trial detention, according to interior ministry figures. Prison occupancy



BAABDA: Nour, a 25-year-old inmate at Baabda women’s prison who was detained eight months prior on drug-related accusations and is raising her four-month-old baby daughter in a crowded cell, sits with the child during an interview at the facility east of Lebanon’s capital. —AFP

stands at 323 percent nationwide. The country’s already slow judiciary has been paralysed since August, when judges started an open-ended strike to demand better wages.

Inmates told AFP they slept on dirty mattresses strewn on the floor in a one-toilet cell shared between more than 20 people. Baabda women’s prison director Nancy Ibrahim said more than 105 detainees were crammed into the jail’s five cells, compared to around 80 before the economic collapse.

Non-governmental organisations help with everything from food to “medications, vaccinations for the

children” and maintenance, she told AFP from her office at the facility. Rana Younes, 25, a social worker at Dar Al Amal, said her organisation helps women prisoners get the basics including sanitary pads, and also provides legal assistance and even funding for cancer treatments.

She said prisoners sometimes missed court hearings because authorities failed to secure fuel or transportation for them. Dar Al Amal has spent thousands of dollars on repairs for worn-out pipes and trucked-in water supplies at the Baabda prison, said organisation director Hoda Kara. “Parents can no longer help, the state is absent, so we try to fill the gap,” she said. —AFP

Qatar Amir says ‘exceptional’...

Continued from Page 1

The IOC has a declared policy of rotating the Games, and the Olympics have never been held in the Middle East. But the scorching summer temperatures of up to 50 degrees Celsius mean the IOC would have to switch the Games to the winter months. Qatar could face competition from Saudi Arabia and Turkey, which has previously bid five times.

The Saudis were part of a Gulf blockade of Qatar from 2017 to 2021. Ties have since been restored,

and Qatar has highlighted the Arab fervor shown at the World Cup to claim its success. The Saudis pulled off a shock win over Argentina, and Morocco reached the semifinals.

“It remains to see how long the Arab unity and revitalization of the FIFA World Cup 2022 will last after the final whistle,” said Danyel Reiche, an associate professor at Georgetown University in Qatar who is leading a World Cup project. Reiche said sport should become “a tool for peace-building”.

Qatar and Saudi Arabia should launch a joint Olympic bid, copying the co-hosting of the next World Cup in the United States, Mexico and Canada and other big events, Reiche said. “Co-hosting sporting events with other Middle East countries would add to Qatar’s image of being a good global citizen that has, for example, mediated in major conflicts,” said Reiche. — AFP

filled museums and historic towns were largely built on the back of that brutality. Spurred by the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States, it has also raised questions about racism in Dutch society. Pressure has been growing at home with the cities of Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Utrecht formally apologizing for the slave trade.

Rutte had long resisted, previously saying the period of slavery was too far back and that an apology would ignite tensions in a country where the far right remains strong. He has now changed tack, but that has not pleased everyone. Sint Maarten’s Prime Minister Silveria Jacobs told Dutch media on Saturday the island would not accept a Dutch apology if made on Monday. “Let me be clear that we won’t accept an apology until our advisory committee has discussed it and we as a country discussed it,” she said.

The fact that another Dutch minister sent to Suriname, Franc Weerwind, is himself of Surinamese descent sparked criticism from the slavery restitution group there on the grounds that he is a “descendant of enslaved people”. On Monday, Dutch cabinet ministers would be in Suriname, Bonaire, Sint Maarten, Aruba, Curacao, Saba and St Eustatius to “discuss the cabinet response and its significance on location with those present” after Rutte’s speech, the government said. — AFP

Three Jordan police, suspect...

Continued from Page 1

arrested in the raid and some weapons seized, the statement said.

Jordan’s King Abdullah II in a Friday statement extended his condolences to Dalabeh’s family and vowed to bring “the criminal” shooter to justice. According to the Public Security Directorate, at least 49 members of the security forces have been wounded in the recent wave of protests, and it vowed Friday to respond to the unrest “with an iron

fist”. On Saturday, the security agency said it had arrested 44 people “who participated in the riots in a number of regions”.

Cab and truck drivers in several southern provinces began strike actions more than a week ago, along with mostly peaceful demonstrations. They were joined by bus drivers, and merchants who closed their shops on Wednesday to protest higher fuel costs. Protests broke out last week when demonstrators blocked roads with burning tyres and confronted security forces in some areas. Fuel prices have nearly doubled in Jordan from a year earlier, particularly the diesel used by trucks and buses, and kerosene for heating. The government has proposed relief measures including financial aid for the most affected families. — AFP

Global ‘peace pact’ signed to...

Continued from Page 1

path of recovery for the benefit of all people in the world,” Huang told the assembly. He overruled an objection from the Democratic Republic of Congo, which had refused to back the text, demanding greater funding for developing countries.

The deal pledges to secure 30 percent of the planet as a protected zone by 2030, stump up \$30 billion in yearly conservation aid for the developing world and halt human-caused extinctions of threatened species. Environmentalists have compared it to the landmark plan to limit global warming to 1.5C under the Paris agreement, though some warned that it did not go far enough.

Brian O’Donnell of the Campaign for Nature called it “the largest land and ocean conservation commitment in history”. “The international community has come together for a landmark global biodiversity agreement that provides some hope that the crisis facing nature is starting to get the attention it deserves,” he said. “Moose, sea turtles, parrots, rhinos, rare ferns and ancient trees, butterflies, rays, and dolphins are among the million species that will

see a significantly improved outlook for their survival and abundance if this agreement is implemented effectively.”

The CEO of campaign group Avaaz, Bert Wander, cautioned: “It’s a significant step forward in the fight to protect life on Earth, but on its own it won’t be enough. Governments should listen to what science is saying and rapidly scale up ambition to protect half the Earth by 2030.” The text pledges to safeguard the rights of indigenous people as stewards of their lands, a key demand of campaigners.

But observers noted it pulled punches in other areas - for example, only encouraging businesses to report their biodiversity impacts rather than mandating them to do so. The 23 targets in the accord also include saving hundreds of billions of dollars by cutting environmentally destructive farming subsidies, reducing the risk from pesticides and tackling invasive species.

At times, the talks looked at risk of collapsing as countries squabbled over money. How much the rich countries will send to the developing world, home to most of the planet’s biodiversity, was the biggest sticking point. Developing countries had been seeking the creation of a new, bigger fund for aid from the Global North. But the draft text instead suggested a compromise: creating a fund under the existing Global Environment Facility (GEF). That concern was echoed by the Democratic Republic of Congo, home to the Congo Basin, a rich haven of biodiversity. — AFP

Dutch PM says sorry for 250 yrs...

Continued from Page 1

But the plan has caused controversy, with groups and some of the affected countries criticizing the move as rushed, and saying the lack of consultation by the Netherlands smacked of a colonial attitude. But Rutte in his speech on Monday said that choosing the right moment was a “complicated matter”. “There is not one right time for everyone, not one right word for everyone, not one right place for everyone,” he said.

The Dutch funded their “Golden Age” of empire and culture in the 16th and 17th centuries by shipping around 600,000 Africans as part of the slave trade, mostly to South America and the Caribbean. At the height of its colonial empire, the United Provinces known today as the Netherlands possessed colonies like Suriname, the Caribbean island of Curacao, South Africa and Indonesia, where the Dutch East India Company was based in the 17th century.

In recent years, the Netherlands has been grappling with the fact that its Rembrandt and Vermeer-

International

Malaysia's premier Anwar Ibrahim wins confidence vote in parliament

Strong majority should bring political stability to the Southeast Asian nation

KUALA LUMPUR: Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim won a confidence vote in parliament Monday, cementing his mandate a month after an inconclusive election result forced him to ally with the graft-tainted party of his former political rivals.

The affirmation of support was done via voice vote late in the day, with those in favour of Anwar's leadership drowning out those opposed, said Johari Abdul, speaker of the lower house of parliament. Anwar told AFP he had the support of 148 members of the 222-seat legislature, giving him the two-thirds majority necessary to pass reforms after a divisive November 19 general election.

House speaker Johari, a close Anwar ally, got 148 votes when he was elected for the post earlier Monday. Analysts said the strong majority should bring political stability to the Southeast Asian nation, which has seen four leadership changes in as many years.

Anwar's Pakatan Harapan (Alliance of Hope) coalition won 82 seats, leading rivals but falling short of the simple majority needed to form a government. A days-long political stalemate followed, as a rival group led by former prime minister Muhyiddin Yassin said it had also garnered majority support, forcing Malaysia's king to intervene.

Anwar, a long-time opposition leader, was sworn in as the country's 10th prime minister on November 24 to head a unity government. This meant, however, that the reformist politician who campaigned on an anti-corruption platform, had to form an alliance with Barisan Nasional, the graft-

tainted party of ex-leader Najib Razak. Najib is currently in jail for money laundering and abuse of power for offences linked to a massive financial scandal at state fund 1MDB.

Political tightrope

Before the confidence vote, questions remained about Anwar's legitimacy in the role, given the king's intervention to appoint him. "The Anwar government is by no means henceforth stable for the next five years," Malaysian political analyst Oh Ei Sun told AFP.

Anwar, however, will likely walk a political tightrope as he "continues to appease his coalition partners" while dealing with soaring food prices and a slowing economy, Oh added. A former fire-brand student leader, Anwar was a rising political star in the 1990s, becoming finance minister and deputy prime minister under Malaysia's political patriarch Mahathir Mohamad.

But the two had a bitter falling-out over how to handle the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis. Anwar was sacked and thrown in jail for corruption and sodomy, charges he said were politically motivated. Street protests erupted and evolved into a movement for democratic reforms.

He was again jailed for sodomy in 2015. He denied the charges and received a full pardon from the king three years into his sentence. Mahathir and Anwar reunited in the 2018 general election to oust Najib, with the senior politician becoming prime minister for the second time, making an agreement to hand over the premier-



KUALA LUMPUR: Malaysia's Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim (C) waves as he leaves the lower house of parliament after receiving a vote of confidence, in Kuala Lumpur on December 19, 2022. —AFP

ship to Anwar at a later date.

He never fulfilled that pact, and their alliance collapsed after 22 months. Last month's election

saw their fortunes reversed, with 97-year-old Mahathir failing to win his seat and Anwar becoming prime minister. —AFP

Thai navy searches for 31 sailors after vessel sinks

BANGKOK: Thai military frigates and helicopters were on Monday searching for 31 sailors after a naval vessel sank, with dozens of others having been hauled from choppy waters. The HTMS Sukhothai capsized late on Sunday night as it was patrolling the Gulf of Thailand, about 37 kilometres (22 miles) off the nation's south-eastern coast.

Some sailors survived by jumping into a life raft at night, according to images shared by the Royal Thai Navy, which said 75 people had been rescued. However, 31 sailors were still missing on Monday afternoon, according to navy spokesperson Admiral Pogkrong Montradpalin.

The search and rescue operation involved two Seahawk helicopters, two frigates and one amphibious ship, according to a navy statement. A statement from the Royal Thai Air Force later Monday said they were also assisting in the operation, without giving details.

Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha said the cause of the incident was being investigated. "I am following the news closely, about five people are seriously injured," he added in a statement. The navy later said the search was

still ongoing over an area measuring around 20 miles by 15 miles, concentrating on a section of sea roughly 18 miles south of the Sukhothai's last position.

"The operation will also cover the areas where the latest crew members were found," the spokesperson said. The vessel is believed to have run into trouble after its electronics system was damaged, according to the navy. "The ship's operating systems stopped working, causing the ship to lose control," the spokesperson said. One image shared by the navy showed the vessel capsized, while a video showed a rescue boat alongside the ship in rough waters.

Other images shared on the navy's Twitter account showed men wrapped in blankets following their rescue. Some of those rescued were being airlifted to a hospital in Sattahip, while uninjured crew would be taken to a naval base.

Storms

In one clip captured by local media, an unnamed crew member said he had been forced to stay afloat for three hours before being rescued. "The waves were quite high, about three metres when the ship sank," he said.

"I put on the life jacket and jumped. I swam for three hours," he added, describing how one of the rescue vessels could not get close enough because of the waves.

Several areas in southern Thailand have been hit by storms and flooding in recent days. The Thai meteorological office said Monday that strong winds were causing stormy conditions in the Gulf of Thailand,



PRACHUAP KHIRI KHAN, Thailand: Army personnel and rescue crew gather at a makeshift rescue operation site during the search for survivors of the Thai naval vessel HTMS Sukhothai about 37 kilometres (22 miles) off the southeastern coast on Sunday night. — AFP

warning seafarers to proceed with caution and small boats to stay ashore.

The HTMS Sukhothai was commissioned in 1987 and built in the United States by the now-defunct Tacoma Boatbuilding Company, according to the US Naval Institute. In 2018, a boat carrying mostly Chinese tourists capsized off Phuket island on Thailand's west coast. More than 40 people died in the accident, one of the worst boat disasters in the country's recent history. —AFP

Fiji voters face nervous wait as talks falter

SUVA: Negotiations to end Fiji's deadlocked general election faltered on Monday, leaving it unclear which former coup leader will take charge of the Pacific archipelago nation. Neither 16-year incumbent Frank Bainimarama nor his rival Sitiveni Rabuka won a clear majority in Wednesday's election, which was marked by allegations of count discrepancies and calls for military intervention.

