



2 Kuwaiti YouTuber Boarki tells story of relocation to Dubai's Sustainable City



8 Boeing seals deals with Qatar Airways, launches cargo plane



12 Traditional UK sweet factory enjoys global sugar rush



16 Red-hot Japan down Saudis to move closer to World Cup



WHO warns 'premature' to declare victory over COVID

6,436 cases, 2 deaths in Kuwait • Denmark lifts all curbs • Subvariant more infectious

MP files to grill foreign minister

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: MP Shuaib Al-Muwaizri yesterday filed to grill Foreign Minister Sheikh Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah over a series of allegations, including failure to safeguard Kuwait's political interests. Sheikh Ahmad, the son of former prime minister Sheikh Nasser Mohammad Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, is the second minister to be targeted with a grilling in the past few weeks after the defense minister, who survived a no-confidence motion last week.

The lawmaker accused the foreign minister of squandering public funds in the

Continued on Page 2



KUWAIT: National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem speaks during a parliamentary session yesterday. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

GENEVA: The World Health Organization chief warned yesterday that it is too early for countries to either declare victory over COVID-19 or give up attempts to halt transmission. "It is premature for any country to either surrender or to declare victory," WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus told reporters. "This virus is dangerous, and it continues to evolve before our very eyes." His comment came as Denmark yesterday became the first EU country to lift all of its domestic COVID curbs despite record numbers of cases of the milder Omicron variant, with a number of other countries eyeing similar moves.

Kuwait yesterday reported 6,436 new COVID-19 cases, in addition to two deaths and 5,658 recoveries. The number of patients in ICUs went down from 91 on Monday to 90 yesterday. The number of patients in hospital rose from 480 to 482, while total active cases increased from 51,718 to

52,467. The percentage of daily new cases to new tests dropped from 20.7 percent to 17.7 percent, while the percentage of recovery remained unchanged at 90 percent.

"We're concerned that a narrative has taken hold in some countries that because of vaccines and because of Omicron's high transmissibility and lower severity, preventing transmission is no longer possible, and no longer necessary," Tedros said. "Nothing could be further from the truth," he said, stressing that "more COVID-19 transmission means more deaths."

The UN health agency chief pointed out that since Omicron was first spotted in southern Africa 10 weeks ago, nearly 90 million cases have been reported to the WHO - more than in all of 2020. And while the new COVID variant is known to be milder, he stressed that "we are now starting to see a very worrying increase in

Continued on Page 2

News in brief

Amnesty slams Zionist 'apartheid'

JERUSALEM: Amnesty International yesterday labelled the Zionist entity an "apartheid" state that treats Palestinians as "an inferior racial group", joining the assessment of other rights groups. "(The Zionist entity's) cruel policies of segregation, dispossession and exclusion across all territories under its control clearly amount to apartheid," Amnesty's secretary general Agnes Callamard said. — AFP (See Page 6)

Two Syrian babies die of cold

HARANBUSH, Syria: Two Syrian infant girls have died from harsh winter weather in north-west Syria where snow and rain have destroyed the tents of hundreds of displaced families, the United Nations said yesterday. "A seven-day-old girl and a two-month-old girl have died from the cold in Idlib province," the UN's humanitarian agency OCHA said. —AFP

Chicken sneaks into Pentagon

WASHINGTON: Apparently she lacked top secret clearance: A chicken was apprehended Monday in a high security zone at the Pentagon, surprising the heavily armed guards that protect the seat of the US military machine. There was no explanation how it got there, but after being cornered in the sub-freezing weather, the bird was handed over to local animal control officers. Pentagon security did not offer any explanation for how the chicken made its way into the compound, or whether it posed any particular threat. —AFP

New York Times buys 'Wordle'

NEW YORK: The New York Times announced Monday it had bought Wordle, a phenomenon played by millions just four months after the game burst onto the Internet, for an "undisclosed price in the low seven figures". Created by engineer Josh Wardle, the game consists of guessing one five-letter word per day in just six tries. The newspaper said the game would continue to be free. — AFP

Biden meets Qatar Amir, hails ties

WASHINGTON: US President Joe Biden hosted Qatar's Amir Monday in the White House, underscoring the tiny Gulf state's strategic importance - including in a scramble to shield European allies from potential Russian energy cut-offs. Minutes after Boeing and Qatar Airways con-

cluded a huge new deal, Biden lavished praise on Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, saying "our partnership in Qatar has been central to many of our most vital interests".

"A lot on our agenda today," Biden said in the fireside Oval Office sit-down. "We want to talk about security in the Gulf and the broader Middle East, ensuring the stability of global energy supplies, continuing our work together to support the people of Afghanistan, and strengthening commercial cooperation."

Continued on Page 2



WASHINGTON: US President Joe Biden meets Qatari Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani in the Oval Office of the White House on Monday. — AFP

India to launch 'digital rupee', tax on crypto

MUMBAI: India will introduce a state-backed "digital rupee" and impose a 30 percent tax on profits from virtual currencies, the government announced yesterday while unveiling the next financial year's budget. The plans are a blow to one of the world's fastest-growing cryptocurrency markets, which has remained unregulated despite burgeoning local trading platforms and glitzy celebrity endorsements.

They make India the latest major

emerging economy to rein in the sector, after China went even further in outlawing all cryptocurrency transactions last September. "There has been a phenomenal increase in transactions in virtual digital assets," finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman told parliament, adding that the growth necessitated a proper tax framework.

Profits made trading cryptocurrencies and other digital assets will be taxed at 30 percent from April, while any losses from digital transactions will not be granted offsets against other income. A one-percent tax will be deducted at the source for all digital asset transactions, including cryptocurrencies and NFTs, a move that the finance minister said would help the government track each trade.

Continued on Page 2

'Obscene' film divides opinion, but many against Netflix ban in Kuwait

By Sahar Moussa

KUWAIT: On Monday, a court in Kuwait received a lawsuit against the Ministry of Communication demanding blocking Netflix in Kuwait. Lawyer Abdulaziz Al-Subaei said Netflix recently produced and released an Arabic film - 'Perfect Strangers' - that provoked a wave of public anger due to several controversial scenes. He said large numbers of young people and adolescents are attached to Netflix, which he says promotes ideas that are against social values and in violation of the teachings of Islam.

But a Kuwait Times survey on social media revealed 82 percent of respondents are against blocking Netflix in

Kuwait. Some commenters even suggested removing only this movie instead of blocking the entire app. Others view blocking Netflix as an act of depriving people from making their own decisions and the right to choose, especially since the platform has been one of the only sources of entertainment during the pandemic.

'Perfect Strangers' tells the story of a dinner party of a close group of friends who agree to leave their phones unlocked on the table, exposing juicy interactions and dark secrets. The film has faced pushback from conservatives in the Middle East ever since its release. Some people in Kuwait share similar views and support a ban on Netflix. (See Page 3)

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Local

Kuwaiti YouTuber Boarki tells story of relocation to Dubai's sustainable city

Five hundred homes, main facilities running on solar power



An aerial view of The Sustainable City in Dubai.



The solar panels are seen on top of the houses.

By Ahmad Jabr

KUWAIT: Kuwaiti YouTuber and social media influencer Ahmad Boarki narrated to Kuwait Times the story of his relocation with his family from Kuwait to The Sustainable City in Dubai. The city is almost the same size of Kuwait's erstwhile Entertainment City and contains 500 homes and essential facilities that all run on renewable energy.

"Imagine a city the size of Kuwait's Entertainment City that contains 500 homes, in addition to three schools, a supermarket, a plaza housing shops, restaurants and cafes, gyms, a health center for people with special needs, playgrounds, a clinic and a mosque. If that's not enough, imagine these homes run on solar power!" Boarki said. Solar panels are installed in every home, while an irrigation system located inside the city uses recycled water to grow vegetables, he explained, adding that the produce is distributed among the city's residents.

The 500 homes are spread over five clusters, each



Kuwaiti YouTuber Ahmad Boarki.

containing 100 homes. The city generates enough electricity to power the city, while any extra power goes to the grid operated by Dubai's government, Boarki explained. Each cluster has a playground for children, he added, noting that the entire city has been

“ I hope to see a similar model in Kuwait ”

'More than enough'

Boarki admitted he was hesitant when he first moved to the Sustainable City when he learned about the house sizes, which are smaller than what people are used to in Kuwait. "However, 200 square meters is more than enough space to live with your family," he said. "I have a family of five, and I can say the place is more than enough for us to live in."

There are plans to adopt the same model of Dubai's Sustainable City in Sharjah and Abu Dhabi, in addition to other countries, including Oman. Boarki expressed hopes to see a similar project in Kuwait in the future. "I hope to see a model in Kuwait similar to Sustainable City, where you can find everything that you need within walking distance," he said.

Living in Sustainable City has taught Boarki's family lessons in self-reliance and living in harmony with their community. "I am proud to be part of the Sustainable City community, which taught my children to be able to rely on themselves and harmonize with their community," he concluded.

adapted to be pedestrian-friendly with golfcarts that residents can use to move around. Furthermore, each house has a parking space for two vehicles, with shades covered with solar panels as well.



A view of the city.



The vegetation inside The Sustainable City.

MP files to grill foreign...

Continued from Page 1

ministry of foreign affairs and other government departments under his authority. He also accused the minister of administrative wrongdoings in the ministry and other departments under him. Muwaizri charged that the minister has failed to safeguard the country's political and security interests and failed to look after the interests of the state and its citizens overseas.

The lawmaker also accused the minister of violating international treaties and covenants and failing to perform his duties as a foreign minister. The grilling provided no further details to the allegations. The grilling is expected to be debated after eight days during the Assembly's regular sessions on Feb 8 and 9 or after the Assembly's national holiday break on March 8 and 9. The grilling could lead to a no-confidence motion, which needs 24 MPs to pass and could result in unseating the minister.

Meanwhile, pro-government lawmaker Hisham Al-Saleh yesterday called on the government to accelerate the employment of Kuwaitis by replacing expatriates who make up the overwhelming majority of the labor market in the country. He said Kuwaitis are capable of replacing expats.