Fijians were left waiting after kingmaker Viliame Gavoka and his Social Democratic Liberal Party, or SODELPA, failed to pick between the two frontrunners. Fiji has been upended by four coups in the past 35 years, and many on the streets of its capital Suva had hoped in vain for a smooth election and quick result.

By the time final results were released on Sunday evening, Bainimarama's Fiji First and Rabuka's coalition were deadlocked at 26 seats each—two shy of a majority in the 55-seat parliament. The Social Democrats won three seats and the balance of power, and have been locked in negotiations since.

The party's top brass met at a hall in

Suva on Monday, under a heavy police presence. They had been expected to announce a coalition government. "SODELPA to decide today," declared the front page of local tabloid the Fiji Sun.

But party leader Gavoka, a former chairman of the Fiji Rugby Union, later told reporters that an update would be provided on Wednesday. The complicated process could draw out even longer—an unwieldy "management board" of some 40 members must reach a majority position before choosing.

'Lost Tribe'

One of the major negotiation sticking points has been Gavoka's push to open a Fijian embassy in Jerusalem. SODELPA has brashly sought to position itself as the deeply religious party of indigenous Fijians, or iTaukei.

Some iTaukei hold the belief that they are descended from a "biblical lost tribe of Israel", anthropologist Edwin Jones wrote in 2015. Linked to the arrival of European missionaries, similar beliefs are held in parts of Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands.

Social Democratic supporters waved blue and white flags bearing Hebrew script while party members met, and some cars outside sported "I Stand with Israel" bumper stickers. Gavoka has also previously suggested he is not in favour of a stronger relationship with China—a position



SUVA: Workers and supporters of the People's Alliance gather outside the party's head office in Fiji's capital city of Suva on December 18, 2022. —AFP

that would appear to align more closely with Rabuka's stance on the matter. Bainimarama, the incumbent prime minister who has been close with Beijing, has not spoken publicly since Wednesday's vote, but his officials are working behind the scenes on a deal to form a new government.

Bainimarama toppled the government in a 2006 putsch, while Rabuka is a former prime minister and military commander who led two coups in 1987.

Rabuka, an ex-rugby international nicknamed "Rambo", has predicted a period of "horsetrading" to come.

He stopped short of claiming victory on Sunday, but sounded like a man who had won against the odds. "For those who follow, the generations to come, they will look back at the election and say that was the turning point in Fiji's journey," he told supporters. "Together we will discover the heart of this great nation of ours." —AFP

Jailed Pakistan Taliban take hostages

BANNU: More than 30 Pakistan Taliban militants were holding several officers hostage on Monday after breaking free from custody and seizing a police station, officials said.

Members of the Tehreek-e-Taleban Pakistan (TTP) group—separate from the Afghan Taliban but with a similar hardline Islamist ideology—overpowered their jailers on Sunday and snatched weapons. The militants, held on suspicion of terrorism, are demanding safe passage to Afghanistan, Muhammad Ali Saif, a spokesman for

the provincial Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government, said in a statement late Sunday.

A senior government official in Bannu, where the incident is unfolding near the border with Afghanistan and Pakistan's former self-governed tribal areas, said hostages were still being held after a failed operation to free them.

"During the interrogation, some of them snatched guns from the policemen and later took the entire staff hostage," he told AFP, on condition of anonymity. "They want us to provide them safe passage via a ground route or by air. They want to take all the hostages with them and to release them later on the Afghan border or inside Afghanistan."

The TTP claimed responsibility for the incident and demanded authorities provide safe passage to border areas. "Otherwise, the entire responsibility of the situation will be on the military," the

TTP said in a statement. A video posted to social media, which the government official confirmed to be from the scene, showed a group of armed men with long beards, with one threatening to kill all the hostages.

He said they had at least eight hostages, including police and military staff.

The TTP emerged in 2007 and carried out a horrific wave of violence in Pakistan that ended with a military crackdown from 2014. Attacks are on the rise again since the Afghan Taliban seized control of Kabul last year but have mostly targeted security forces. A shaky months-long ceasefire agreed with Islamabad ended last month.

In 2012 and 2013, dozens of heavily armed Taliban fighters freed more than 600 prisoners, including hardcore militants, during two sophisticated overnight attacks on a jail in Bannu town. —AFP



BANNU, Pakistan: Police stand guard along a road they blocked after Taliban militants seized a police station in Bannu on December 19, 2022. —AFP

China reports first COVID deaths since hardline policy eased

BEIJING: China on Monday reported its first deaths from COVID-19 since loosening its hardline containment policy, as hospitals and crematoriums struggle with an outbreak authorities say is impossible to track.

The country is pressing ahead with unwinding years of its zero-COVID policy, with people in one megacity now even told they can go to work if they are visibly ill. Official case numbers are widely considered unreliable following the end of mandatory mass testing, while fears are mounting of a wave of infections in poor rural areas during the upcoming Lunar New Year holidays.

Authorities on Monday reported two deaths from the virus in the capital Beijing, where fear of COVID has emptied streets and stripped pharmacies of medications. Millions of unvaccinated elderly Chinese remain vulnerable to the disease. Accounts from strained hospitals and crematoriums suggest the true toll of the outbreak has gone unreported.

"Numbers don't tell the full story," Hoe Nam Leong, a Singapore-based infectious diseases expert, told AFP, saying he expected the real number of deaths was higher. A lack of testing likely meant many infections were going unnoticed, he added. Some hospitals were too full to admit patients, while health workers may be downplaying COVID as a cause of death, Leong said. "Individuals may die of a heart attack from the stress of infection. The main cause of death would be a heart attack, but the underlying cause is COVID."

Back to work

Authorities are nevertheless determined to press ahead, with the southern city of Chongqing—home to around 32 million people—becoming one of the first parts of China to let people attend work even with visible symptoms. The Chongqing Daily newspaper reported Monday, citing a notice from municipal authorities, that "mildly symptomatic" state employees "can work as normal". In Beijing, authorities urged residents to "resume normal life and production as soon as possible", saying recovered patients would not need a test to enter public spaces. Officials also encouraged the resumption of conferences and weddings.

It marks a dramatic reversal in a country where previously a single infection could send thousands of people into lockdown. The Chongqing notice, issued Sunday, also urged residents not to take tests "unnecessarily" or require people to show a negative result, with exceptions for facilities such as care homes, schools and prisons.

Local governments across China have generally encouraged people to isolate at home while recovering—a major shift from the previous policy of forcing people into state quarantine facilities. On Sunday, the eastern province of Zhejiang—a major economic hub home to more than 60 million people—said those with mild symptoms could "continue to work, if need be, on the prerequisite of taking personal protections". —AFP

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 20, 2022

Business

EU members in last-minute push to compromise on gas price cap

Issue remains critical with Europe facing tight energy supplies as it endures winter

BRUSSELS: EU energy ministers sought a breakthrough Monday on plans to cap natural gas prices, weighing the danger of allowing prices to soar against the fear of driving exporters elsewhere. Some entering the meeting in Brussels said an accord appeared to be within reach, with discussions revolving around what price level a cap should kick in. The issue is urgent, with Europe facing tight energy supplies as it endures winter, because Russia has cut gas deliveries in retaliation for EU sanctions over its invasion of Ukraine.

An agreement on a gas price cap would unlock other measures that are already green-lit, such as joint gas purchases and a new gas price benchmark. Those are contingent on a price-cap accord being reached. The European Commission had proposed a ceiling of 275 euros per megawatt hour, considered too high by many EU countries.

It attached conditions that countries saw as unattainable, including requiring the price of gas to go above the threshold for at least two weeks, and the price of liquified natural gas (LNG) to go above 58 euros for 10 days within that same two-week period. Those tight hoops to jump through reflected reluctance from Germany and the Netherlands over a price cap, which they feared could send LNG to more lucrative markets in Asia.

Ministers said they were now looking at a much lower threshold. "I think 188 (euros per megawatt hour) — that will give the right signals to markets," Greek Energy Minister Konstantinos Skrekas said. "The pressure to reach an agreement today is high, and I'm positive that we can achieve a compromise," said Estonia's economy minister, Riina Sikkut.

According to a draft text, a cap triggered if front-month contract prices on the Dutch TTF,

Europe's main benchmark for natural gas prices, exceed 188 euros (\$200) per megawatt hour for three days. Runacher said France would be "comfortable" with a range of "160 to 200 euros and we feel that this price [range] converges with that of the presidency." On Monday morning, ministers referred to the measure as a "gas market correction mechanism" rather than a cap. Belgian Energy Minister Tinne van der Straeten said the draft text refers to the proposal under this name.

The move is intended to shield consumers from the sharply higher prices that have hit the bloc following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. European natural gas prices reached historic levels of around 350 euros per megawatt hour in August, when traders were concerned about the bloc's unity in fighting the energy crisis.

The European Central Bank warned earlier this month that capping natural gas prices could create instability in financial markets. "The more safeguards, the more safety nets there are, the more tolerant we can all be with the number, but it would be irresponsible to just set a number and say this is strict and we don't do anything else," German Economy Minister Robert Habeck said. The central bank is not the only institution warning about the potential market ramifications of a price limit. Market operator ICE (Intercontinental Exchange) — the operator of a key natural-gas market in Europe — has threatened to remove trading from the bloc if the EU goes ahead with the measure, according to the Wall Street Journal.

"Germany has asked for strong safeguards with regards to security of supply, but also stability on both the energy and financial markets. These are concerns that we all share. It's not a concern of Germany alone, it's a concern of all 27 of us," said



BRUSSELS: We do now have a very good and solid roadmap to keep on working on the topic of energy prices," Commission President Ursula von der Leyen (right) said after the summit. —AFP

Belgium's van der Straeten. Miriam Dalli, Malta's energy minister, said it was "crunch time for reaching a compromise" that makes sense for all member states and can "calm the markets" while ensuring security of gas supply. She said talks had progressed a long way from the European Commission's original proposal of a 275 euros per megawatt hour cap, which several member states argued was too high and unlikely to be triggered.

Greek Energy Minister Konstantinos Skrekas said countries had a "clear mandate from our leaders to come out with a solution to the cap

today." "We wouldn't be so insistent if we were not convinced that this is the best solution for European citizens," he said, adding that any cap between 150 and 200 eur/MWh would be effective. Asked about the suitability of a price ceiling at 188 eur/MWh, he said such a level would "give the right signals to the market." Estonian Finance Minister Riina Sikkut also said she was "positive" a compromise could be reached but added that it was difficult to say exactly what it would be. She expressed confidence that "good news" would emerge by Monday evening. —Agencies

UK agrees to deal with EU neighbors on renewable energy

LONDON: The UK has agreed to a new deal with EU and North Sea neighbors on developing renewable energy. The move is "essential" for the delivery of Britain's net-zero goals and strengthening energy security, government ministers say.

Climate Change Minister Graham Stuart signed the preliminary agreement on Sunday. It enables the UK to work with the North Seas Energy Co-operation, which includes the European Commission, to develop renewable projects, specifically those linking

energy grids and windfarms. The agreement represents a renewal of Britain's relations with the NSEC after Brexit.

The UK will not regain its membership, but the European Commission said it would benefit from a "privileged framework for co-operation". The offshore grid links Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Sweden and Norway.

The initiative is expected to support the UK's targets to increase offshore wind fivefold to 50GW and deliver 18GW of electricity interconnector capacity, up from 8.4GW today, by 2030. "I'm pleased to agree even greater energy co-operation with our North Seas neighbors, which will be vital in helping the UK meet its ambitious renewables target," Stuart said. "The development of renewables in the North Sea is critical for accelerating our clean transition and boosting energy security for the UK and our European neighbors." —Agencies



A hydroelectric motor at a tidal farm in the harbour of Brest, in western France. —AFP

Musk believes other automakers 'much closer' to bankruptcy

SAN FRANCISCO: Elon Musk is known for his unique views on all things automotive and he recently said on Twitter that there are established automakers (which he didn't name) that are closer than they think going bankrupt. Granted, he was answering a tweet that specifically stated this and confirmed the original poster's message, although it does slot into his usual narrative that the traditional car industry is headed for a nosedive.

Answering a tweet by Farzad Mesbahi, a tech content creator on YouTube, who was talking about how fingers are being pointed at Tesla these days even though "most other automakers are on the doorstep of bankruptcy." To this Elon replied that established

automakers (which he did not name directly) are "much closer than they realize" to going bankrupt.

Elon has rarely said anything positive about another automaker, and the only non-Tesla EVs that he's ever brought praise to are the Ford Mustang Mach-E and the Porsche Taycan. In regard to other companies currently building EVs, he's mostly predicted their downfall, especially when we're talking about startups that want to rival Tesla, like Lucid and Rivian.

In fact, just last week the Tesla founder and CEO said he thought Lucid was going to go under, again replying to a tweet saying "they are not long for this world." That tweet came after it was discovered that Lucid seemed extremely determined to convince those who had put their name down for an Air to go through with their order, even if it meant calling them repeatedly to make sure.

At the same time, Elon has been criticized by Tesla investors and shareholders who consider he is not as involved with running the automaker as he should be, especially after buying

ty to contribute to a modern, efficient and integrated downstream sector in both China and Saudi Arabia," Mohammed Al-Qahtani, Aramco's senior vice president of downstream, said. "They also underpin our long-term commitment to remain a reliable supplier of energy and chemicals to Asia's largest economy."

The petrochemicals industry is expected to be a big driver of crude oil demand in the next few decades as consumers switch to electric vehicles. Petrochemicals are set to account for more than a third of the growth in oil demand to 2030, and about half to 2050, ahead of the lorry, aviation and shipping sectors, according to the International Energy Agency.

Petrochemicals are also likely to consume an additional 56 billion cubic meters of natural gas by 2030, equivalent to about half of Canada's total gas consumption today, the agency said. Aramco aims to increase its liquids-to-chemicals capacity to up to four

million barrels per day by 2030. This month, Aramco signed an initial agreement with China's Shandong Energy Group to supply crude oil and chemical products. The scope of the agreement also extends to co-operation across technology related to hydrogen, renewables and carbon capture and storage. China, the world's second-largest economy and the biggest crude importer, has been signing long-term agreements with energy exporters amid rising volatility in crude and natural gas prices.

In November, Aramco said it would build a \$7 billion refinery-integrated petrochemical steam cracker in South Korea through its S-Oil unit. Saudi Arabia and China agreed to enhance political, economic and energy ties during Chinese President Xi Jinping's three-day visit to Saudi Arabian capital Riyadh this month. In September alone, China's exports to Saudi Arabia reached \$3.43 billion, while imports stood at \$6.81 billion. —AFP



Saudi Aramco's Ras Tanura oil refinery and oil terminal in Saudi Arabia.

Aramco, Sinopec ink agreement to set up refinery in China

RIYADH: Leading crude oil exporter Saudi Aramco and China Petroleum and Chemical Corporation (Sinopec) have signed an initial agreement to build a refinery and a petrochemicals plant in China. The 320,000 barrels-per-day refinery and 1.5 million tonnes-per-year petrochemical cracker complex will be in operation by the end of 2025, Aramco said in a statement on Sunday.

Aramco and Sinopec, along with Saudi Basic Industries Corporation (SABIC), have also signed a preliminary agreement to study the feasibility of developing a petrochemicals complex to be integrated with an existing refinery in Yanbu, Saudi Arabia.

"These projects represent an opportuni-

KDF project to boost electricity network in GCC

KUWAIT: Kuwait Development Fund (KDF) has announced the start of a project to enhance the electricity connection system between Kuwait and the rest of the countries of the Arabian Gulf on Sunday.

"The project aims to meet some of the demands for electrical power requirements in the Gulf countries. This will help member countries to improve their national electricity network and increase its reliance to ensure the sustainability of electric energy at all times," a press statement said on Monday.

"Kuwait will be the biggest benefactor from this project, so the quantity of supportive electricity is raised by about 2500 megawatts which improves the quality of operating Kuwaiti network," the KDF clarified.

The project will also reflect positively on the network located south of Iraq as it will be provided with 500 megawatts of power," the KDF said.

"The project will achieve many sustainability goals, including health, entertainment and education and provide clear energy at reasonable rates top sustainable cities and districts," it added.

It is worth noting that the KDF has previously signed a loan agreement amounting to KD 35 million with the GCC Interconnection Authority (GCCIA) last March to finance the GCC and south Iraq connection network project.

Business

TikTok owner denies setting up 'illegal operations' in Taiwan

Investigators probing business activities of ByteDance

TAIPEI: TikTok's Chinese owner denied on Monday setting up a subsidiary company in Taiwan after the island's authorities said they were investigating the social media app for running "illegal operations".

The Mainland Affairs Council (MAC), Taiwan's top China policy-making body, said the cabinet had requested a multi-agency investigation during a meeting on security issues posed by TikTok earlier this month. The case was also forwarded to prosecutors for investigation after a local company allegedly engaged in business activities in Taiwan on behalf of ByteDance, TikTok's Chinese parent firm, MAC said without elaborating.

Chinese internet and social media platforms are banned from operating businesses in Taiwan under local laws. ByteDance said on Monday it had no presence in Taiwan.

"The recent reports suggesting ByteDance has set up a subsidiary in Taiwan are incorrect," a

spokesperson told AFP. "The company has not established any legal entities in Taiwan."

TikTok is available in Taiwan but is not especially popular. The Taiwanese newspaper Liberty Times reported on Monday that the subsidiary under investigation was a company set up in 2018 that changed its name to ByteDance Taiwan Ltd Co in November.

Taiwan has long warned that it is on the receiving end of huge Chinese disinformation and espionage campaigns. It has ramped up scrutiny of Chinese businesses in recent years and imposed investment rules on various key sectors, including the island's state-of-the-art semiconductor industry.

MAC described TikTok as a security risk. "In recent years, China has used TikTok and other short videos to conduct cognitive operations to infiltrate other countries," it said in a statement late on Sunday. "There is also a high risk of users' personal information being collected for the Chinese govern-

ment," it said. China's Communist Party claims democratic and self-ruled Taiwan and has vowed to one day seize it. Relations between Beijing and Taipei are at their worst in years.

Beijing has increased military, diplomatic and economic pressure on the island since Tsai Ing-wen became Taiwan's president in 2016 because she views the island as a sovereign nation and not part of "one China". Taipei has also accused Beijing of stepping up so-called "grey zone" threats, from warplane incursions into its air defense zone to cyberattacks and cognitive warfare.

TikTok denies being a security risk or that it is beholden to Chinese authorities. However, the company has come under increasing pressure and scrutiny within Western nations, especially in the United States, over its Chinese ownership. US senators voted unanimously last week to ban the video-sharing app on government phones, part of a growing bipartisan crackdown on TikTok. — AFP



Key Wirecard witness blames ex-CEO for 'scam'

FRANKFURT: A former manager of disgraced payments company Wirecard painted a damning picture of ex-CEO Markus Braun on Monday, telling judges he was "at the core" of the biggest accounting fraud scandal in German corporate history. Oliver Bellenhaus, former head of Wirecard's Dubai subsidiary, is on trial alongside Braun but has admitted wrongdoing and turned chief witness for the prosecution.

"Braun was at the core of everything," Bellenhaus told the court in Munich, describing a "system of organized fraud" at the company. "The whole thing was a scam from the start," Bellenhaus said.

Wirecard imploded spectacularly in June 2020 after it was forced to admit that 1.9 billion euros (\$2.0 billion) in cash, meant to be sitting in trustee accounts in Asia, didn't actually exist. Braun and Bellenhaus are in the dock along with Wirecard's ex-accounting boss Stephan von Erffa. They face charges including commercial gang fraud and market manipulation. Prosecutors accuse the trio of inventing revenue streams with third-party companies in order to inflate Wirecard's accounts and make the loss-making company appear profitable to investors and creditors.

Austrian-born Braun denies the allegations. He says the fraud was perpetrated without his knowl-



MUNICH: Former Wirecard CEO Markus Braun (right) stands next to his lawyer Alfred Dierlamm (left) in a courtroom at the District Court in Munich, southern Germany on December 19, 2022. — AFP

edge, fingering fugitive former COO Jan Marsalek as the mastermind. Bellenhaus, taking the stand for the first time since the Wirecard trial opened earlier this month, also implicated Marsalek in the fraud.

"I am shocked by my own behaviour," Bellenhaus said about his own role in the trickery, saying he had acted out of "blind loyalty" to Braun and Marsalek. Defense lawyers for Braun gave a different version of events last week, arguing that Bellenhaus was not a witness but "a main perpetrator in a gang whose sole aim was to embezzle mon-

ey". Von Erffa's lawyer has also attacked Bellenhaus's credibility, calling him "a dubious chief witness".

The downfall of the once celebrated digital payments company sent shockwaves through Germany, damaging the country's reputation as a financial centre and prompting an overhaul of market regulator Bafin. The trial is set to run well into 2024. Braun, who has been in custody for over two years, has not yet addressed the court but may take the stand in the second half of January, his lawyer said. — AFP

German business morale rises as prospects brighten

BERLIN: German business confidence improved for a third straight month in December, a key survey showed Monday, the latest sign a downturn in Europe's top economy may be milder than feared. The Ifo institute's monthly confidence barometer, based on a survey of about 9,000 companies, reached 88.6 points, up from a reading of 86.4 points in November.

Earlier in the year, the gauge declined for months after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and subsequent reduction in gas exports, sent inflation soaring and triggered warnings of recession for next year.

But a massive government fund to cap prices and efforts to diversify the country's energy supplies have eased the immediate sense of crisis. "Sentiment in the German economy has brightened considerably," Ifo president Clemens Fuest said. "German business is entering the holiday season with a sense of hope."

ING bank economist Carsten Brzeski said the reading shows that "hope has returned". "Hope that the economy might even avoid a winter recession or at least hope that it will only be a mild one." But he cautioned "the downsides still outweigh the upsides", noting that gas reserves were dropping fast due to cold weather, as well as warning signs there could be a weakening of global trade.

After months flashing red, leading indicators



Volkswagen assembly line in Wolfsburg, Germany.

have started giving more optimistic readings in recent weeks. Last week, Ifo said the looming recession will be milder than expected, with economic output shrinking 0.1 percent in 2023, revising its previous prediction of a 0.3 percent contraction.

Its policy arsenal has been beefed up this year with two new pieces of EU legislation, the Digital Services Act and the Digital Markets Act, that carry massive financial penalties in the event of infringement. Those acts will come fully into force through 2023 and 2024. Monday's announcement was about "suspected violations" of EU antitrust rules and gives Meta a chance to respond to the commission's formal Statement of Objections. Those concerns focus on the way Meta gives Facebook users automatic access to Facebook Marketplace "whether they want it or not". That link may unfairly disadvantage Facebook Marketplace competitors, the commission said.

The concerns also home in on unfair trading practices on competing online classified ads services which advertise on Facebook or Instagram, both of which are part of Meta.

The commission said it was worried that the user terms on those platforms could allow Meta to use ads-related data from competitors to boost Facebook Marketplace. If the EU's concerns stand,

And another influential institute, IWF Kiel, even predicted that the economy would dodge recession due to the government relief measures. In its autumn forecast, the German government said the economy would contract 0.4 percent next year. — AFP



and enough evidence of infringement is produced, Meta could face a fine of up to 10 percent of its total global annual turnover. Meta's worldwide revenue for the 12 months ending September 30 was \$118 billion. The commission could also prohibit the infringing behavior. — AFP

UK economy to be in recession for all of 2023: KPMG

LONDON: The UK economy is in recession and will remain so for the whole of 2023, financial services firm KPMG predicted on Monday. According to its latest forecasts, the UK economy will shrink by 1.3 per cent next year, as high inflation and rising interest rates slow the pace of growth.

KPMG predicted the UK is already in what will be a shallow yet prolonged recession, following official figures from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) that showed the economy shrank by 0.2 per cent in the third quarter, between July and September. The technical definition of a recession is two consecutive quarters of negative growth. KPMG also forecast that output could also fall by 1.9 per cent next year as falling consumer spending and higher borrowing costs weigh on businesses.

Last week, the Bank of England increased interest rates to a 14-year high of 3.5 per cent. They are expected to reach at least 4 per cent by next spring. On the prospects for the labor market, KPMG said a deteriorating picture will start to emerge in the first half of 2023, with the unemployment rate reaching 5.6 per cent by mid-2024, representing an increase of about 680,000 people.

"The increase in energy and food prices during 2022, as well as higher overall inflation, have significantly reduced households' purchasing power," said Yael Selfin, chief economist at KPMG UK. "Rising interest rates have added another headwind to growth. Lower income households are particularly exposed to the mix of current price pressures, as the most affected spending categories largely fall on necessities, with few substitutes in the short run. "Households are expected to rein in spending on discretionary items in 2023 in response to the squeeze on income. — AFP

European stocks attempt rebound ahead of Christmas

LONDON: Europe equities rose Monday in light pre-Christmas trade with many traders away for the festive break, rebounding gently from last week's losses that followed bumper interest rate hikes.

"We really don't have much volume in markets as traders are away for holidays," AvaTrade analyst Naem Aslam told AFP. "Markets are grinding higher as some traders are optimistic about valuations which seem to them somewhat attractive."

Heading into the afternoon, London rose 0.5 percent, while Frankfurt and Paris each won 0.4 percent in value. "Overall I think it's going to be pretty subdued trading, given the lack of significant data to react to," noted analyst Susannah Streeter at stockbroker Hargreaves Lansdown.