The amir was the first Gulf state leader to visit Biden since he became president just over a year ago. In addition to meeting Biden, the sheikh was meeting with Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, Secretary of State Antony Blinken, members of Congress and other officials. During the Afghanistan evacuation last year, US forces sent about 60,000 Afghans and Americans transiting through the Qatar air base. Doha served as Washington's diplomatic contact with the Taliban, through months of painful negotiations, and will be pivotal to any future contact with Afghanistan, as well as playing a role in efforts to resurrect the Iran nuclear deal.

Biden described Qatar as "a good friend and a reliable partner". Given Qatar's energy riches, it now finds itself rising in importance on yet another front now - the transatlantic tensions over Russia's intentions in Ukraine. Qatar is one of the world's biggest liquid natural gas exporters, along with the United States and Australia, and there are hopes in Washington and Europe that Doha can temporarily redirect exports destined for Asian markets.

However, Qatar has little to no extra capacity in its LNG and there are limitations to how much supply can be diverted from existing contracts. Speaking just ahead of the visit, a senior US official seemed to downplay the focus on how much to expect from Qatar in the energy reshuffle, saying only "we're consulting with all the leading gas suppliers around the world". "I'm not going to be able to give you anything further on LNG," the official told reporters Sunday. —AFP

Biden meets Qatar Amir...

Continued from Page 1

On that last note, the two leaders were able to celebrate a \$20 billion deal for Qatar Airways to become the first customer for Boeing's new 777x cargo planes, with 34 aircraft in the initial order. In a White House ceremony, Qatar Airways likewise signed a letter of intent for \$6.7 billion for 25 737 MAX narrow-body airliners.

Recognizing Qatar's place in the US military's global footprint - the state hosts the Pentagon's Central Command and a huge airbase - Biden also announced he was designating it a "major non-NATO ally", which opens the door to closer military and commercial ties. Overshadowing the meeting, however, were efforts to source enough natural gas to keep Europe heated through the winter if the brewing conflict with Russia escalates.

Western capitals are threatening unprecedented economic sanctions if Russia attacks Ukraine, where it has placed more than 100,000 combat troops on the borders. However, there are fears that the oil- and gas-producing giant could then retaliate against the European Union, which imports some 40 percent of its natural gas from Russia and is already going through a steep price crunch.

WHO warns 'premature' to...

Continued from Page 1

deaths in most regions of the world". It is vital, he said, to keep striving to halt transmission of the virus. "We are not calling for any country to return to so-called lockdown," Tedros said, adding though that "we are calling on all countries to protect their people using every tool in the toolkit, not vaccines alone". The WHO head stressed the need to continue tracking emerging variants, including the Omicron sub-lineage BA.2. "This virus will continue to evolve, which is why we call on countries to continue testing, surveillance and sequencing," he said. "We can't fight this virus if we don't know what it's doing."

The sub-variant is even more infectious than the original version, according to a Danish study published on Monday. BA.2 - also called "stealth Omicron" - was detected earlier this year and has displaced the first Omicron variant, known as BA.1, as the dominant strain in Denmark. A person infected with BA.2 has a 39 percent chance of transmitting the virus to someone else in their household within a week, compared to a 29 percent risk with BA.1, Denmark's SSI health authority said in a statement.

The study by SSI researchers and Danish universities involved 18,000 people and was carried out between Dec 20 and Jan 18. SSI doctor Camilla

Holten Moller said BA.2 was more likely to infect unvaccinated people than BA.1. Those who have been fully jabbed, particularly those who have received a booster dose, are much less likely to catch the strain, she added.

Denmark waved goodbye to facemasks and health passes yesterday as it became the first European Union country to lift all of its domestic COVID curbs. Only a few restrictions remain in place at the country's borders, for unvaccinated travelers arriving from non-Schengen countries. After a first attempt at lifting restrictions between September and November, the Scandinavian country once again ditched its COVID checks and limited opening hours for bars and restaurants.

The easing comes as Denmark registers about 40,000-50,000 new COVID cases a day, or almost one percent of the country's 5.8 million inhabitants. Health officials believe those figures will soon start going down. More than 60 percent of Danes have received a third dose of a COVID-19 vaccine - one month ahead of health authorities' schedule - compared to an EU average of just under 45 percent.

Including those who have recently had COVID, health authorities estimate that 80 percent of the population is protected against severe forms of the disease. Two years after the outbreak of COVID-19, the Danish strategy enjoys broad support at home. The Danish Health Authority currently "recommends" those who test positive to isolate for four days, while contact cases no longer need to quarantine. Facemasks and the COVID pass are also recommended for hospital visits. — AFP

India to launch 'digital rupee'...

Continued from Page 1

Sitharaman also said the central bank would introduce a "digital rupee", based on blockchain technology, by the end of March 2023. "Introduction of central bank digital currency will give a big boost to (the) digital economy. Digital currency will also lead to a more efficient and cheaper currency management system," she said. Cryptocurrencies have been under scrutiny by Indian regulators since first entering the local market nearly a decade ago, with a surge in fraudulent

transactions leading to a central bank ban in 2018.

India's Supreme Court lifted the restrictions two years later and the market has surged since, growing by nearly 650 percent in the year to June 2021 - second only to Vietnam, according to research by Chainalysis. Prime Minister Narendra Modi last year warned that Bitcoin presented a risk to younger generations and could "spoil our youth" if it ended up "in the wrong hands". The government last year proposed banning "all private cryptocurrencies", but ultimately held back.

"It's good to finally have some clarity on the taxation aspect," said Sathvik Vishwanath, the co-founder of Unocoin, one of India's oldest crypto trading platforms. "Now we can infer that if they are introducing taxation it's because they know that the ban (on trading cryptocurrencies) is not happening." — AFP

Local

Netflix, 'Perfect Strangers' row reignites freedoms debate in Kuwait

Kuwait Times survey shows 82 percent are against blocking app

By Sahar Moussa

KUWAIT: Kuwait is no stranger to arts and entertainment, as it boasts of having one of the oldest entertainment industries in the Arabian Peninsula. Since the late 1960s, Kuwait's television, drama and comedy scenes have flourished, reflecting an image to the world of the Gulf state's open-minded society that was always considered a pioneer in this field among its peers.

In recent years however, people living in Kuwait are feeling a shift in the atmosphere when it comes to entertainment and freedom of choosing what to watch or how to live. On Monday, a court in Kuwait received a lawsuit against the Ministry of Communication demanding blocking Netflix in Kuwait. Lawyer Abdulaziz Al-Subaei said Netflix recently produced and released an Arabic film ('Perfect Strangers') that provoked a wave of public anger due to several controversial scenes. He said large numbers of young people and adolescents are attached to Netflix, which he says promotes ideas that are against social values and in violation of the teachings of Islam.

“The choice to watch is upon the viewer”

instead of blocking the whole app. "I'm against (the decision). Why would you block an app just because of one bad movie that no one probably even heard of until all this broke out?" one commenter wrote. "Let them just remove that movie from Kuwait and keep Netflix," said another.

The movie talks about real-life situations that many argue exist in our Arab society. It tells the story of a dinner party of a close group of friends who agree to leave their phones unlocked on the table, exposing juicy interactions and dark secrets.

"All the secrets revealed by the film exist in Arab societies and across all classes, but there is this duality which makes people refuse to acknowledge it," said Ghada Shabbender, a scriptwriter and human rights activist. She also argued that since the rise of the Internet in Arab countries, public discourse about the arts had been driven by popular views on social media rather than 'elitist' critics.

One commenter agreed with Shabbender. "The movie literally depicted real-life stories and the truth that has been happening in our 'Muslim' societies for years," they argued. "If you do not like it, then do not watch it. Let us watch Netflix in peace... there is bigger fish to fry than this."

Some commenters view blocking Netflix as an act of depriving people from making their own decisions and the right to choose, especially since the platform has been one of the only source of entertainment during the pandemic. "You are taking



away a basic right to choose! If something offends you, do not watch it! Does Netflix oblige you to watch every movie on their site?" one comment said. "Netflix was a major source of entertainment during the pandemic, so don't use the moral shock angle - just grow up and get a life."

"Even Saudi Arabia opened up," another commenter argued. "Why are we going backwards? The choice to watch is upon the viewer. One should be given the right to choose and not to be under the hammer. Keep Netflix, that's my opinion," they added, suggesting that those who don't like its contents can choose to end their subscriptions.

Pushback

The movie has faced pushback from conservatives in the Middle East ever since its release. One Egyptian politician accused the film of "perversion,

promoting homosexuality and infidelity and even being part of a plot to disrupt Arab society." Some people in Kuwait share similar views and support a ban on Netflix. "Anything which is not good for Kuwait's community and its culture should be banned or blocked," said one of the commenters. "We are with the ban," said another. "Netflix movies are against our culture and religion. Netflix is haram and should be banned; it is ruining children's lives."

The debate over banning Netflix sheds light on the issue of freedoms in Kuwait at a time when other countries in the region have become more open to hosting cultural, musical and international events. MP Hamdan Al-Azmi warned the government yesterday of allowing concerts to be held in Kuwait, saying that they are "destructive" to society, "corrupt our children" and go against the Kuwaiti society's conservative nature.

Jazeera Airways certified to provide pilot, cabin crew training

KUWAIT: Jazeera Airways has achieved a new milestone as an "Approved Training Organization" certified by Kuwait's Directorate for Civil Aviation, enabling the airline to conduct training programs for pilots and cabin crews from its headquarters in the State of Kuwait.

The certification confirms that Jazeera complies with the Part-ORA (Organization Requirements for Aircrew), Part-FCL (Flight Crew Licenses) and other applicable regulations. The airline can offer training programs for deck and cabin crew that include:

- A320 Type Training
- Cross Crew Qualification (CCQ)
- Initial Safety and Emergency Procedures Training for Deck and Cabin Crew.

Commenting on the milestone, Jazeera Vice President of Flight Operations, Captain Ayman Al-Shammari, said: "This a significant move for Jazeera Airways as it expands its capabilities and ensures our ability to train the required manpower for future growth. Our team has been working on completing the certification for the past year and is ready today to train fresh graduates looking to become new airline crews. It's another proud milestone for Jazeera in our contribution to the aviation sector in Kuwait and the region."