Asian indices however fell on lingering concern over a possible global recession caused by moves to fight inflation from top central banks. Equities took a turn south last week after monetary policymakers around the world signaled that while price rises appeared to be stabilizing, more work would be needed to get them under control. All three main indexes on Wall Street ended sharply lower Friday after the Federal Reserve warned it would continue tightening monetary policy into 2023.

That was followed by similar warnings from the European Central Bank and Bank of England, while data suggested economies were feeling the pinch, dealing a blow to sentiment heading into the Christmas break. "With no shortage of economic headwinds, investors struggle to find something cheerful about this holiday week after the two most dominant central banks cast a pall over the proceedings," said SPI Asset Management's Stephen Innes. — AFP

Meta 'breached EU antitrust rules' on Facebook ads

BRUSSELS: US online giant Meta appears to have "breached EU antitrust rules" in the online classified section of its Facebook social network, the European Commission said Monday in a preliminary finding. "The Commission takes issue with Meta tying its online classified ads service, Facebook Marketplace, to its personal social network, Facebook," it said in a statement. "The Commission is also concerned that Meta is imposing unfair trading conditions on Facebook Marketplace's competitors for its own benefit."

The commission, the regulator for the 27-nation European Union, has had several run-ins with Meta and other Big Tech companies over their practices.

Business

Ghana suspends part of foreign debt payments in line with deal

\$3bn credit deal with the IMF aimed to tackle economic crisis

ACCRA: Ghana suspended payments on part of its foreign debt on Monday as the country undertakes debt restructuring in line with a bailout deal with the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

The West African state is facing an economic crisis with inflation at more than 50 percent and its cedi currency down sharply, hit by the adverse effects of the global pandemic and Ukraine crisis. "That is why we are announcing today a suspension of all debt service payments under certain categories of our external debt, pending an orderly restructuring of the affected obligations," the finance ministry said in a statement. "This suspension will include the payments on: our Eurobonds; our commercial term loans; and on most of our bilateral debt," it said.

The government however said the suspension would exclude payments of multilateral debt, new debt (whether multilateral or otherwise) contracted after December 19, 2022 or debts related to certain short-term trade facilities. "We are also evaluating certain specific debts related to projects with the highest socio-economic impact for Ghana which may have to be excluded," it said.

Debt troubles

Once seen as an investor favorite, Ghana struggled recently with its debt burden. The government spends more than half of its revenues on debt servicing. The fall in the cedi increased debt values by \$6 billion just this year. The government said the foreign debt payment suspension was an interim emergency measure pending future agreements

with the country's creditors.

It also promised to engage with all of its external creditors to make Ghana's debt sustainable. Ghanaian economist Daniel Anim Amartey said the government move could erode investors' confidence in the economy. "It could affect our credibility in the eyes of the investor community globally and our ability to go to the market in the near future could be affected," Amartey told AFP. "This move will lead to a further downgrade by the international rating organizations." Three major international rating agencies have all downgraded Ghana's debt, in a sign of investor worries over its potential for defaulting. "The ministry is yet to engage creditors. Whether or not they will agree to the terms from the ministry of finance is another issue. We are moving on very difficult turf," he added.

Last week, Ghana agreed on a \$3 billion credit deal with the IMF to tackle its economic crisis. Although the three-year loan has yet to be approved by the fund's board, the program aims to reduce inflation, strengthen the economy's resilience to external shocks and improve market confidence in the country. A top cocoa and gold producer, Ghana also has oil and gas reserves, but its debt has soared and like the rest of sub-Saharan Africa it has been hit hard by fallout from the COVID pandemic and the Ukraine war.

The economic woes have caused social tension in the West African nation of 30 million people. There have been street protests against rising costs of living and the opposition has called for the removal of the finance minister. The crisis



WASHINGTON: US Secretary of State Antony Blinken (third left) meets with Ghana's President Nana Akufo-Addo (second right) during the US-Africa Leaders Summit at the Walter E Washington Convention Center in Washington, DC. —AFP

forced President Nana Akufo-Addo's government to reverse its position earlier this year and seek IMF help as economists warned of a default on debt payments. The government has already

announced a domestic debt swap as part of the program to ease a crunch in payments and was soon expected to release details about restructuring foreign debt. —AFP

CBK bonds and related Tawarruq

KUWAIT: The Central Bank of Kuwait (CBK) announced the most recent issues of CBK bonds and related Tawarruq at a total value of KD 240 million for three months with rate of return at 4.125 percent.

Hong Kong plans to regulate crowdfunding

HONG KONG: Hong Kong's government announced plans Monday to ensure all crowdfunding must seek official approval following a clampdown on democracy protesters using donations to pay for their legal defense. Online crowdfunding was popular among the city's democracy supporters to pay legal and medical costs for those arrested during huge and often violent protests in 2019, and the living expenses of those who have fled abroad.

But most projects have closed down, or have been forcibly shuttered, as Beijing and local authorities tighten their grip. The proposal unveiled Monday will prevent activities that are "fraudulent, jeopardizing public interest, or endangering public and national security in the name of crowdfunding", a government spokesperson said.

All future crowdfunding activities, online or offline, must be approved first by a Crowdfunding Activities Office "regardless of their purpose or location". "Illegal" crowdfunding projects will be halted by law enforcement and subject to prosecution, according to the proposal.

Officials are also considering a registration system for online crowdfunding platforms even if they are not based in Hong Kong, but they did not specify enforcement details. The plans will undergo three months of public consultation before heading to a legislature that has been scrubbed of opposition since 2019's protests. Secretary for Financial Services and the Treasury Christopher Hui wrote on Saturday that Hong Kong lacked a regulatory system for crowdfunding and projects must be "transparent and accountable".

The proposal makes exceptions and special accommodations for lottery sales, physical donation events, charity events and crowdfunding events "widely recognized by the society". Last month, trustees and the secretary of the now-defunct "612 Humanitarian Relief Fund", which raised funds to support protesters, were fined by a court for failing to properly register their group.

The fund disbanded last year after national security police demanded it hand over operational details, including information about its donors and beneficiaries. Among the fund's defendants was 90-year-old Cardinal Joseph Zen, one of Asia's most senior Catholic bishops.

Prosecutors have also used money laundering charges in cases involving crowdfunding for pro-democracy causes. In October, a trio of Hong Kong activists said online payments firm Stripe declined their business after they used crowdfunding to pay legal bills accrued from suing police. —AFP

Neom signs agreements with banks to finance green hydrogen project

RIYADH: Neom Green Hydrogen Company has signed agreements with banks and executed a letter of commitment with the Saudi Industrial Development Fund to finance a green hydrogen production plant. Saudi Arabia is building the world's largest green hydrogen-based ammonia production plant in the kingdom's planned futuristic city. The green hydrogen scheme within Neom will use 4 gigawatts of renewable power from solar, wind and storage to produce 600 tons per day of hydrogen.

The project, set to come on stream in 2026, is expected to produce about 1.2 million tons of green ammonia per year. Financial terms of the deals signed on Sunday were not disclosed.

"NGHC has a clear mission: to leverage the expertise and vision of its partners to accelerate the global green hydrogen economy," David Edmondson, chief executive of the company, said. "We are grateful for the significant support from our shareholders and the investment community [for] making that happen."

Saudi Arabia is focusing heavily on renewable energy as it looks to meet its climate commitments, while diversifying away from oil exports. Hydrogen, which is produced from renewable energy and natural gas, is expected to become a critical fuel as economies and industries transition to a low-carbon world. It comes in various forms, including blue, green and grey. Blue and grey hydrogen are produced from natural gas, while green is derived from splitting water by electrolysis.

Reactions to COP15 deal

MONTREAL: The COP15 in Montreal ended Monday with what many described as an historic agreement that aims to stop the destruction of nature and prevent a 6th mass extinction. Here are the first reactions to the Kunming-Montreal Agreement:

Huang Ruqin, Chinese President of COP15

The chair of the COP15 nature summit, Chinese Environment Minister Huang Runqiu, declared it a "historic step". "We have in our hands a package which I think can guide us all to work together to hold and reverse biodiversity loss, to put biodiversity on the path of recovery for the benefit of all people in the world," Huang told the assembly.

Ursula von der Leyen, president of the European Commission

EU chief Ursula von der Leyen on Monday welcomed a "historic" international deal on saving the world's biodiversity, calling it "a roadmap to protect and restore nature". "This agreement provides a good foundation for global action on bio-



Trojena will open in 2026 as part of Saudi Arabia's mega-city of the future.

Last month, the International Renewable Energy Agency (Irena) said that members of the Group of Seven advanced economies could be "front runners" in green hydrogen, but that overuse of the fuel could slow the energy transition. Globally, the hydrogen industry is expected to be worth \$183 billion by 2023, up from \$129 billion in 2017, according to Fitch Solutions. French investment bank Natixis estimates that investment in hydrogen will exceed \$300 billion by 2030.

State-owned oil exporter Saudi Aramco has established a \$1.5 billion sustainability fund to invest in "breakthrough" technology and start-

ups to help fight climate change. The fund, managed by Aramco's venture capital arm, will invest in technology that supports the energy company's 2050 net-zero goals while helping to develop new lower-carbon fuels. The International Energy Agency expects fossil fuel demand to peak or reach a plateau in all its scenarios.

Based on current policies, natural gas demand will reach a plateau by the end of the decade while oil demand will "level-off" in the mid-2030s amid rising sales of electric vehicles, the agency said, in its World Energy Outlook report in October. —Agencies

diversity, complementing the Paris Agreement for Climate," the European Commission president said in a statement. "Now the world has a double track of action for a sustainable global economy by 2050."

Virginijus Sinkevicius, the European Commissioner of the Environment "DEAL," wrote Virginijus Sinkevicius on Twitter. "Tonight, we make history at COP15."

Steven Guilbeault, the Canadian Minister of Environment and Climate Change

Steven Guilbeault called it a "historic step." "We did it," he wrote on Twitter. "The world has come together to land a historic deal to protect nature and biodiversity."

Marco Lambertini, Director General of WWF International

Marco Lambertini called the agreement to halt and reverse nature loss by 2030 "an exceptional feat" and a "win for planet and people." "The agreement represents a major milestone for the conservation of our natural world, and biodiversity has never been so high on the political and business agenda, but it can be undermined by slow implementation and failure to mobilize the promised resources," he said, calling for an "immediate implementation"

12/12/2022 under the auspices of the Minister of Information and Culture. The campaign was launched by the Central Bank of Kuwait (CBK) in cooperation with the Kuwait Banking Association, the Kuwaiti banks and other entities with the aim of promoting financial literacy among all segments of society, and disseminating banking and financial awareness about the Creativity Award within the Social Responsibility spectrum.

Honoring the campaign affirms the vital role that it played throughout the past and current years

through a continuous and intensive series of creative and productive artistic works and events on various topics, including those related to electronic fraud, money laundering, savings and awareness of high-risk investments, borrowing, bank cards as well as other key topics during which it was able to reach wide audience. It is worth noting that the number of views and impressions have reached nearly 90 million within the span of nine months in several social media platforms, contrary to other events and platforms.

Kuwait Creativity Authority honors CBK awareness drive

KUWAIT: The Kuwait Creativity Award Authority 2022 honored the banking awareness campaign "Let's Be Aware" in its annual ceremony on

Lifestyle | Features

E.T. MODEL SELLS FOR \$ 2.6 MILLION AT MASSIVE MOVIE PROP AUCTION



In this file photo the original first mechatronic E.T. character from Steven Spielberg's 1982 film 'E.T. the Extra Terrestrial' is on display at Julien's Auctions in Beverly Hills, California ahead of the "Julien's Auctions and TCM Present: Icons & Idols: Hollywood." —AFP

The original animatronic model used to bring big-eyed alien E.T. to life in Steven Spielberg's classic sci-fi film sold this weekend for a whopping \$2.6 million, according to auction organizers. The item was sold as part of a two-day mega-sale put on by Julien's Auctions and Turner Classic Movies that included over 1,300 props ranging from Robert DeNiro's Raging Bull boxing gloves to Chris Hemsworth's Thor hammer.

But the highest ticket item was the extra-friendly extra-terrestrial, whose glowing finger and childlike innocence melted hearts in 1982, before the age of ubiquitous computer-generated imagery. With 85 mechanical joints, nearly everything moves on the E.T. model, from the eyes, to the neck, and of course that pointy finger that was held aloft as the alien informed his new friend Elliott that he wanted to "phone home."

A maquette of E.T. also sold for \$125,000, while one of the bikes used in the film's climatic getaway scene went for \$115,000. Other movie memorabilia sold at the Beverly Hills auction included the staff that Charlton Heston used to part the Red Sea in "The Ten Commandments"-which went for \$448,000 — and Daniel Radcliffe's Nimbus 2000 broomstick from the Harry Potter film series, which fetched \$128,000. — AFP



The comeback queen of 'Emily in Paris'

To Netflix viewers, she is among the most famous French faces of the moment, appearing in three hits: "Call My Agent", "The Crown" and "Emily in Paris", which returns for a third season on Wednesday. It is quite a turnaround for Philippine Leroy-Beaulieu, 59, who never expected this level of international fame. She credits Cedric Klapisch, a director on "Call My Agent", with pulling her "out of the coffin" after her career stalled in her forties. But it is her role as Sylvie Grateau, boss of a luxury marketing agency who reluctantly takes on the young naive American, Emily, that has turned Leroy-Beaulieu into a global star.

She relishes the caustic part. "There is a type of American, like Emily, who wants to conquer the world and thinks they know how to do everything better than the rest, but then comes up against someone like me who says: 'I am Asterix and I will not let you pass!'" said Leroy-Beaulieu with a grin, invoking the beloved French comic-book star who fights the Roman Empire.

'Vulnerability'

Leroy-Beaulieu's career started strong in the 1980s, with an award-nominated turn in "Trois Hommes et un Couffin" (remade by Hollywood as "Three Men and a Cradle"). But she never expected to become the embodiment of Parisian style for foreign audiences, having struggled to fit into the city after arriving from Italy as a child. Her character in "Emily in Paris" is a joyous collection of clichés about French women: chic, thin, disdainful, perched on towering heels, cigarette permanently lodged in her mouth. Yet Leroy-Beaulieu says the show challenges stereotypes while having fun with them.

"These characters show the importance of breaking certain rules of behavior, that people have many facets, and you can't judge them on face value," she said. There were moments in season two when Grateau's tough facade was broken, such as when she was mistaken for the mother of her young lover in a restaurant. "In season three, we will see more of her vulnerability," said Leroy-Beaulieu. —AFP



(From left to right) Jamie Flatters, Trinity Jo-Li Bliss, Joel David Moore, Stephen Lang, Sigourney Weaver, Alan Bergman, Chairman, Disney Studios Content, Jon Landau, Zoe Saldana, Sam Worthington, Britain Dalton, Bailey Bass and Jack Champion attend the US Premiere of 20th Century Studios' "Avatar: The Way of Water" at the Dolby Theatre in Hollywood, California. —AFP photos

'Avatar' sequel dominates N. America movie screens

Sci-fi epic "Avatar: The Way of Water," the long-awaited sequel to James Cameron's 2009 blockbuster, swamped the competition at North American theaters, taking in an estimated \$134 million, industry estimates showed Sunday. That big number—roughly 10 times the total take of the next four films on the top 10 — was nevertheless below analysts' expectations for the Friday-through-Sunday period. Still, international

ticket sales of an additional \$300 million gave the "Avatar" sequel a sizable \$434 million total, according to industry tracker Exhibitor Relations.

That makes it one of the biggest cinematic openings in pandemic times, and its combination of dazzling visuals and big-screen lure are expected to be a box office draw for weeks. "Expectations aside, this is outstanding," said David A. Gross of Franchise Entertainment research. "The movie is set up for a very strong run through the holidays." "The Way of Water" picks up the story of the extrasolar moon Pandora more than a decade after the events portrayed in the 2009 original. US Marine Jake Sully (played by Sam Worthington) has by now transitioned into one of the tall, blue Na'vi people and works with them to protect their home from an ominous threat.

Disney/Marvel powerhouse sequel "Black Panther: Wakanda Forever," which had



US actress Zoe Saldana and British-Australian actor Sam Worthington attend a press conference to promote their new film Avatar: The Way of Water in Seoul.

topped the box office for five weeks, was pushed back into a distant second by "Avatar," with a weekend take of \$5.4 million. Its domestic total now stands at a solid \$419 million. In third place was action comedy "Violent Night" from Universal at \$5 million. David Harbor stars as Santa Claus, with a twist: he is forced to fight a team of mercenaries who have taken a wealthy family hostage in Connecticut. Disney's computer-animated feature "Strange World" settled into fourth place with a take of \$2.2 million. And rounding out the top five was Searchlight's horror-comedy "The Menu," starring Ralph Fiennes, at \$1.7 million. The rest of the top 10 is as follows:

- "Devotion" (\$825,000)
- "The Fabelmans" (\$750,000)
- "Black Adam" (\$500,000)
- "I Heard the Bells" (\$309,000)
- "Empire of Light" (\$235,000)—AFP



In this file photo people walk past a toy store in Madrid. —AFP photos



In this file photo hand-made wooden toys are displayed at "Arbole" workshop in Albolote near Granada.



In this file photo a woman displays hand-made puppets at the "Arbole" wooden toys workshop in Albolote near Granada.

Cars and dolls for all: Spain tackles toy gender bias

Cars for girls, dolls for boys and no more pink and blue: for Spain's left-wing government and the toy industry, it's game over for gender stereotypes when it comes to the country's littlest citizens. Since December 1, a code of ethics has been in place encouraging toy shops and manufacturers to "avoid gender bias" when marketing toys, in guidelines agreed with the consumer affairs ministry. Toy Planet, a Spanish chain based near the eastern resort of Valencia, has been following this strategy for the past decade in adverts for its own-brand toys.

Flicking through its catalogue, one image shows a girl with a toy gun wearing a police vest, another shows a girl hitting a punchbag, while another portrays a

boy pushing a pram. "Toys play a very important role in what sort of adults we become. So let's not be the ones to create prejudice from such an early age," said Toy Planet's director Ignacio Gaspar.

"It's important if we want to see a future in which a boy could become a midwife or a girl could become a mechanic." What drove the change back in 2012 was the realization that Toy Planet was coming under fire on social media for its unimaginative publicity. "We started using images that were the opposite: boys playing with dolls, girls using tool benches," Gaspar said. But the switch wasn't easy. "People said it would make boys more effeminate or turn girls into tomboys," he said.

Out with the pink and blue

A pioneer in feminist initiatives, the government of Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez has pushed through several schemes to tackle gender-based violence as well as advancing equality and women's rights. Under the new code of ethics, advertisements can no longer say a toy is for a particular gender, or designate pink for girls and blue for boys, which is deemed to reinforce outdated gender roles.

Signed by the Spanish Association of Toy Manufacturers (AEFJ), which represents 90 percent of the industry in Spain, it took a year to draw up, said Rafael Escudero of the consumer affairs ministry. But its scope remains limited since it does not affect packaging, street advertising

or toy shop catalogues, Escudero added.

There are no sanctions for those who fail to comply, who only run a "reputational risk", and major international brands are not affected. "It's obviously not enough but it's necessary if we want to move forwards," said Escudero. On Gran Via, Madrid's main shopping street where people are out Christmas shopping, Julio Cesar Araujo, 62, has a clear idea of what to buy his grandchildren. "For the girls, it's dolls and things like that," he says, then adds: "But if you have a girl who wants to play with cars, you'll buy her a car. If she wants to play with boys' toys, she can." —AFP

Bernard Arnault, emperor of luxury and world’s top fortune

Bernard Arnault—who with his family now tops the wealth of Elon Musk—gradually built LVMH into a global luxury empire by buying up iconic brands, sealing his reputation as a formidable and insatiable businessman. With \$184 billion on Thursday, the 73-year-old Frenchman and his family moved to the top of Forbes’ billionaire list, knocking the Tesla, SpaceX and Twitter boss off the top spot. LVMH—the world’s leading luxury group—boasts more than 75 brands, acquired over time.

They include some of the most recognizable names in fashion and prestige goods, from Louis Vuitton and Kenzo to Moët Hennessy and Tiffany. “An essential quality in our family is patience,” Arnault acknowledged in a 2012 TV profile of him. A decade later—by which time LVMH’s annual sales had more than doubled to over 64 billion euros (\$68 billion) — he told France’s Radio Classique: “We can continue to progress—but let’s be patient. “No rush,” he said.

The businessman has also invested in the French media, a move he described during a Senate hearing in January 2022 as “more on the patronage side”. During a hearing in the French Senate earlier this year Arnault said he had intervened to stop LVMH advertising in the Liberation newspaper, after it irked him with a front-page article.

‘Invest in something promising’
Arnault was born in the northern French city of Roubaix on March 5, 1949 and joined his father’s public works building company at the age of 22. He had just left the elite Ecole Polytechnique and convinced



This combination of pictures shows a file photo of Elon Musk as he attends TIME Person of the Year in New York City and a file photo of CEO of LVMH Bernard Arnault as he poses during a photo session in Paris. —AFP photos

his father to transform the construction business into real-estate development instead. In 1981, after socialist Francois Mitterrand was elected president, Arnault left France for the United States. On his return three years later, he bought the debt-ridden textiles company Boussac, prevailing against several serious competitors with a promise to save jobs.

However, he embarked on a drastic reorganization of the firm, only retaining some of its businesses, including the fashion house Christian Dior. By then, Arnault was 35 years old. “My father was surprised when I went to see him saying: ‘We’re going to redirect the family group and try to invest in something more promising, Christian Dior,’” the businessman recalled recently on Radio Classique.

It would be the foundation stone for his luxury empire. LVMH was born out of the merger in 1987 of trunk-maker Louis Vuitton and the wines and spirits group Moët Hennessy. Rivalry between the families owning the two companies aided Arnault’s ascendancy and he took control of the group in 1989 after no fewer than 17 legal proceedings. “He’s a tough negotiator but unmatched, a visionary who knows how to surround himself with good people and who in the end always gets his way one way or another,” Arnaud Cadart, portfolio manager at financial services firm Flornoy, told AFP. Arnault’s rise, however, has not been without some failures.

Corporate criticisms
He lost Italian fashion and leather goods house Gucci to his French rival Francois Pinault, head of the PPR group, in 1999. Arnault also tried in vain to take over Hermes, known for its silk scarves and leather handbags, by secretly building up a stake in the firm. He rarely speaks publicly and does not like the limelight. When the use of private jets by celebrities was being tracked on social media earlier this year, Arnault sold the LVMH jet.
“The upshot now is that no one else can know where I’m going because I lease planes,” he said on Radio Classique. “It’s the French businessman’s lot to embody—sometimes in a totally unjustified way—the criticisms of the day since the mindset has for a few years now been a bit anti-corporate,” he lamented on France 2 in 2016. That same year he was skewered in a satirical documentary entitled “Merci Patron!” (Thank

you Boss!) by filmmaker and now politician Francois Ruffin, who often has Arnault in his crosshairs.

Obama, Putin, Trump, Macron...
Last year, LVMH paid a 10-million-euro fine to settle a case as part of a probe into spying. Arnault abandoned his bid to secure Belgian nationality in 2013 issuing a mea culpa after it whipped up a storm of controversy which rumbled on for months amid public debate over the tax arrangements of the wealthy. In 2011, he was received at the White House by president Barack Obama; Russian President Vladimir Putin welcomed him to Moscow five years later; former French president Francois Hollande cut the ribbon on his Louis Vuitton Foundation, while Donald Trump did the same for a Vuitton workshop in Texas.

And when the historic Samaritaine department store, owned by LVMH, reopened last year, French President Emmanuel Macron was a guest at the inauguration. In Japan, China and the Middle East, the luxury mogul has access to top leaders. Arnault has five children, all of whom work for LVMH, but shows little sign of slowing down—or handing over the reins just yet.

Every week he makes a point of touring all the group’s Paris-based companies. At its last general meeting, the age limit for his role as LVMH chief executive was extended to 80 years old, ensuring the luxury conglomerate stays in family hands. Married to a pianist and art lover, Arnault also created the Louis Vuitton Foundation, one of Paris’ most prestigious exhibition locations for contemporary art. —AFP

Girls strike new note at ancient German boys’ choir school

Every year in December, the corridors and classrooms of the famous Regensburg cathedral school swell with the sound of choirboys rehearsing traditional Christmas music. But this year has been different for the ancient Bavarian choir school, home to the world-renowned Regensburger Domspatzen boys’ choir. In September the school, founded more than 1,000 years ago, broke with tradition and opened its doors to girls for the first time, founding a separate girls’ choir.

The girls have since been rehearsing and will give their first performance at Regensburg cathedral on Sunday. It’s a big moment for Dorothea Krakowsky, 11, who enrolled in September alongside her twin brother, Johannes. “I’m excited because it’s the first time we’ve done this and it’s the first time the girls have sung in the cathedral,” she said. Dorothea, from Munich, had wanted to study at the school ever since she was a little girl. “It always annoyed me that the boys were favored. That’s why I think it’s really great that there are girls here too now,” she said. Founded in 975, the Regensburger Domspatzen—whose name translates as “cathedral sparrows”—is one of the world’s oldest and most famous boys’ choirs.

International stardom
The school created alongside the choir offers pupils a standard German education, but with a heavy focus on music and at least one hour of choir practice every day. There are a total of 305 students aged between 10 and 19, around two-thirds of whom are boarders. Full tuition and board costs 570 euros (\$600) a month and students must pass a gruelling audition before being offered a place. As well as providing the music for services at Regensburg cathedral, the boys’ choir regularly embarks on prestigious international concert tours. However, the school has not been spared from the Catholic Church’s child abuse scandal and a 2017 report found that more than 500 choirboys suffered sexual or physical abuse at the institute between 1945 and the early 1990s. The report criticized senior church figures for failing to do enough to prevent the abuse. They include Georg Ratzinger, brother of former pope Benedict, who led the choir from 1964 to 1994. The scandal “probably” contributed to a decline in applications in 2016 and 2017, according to Christian Heiss, the current conductor of the Regensburger Domspatzen. Then, having completed extensive renovations in 2020, the school also found itself receiving fewer applications as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. The extra capacity meant “the time was ripe... to start a new pathway, a girls’ choir pathway”, Heiss said. A total of 33 girls joined the school in September, 15 of them in the reception year and the others in older year groups. The girls’ choir rehearses separately from the boys’ choir but otherwise all lessons are now mixed.