As part of its expanding capabilities as an "Approved Training Organization", Jazeera has

announced plans to invest in building a new training facility in Kuwait equipped with the latest

approved training equipment. This state-of-the-art facility will include an Airbus 320 simulator and safety and emergency training equipment for crew training. Jazeera recently completed an order with Airbus at the Dubai Airshow for 28 new aircraft: twenty A320neos and eight A321neos. The order is valued at \$3.4 billion.



Kuwait continues efforts protecting heritage in conflict areas: Envoy

PARIS: Kuwait said on Monday it would carry on its efforts to preserve human heritage, strongly condemning the destruction of cultural and archaeological edifices and massacres committed against people. This came in a speech delivered by Kuwait's Ambassador to France Sami Al-Suleiman at the second conference of donors and partners supporting the international alliance for the protection of heritage in conflict areas (ALIPH Foundation) held at the Louvre Museum.

The ambassador conveyed greetings of Foreign Minister and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammed Al-Sabah, wishing the success of this important conference concerned with the protection of cultural heritage. He stressed the necessity for cooperation between international organizations and the international community to combat such crimes. He affirmed that the world has suffered several tensions and conflicts, over the past period, in which humanity and heritage were the victims amid the devastating wars of cultural and heritage properties. Kuwait is paying much attention to this conference whose goals aim to preserve culture and heritage of peoples, he said.

Meanwhile, the ambassador recalled the late Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad's participation in the international conference on heritage in Dubai in 2016, pointing out that Kuwait donated \$five million at the first donor conference in 2017. He pointed to Kuwait's effective role in this field, recalling the country's participation in the conference on the reconstruction of Iraq's Mosul on September 11, 2018, held at the headquarters of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). He also stated the Kuwait International Conference for the Reconstruction of Iraq in 2018 that could achieve financial pledges worth \$30 billion.

Speaking to the press in a statement on the sidelines of the conference, Secretary-General of



PARIS: Kuwait's Ambassador to France Sami Al-Suleiman speaks during the conference. — KUNA

the National Council for Culture, Arts and Letters (NCCAL) Kamel Al-Abdul-Jalil said that it is paramount to know that what remains of ancient historical civilizations will be the treasure of humanity and its great legacy. "We have a great responsibility to preserve this cultural and civilized human heritage away from any crises and conflict to help it reach successive generations," he said.

Abdul-Jalil lauded the conference and its goals aiming to protect the global human heritage from destruction and damage caused during the wars, tragedies and armed conflicts. He said Kuwait has been keen on, and interested in, spreading peace, love and coexistence among humans, and supports all human endeavors on preserving the remnants of human historical civilizations. In addition, French President Emmanuel Macron announced, during the opening of the conference, France's contribution of \$30 million.

In his opening speech, French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian emphasized that the conference, hosted by France as head of the Council of the European Union, is an opportunity for the international community to reiterate its commitment to protecting cultural heritage in the conflict areas, as an element of achieving sustainable development, reconciliation and peace. A number of countries declared financial pledges worth \$90 million at the conference which was attended by Suleiman and Al-Abdul-Jalil. ALIPH Foundation was established in 2017, upon an initiative from France and the UAE, and includes Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Luxemburg, China and Morocco as well as some donors. —KUNA

Kuwait Cabinet okays frontliner incentives given within a month

KUWAIT: Kuwait's Cabinet at a session on Monday agreed to hand out financial incentives to over 50,000 COVID-19 frontliners, including 1,370 illegal residents, within a month. This decision comes after the list of those entitled to the hand-outs, as per the directions of the late Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, was completed by relevant authorities. The move is currently being monitored by both His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. The sums will initially be distributed to the Ministry of Health followed by

the Ministry of Interior, then other government bodies who were part of the endeavor, Health Minister Dr Khaled Al-Saeed told fellow ministers. Minister Saeed went on to outline the country's current COVID-19 status, describing it as "unstable" due to the rise in infections, hospitalizations and intensive care unit occupancy. He said that the vaccination campaign for 5-11 year-olds, which started earlier this week, will initially target those vulnerable before others, going on to underline the safety and efficacy of the jabs administered by the ministry.

In their discussion of regional political affairs, the ministers expressed Kuwait's strong condemnation and denunciation of the Houthi militia's terrorist attack on the United Arab Emirates, after the group fired a ballistic missile at the Gulf Arab country. Kuwait supports the UAE in any measures it takes to protect its security and stability, the ministers reiterated. They also condemned the missile attack on Iraq's Baghdad International Airport, expressing their rejection of all forms of violence and fundamentalism and their support of

Baghdad in steps taken to ensure safety and stability. Ministers were also briefed by Foreign Minister and State Minister for Cabinet Affairs Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammed Al-Sabah on the results of the concluded Arab League ministerial talks in Kuwait and his recent visits to Beirut, Brussels and Washington.

Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad's efforts received praise from the Cabinet, particularly his recent tour, which they agreed outlined Kuwait's intention to strengthen partnerships and friendly ties with the international community, support mediation and spread peace and tolerance globally. They also congratulated Deputy Prime Minister and Interior Minister Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah, after he passed a vote of confidence following a parliamentary interpellation raised by lawmaker Hamdan Al-Azmi at the National Assembly. The talks also shed light on a Public Authority of Agriculture Affairs and Fish Resources report regarding entertainment zones in the areas of Abdali in the north and Wafra in the south. — KUNA

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Egyptian president receives Kuwait's KCCI chairman

CAIRO: Egypt is keen on bolstering the strong and historic ties with the State of Kuwait and GCC countries in line with the interest of both Egypt and fellow Arab countries, said President Abdel-Fatah Al-Sisi yesterday. Egyptian Presidential spokesman Bassam Radi said that Sisi's statement came during his reception of chairman of Kuwait Chamber of Commerce and Industry (KCCI) Mohammad Al-Saqer. Radi revealed that the meeting between President Al-Sisi and chairman Saqer focused on ways to bolster relations on all possible levels namely with investments, business, and commerce.

Sisi asked Saqer to convey his greetings to His Highness the Amir of Kuwait Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. Sisi affirmed that his country was in favor of bolstering ties with Kuwait, reflecting his full support of boost trade, commerce, and investments with the fellow Arab country. The Egyptian government is keen maintaining contacts with Kuwaiti investors to update them on Egypt's business opportunities and ways to enhance commercial exchange, added the President.

Meanwhile, Saqer conveyed greetings from the Kuwaiti leadership to President Al-Sisi and also commended the vital role played by Egypt in the region. He also praised the level of developments witnessed during the reign of Al-Sisi, affirming that the Egyptian government had provided lucrative opportunities for investments in major development projects. Kuwaiti businessmen are keen on seeking business in Egypt, indicated Saqer. — KUNA

Kuwait celebrates tennis player, writers for supporting Palestine

Boycott in line with stance against normalization with Zionist entity



KUWAIT: Kuwaiti tennis player Mohammed Al-Awadhi (center) is honored during the event.

— Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat



Mohammed Al-Awadhi.

By Nawara Fattahova

KUWAIT: The Kuwaitis for Jerusalem committee organized an award ceremony for young Kuwaiti tennis player Mohammed Al-Awadhi and some Kuwaiti writers for boycotting activities in which athletes and writers from the Zionist entity participated. The group is a joint committee from the Women's Cultural and Social Society and the Society of Graduates.

The boycotts are against the normalization of ties with the Zionist entity, which is the position of the government of Kuwait. According to a representative of the committee and both societies, this issue is still important, even to young Kuwaitis. Mohammed is one of the examples, as he lost the title but gained people's respect. A video from Gaza appreciating Mohammed's withdrawal has gone viral on social media.

The 13-year-old Kuwaiti tennis player withdrew from the match against the Zionist entity's player in the semifinals of the Ten-Pro Global Junior Tour for competitors under the age of 14 held in Dubai last month. This caused him to lose the chance to be the champion. "I want to thank all those who encouraged and supported me. Hopefully, I will rank first in upcoming competitions, and hope I will be as good as Rafael Nadal one day," Mohammed Al-Awadhi said during the ceremony.

In a previous interview with Kuwait Times, Mohammed's father Dr Jassem Al-Awadhi said his son would've most probably won the tournament and ranked first if he hadn't withdrawn in the semifinal, as he managed to defeat the candidate for the title. He also said Kuwaiti players respect the deci-



Mohammed Al-Awadhi cuts the cake during the ceremony.

sions of the Kuwaiti government.

Judaization of Jerusalem

Lulwa Al-Mulla, President of the Women's Cultural and Social Society and a member of the Kuwaitis for Jerusalem committee, said the group works against the Judaization of Jerusalem, and has been supporting the Palestinians since the 1980s. The name of this committee has changed depending on the circumstances. It was called the 'Children of Stones' in the beginning," she noted. The committee is involved in various projects in Jerusalem. "We prefer to work on projects that serve the people there, rather than sending donations. We do reconstruction of buildings and reop-

eration of schools," Mulla added.

The boycott by the Kuwaiti writers, although online, expressed the rejection of Kuwaitis of any normalization with the Zionist entity. "This sends a message to those running after normalization with the Zionist entity that Palestine will always remain Arab, and their nation will resist with Kuwait's support. Kuwait will never normalize ties with the Zionist entity. A group of NGOs is working on rejecting any normalization with (the Zionist entity)," explained Mulla. Jinan Shihab, a Kuwaiti inventor also withdrew from Expo Dubai two days ago because a special celebration was held for the Zionist entity, is another example of Kuwaiti support for the Palestinian cause.

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KUWAIT: Oil Minister Dr Mohammad Al-Fares speaks during yesterday's parliament session. —Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

All measures will be taken to Kuwaitize oil sector: Minister

KUWAIT: Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Oil and Minister of Electricity, Water and Renewable Energy Dr Mohammad Al-Fares said that Kuwaitization as a policy is approved by Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) and all necessary measures will be taken to "Kuwaitize" the oil sector. This came in an intervention by Minister Fares during the regular session of the National Assembly yesterday, after the parliament moved to discussing a parliamentary question about the reason for renewing the contracts of non-Kuwaiti engineers at KPC. He explained that the Kuwaitization procedures for the sector will be in two phases, beginning with direct

employment, where 2,000 Kuwaitis were employed during the past year, then Kuwaitization of the private sector represented by contractor companies, equivalent to 30 percent of workers in this sector.

Furthermore, in a response to another parliamentary question regarding the employment of engineers in the Ministry of Electricity, Water and Renewable Energy, Fares affirmed the government's interest in appointing engineering graduates, whether university students or diploma holders in the Ministry. The optimum utilization of engineers in water production plants was reviewed, added Fares, pointing out the preparation of an integrated plan to redevelop the sector and raise the level of engineers so that they are recruited appropriately according to the needs of the ministry. He also affirmed the commitment of the Ministry of Electricity, Water and Renewable Energy to the decision of the Civil Service Council regarding the dismissal of resident workers and their replacement with Kuwaiti engineers and technicians. — KUNA

Kuwait oil price gains 94 cents to \$91.23 pb: KPC

KUWAIT: Kuwait crude oil rose 94 cents during Monday's trading sessions to reach \$91.23 per barrel (pb) compared with \$90.29 pb on Friday, Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) said yesterday. Brent futures surged \$1.18 to \$91.21 pb and West Texas Intermediate future jumped \$1.33 to \$88.15 pb. Meanwhile, OPEC's basket of crudes rose by 75 cents to \$90.89 per barrel on Monday compared to \$90.41 pb on Friday, the cartel bulletin reported yesterday. The bulletin said that the yearly rate of the basket of oils averaged \$69.89 a barrel, last year. The coalition of oil producers, OPEC+, decided at its 24th ministerial meeting, held on January 4, to maintain the production plan designed to increase the output gradually, where the stakeholders agreed



on pursuing the output increase by some 400,000 barrels per day during the current month. They had also agreed to keep the session open for following up on impact of the coronavirus on the oil market and change the production as it may warrant. The petroleum stakeholders are scheduled to hold the 25th session at the same level virtually today. — KUNA



Justice on hold for slain Lebanese activist Lokman

Murder trial over Bangladesh factory collapse resumes after five years

Page 7

Page 6



YANGON: File photo shows, protesters make the three-finger salute during a demonstration against the military coup in Yangon. Myanmar marks one year since Myanmar's military seized power, ousting the civilian government and arresting its de facto leader Aung San Suu Kyi. —AFP

Myanmar protesters defy junta with strike

Ten arrested for taking part in the clapping protest

YANGON: Anti-coup protesters across Myanmar defied a junta order not to mark the first anniversary of the military's power-grab with a silent strike and clapping protests yesterday. The military takeover that ended the Southeast Asian country's brief democratic interlude and toppled civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi has triggered mass protests and a crackdown on dissent.

Struggling to contain the backlash and contending with daily clashes, the junta has killed more than 1,500 civilians, according to a local monitoring group. Swathes of the country are under the control of anti-coup fighters. Residents across commercial hub Yangon and in the second city of Mandalay clapped en masse at 4 pm (0930 GMT). AFP correspondents and locals said, marking the end of a "silent strike" against the coup.

"We were clapping," one Mandalay resident said. "Other houses in my neighbourhood clapped as well." The junta had ordered shops to stay open yesterday but the streets of Yangon began emptying at 10 am, a scene that was repeated in Mandalay and the southern Tanintharyi region.

Mandalay's famous jade market had opened in the morning, but saw little traffic, a resident told AFP. "No one is going out on the streets around my area and security forces are patrolling," the resident said. "I'm staying at home playing online games to participate in the silent strike."

A similar shutdown in December emptied the streets of cities and towns across the country. Ten people were arrested for taking part in the clapping protest in Yangon, local media reported.

'Thunderous silence'

"If the strike is shaping up as is reported, it is a thunderous silence, a resounding rebuke of military rule," David Mathieson, an analyst formerly based in Myanmar, told AFP. Ahead of the anniversary, the junta had threatened to seize businesses that shutter and warned that noisy rallies or sharing anti-military "propaganda" could lead to treason or terrorism charges.

Yesterday morning, local media showed isolated flashmobs in Yangon and Mandalay, where protesters unfurled pro-democracy banners and set off flares. Photos released by the junta's information team yesterday painted a picture of normalcy in the country, including competitors finishing a marathon in the southern Bago region and a religious celebration.



Undated video handouts showed pro-military demonstrations in unspecified parts of the country, some holding national flags and chanting slogans in support of the army.

Others held banners denouncing the "People's Defence Forces" that have sprung up to fight the military and dealt painful blows to junta troops with guerilla ambushes and mine attacks.

A bomb attack on a pro-military rally in the town of Tachilek caused several casualties, local media reports said, without giving exact figures. AFP was unable to verify the reports.

Sanctions

The United States, Britain and Canada unveiled coordinated sanctions on Myanmar officials Monday, including those involved in the trial of ousted leader Suu Kyi. Washington sanctioned Attorney General Thida Oo, Supreme Court Chief Justice Tun Tun Oo and Anti-Corruption Commission chairman Tin Oo, all of whom it said were closely involved in the "politically motivated" prosecution of Suu Kyi.

Citing "unspeakable violence against civilians", the

undermining of regional stability and "rampant" corruption, US President Joe Biden said he was working with allies to "hold accountable" those responsible.

But the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Myanmar said the international community needed to do more. "The fact that one year has elapsed with no Security Council Resolution imposing a comprehensive arms embargo-as arms continue to flow to the junta and kill innocent people-is unacceptable," said Tom Andrews. "The people of Myanmar deserve better from the United Nations."

Another trial for Suu Kyi

Suu Kyi has been detained since the coup, and faces a raft of charges from election fraud to breaching the official secrets act, and faces over 100 years in jail. The day before the anniversary the junta announced the Nobel laureate will face a new trial for electoral fraud during 2020 polls in which her National League for Democracy party trounced a military-backed rival.

Several senior members of the national electoral commission have also been arrested since the coup, accused of masterminding the NLD's landslide victory. The junta cancelled the results of the 2020 election in July last year, saying it had found some 11.3 million instances of fraud. Independent monitors said the polls were largely free and fair. —AFP

N Zealand relents on woman offered refuge by Taleban

WELLINGTON: A pregnant New Zealand journalist who claimed to have nowhere to go but Afghanistan will be allowed to return home, after officials granted her an exemption from strict COVID-19 entry restrictions amid public outcry. Reporter Charlotte Bellis yesterday said she would

return to New Zealand next month to give birth to her daughter, after being granted a rare place in state-managed quarantine following a second request.

New Zealand's borders have been closed for much of the last two years, as the country kept coronavirus at bay. Only 800 rooms per month are set aside for New Zealanders and visa holders who urgently need to return. "We are so excited to return home and to be surrounded by family and friends at such a special time," Bellis said in a statement, thanking Kiwis for their support.

The 35-year-old's case has underscored the plight of Kiwis stranded overseas by tough virus-

related border controls, and heaped pressure on Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's government to ease restrictions. "We are disappointed it had to come to this," Afghanistan-based Bellis said.

Bellis was working for Al Jazeera in Kabul when Afghanistan fell to the Taleban. She did not realise she was pregnant until she was at the media company's headquarters in Doha, Qatar, where it is illegal to be pregnant and unmarried. Bellis kept her pregnancy secret as she prepared to return to New Zealand, but was told she did not qualify for an exemption to return.

Instead she called senior Taleban contacts and was told she could give birth there. "When the

Taleban offers you-a pregnant, unmarried woman-safe haven, you know your situation is messed up," she told the New Zealand Herald on Saturday. Deputy Prime Minister Grant Robertson said Bellis was given a quarantine slot after her circumstances were reviewed, not because of the intense publicity the case generated.

"Her case has been assessed, there is a place for her to be able to return to New Zealand and I urge her to take it up," he told reporters. Robertson said an announcement would be made Thursday on reopening borders in New Zealand, which throughout the pandemic has recorded only 53 COVID-19 deaths in a population of five million. —AFP

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US urges direct nuclear talks with Iran

WASHINGTON: A senior US official said Monday that time was running out for nuclear negotiations with Iran and urged Tehran to agree to direct talks to help

forge a deal. Speaking on background, the official said that Iran's nuclear program was nearing "breakout" toward nuclear weapons capability, leaving just "weeks" to reach a deal that would put the program on hold and ease sanctions on the country.

"I think we're at the point where some of the most critical political decisions have to be made by all sides" in the talks to revive the 2015 deal involving Iran, the United States, Britain, China, France, Germany and Russia, the official said. "If

our goal is to reach an understanding quickly... the optimal way to do that, in any negotiation, is for the parties that have the most at stake to meet directly," the official said, referring to the United States and Iran.

"That's been our view from the outset: we're prepared to meet with Iran if they're prepared to meet with us." The official said Iran's enrichment program was very close to producing enough fissile material for a nuclear weapon. —AFP

Putin to host EU ally Orban

MOSCOW: Russian President Vladimir Putin will host talks yesterday with Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, who has taken a softer line on the Ukraine crisis than fellow NATO and EU members. The Kremlin said ahead of the meeting that the leaders would discuss bilateral ties as well as "security issues on the European continent and regional conflicts," an allusion to the standoff between Russia and the West over Ukraine.

Orban has said he will seek an agreement to increase Hungary's gas imports from Russia at a time when some in Europe accuse Russia of orchestrating an energy crisis to pressure European countries. Hungary's opposition parties released a joint statement calling on Orban to cancel his trip, describing it as "contrary" to national interests.

The opposition said that, by meeting with Putin, Orban "indirectly encourages the Russian president to further escalate the current tense situation." US President Joe Biden has accused Russia of plans to invade Ukraine imminently with its troops massed on the border and warned of severe economic sanctions if it does. —AFP

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International

Amnesty joins other rights group in condemning Zionist 'apartheid'

Palestinians are treated as an inferior racial group

JERUSALEM: Amnesty International yesterday labeled the Zionist entity an "apartheid" state that treats Palestinians as "an inferior racial group", joining the assessment of other rights groups which the Zionist entity vehemently rejects. "The Zionist entity's cruel policies of segregation, dispossession and exclusion across all territories under its control clearly amount to apartheid," said Amnesty's secretary general Agnes Callamard. "Whether they live in Gaza, east Jerusalem and the rest of the West Bank, or (the Zionist entity) itself, Palestinians are treated as an inferior racial group and systematically deprived of their rights."