‘Bright, radiant sound’
For 16-year-old Jakob Bauer, in his fifth year at the school, it’s a positive development. “It’s definitely different,” he said. “At first I thought it was going to be a major change... but now it’s actually pretty normal and quite cool too.” The girls’ choir will perform on Sunday under their conductor Elena Szuczies, who has been putting them through their paces for the past four months. The initial plan was for the choir to perform for the first time in 2023 but the girls have exceeded her expectations,



Christian Heiss, head of Regensburger Domspatzen (Regensburg Cathedral Choir), conducts a boys choir during a rehearsing in Regensburg, southern Germany. —AFP



Members of the Regensburger Domspatzen girls’ choir take a group selfie prior to their first appearance during a service at the Regensburg Cathedral.



A music score sheet is pictured in a rehearsal room in Regensburg, southern Germany.

Szuczies said. “We’ll be able to sing a really nice girls’ choir program, in beautiful polyphony... and it’s great that they’ve developed so quickly,” she said. There are currently no plans for the school to start a mixed choir, partly because the girls have their own “different sound”, according to Szuczies.
“I personally love this bright, radiant sound,” she said. To begin with, the girls’ choir will stick to singing at Sunday



Members of the Regensburger Domspatzen girls’ choir sing during their first appearance during a service at the Regensburg Cathedral.



Members of the Regensburger Domspatzen girls’ choir rehears in Regensburg, southern Germany.



Members of the Regensburger Domspatzen girls’ choir prepare for their first appearance during a service at the Regensburg Cathedral.

services in Regensburg cathedral. But Heiss hopes they will eventually reach the same heights as their male counterparts. “Boys’ choirs are famous and have a certain reputation musically, but the girls’ choir scene is not yet as established,” he said. “I think that by offering this pathway we will also help to make the girls’ choir scene better known and raise its profile.” —AFP

Cannes fest condemns arrest of Iran actress

The Cannes Film Festival demanded on Monday the immediate release of award-winning actress Taraneh Alidoosti, among the most prominent persons arrested in Iran’s months-long protests. “In solidarity with the peaceful struggle she is carrying out for freedom and women’s rights, the @Festival_Cannes extends their full support to her,” the festival wrote on Twitter.

Alidoosti, 38, was arrested on Saturday, official media said, after making a string of social media posts supporting the protest movement—including removing her headscarf and condemning the execution of protesters. The unrest was sparked by the September 16 death in custody of Mahsa Amini, 22, whom the morality police accused of violating the Islamic Republic’s strict dress code for women.

Alidoosti, who starred in the Oscar-winning “The Salesman”, was in Cannes last May to promote “Leila’s Brothers”. The festival tweeted that it “strongly condemns this arrest and demands her immediate release.”

A spokesperson of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights also said they were “seriously concerned” by the detention of Alidoosti “for simply expressing her views on the current protests and particularly the execution of Mohsen Shekari, the first protester to be executed in the context of demonstrations.” British pop group, the Pet Shop Boys, also tweeted about the case, saying: “Iran’s fascist government has executed protesters recently which Taraneh has condemned.” —AFP

Spielberg regrets ‘Jaws’ impact on shark population

Film-maker Steven Spielberg has said he truly regrets the “decimation of the shark population” following the success of his 1975 film “Jaws”. Spielberg’s Oscar-winning thriller told the story of a man-eating great white shark that attacked a US seaside town, prompting a rise in sports fishing across America.

“I truly and to this day regret the decimation of the shark population because of the book and the film. I really, truly regret that,” Spielberg, 75, told BBC Radio’s Desert Island Discs program. According to a study in Nature last year, the world’s population of oceanic sharks has fallen by 71 percent since the 1970s due to overfishing.

The Shark Conservation Fund, meanwhile, says 36 percent of the world’s 1,250 shark and ray species are currently threatened with extinc-

tion. Researchers have blamed films such as “Jaws” for playing a role in the public’s perception of sharks, driving support for killing them. Others, however, argue that this attributes too much significance to the influence of Hollywood. Spielberg, who is also known for Hollywood blockbusters including ET, Indiana Jones and Jurassic Park, chose the 10 records he would take if he was stranded on a desert island in the Sunday broadcast.

‘It was a tightrope’
Asked by presenter Lauren Laverne how he felt about having real sharks circling his desert island, he said: “That’s one of the things I still fear. “Not to get eaten by a shark, but that sharks are somehow mad at me for the feeding

frenzy of crazy sports fishermen that happened after 1975.” Spielberg also discussed his successful directing career, including his latest project—semi-autobiographical film “The Fabelmans”.

Spielberg’s latest film tells the mostly true story of his own childhood and introduction to filmmaking in post-war America. The film, starring Paul Dano and Michelle Williams, has already received wide critical acclaim, picking up top nods at both the 2023 Golden Globes and Critics Choice Awards. Discussing the making of the film, Spielberg admitted he had initially thought the project would be the “most self-indulgent thing I’ve ever asked people to accompany me through”.

Describing it as “\$40 million of therapy”, he said: “I didn’t know really what I was doing, except I was answering a need I had. “Being an



orphan, or recently orphaned by the loss of both parents, to recapture some of those memories in some way that wouldn’t seem too indulgent to actors I really respected. “So it was a tightrope for a while.” —AFP

Sports

Shiffrin wins Super-G to close in on WCup record

27-year-old returned to success, claims third win

ST MORITZ: Mikaela Shiffrin claimed her 77th World Cup victory in Sunday's Super-G race in St Moritz to close in on the record for overall women's victories of fellow American Lindsey Vonn. The two-time Olympic gold medalist and reigning overall World Cup champion edged Italian Elena Curtoni by 0.12sec with France's Romane Miradoli third at 0.40sec. The 27-year-old from Colorado has returned to success in Super-G, nearly three years after her last victory in the discipline, claiming her third win of the season after Levi's two slaloms.

She is approaching the women's record of 82 World Cup victories set by Vonn, who retired in 2019, and is also on track for the 86 World Cup victories of Swedish great Ingemar Stenmark. "That was the best run I could possibly have," said Shiffrin, who claimed her fifth Super-G victory and first since January 2020. "I don't know if it felt perfect, but what I've learned over the years in super-G is that you can't really do it perfect. "You have to push so hard that maybe there's going to be one mistake or one spot where you almost don't make it, and that's how my run was."

It was Shiffrin's fifth podium in the discipline in St Moritz. Specialist in the technical disciplines - giant and slalom - Shiffrin returned to speed events in St Moritz this weekend competing in both the downhill

and Super-G. She finished sixth in Friday's downhill and fourth on Saturday in a race dominated by Italian Sofia Goggia, who placed fifth Sunday in the Super-G. After a good first part of the race, Shiffrin built her success in the second half of the course, after starting in seventh position.

Curtoni, 31, was close to the leading time but a mistake on the final jump cost her a second victory of the weekend after her triumph in Friday's shortened downhill before fog descended on the Swiss Alps. "I knew I needed a lot of tactics and technique but I also needed to push," Curtoni said. "I think I've tried in the best way even though the lines were not perfect on the steep and the last jump was sketchy." Victorious in her only World Cup race in the Super-G of Lenzerheide last March, Miradoli salvaged a third World Cup podium, after two disappointing downhill races this weekend.

Shiffrin leads the general classification of the World Cup this season with 575 points, ahead of Goggia (470) and Swiss Wendy Holdener (376). Barring injury, the American will be favorite at the World Championships in Courchevel-Meribel, France from February 5-19. She has the opportunity to increase her World Cup tally in Semmering, Austria, where two giants will be run, including the rescheduled Soelden event and a slalom from December 27-29. —AFP



ST MORITZ: US skier Mikaela Shiffrin competes during the Women's Downhill event of the FIS Alpine Ski World Cup in Saint-Moritz. —AFP

Second tennis masters tournament kicks off

By Abdellatif Al-Sharaa

KUWAIT: The second Arab Masters Tennis Tournament at Sheikh Jaber Al-Abdullah Al-Sabah International Tennis Court Complex begins on Tuesday. The draw for the tournament's second edition was completed at the Kuwait Tennis Association with the attendance of the best 24 Arab tennis players, according to ATP ratings.

Benzema ends France career after Qatar blow

PARIS: Ballon D'Or winner Karim Benzema announced he was ending his international career on Monday, the day after France lost the World Cup final to Argentina. Benzema, who scored 37 goals in 97 appearances for France, had to withdraw from the World Cup squad before their first match in Qatar due to a left thigh injury he suffered in training. In his surprise announcement, the 35-year-old Real Madrid forward said on Twitter: "I made the effort and the mistakes it took to be where I am today and I'm proud of it! I wrote my story and ours ends."

Benzema, who won the Ballon d'Or award for the world's best player in October, had been desperate to feature in this year's World Cup having not been selected when France became world champions in Russia four years ago. He was frozen out of the France team for five and a half years because of his involvement in a blackmail scandal over a sextape involving his former teammate Mathieu Valbuena.

In a trial over the affair last year he was handed a one-year suspended prison sentence and fined 75,000 euros (\$79,500). For the Qatar World Cup, coach Didier Deschamps opted not to call up a replacement for a squad that included 23-year-old Kylian Mbappe. Paris Saint-Germain forward Mbappe won the World Cup Golden Boot award with eight goals, including a hat-trick in Sunday's penalty shootout defeat by Argentina after the teams had drawn 3-3 draw at the end of extra time.

"The elite Arabs will pave the way for Arab champions to reach global heights, through the direct participation of first and second place winners in the Qatar and Dubai open tournaments, which will be an extra incentive for competition in the tournament as well as regionally unprecedented prizes which for the winners." Secretary General of the Arab association and Kuwait Tennis Association Faleh Al-Otaibi said.

"All players started their final preparations on the fields of the complex before the start of the tournament, and that was after their arrival on Sunday. Moreover, everything is moving swiftly according to the planned program by the committee organizing the tournament, headed by Sheikh Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, and cooperation between the Arab and Kuwaiti tennis associations," he added, wishing everyone luck.

Egyptian national team player Mohammed Safwat

said: "The tournament is among the most competitive on the regional level due to the participation of the best Arab players, and I hope to compete for the title despite the participation of the best ranked Arab tennis players." Safwat appraised the organization of the tournament, saying: "The tournament is one of the best organized tournaments, whether within the complex, transportation or residency, which will help players display the best of their capabilities."



Faleh Al-Otaibi



France's forward Karim Benzema

During the tournament Benzema alternated between messages of encouragement for France on social media and other more enigmatic ones, writing on Instagram before the final: "I'm not interested". That message came after he rejected an invitation from French President Emmanuel Macron to attend the World Cup final. Benzema, who scored on his senior debut in March 2007 against Austria, never tasted real glory with France, with his only title the 2021 Nations League.

He had numerous run-ins with Deschamps over the years with the player, who is of Algerian descent, at one stage hinting the France coach was being "racist" in keeping him out. He made a surprise return to the France team just before Euro 2021, scoring ten goals in a year including four in the European Championship but could not prevent France crashing out to Switzerland in the last 16. Benzema has won the Champions League five times with Real Madrid and helped them to four Spanish titles. —AFP

Tiger will rest and work on walking after family outing

MIAMI: Tiger Woods isn't sure when he will play competitive golf again, but the 15-time major winner intends to rest and improve his walking ability in the coming weeks. Woods and his son Charlie settled for a share of eighth on Sunday at the PNC Championship family golf tournament won by Fiji's Vijay Singh and son Qass Singh. Woods, aided by carts at the weekend event, plans to strengthen his legs as he recovers from severe leg injuries suffered in a February 2021 car crash and nagging plantar fasciitis in his right foot.

"Plantar fasciitis is no fun and now I get to truly recover and heal and progress forward on this," Woods said Sunday. "There are so many good things that I've been able to do physically—be able to hit the golf ball and practice and do everything in a standstill. "But I haven't been able to get from point A to point B and we're obviously going to work on this." Woods, whose 82 PGA Tour titles is level with Sam Snead for the career record, reflected on the progress he made from last year's event, when his recovery and future were unclear.

"A lot," he said. "Last year I played with a broken leg. This year nothing was broken, but it was good that all the pieces are there again all lined up." Woods only managed nine competitive rounds in 2022, finishing 47th at the Masters, withdrawing with leg pain after three rounds of the PGA Championship and missing the cut at the British Open at St. Andrews. "It was a tough year but also one of the more rewarding years I've had in a while," Woods said.