The Zionist entity's Foreign Minister Yair Lapid strongly rejected the report as "divorced from reality" and charged that "Amnesty quotes lies spread by terrorist organizations". A year ago, the Zionist entity-based human rights group B'Tselem drew fire when it asserted that Zionist policies had been designed to enforce "Jewish supremacy from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea" and met the definition of "apartheid".

New York-based Human Rights Watch in April last year became the first major international rights group to publicly level the controversial allegation. The report by London-based Amnesty builds on those previous calls in asserting that Zionist-enforced apartheid exists in occupied Palestinian territories and within itself, where Arab citizens make up more than 20 percent of the population.

Amnesty stressed it was not comparing the Zionist entity's treatment of Palestinians to con-

ditions in apartheid-era South Africa but said the Zionist entity's conduct and policies met the criteria for the crime of apartheid as defined under international law. Callamard told AFP that Arab citizens "will not experience the apartheid in the same way" as a Palestinian in Gaza but that "the regime of apartheid" exists in both places.

The Zionist entity's foreign ministry, in a statement released Monday, called on Amnesty to "withdraw" the report. "Amnesty was once an esteemed organization that we all respected," said Lapid. "Today, it is the exact opposite."

'Open to scrutiny'

"(The Zionist entity) is not perfect, but it is a democracy committed to international law and open to scrutiny," said Lapid, who is also the Zionist entity's alternate prime minister. He also charged that Amnesty had an anti-Semitic agenda. The president of the World Jewish Congress, Ronald Lauder, said Amnesty's report "does absolutely nothing to offer a constructive way forward and has no real interest in promoting the human rights of Palestinians or advancing peace and a lasting two-state solution. "It will only serve, like previous similar prejudiced reports, to fuel the fires of anti-Semitism under the guise of political correctness."

Callamard countered that "a critique of the practice of the state of Jews is absolutely not a form of anti-Semitism". "Amnesty International stands very strongly against anti-Semitism, against any form of racism," she

'Regime of apartheid' exists in both places



JERUSALEM: Agnes Callamard, the Secretary General of Amnesty International (C) attends a press conference together with Middle East and North Africa Research and Advocacy Director Philip Luther (L) and activist Orly Noy (R) in Jerusalem. Amnesty International labelled the Zionist entity an "apartheid" state that treats Palestinians as "an inferior racial group." —AFP

said. "We have repeatedly denounced anti-Semitic acts and anti-Semitism by various leaders around the world."

'Avenues to justice'

Zionists have controlled the West Bank and east Jerusalem since 1967. Some 700,000 Jews now live alongside Palestinians in both areas, in settlements regarded as illegal under international law. The Zionist entity withdrew from Gaza in 2005 but has enforced a blockade of the Hamas Islamist-controlled territory since 2007. The International Criminal Court has opened an investigation into the Zionist-Palestinian conflict

expected to focus in part on possible war crimes committed during the 2014 conflict in Gaza.

Amnesty called on the ICC "to consider the crime of apartheid in its current investigation". It also urged the United Nations Security Council to "impose targeted sanctions, such as asset freezes, against (Zionist) officials most implicated in the crime of apartheid". It said the international community needed to "face up to the reality of (Zionist) apartheid and pursue the many avenues to justice which remain shamefully unexplored". Callamard told AFP that international "fatigue" to address the plight of Palestinians was "not an option". —AFP

UK PM safe for now, but future in jeopardy over 'partygate'

LONDON: British Prime Minister Boris Johnson is "probably safe" for now despite a scathing report into government lockdown parties, but his long-term future is "very much out of his hands" as police probe the claims, analysts said yesterday. Johnson on Monday apologized after his government was criticised for "failures of leadership and judgment" in allowing parties at his offices during lockdown.

His position has been hanging by a thread because of the steady drip of revelations since late last year, leading to an increasingly mutinous mood among his MPs. Senior civil servant Sue Gray published her report into the claims on Monday, but only a watered-down version as she has passed on the most serious accusations to the police to investigate.

This has given Johnson some breathing space, but "given how much is being investigated by the police, that is going to hurt him very hard," Simon Usherwood, political and international studies professor at the Open University, told AFP. "He's probably safe for the next short period of time but I think yesterday has really highlighted that it's very much out of his hand at this point," he added. The timeline "is probably weeks rather than months," he added.

'Mark of shame'

Despite being limited in what she could say, Gray still managed a stinging rebuke to the prime minister's authority, contrasting government officials' behaviour with the sacrifices made by the public during the pandemic. "Too little thought" had been given about how appropriate boozy events were and would be seen as others stuck to the rules, unable to comfort sick and dying loved ones with COVID.

"Some of the events should not have been allowed to take place. Other events should not have been allowed to develop as they did," she added. Opposition Labour leader Keir Starmer said the fact that 12 of the 16 parties, including one in Johnson's own flat, were subject to a police probe was "a mark of shame". Anand Menon, European politics and foreign affairs professor at King's College London, said Johnson was "slightly more in jeopardy" than before the report was published. However, he said the lack of any obvious candidates for MPs to coalesce around was helping the prime minister. "I think one of the reasons why he's still there is precisely because his MPs are unconvinced by any of the alternatives." —AFP

Justice on hold for slain Lebanese activist Lokman

BEIRUT: A year after the murder of Lebanese intellectual and Hezbollah critic Lokman Slim, his family is still searching for accountability in a country where crimes often go unpunished. "We really need justice for Lokman," his widow Monika Borgmann told AFP from their home in the southern suburbs of the capital Beirut, days before the first anniversary of his killing.

If his murder goes unpunished, it would be like "giving the green light to the killers, whoever they are, to continue" their crimes, she said, amid stalled investigations into his murder. A secular activist from a Shiite family, 58-year-old Slim was found dead in his car on February 4 last year, a day after his family reported him missing.

His body was found in southern Lebanon—a stronghold of the Iran-backed Hezbollah movement—but the culprits have yet to be identified. An outspoken activist and a researcher passionate about documenting the civil war that raged from 1975-1990 in Lebanon, Slim was a divisive figure. His sway over foreign diplomats in Lebanon often

Macron in no rush to make candidacy declaration

PARIS: France's President Emmanuel Macron plans to wait before officially declaring he will seek a second term in April elections, with Ukraine and coronavirus still high on the agenda, the government spokesman said yesterday.

This week's presidential schedule, released on Monday, sparked speculation that Macron might announce his candidacy on Thursday or Friday when no formal events have been planned, but spokesman Gabriel Attal ruled it out. "There are a lot of events at the moment that require his full attention... and do not give him much scope to express himself as a campaigner," Attal told Franceinfo, replying "no" when asked if it was time for Macron to formalise his bid. Attal said Macron was holding intense daily talks with world leaders on the cri-

sparked the ire of Hezbollah and its loyalists.

In several televised interviews, Slim accused the group of taking Lebanon hostage on behalf of its Iranian patrons. In one of his last TV appearances, he accused the Syrian regime of having links to the ammonium nitrate shipment that caused the catastrophic explosion at Beirut's port in August 2020.

Slim's family has received no updates from the authorities since investigations into his murder started. This is not unusual for a country where even investigations into the Beirut port blast have yet to identify a single culprit—a year and a half after the explosion destroyed swathes of the city.

'Information-gathering'

The judiciary is still working on gathering evidence from security agencies over Slim's murder, said a judicial source, explaining that investigations are still at an "information-gathering phase". They are yet to reach any key conclusions because not all security agencies have provided investigators with the necessary information, the same source added.

Borgmann, Slim's widow, said that the family has been left in the dark. "We don't really know where we are going," she said, expressing doubts over whether any progress will ever be made. Slim's family has called for an independent, international probe into his murder. It is a demand that Borgmann said is within reach after United Nations experts last year called for a credible



BEIRUT: German documentary filmmaker Monika Borgmann, the widow of slain prominent Lebanese activist and intellectual Lokman Slim, gives an interview with AFP at her residence in the southern suburb of Lebanon's capital Beirut. —AFP

and impartial investigation.

"The government should consider requesting international technical assistance to investigate the killing of Mr. Slim," UN human rights experts said in March. Lebanese politicians and media personalities have suspected Hezbollah's involvement in his murder, but Slim's family has never publicly accused the party of his killing. "Of course, I have my opinion who is behind (the murder)," said Borgmann, a film director, originally from Germany. —AFP

link" it to the October 1, 2016 attack, helped by digital evidence and witness interviews, it said. "The report concluded there are reasonable grounds to believe that the industrial chlorine cylinder was used as a weapon," the OPCW said in a statement, based on a report by its Fact-Finding Mission which probes chemical attacks in Syria.

Witnesses reported a helicopter taking off from regime-held Hama airport before the attack, on an agricultural area where a number of rebel groups were sheltering in caves. "Shortly afterwards, the helicopter dropped two barrels, according to a number of witnesses, while others reported being aware of one barrel only," the report said.

"Approximately 20 individuals suffered from suffocation and breathing difficulties." The inspectors found that "the cylinder ruptured as a result of mechanical force and released a toxic irritant substance", said the report. —AFP

770-km US megaflash sets new lightning record: UN

TEXAS: A single flash of lightning in the United States nearly two years ago cut across the sky for nearly 770 kilometres, setting a new world record, the United Nations said yesterday. The new record for the longest detected megaflash, measured in the southern US on April 29, 2020, stretched a full 768 kilometres, or 477.2 miles, across Mississippi, Louisiana and Texas. That is equivalent to the distance between New York City and Columbus, Ohio, or between London and the German city of Hamburg, the UN's World Meteorological Organization (WMO) pointed out in a statement.

That lightning bolt zig-zagged some 60 kilometres further than the previous record, set in southern Brazil on October 31, 2018. The WMO's committee of experts on weather and climate extremes also reported a new world record for the duration of a lightning flash. A single flash that developed continuously through a thunderstorm over Uruguay and northern Argentina on June 18, 2020 lasted for 17.1 seconds — 0.37 seconds longer than the previous record set on March 4, 2019, also in northern Argentina.

"These are extraordinary records from single lightning flash events," Randall Cerveny, the WMO rapporteur of weather and climate extremes, said in the statement. "Environmental extremes are living measurements of the power of nature, as well as scientific progress in being able to make such assessments," he said. The technology used to detect the length and duration of lightning flashes has improved dramatically in recent years, enabling records far greater than what was once the norm. —AFP

Chlorine used on Syrian rebel area in 2016: Watchdog

THE HAGUE: Chlorine was used in an attack on a rebel-held area in Syria in 2016 in which at least 20 people suffered breathing difficulties, the world's chemical weapons watchdog concluded yesterday. The incident near a field hospital outside the town of Kafr Zeita came shortly after witnesses reported a helicopter dropping at least one object, the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) said.

Inspectors obtained an industrial chlorine cylinder retrieved from the site and were able to "positively



PARIS: French Junior Sports Minister Roxana Maracineanu speaks during a session of questions to the Government at the French National Assembly in Paris yesterday. —AFP

opportunity for him to declare his candidacy between 10-20 February," one presidential aide told AFP on condition of anonymity. "The health crisis needs

to be behind us and we need to be neither in an international crisis nor on the threshold of a major EU event," the aide said. —AFP

International

Murder trial over Bangladesh factory collapse resumes after five years

‘We want to conclude the trial as quickly as possible’

DHAKA: Bangladesh has resumed the murder trial over one of the world's most devastating factory disasters after five years mired in appeals and court procedure, prosecutors told AFP yesterday. More than 1,130 workers died in 2013 when a nine-floor warren of textile factories in the capital Dhaka fell down.

The collapse of Rana Plaza — where clothes for top fast fashion brands such as Primark and Benetton were produced — highlighted unsafe conditions in the country's lucrative garment industry and triggered mass protests demanding action from global retailers. A court in 2016 charged 41 people with murder for signing off on building standards and forcing employees to work despite cracks appearing in the complex the day before the disaster.

But the case was halted for more than five years while several defendants tried to get their charges vacated, and the country's high court suspended the indictments of two local officials accused of approving the shoddy building. On Monday, a judge ordered the trial resumed for 36 of the original defendants — three have since died — while a prosecution request to vacate the two suspended indictments will be considered separately.

“We want to conclude the trial as quickly as possible. Already too much time has been wasted,”

chief public prosecutor Sheikh Hemayet Hossain told AFP. “The building didn't have any (construction) plan. It would shake when machines were switched on. And the owner of the building, Sohel Rana, used hired muscle to force the workers to go to work on the day of the collapse.”

Hossain said all of the accused except Rana have been free on bail. Rana's father, who was a co-owner of the complex, is among the defendants who died before facing trial, fellow prosecutor Shamsur Rahman said.

“Of course we want justice”

Bangladesh's economy has soared in recent years, largely on the back of its \$35 billion garment trade, which accounts for more than 80 percent of the country's exports. The industry is second in size only to China's, but fires and factory collapses are common due to lax building regulations and improperly kept volatile chemicals.

Its operators are also a powerful political lobby, and Rana's connections to the ruling Awami League party have been widely reported in local media. He became a nationally reviled figure after the disaster, with survivors recounting how they were slapped and threatened



SAVAR: File photo shows, Bangladeshi firefighters try to control a blaze during a rescue attempt as Bangladeshi Army personnel begin the second phase of the rescue operation following the Rana Plaza building collapsed in Savar, on the outskirts of Dhaka. — AFP

into working on the day of the collapse.

Rescue workers struggled for weeks to retrieve the bodies from the ruins, but some of those in Rana Plaza that day are still unaccounted for. “We haven't got justice for nine years,” said former garment

worker Rehana Akhter, 35, whose left leg was amputated after she was trapped in the complex. “Of course we want justice. They should keep (Rana) alive so that he could look after the amputees like me and all other victims.” — AFP

UN appeals for \$826m in aid for Myanmar

GENEVA: The UN appealed yesterday for \$826 million to get humanitarian aid to 6.2 million people in Myanmar in 2022, saying the country had plunged into unprecedented suffering since last year's coup. Exactly a year on from the February 1 military takeover, the United Nations said the economic chaos following the coup had left many unable to feed their families.

The UN estimates that out of 54 million people in Myanmar, 25 million are living in poverty and 14.4 million need humanitarian aid—including five million children. Of those, the UN hopes to reach the 6.2 million most severely in need, with a plan that seeks a record amount for the country—more than twice the money requested last year.

“The economic and political turmoil of 2021, combined with the devastating impact of COVID-19, has driven half the population into poverty,” Jens Laerke, a spokesman for the UN's humanitarian agency, told reporters in Geneva. “Many can no longer afford to feed their families because of job and income losses, and price increases.”

Myanmar's military seized power one year ago, ousting the civilian government and arresting its de facto leader, Aung San Suu Kyi. The UN Human Rights Office said that since the coup, at least 1,500 people had been killed by the military in a brutal effort to crush dissent, while thousands



YANGON: Vendors wait for customers in their stalls at a street market in Yangon. — AFP

more would have been killed in the wider armed conflict and violence.

“Appalling conditions”

Laerke said more than 400,000 people had been displaced since the coup d'etat. “Thousands of displaced people are living in appalling conditions, many in camps and displacement sites, others with host communities. And some have crossed the borders with Thailand and India or have sought refuge in the jungle without adequate food, shelter, sanitation, protection or medical care,” he said. He called for humanitarian agencies to be allowed access to displacement sites to deliver life-saving food, water and healthcare.

Ramanathan Balakrishnan, the UN resident and

are Japan's biggest trading partners.

A majority vote in the lower house approved the resolution, which expresses “serious concerns over the human rights situations” in China's Xinjiang region, Tibet, Hong Kong and Inner Mongolia. The resolution also calls on Japan's government to engage constructively on rights issues in China. In response, Beijing slammed the resolution as a “serious political provocation”.

The resolution “grossly interferes in China's internal affairs,” said foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian, adding that “China reserves the right to take further measures”. China has long denied accusations over its treatment of Uyghurs and other mostly Muslim Turkic people, including a US allegation it committed genocide.

Experts have estimated that more than one million people are incarcerated in camps in the Xinjiang region home to the minority. Likewise, Beijing has denied claims that Tibetans live under strict surveillance with the threat of jail or abuse for any signs of a non-Chinese identity, including possessing images of the Dalai Lama—their exiled

Without naming the Taliban, an official at Ariana told AFP the reporters were seized by masked gunmen in front of the channel's office as they went out for lunch. But he said Taliban officials “have assured us of a comprehensive investigation”. The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) also expressed concern over their whereabouts.

“UN urges Taliban to make public why they detained these ArianaNews reporters and to respect Afghans' rights,” it said on Twitter. Amnesty International, meanwhile, demanded on Twitter that the Taliban “unconditionally and immediately” release the pair. A Taliban spokesman told AFP he had no information on the missing journalists.

Missing women

A fortnight ago, two women activists went missing after taking part in a demonstration in Kabul calling for women's rights. Yesterday the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights expressed concern for them and four of their relatives, who are also

humanitarian coordinator in Myanmar, said the outlook was “grim” and many of the country's gains of the last 15 years were under serious threat. “2021 has been a traumatic year for the people of Myanmar, characterised by unprecedented levels of human suffering,” he said in the document outlining this year's response plan.

“Poverty is back to levels not seen since 2005, with almost half the population now unable to make ends meet.” He said more than 13 million people were now in moderate or severe food insecurity. “The outlook for malnutrition is dire unless we intervene now,” Balakrishnan said. “People are increasingly resorting to dangerous coping strategies to survive, leading to worsening protection risks.” — AFP

spiritual leader.

On Hong Kong, Japan has repeatedly expressed “grave concerns” over the former British colony's electoral system as China ramped up control of the financial hub, prompting huge pro-democracy protests.

In December last year, Japan said it would not send government representatives to the Beijing Olympics as it called on China to respect human rights and the rule of law. The move came after the United States, Britain, Australia and Canada announced diplomatic boycotts of the Games over what they consider to be widespread rights abuses by China.

Their boycott stops short of not sending athletes to the Winter Games, which start on February 4. But Beijing has warned the four Western nations would “pay the price” for the US-led campaign. Japan, which hosted the virus-postponed Tokyo Olympics last year, is sending Tokyo 2020 chief Seiko Hashimoto and Japanese Olympic Committee head Yasuhiro Yamashita to the Beijing opening ceremony. — AFP

missing. The Taliban denied knowledge of their whereabouts, and say they are investigating.

The UN said it was alarmed by what appeared to be a “pattern of arbitrary arrests... as well as torture and ill-treatment” of civil society activists, journalists and members of former government and security forces. A UN report this week accused the Taliban and their allies of killing more than 100 security and civilian personnel linked to the former US-backed government since returning to power.

Taliban officials have rejected the claims. Last month, the Taliban detained a well-known university lecturer and regime critic Faizullah Jalal but released him days later after a media furor in Afghanistan and abroad. Despite promising their second time in power would feature a softer brand of governance, the Taliban have slowly introduced restrictions on freedoms—especially for women.