Woods reflected on his emotions on playing at St. Andrews, saying that while he plans to play again at the Open, he might no longer be playing the next time the event is played on the famed Scottish course, with Opens scheduled elsewhere through 2025. "I don't know if I ever get back to playing St Andrews in a British Open but to be able to experience that maybe one last time at this level was very special to me," Woods said.

The Singhs, three-time runners-up, opened with seven straight birdies on the way to firing a 13-under 59 Sunday to capture the light-hearted 36-hole scramble at the Ritz-Carlton in Orlando, Florida. Singh, a 59-year-old former Masters champion, sank a five-foot birdie putt at the par-5 18th to give Team Singh a second 59 in a row, making them the first duo in the event's history to break 60 twice in the same year.

Their record total of 26-under par 118 was enough for a two-stroke victory over John Daly and son John and Justin Thomas and his father, Mike. Team Woods, which opened on 59 to share second, struggled to a closing 65, with Woods happy to be alongside his 13-year-old son. —AFP

Mercedes-Benz Kuwait concludes participation in 'Gulf Run GP' event

KUWAIT: Al Mulla Automobiles Co, a member of the Al Mulla Group and the sole authorized distributor of Mercedes-Benz in Kuwait, recently concluded its participation in the 2022 "Gulf Run GP" event, which was held at Kuwait Motor Town. Al Mulla Automobiles Co took this opportunity to showcase the Mercedes-AMG GT 43 four door Coupe, Mercedes-AMG G 63, Mercedes-AMG A 35, Mercedes-AMG GLA 45, Mercedes-AMG GLE 53 Coupe and the highly anticipated all new Mercedes-AMG SL 55 through on-track activities, presenting guests and clients with a safe platform to test-drive the vehicles on track and as passengers.

The two day event offered a great opportunity for the company to share with its fans a thrilling Mercedes-Benz experience at the "Gulf Run GP" event. Mercedes-Benz hosted its guests in two garages within Kuwait Motor Town in addition to utilizing its mobile showroom, to display the EQS from Mercedes-EQ and the all new Mercedes-

AMG SL 55.

Available on location, were sales consultants, product experts, aftersales, and service teams for any customer inquiries. Al Mulla Automobiles also had a boutique and accessories corner where customers were presented with a variety of offerings from the latest Mercedes-Benz collection. The garages also featured a selection of vehicle displays including the Mercedes-AMG GLS 63 and Mercedes-AMG G 63, and the Mercedes-AMG GT 43 four door Coupe.

The Director of Al Mulla Automobiles Mercedes-Benz Kuwait Mr. Steve Brown, stated: "We were delighted to participate in the latest edition of the "Gulf Run GP" event in Kuwait Motor Town, the event was a tremendous success and the turnout was impressive. We were happy to engage with our Mercedes-Benz customers and fans and present them with an opportunity to take part in on-track activities to see the full capabilities of Mercedes-Benz vehicles."

We took this opportunity to showcase the highly anticipated recently released Mercedes-AMG SL which was the star of the show with our guests and participants. The feedback we received has been great. On behalf of Al Mulla Automobiles Co., I would like to thank the organizers and our guests for making it such a success and we look forward to participating in future editions."



ward to participating in future editions."

Gulf Run GP event in Kuwait Motor Town included a variety of activities for motorsports enthusiasts and participants, including an intense qualifying and finale shootout across four categories with more than 100 participating racers. The GulfRun event was held for the first time in Kuwait Motor Town and presented a wide range of engagement



activities for its guests.

"Gulf Run" was established in 2005 by a group of young Kuwaitis who have a passion for the automotive world. It has since been transformed into a full season of activities related to motor sports, including 24-hour World Series Karting Race, and the region's largest Time Attack event in both Kuwait and Bahrain.

Sports

Nuggets beat Hornets as Nets, Warriors win

Jokic joins rare NBA company with a 40-point

LOS ANGELES: Nikola Jokic joined rare NBA company on Sunday with a 40-point, 27-rebound, 10-assist triple-double for the Denver Nuggets in a 119-115 victory over the Charlotte Hornets. Jokic showed all the skills that saw him scoop the last two NBA Most Valuable Player awards, and became the first player to record at least 40 points, 25 rebounds and 10 assists in a game since the great Wilt Chamberlain in 1968. "What he does is just amazing every night," said Nuggets coach Michael Malone, whose team needed everything Jokic gave them to get past the tenacious Hornets.

Denver led by 10 after his three-pointer with 6:45 to play, but the Hornets were just two back after P.J. Washington's dunk with 13.5 remaining. Jokic made a pair of free throws to seal the win and cap his 81st career triple-double. Brooklyn's Kevin Durant and Golden State's Jordan Poole had big nights, too, both scoring 43 points to lead their teams to impressive wins.

The Nets erased a 17-point halftime deficit to beat the Pistons 124-121 in Detroit while the reigning champion Warriors earned just their third road win of the season with a 126-110 victory over the Raptors in Toronto. Durant said defense was key to the Nets' sixth straight victory. Trailing 71-54 at halftime, the Nets out-scored the Pistons 44-25 in the third quarter and held on for the win. Durant scored 26 points in the third period alone. Kyrie Irving added 38 points for the Nets, whose seven-point lead was cut to one by Bojan Bogdanovic's running three-pointer with 40.1 seconds to play.

Irving made two free throws to push the lead back to three, but a basket by Detroit's Alec Burks pulled the Pistons back within one before Durant

made two free throws to clinch it. Durant said physical defense was the key to the Nets' comeback. "We upped the pressure, upped the physicality and were able to get back in the game," he said. "I was able to get some good looks off of the screens, and I was really able to just lock into the game plan on defense."

"That usually gets me going on offense," In Toronto, Poole's 43 were a career high. Klay Thompson and Draymond Green scored 17 points apiece for the Warriors, whose star Stephen Curry missed his second game with a left shoulder injury. Poole made five of the Warriors 18 three-pointers, connecting on 14 of 23 shots from the field overall. "We needed to get a big-time win on the road against a really good team," Poole said. "We were just connected and we executed from the beginning of the game."

Magic top Celtics

In Boston, NBA top draft pick Paolo Banchero scored 31 points to lead surging Orlando to a 95-92 victory—the Magic's second win over the Celtics in three days. Banchero, who scored 22 points in the first half, connected on six of his seven three-point attempts and the Magic—whose slow season start included a nine-game losing streak—have now won six straight.

Their second consecutive win in Boston meant the Celtics, who fell to 22-9, slipped a hair behind the 21-8 Milwaukee Bucks atop the Eastern Conference. The Celtics were without their leading scorer, Jayson Tatum, who missed the game for personal reasons. Jaylen Brown led Boston with 24 points, Marcus Smart added 15 and Grant Williams



TORONTO: Fred VanVleet #23 of the Toronto Raptors drives to the net against Jordan Poole #3 of the Golden State Warriors during the second half of their NBA game at Scotiabank Arena on December 18, 2022. —AFP

chipped in 14.

After struggling to find shots in the first half, the Celtics put together a 16-6 scoring run in the third and took a 71-68 lead into the fourth quarter. Down by one in the final minute they came up empty on two possessions, unable to get the ball inbounds on one in the face of Orlando's defense. In Minneapolis, Anthony Edwards scored 37 points and D'Angelo Russell added 28 as the Minnesota Timberwolves routed the Chicago Bulls 150-126.

The T'Wolves set a season high with 23 three-pointers and a franchise high for points in a game. Jalen Brunson scored 30 points to propel the New York Knicks to a seventh straight victory, 109-106 over the Indiana Pacers. It came down to the wire in Los Angeles, where LeBron James scored 33 points and Thomas Bryant—starting at center for injured star Anthony Davis—delivered the game-winning dunk with 7.4 seconds remaining in the Lakers' 119-117 victory over the Washington Wizards. — AFP

Brook's century gives England edge in Test

KARACHI: Harry Brook continued his remarkable series to rebuild England's innings with a third century in as many Tests after Pakistan had the visitors pinned down on the second day of the final match in Karachi on Sunday. England took an improbable 50-run lead on the back of Brook's innings before they were bowled out for 354 and Pakistan cut the deficit to 29 at the close of play.

Pakistan's openers Abdullah Shafique and Shan Masood were batting on 14 and three respectively as the home side ended the day on 21 for no loss. Brook's 111 revived England's chances of becoming the first team ever to clinch a 3-0 series sweep in Pakistan after the visitors were teetering at 145-5.

England lead the three-match series 2-0 after a 74-run win in Rawalpindi and a close-fought 26-run victory in Multan. After Pakistan's spinners knocked over the English top order, Brook and wicketkeeper Ben Foakes amassed 117 for the sixth wicket, and brought England within touching distance of Pakistan's first innings 304. Brook drove spinner Abrar Ahmed for his eighth boundary to reach his third career hundred following up his 153 in the first Test and 108 in the next.

After the close of play, the 23-year-old Brook revealed he had set a goal of scoring two centuries during the tour. "I said to one of my mates I'd like to get two before I got here, so it feels very nice to go one better," said Brook, who played for Pakistan Super League winners Lahore this year. On his cru-



KARACHI: England's Harry Brook (left) plays a shot during the second day of the third cricket Test match between Pakistan and England at the National Stadium in Karachi on December 18, 2022. —AFP

cial sixth wicket partnership, Brook said the key was staying at the crease. "Ben (Foakes) didn't look like he was going to get out. We just knocked it around for as long as we could. We were just trying

to build a partnership."

In all Brook cracked eight fours and three sixes before he was trapped leg before to become debutant paceman Mohammad Wasim's first Test wicket. Brook has now scored 468 runs - beating David Gower's 449 in 1984 - for the highest series total by an England batter in Pakistan. He also equaled Mohammad Yousuf's record of three hundreds in successive matches in an overseas series. The Pakistani batter hit three centuries in England in 2006.

Undone by spin

Pakistan's spinners Nauman Ali and Abrar Ahmed had England in a tight spot after the first session. The pair claimed the first four English wickets and finished with 4-126 and 4-150 respectively. England were struggling at 145-5 soon after lunch when Ben Stokes (26) attempted a third run which Brook turned down only to see his skipper stranded. After Brook fell, Foakes added another 51 alongside Mark Wood for the eighth wicket. Nauman then dismissed Foakes while Ahmed accounted for Wood and Ollie Robinson for 29. The Pakistan spinner was optimistic about getting a win in the match despite England's recovery. "We still have a good chance because they have to play the fourth innings," said Nauman. "If we give them a 200-250 target then we have a good chance because there will be turn and low bounce in the coming days."

In the morning session, Nauman removed Ben Duckett and Joe Root off successive deliveries. With the National Stadium pitch offering turn, left-armar Nauman trapped Duckett (26) leg before and had the experienced Root caught low in the slip by Agha Salman for nought. Pope stood firm amidst the dual wicket fall, reaching his 11th fifty before he was bowled for 51 by Ahmed, who added to the wicket he took on Saturday. — AFP



KARACHI: Pakistan's Babar Azam plays a shot during the third day of the third cricket Test match between Pakistan and England at the National Stadium in Karachi on December 19, 2022. — AFP

Pakistan's Azam completes 1,000 runs in a year

KARACHI: Babar Azam became the first Pakistani in six years to score 1,000 Test runs in a calendar year and the fourth batter to reach the milestone in 2022 during the third Test against England in Karachi. He is the sixth Pakistani batter to reach 1,000 in a year, crossing the total when he reached 45 during an innings that ended on 54. Despite Babar's solid form, Pakistan are staring at a first-ever 3-0 series whitewash on home soil. Babar will have one more game in which to add to his 1,009 in 8 Tests when Pakistan take on New Zealand next week.

England's Joe Root—playing for the visitors in Karachi—tops the table for most runs in 2022, having scored 1,098 in 15 Tests. Australian Usman Khawaja (1,079 in 10 Tests) and England's Jonny Bairstow (1,061 in 10) are the other batters to have achieved the feat in Test cricket this year. For Pakistan, Younis Khan achieved the feat twice, scoring 1,179 runs in 2006 and 1,064 in 2014. Others to score 1,000 or more runs in a year are Mohammad Yousuf (1,788 in 2006), Inzamam-ul-Haq (1,090 in 2000), Azhar Ali (1,198 in 2016) and Mohsin Khan (1,029 in 1982). Yousuf's aggregate is the most by any batter in a calendar year. —AFP

Toulouse beat Sale in Champions Cup

PARIS: France scrum-half Antoine Dupont scored twice as Toulouse ran in seven tries in a 45-19 bonus-point win over Sale in the second matchday of the Champions Cup on Sunday. After beating Munster in their Pool B opener in Limerick last week, the French giants turned up the volume for an Ernest-Wallon stadium which was sold out in spite of the alternative attraction of France in the football World Cup final.

After half their Pool B games, Toulouse are joint top on nine points. "We have to be careful, we are only at two matches out of four," said Dupont. "Of course we have started our competition well, but there are still two important matches to try to be at our best and have a good draw for the knock-out rounds." After conceding an early try from Sale prop Bevan Rodd, Toulouse hit back with tries from Thibaud Flament, Cyril Baille and Dupont.