Western countries insist the Taliban must respect women's rights to unlock billions of dollars in assets and foreign aid. The halting of aid has triggered a catastrophic humanitarian crisis in a country already devastated by decades of war. — AFP

News in brief

Flooding kills 11

QUITO: At least 11 people were killed and 32 injured on Monday after the heaviest flooding to hit Ecuador in nearly two decades triggered a massive landslide in capital Quito, authorities said. Torrents of water carrying stones and mud swept down an avenue in the Ecuadorian city, washing away cars and flooding houses and streets, according to images released by the emergency services. The torrential downpour caused a water collection structure to overflow, sending a deadly stream down a nearby hillside onto a sports ground where several people were practicing, authorities said at a virtual press conference. Quito mayor Santiago Guarderas initially said “there are eleven dead, 15 injured and we have eight collapsed structures”. But municipality authorities later revised the figure to 32 injured and added affected families had been placed in local shelters. — AFP

6 dead in Mozambique floods

MAPUTO: Six people were feared dead in Mozambique yesterday after they tried to cross rivers swollen by floodwaters in dugout canoes, police said. The accidents on the Zambezi and Revuboe rivers came in the wake of Tropical Storm Ana, which pummeled the region last week, leaving 86 dead in Mozambique, Madagascar and Malawi. Heavy seasonal rains have continued to hit central Mozambique, leaving rivers still raging days after Ana dissipated. On the Revuboe River, the tropical storm washed away a key bridge, forcing people to cross by boat. One canoe carrying 12 people capsized at the weekend. Eight people were rescued, but the rest are feared dead, including a three-year-old child, said police spokesman Feliciano da Camara. — AFP

Expulsion of French envoy ‘unjustified’

BERLIN: Germany yesterday criticised as “unjustified” the Mali junta's decision to expel France's ambassador and said it stood alongside its French ally. “Unjustified expulsion of the French ambassador leads to a dead end,” the German foreign ministry tweeted. “Need dialogue, not escalation for the shared goal of security for Mali and the fight against terrorism. We stand firmly by France's side.” The French government said earlier yesterday that it was reviewing along with its EU partners its military presence in Mali following the expulsion. Mali on Monday said it had given envoy Joel Meyer 72 hours to leave in the light of “hostile” remarks made by French government officials. — AFP

Haiti floods kill 3

PORT-AU-PRINCE: Flooding triggered by torrential rain in Haiti left three people dead and one missing, authorities said yesterday. Violent weather affected at least 20 districts across Haiti in recent days, flooding more than 2,500 homes and completely destroying three. The deaths and missing person were reported in the Nord-Ouest department of the impoverished Caribbean country. Cap-Haitien, Haiti's second largest city with 300,000 inhabitants, was hit particularly hard, with a number of neighborhoods flooded. However, a full picture of the damage is not yet available as travel in the city is still difficult, the country's Civil Protection agency said. — AFP

Japan's parliament adopts resolution on China rights issues

TOKYO: Japan's parliament yesterday passed a rare resolution expressing concern about rights issues in China, including the treatment of its Uyghur Muslim population and the city of Hong Kong, days before the Beijing Olympics open. The wording of the resolution proposed by a bipartisan group was reportedly watered down after lengthy discussions, avoiding directly accusing Beijing of rights abuses.

But it comes at a time of increased focus on China's rights record as the country prepares to host the Beijing Winter Olympics this month. Tokyo has sought to walk a careful line in its approach to China, balancing the pressure put on Beijing by close ally Washington. The United States and China

UN, rights groups blame Taliban for missing journalists

KABUL: The Taliban have arrested two Afghan journalists working for a local news channel, rights groups and the United Nations said yesterday, weeks after two women activists went missing. Since seizing power in August, the hardline Islamists have cracked down on dissent by detaining critics and forcefully dispersing protests against their regime.

Several Afghan journalists have also been beaten while covering rallies not approved by authorities. The Afghan Media Association—a newly formed journalists' rights group—said Ariana TV reporters Waris Hasrat and Aslam Hijab were picked up by the Taliban on Monday “and taken to an unknown location”.

Business

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 2, 2022

Boeing seals deals with Qatar Airways, launches cargo plane

Deal includes sale of 34 777X freighters, plus options for 16 more planes

WASHINGTON: Boeing launched a new freighter jet Monday while announcing a pair of major agreements with Qatar Airways, in a boost to the still-struggling US aviation giant. The deal with the Middle Eastern carrier was unveiled at a White House ceremony attended by top US and Qatari officials, and includes the sale of 34 777X freighters, plus options for 16 more planes in the latest incarnation of Boeing's storied dual-aisle 777 line.

Boeing said the \$20 billion value of the Qatar Airways deal constitutes the largest freighter commitment in Boeing history. The airline also reached an agreement worth nearly \$7 billion for a firm order of 25 737 MAX planes plus purchase rights for another 25 planes, Boeing said.

The agreements give a lift to Boeing, which continues to struggle with quality control problems as commercial aviation experiences a mixed recovery from the depths of the coronavirus downturn.

The announcements show that Boeing "serves a global need that in a post-COVID world will be coming back, and coming back in a significant way," Boeing Chief Executive David Calhoun said at the signing.

For Qatar Airways, the deals with Boeing follow an unusual public fight with European plane maker Airbus. Earlier this month, Airbus canceled the carrier's multi-billion-dollar order of 50 new single-aisle planes in an escalating feud over Qatar Airways' decision to ground its A350 widebody aircraft.

"Today marks a great day in the ever-building and strong relationship between Qatar Airways and

Boeing," said Qatar Airways Chief Executive Akbar Al Baker. "We certainly push Boeing hard to deliver upon our expectations, and the team at Boeing consistently strives to meet and exceed our expectations, giving the opportunity for us to be here today to launch the most significant new freighter aircraft for a generation."

The signing ceremony came as Qatar's Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani visited the White House, where President Joe Biden was expected to shore up the energy back-up for European allies as Washington pressures Russia over the Ukraine crisis. Qatar is a major natural gas exporter.

Hot cargo market

Boeing last week reported a \$4.1 billion quarterly loss connected to problems with its 787 Dreamliner plane that resulted in \$3.8 billion in one-time expenses. The company has suspended deliveries on the model due to a series of production problems. The 787's woes have dampened Boeing's comeback despite a surge in deliveries of the MAX last year, which was cleared for service in late 2020 following a 20-month grounding after two fatal crashes.

On the 777X, Boeing had initially launched the program in 2013 with a plan to bring the jet into service in 2020. But the timeframe has been repeatedly pushed back. Boeing now expects the first jets for commercial service to be delivered in 2023. The 777x cargo planes jets connected to Monday's Qatar Airways deal will be delivered starting in 2027, Boeing said.

Diem Networks' US CEO Stuart Levey said in a statement that the initiative made progress, but "it nevertheless became clear from our dialogue with federal regulators that the project could not move ahead." "Over the coming weeks, the Diem Association and its subsidiaries expect to begin the process of winding down," the association's statement said. The technology was bought by Silvergate Capital Corporation in California that is a go-to for crypto projects, and which put the sale price at \$182 million.

Silvergate bought development, deployment and operations infrastructure, as well as tools for running a blockchain-based payment network for payments as well as cross-border wire transfers. "As far as I can tell, Diem is dead," Enderle said.

Crypto boom

"As we undertook this effort, we actively sought feedback from governments and regulators around the world, and the project evolved substantially and improved as a result," the Diem association's statement said. Facebook developed the technology, initially named Libra, and then entrusted control of the project to an independent entity based in Geneva.

Facebook's crypto project Diem sold after pushback

SAN FRANCISCO: The Facebook-backed digital currency project Diem announced Monday the winding down and \$182-million sale of its technology, capping a years-long initiative that drew significant concern from regulators.

Facebook's announcement in 2019 of plans to design a cryptocurrency and payment system raised immediate red flags for global finance officials, who expressed a barrage of criticism about the security and reliability of a private network. "The idea of Facebook doing a cryptocurrency was a bridge too far for regulators," said analyst Rob Enderle of Enderle Group.

"They have made it clear they don't trust Facebook with what they are doing now, so sure as heck were not going to let it go into the money business."

Tesla recalls 54,000 vehicles to fix 'rolling stop' feature

NEW YORK: Electric car maker Tesla will recall nearly 54,000 vehicles in the United States to end a feature that allows the cars to go through a stop sign without fully stopping. This "rolling stop" feature in cars equipped with full self-driving software allowed the vehicles "to travel through an all-way stop intersection without first coming to a stop," which "can increase the risk of a crash," the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) said in a letter Monday.

Starting in October 2020, Tesla included the programming in the beta version of the software, which would allow a car to move through a stop sign when traveling under 5.6 miles per-hour if no other moving vehicle, bicycle or pedestrian were present. But after two meetings with the NHTSA, Tesla decided on January 20 to deactivate this program, and notified regulators of the recall on January 27. The manufacturer said it was not aware of any accidents caused by the rolling stops.

The company will recall Model 3 vehicles built between 2017 and 2022, the 2016-2022 Model S and Model X cars and Model Y vehicle produced between 2020 and 2022. Tesla will send out a software update to the vehicles remotely and at no cost to their owners. In its quarterly earnings results released last week, Tesla said the FSD Beta is now being tested in real-world conditions by more than 60,000 drivers.

Company CEO and founder Elon Musk estimated that fully autonomous driving software was possible "by the end of the year," a promise he has made in the past. The latest recall follows another last November for 7,600 Tesla vehicles to fix driver airbag risks and the larger recall of half a million cars in December for trunk issues. The company also agreed late last year to disable a feature allowing drivers to play video games while driving, after a NHTSA investigation. —AFP

Ethiopian Airlines to resume 737 MAX flights after 2019 crash

ADDIS ABABA: Ethiopian Airlines will operate the Boeing 737 MAX for the first time since a crash nearly three years ago killed all 157 people on board and triggered the global grounding of the aircraft.

Flight 302 from Addis Ababa to Nairobi plunged six minutes after takeoff into a field southeast of the Ethiopian capital in March 2019, five months after a similar crash in Indonesia left 189 people dead.

The twin disasters and subsequent scrutiny of the 737 MAX's faulty flight handling system—known as the Maneuvering Characteristics Augmentation System (MCAS)—amounted to the worst crisis in Boeing's history. State-owned Ethiopian Airlines, the jewel of the economy of Africa's second most populous country, had long said it would be the last carrier to use the single-aisle jets again.

In a statement to AFP, the airline said the decision to resume 737 MAX flights came after "intense recertification" by regulators in the United States,



WASHINGTON: Stan Deal, President and CEO of Boeing Commercial Airplanes (left), and Akbar Al-Baker, Group Chief Executive Officer of Qatar Airways, participate in a signing ceremony in the Eisenhower Executive Office building in Washington, DC, on Monday. —AFP

Richard Aboulafia, an aviation expert at AeroDynamic Advisory, said cargo demand "is about the only bright spot" in the dual-aisle plane market, where activity has remained more depressed compared with single-aisle plains. The 777X jets will be assembled at Boeing's Everett, Washington complex and will employ engines produced by General

Electric, which will also be assembled in the United States, US Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo said. She described the agreement as testament to "the thriving trade relationship between the United States and Qatar." Boeing said the 777X Freighter order will sustain 35,000 US jobs and bolster suppliers across 38 states. —AFP



After the defection of several major partners such as PayPal, Visa and Mastercard, the organization scaled back its ambitions, before renaming itself Diem at the end of 2020. The so-called stablecoin—a type of digital money tied to other kinds of assets—never launched. It was not clear what will become of related plans for Facebook-parent Meta to build a virtual wallet for holding cryptocurrency. "The combination of a stablecoin issuer or wallet provider and a commercial firm could lead to an excessive concentration of economic power," US regulators said in a 2021 report. —AFP

Sony to buy 'Halo' creator Bungie as gaming fight heats up

SAN FRANCISCO: PlayStation maker Sony announced a \$3.6 billion agreement on Monday to buy US video game studio Bungie, creator of hits like "Halo" and "Destiny", as a gaming industry battle heats up with Microsoft. Sony's deal comes weeks after Microsoft unveiled a landmark \$69 billion pact to acquire "Call of Duty" maker Activision Blizzard, which Microsoft says would make it the third-largest gaming company by revenue behind Tencent and Sony.