Sale's South African hooker van der Merwe dotted down to keep the English Premiership side in touch as they trailed 19-12 at the break. Toulouse forced a penalty try early in the second half as Byron McGuigan tackled Thomas Ramos without the ball in the in-goal area. Dupont added his second in a speedy counter-attack before a superb sequence of passing ended with centre Lucas Tausin flying in at the corner. Romain Ntamack added the seventh after which Ramos was sent off for a head butt on McGuigan during the build-up to what would have been an eighth from Matthias Lebel.

Down to 14 for the final few minutes, Toulouse coughed up a third try when Sale lock Jonny Hill went over. Dupont said the way Toulouse had scored was pleasing. "We have scored a lot of tries this season, but they were not always very well constructed," he said. "We have had trouble finding each other. That's what is positive today. We were able to be pragmatic and score from turnovers but



TOULOUSE: Sale's South African flanker Jonathan Ross (center) shouts in a scrum during the European Rugby Champions Cup pool B rugby union match between Toulouse and Sale on December 18, 2022. —AFP

also hold the ball and be pretty good on our offensive game system."

Alex Sanderson, the Sale coach, was looking forward to the rematch on January 14. "I'm looking forward to playing them again on a cold, rainy afternoon in Manchester," said Sanderson. Munster, meanwhile, bounced back from last week's defeat to Toulouse with a 17-6 win at Northampton, Irish number eight Gavin Coombes scoring both tries.

'Huge win'

Munster defended their lead for long stretches with 13 or 14 men after yellow cards to Jack O'Donoghue, Craig Casey, and Joey Carbery. "It's a huge win for us and the manner in which we achieved it," said Munster coach Graham Rowntree. "We picked up three yellow cards and we had to dig in but our defensive effort was

exceptional with players getting up off the floor to help the man next to them." In the final game of the round, on a cold, rainy night in Twickenham, Harlequins struggled to an ugly 14-10 victory over Racing 92.

Quins hooker George Head sprinted 40 metres to give the home team a third minute lead. Quins squandered a long spell of pressure on the Racing line and the visitors showed how to execute when No.8 Kitione Kamikamica smashed over following a scrum five metres from the line seconds before halftime. Quins took note and from a five-meter scrum of their own, hulking centre Grant Esterhuizen scored in the same spot after 49 minutes. One minute later, Kamikamica received a red card for a crunching tackle on Nick David which ended with the Quins fullback landing on the back of his neck. —AFP

New Zealand without Williamson, Southee for India series

WELLINGTON: Kane Williamson and Tim Southee will miss a six-match tour of India as New Zealand juggle their resources to cope with a condensed start to the year. Coach Gary Stead will also sidestart the January tour, with his assistant Luke Ronchi to take charge of a squad to contest three ODIs followed by three Twenty20 internationals. While the T20 squad is still to be named, captain Williamson, Southee and Stead won't be involved. Black Caps selector Gavin Larsen confirmed on Monday the trio will return home after next month's tour of Pakistan to begin preparations for the home Test series against England, starting in mid-February.

"It's a conveyor belt of cricket at international level," Larsen told journalists. "We've got two very important Test matches against England, so bringing Kane and Tim back and letting them recharge their batteries mentally and physically is really, really crucial." Williamson last week relinquished the Test captaincy to veteran seamer Southee but will remain skipper in the shortened formats. A 17-player squad will span two ODI series - in Pakistan from January 10-14 and India from January 18-24. Mark Chapman and Jacob Duffy will replace Williamson and Southee in India, with Tom Latham taking the captaincy — AFP

Even in Brazil - an intense rival - the O Globo newspaper paid tribute to Messi, saying football had "paid its debt" to its biggest star. In the United States, which will host the next World Cup with Canada and Mexico, a report in The Washington Post said Messi was finally rewarded in an "immortal" final. — AFP

Cowboys advance despite defeat as Chiefs reach NFL playoffs with win

Eagles improve the NFL's best record to 13-1

WASHINGTON: Patrick Mahomes threw for two touchdowns and ran for another on Sunday as the Kansas City Chiefs clinched an eighth straight NFL playoff berth. Jerick McKinnon's 26-yard touchdown run in overtime gave the Chiefs a hard-fought 30-24 victory at league-doomed Houston, clinching Kansas City's seventh straight AFC West division title.

Mahomes completed 36-of-41 passes, including 20 in a row to finish the game, for 336 yards without an interception and ran for 33 yards to spark a second-half comeback. "We'll enjoy it, then we will get right back to it," Mahomes said. "We'll go back and watch some film. We've got to get better and better as we try to work our way into the playoffs." Mahomes was concerned about two lost fumbles and 10 penalties for 102 yards against a Texans team that fell to 1-12 with one draw.

"Guys had to continue to battle," Mahomes said. "We hurt ourselves a lot. We've got to cut out the penalties, cut out the turnovers and be cleaner or there are going to be a lot more battles for us." The Chiefs followed the Philadelphia Eagles, San Francisco 49ers, Buffalo Bills and Minnesota Vikings into the post-season, and the Dallas Cowboys also advanced with a little help from the New York Giants.

Dallas missed a chance to clinch a playoff spot by losing 40-34 at Jacksonville on a 52-yard overtime interception return touchdown by the Jaguars' Rayshawn Jenkins. The Cowboys lost another chance to reach the playoffs when Detroit edged the host New York Jets 20-17 on Jared Goff's 51-yard touchdown

pass to Brock Wright with 1:49 to play. But the Cowboys claimed a spot when the New York Giants beat the Washington Commanders 20-12 in an NFC East division battle that capped the day's action.

The Eagles improved the NFL's best record to 13-1 with a 25-20 triumph at Chicago. Jalen Hurts ran 17 times for 61 yards and three touchdowns while also

throwing for 315 yards as Philadelphia won despite three turnovers. "There was so much that we overcame. We persevered," Hurts said. "It was ugly at times but we found a way. Great teams find a way. We stuck together. There was adversity. We turned it over. We gave them some things. When it mattered most, we found a way."

Bengals beat Bucs

In a showdown of division leaders, Joe Burrow threw for four touchdowns and the Cincinnati Bengals won 34-23 at Tampa Bay. A sixth consecutive victory put the Bengals at 10-4, one game ahead of Baltimore atop the AFC North, while Tom Brady's Buccaneers fell to 6-8, one game atop the rest of the NFC South. Seven-time Super Bowl champion Brady fell to 89-1 in home games when his team led by 17 or more points.

Two Brady touchdown passes helped lift the Bucs ahead 17-0, but then Brady made four consecutive turnovers - twice on lost fumbles plus two interceptions - and Cincinnati scored the next 34 points.

Burrow answered with touchdown passes of three yards to Tyler Boyd, five yards to Tee Higgins, eight yards to Ja'Mar Chase and 12 yards to Mitchell Wilcox. The wildest ending came in Las Vegas, where New England tried a rugby-style lateral on the last play of regulation in a deadlocked game.

An errant backward toss went to Raiders' defender Chandler Jones and he ran 48 yards with the fumble recovery to give Vegas a 30-24 victory. Cameron Dicker kicked a 43-yard field goal with four seconds remaining to give the Los Angeles Chargers a 17-14 victory over visiting Tennessee, trimming the Titans' AFC South lead over Jacksonville to one game. New Orleans edged visiting Atlanta 21-18 while Pittsburgh won 24-16 at Carolina and host Denver defeated Arizona 24-15 in matchups of clubs with losing records. — AFP



JACKSONVILLE: Josh Allen #41 of the Jacksonville Jaguars sacks Dak Prescott #4 of the Dallas Cowboys during the second quarter of the game at TIAA Bank Field on December 18, 2022. — AFP

FIFA readies 48-team WCup, targets 2026

DOHA: Forty-eight teams, three host countries, and potentially more than 100 games. After successfully staging the most compact World Cup in history, FIFA is now preparing to organize the biggest. The dust had barely settled on Sunday's World Cup final before attention turned to the gargantuan figure of 2026 looming on the horizon. For the first time, football's greatest tournament will be held across three host nations - the United States, Canada and Mexico.

The tournament will notably see an expansion to 48 teams, up from the current 32-team format that has been in place since 1998, and double the number of teams that took part in the last World Cup held on US or Mexican soil. The enlarged competition represents a triumph for FIFA president Gianni Infantino, who made expanding the World Cup a priority after taking over as world football's supremo in 2016. The 16-team increase marks the biggest expansion in the World Cup's evolution.

From 13 teams at the inaugural tournament in 1930, the finals remained a 16-team event from 1934 to 1978, before increasing to 24 in 1982. The biggest beneficiaries of the expansion to 48 teams will be Africa and Asia. Under the new format, teams will receive nine qualifying slots for the finals (compared to five previously) while Asia will nearly double to eight (from 4.5 slots). Oceania, traditionally forced to compete for a World Cup place via a playoff, will receive an automatic qualifying berth.

"For us Africans, it's heaven sent," said former Nigeria international Sunday Oliseh. "I have always thought (Africa) should send more representatives - the more time you play, the more your chances are. "It's a continent of over a billion people. My country is 200 million people. "For us it's fascinating to see a bigger, larger World Cup." The expanded African contingent is welcome news for some of the region's powerhouses. Egypt, Algeria and Nigeria were all squeezed out of the Qatar finals during qualifiers.

Europe's representation will also be boosted, up to 16 teams from 13, while South America increases from 4.5 qualifying places to six. With Canada, United States and Mexico qualifying as hosts, CONCACAF will have a further three spots, for a total of six teams from the region. Two additional places will be decided



DOHA: Argentina's goalkeeper #23 Emiliano Martinez (left) receives the FIFA Golden Glove award from FIFA President Gianni Infantino. — AFP

by playoff. What this expansion means for the tournament format remains to be seen. FIFA initially indicated that it favoured 16 groups of three teams, with the top two in each group advancing to a 32-team knockout stage.

But the success of the four-team group first phase in Qatar - where several groups went down to the wire - has prompted a rethink. Infantino told reporters on Friday that FIFA now plans to "revisit" the three-team group format. The likeliest 2026 scenario is 12 groups of four, with the top two teams advancing to the knockout rounds along with the eight best third-place finishers. That format however would mean 104 matches - up from the 64 in Qatar - while a team reaching the final would be required to play eight games.

The number of venues for the finals will double, from eight stadiums in Qatar to 16. Eleven venues will be in the US, with three in Mexico and two in Canada. All of the US games are taking place in venues used by NFL teams, with stadiums such as the \$5 billion SoFi Stadium in Los Angeles and the New York Giants' 82,000-seater MetLife Stadium in East Rutherford tipped to host the final.

The bulk of the games - including all matches from the knockout rounds onwards - will be held in the United States. Given the geographical spread of the tournament, FIFA is studying basing the teams in regional clusters to minimise travel. "When you're dealing with such a large region as North America we need to care about the fans and make sure that teams are playing in clusters, that fans and teams don't have to travel crazy distances," Infantino said earlier this year. — AFP

Bangladeshis chant Messi, Messi, Messi, celebrate Argentina

DHAKA: Bangladeshi football fans chanted "Messi, Messi," shedding tears of joy and dancing in the streets to celebrate the triumph of Argentina-a country half a world away-over France in the World Cup final Sunday. According to police, hundreds of thousands of people defied chilly temperatures to watch the match on giant screens set up in the capital Dhaka's key squares, roads and football grounds. Many wore Argentina's sky blue and white national colours and sported Lionel Messi's iconic number 10 jersey.

"I don't know why I am crying, but I am crying for him," Nafiun Rahman Zian, an 18-year old Messi fan, told AFP. "Years of wait (is over) to see the love of my life, the little magician, hold the most prestigious trophy which he desired so much," he said. Bangladesh, a Muslim-majority country of 170 million people, is cricket mad, with its national team one of the best in the world. It is, however, ranked

among the bottom in global football.

But every four years during the World Cup, the country renews its love affair with the sport, as many young people divide themselves largely into two rival groups-one supporting Argentina, the other Brazil. Sunday's biggest crowd gathered at the Dhaka University campus at the heart of the city, as many people painted the Argentinean flag on their cheeks to watch the proceedings from Qatar. The crowd became ecstatic when Messi scored the first goal of the game, with a penalty. "I just can't express how happy I am," said Imon Gazi, wiping his eyes after Argentina's Angel Di Maria scored to make it 2-0.

'Greatest player in the world'

The throng fell into an eerie silence as a brace from France's Kylian Mbappe took the match into extra time at 2-2. "I felt like I would suffer a heart attack," said Abdus Sabur, a 40-year-old motorbike driver, who says he is a Brazil supporter but switched to Argentina in the final because of Messi. "Mbappe is 23. He can play three more World Cups. This time the Cup should go to Messi," he said, as another Mbappe penalty took the match into the a shootout, with the score at 3-3. — AFP



DHAKA: Argentinean supporters react as they watch the final football match of the Qatar 2022 World Cup between Argentina and France in Dhaka on December 18, 2022. — AFP