Bungie is based not far from Microsoft headquarters in the US state of Washington, and its "Halo" franchise is considered to be among the video games that contributed to the popularity of Xbox consoles. "This is an important step in our strategy to expand the reach of PlayStation to a much wider audience," Sony Interactive Entertainment chief Jim Ryan said of the Bungie buy. Since it was founded in early 1991, Bungie has created games for play on rival PlayStation and Xbox consoles as well as on computers powered by Microsoft Windows software.

Bungie is to remain an independent studio, making games for play on competing devices, according to Sony. "We will continue pursuing our vision of one, unified Bungie community, building games that value our community and meet them wherever and however they choose to play," studio chief Pete Parsons said in a release. —AFP

Sri Lanka food inflation hits record 25%

SRI LANKA: Food inflation in crisis-hit Sri Lanka hit a record 25 percent in January, the statistics office said yesterday, with crop failures and difficulties in financing imports leading to widespread shortages.

The island nation's economy has tanked since the onset of the pandemic, with the collapse in tourism revenue leaving traders unable to finance purchases of essential goods from abroad.

The government last year banned the import of agricultural chemicals in a desperate attempt to shore up foreign currency reserves, drastically lowering crop yields and prompting many farmers to leave their fields bare. Supermarkets have rationed rice, lentils and other essentials, while power companies unable to pay for imported fuel have been forced to impose rolling blackouts.

January's food inflation figure was the fourth consecutive record rise and nearly double October's figure of 12.8 percent. Overall inflation measured by the Colombo Consumer Price Index (CCPI) was also a record 14.2 percent in January.

The government lifted its agrochemical import ban in October after intense protests by farmers, but banks are still short of dollars to finance imports. Sri Lanka was banking on a post-pandemic recovery in tourist arrivals to help replenish its foreign exchange coffers. —AFP



ADDIS ABABA: Ethiopian Airlines employees pose for a group photo in front of a Boeing 737 MAX on the tarmac of the Bole International Airport in Addis Ababa yesterday. —AFP

the European Union, China and Ethiopia.

Ethiopian initially planned a flight to Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania, but because of bad weather it changed the route to a four-hour "scenic flight" in Ethiopian airspace. Airline and Boeing representatives were on board along with the US ambassador Geeta Pasi.

'Open wound'

The airline, which had four of the jets in its fleet at the time of the crash, provided a list of 35 other carriers that are also now flying them. "Our pilots, engineers, aircraft technicians, and cabin crew are fully prepared to take the B737 MAX back to the skies and we look forward to welcoming you on board," its statement said. The decision to wait as long as it did before flying the 737 MAX again was "really commendable", said Yeshiwas Fentahun, who was president of Ethiopia's independent pilots' association in 2019 but is no longer with the company. The loss of the flight crew—including its youngest captain, Yared Getachew—was traumatic for all employees, he said. "There were pilots who were close to the people who lost their lives in the accident, and it's really hard to say if everyone has moved past that experience," he said. —AFP

Business

In space race, Europe faces choice: Passenger or pilot

Race to send people to the Moon and beyond heats up

PARIS: As the race to send people to the Moon and beyond heats up, Europe faces calls to make a choice: Keep paying for seats on spacecraft or finally fly its own manned vehicle.

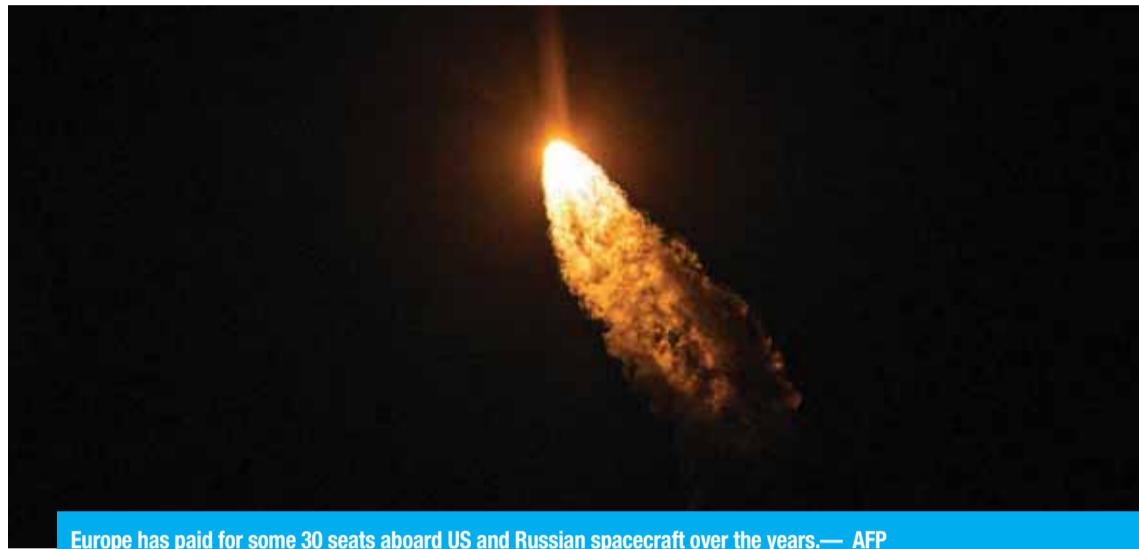
Imagine if Christopher Columbus did not have a ship to sail to the Americas, the head of the European Space Agency said recently, lamenting that the continent lacked a vessel to "explore the next frontier".

"We will be on the Moon and we believe we will be living there. We will use the Moon as an economic zone. This is a new frontier," ESA director general Josef Aschbacher told the 14th European Space Congress last week in Brussels. "The big question is, do we want, as Europeans, to be part of it, or do we want to be watching others going to the Moon?"

NASA is aiming to return to the Moon with its Artemis program by 2025, while China plans to send one of its taikonauts there by 2030. India plans an uncrewed test flight for its Gaganyaan program this year to prepare for a manned mission. Europe, meanwhile, has no manned vessels to speak of, having relied on US and Russian spacecraft to take more than 30 astronauts into orbit over the years.

Private companies have now become major players in the sector, with Elon Musk's SpaceX taking astronauts to the International Space Station. French astronaut Thomas Pesquet, who travelled to and from the ISS aboard SpaceX's Dragon capsule, has called for more ambition in Europe in terms of crewed flights.

European space firm ArianeGroup, owned by Airbus and French group Safran, says it is ready to develop a reusable two-stage launcher capable of carrying astronauts.



Europe has paid for some 30 seats aboard US and Russian spacecraft over the years.— AFP

Philippe Baptiste, president of France's CNES space agency, says such a launcher would pave the way for Moon and Mars missions, but he said Europe's space ambitions remain a political question.

That question takes on particular significance in the runup to a European space summit in the French city of Toulouse on February 16. An ESA ministerial meeting will be held in November to lay out priorities and budgets for the coming years.

Mere passengers

The ESA's 2021 space exploration budget stood at

735 million euros (\$822 million) — just seven percent of NASA's. Meanwhile, private-sector funding in space-related companies exceeded \$10 billion last year—an all-time high—and investors are directing more funds to Moon projects and further from Earth's orbit, according to the McKinsey consultancy.

Lacking its own vehicle, the ESA will seek to secure a spot for a European on a NASA Moon mission by proposing to develop a lunar supply lander, Didier Schmitt, the agency's head of exploration strategy, told Bsmart online media. Europe is already guaranteed three stays on NASA's Gateway, a space

station that will orbit the Moon with several European-built modules.

But even NASA has had to rely on SpaceX for flights to the ISS as the US space agency works on a new vessel to replace the mothballed space shuttle program.

German astronaut Alexander Gerst warns that using private hardware could see his colleagues denied full access to data. "I see that from my colleagues who were training now for example with SpaceX with the Dragon, it's a totally different game. They're not partners on an equal level anymore, they are actually more like passengers," he said. "They're not allowed to have access to all the information anymore, so it is a step back."

'Economic rationale'

Europe tried to have its own manned spacecraft before. The Hermes program, however, was abandoned in 1992 after delays and failure to meet cost and performance goals. Jean-Jacques Tortora, director of the Vienna-based European Space Policy Institute, said arguments in favor of a European space program lack an "economic rationale." "Essentially, it is about political objectives, if Europe has the desire to be a space power or not," Tortora said.

In last week's Brussels conference none of the ministerial level representatives from France, Germany or Italy—which together put up some 60 percent of the ESA budget—mentioned crewed European flight as a priority. That did not deter ESA chief Aschbacher, who said he is not "asking for a decision today or in three weeks." — AFP

CBK issues draft updated e-payment instructions for consultation

KUWAIT: The Central Bank of Kuwait (CBK) has issued updated draft e-payment instructions for public consultation. This effort aims to provide customers with services that add value, set judicious regulatory and supervisory frameworks, and keep abreast with advancements in financial technology and e-payment services.

The document includes enhancements on the instructions in this regard issued in 2018 pursuant to law No (20) of 2014, which gave the CBK full regula-

tory and supervisory authority on e-payments, as well as the authority to issue binding instructions in this respect. The instructions were updated to encourage innovation and support both existing institutions and startups. The Central Bank of Kuwait will offer direct support, licensing, and supervision of these companies to promote competitiveness. This is in addition to the CBK specifying risk-proportional regulatory requirements and enabling access to infrastructure.

Upholding the principle of transparency, the CBK is publishing the draft for feedback and comment ahead of their official issuance mid-2022. Thus, CBK urges the public and those interested among companies and financial institutions offering e-payment services and products to present their views and comments by 24 March 2022 at the latest and submit those via the following email (PaymentPublicConsultation@cbk.gov.kw). All feedback shall be considered to aid in finalizing the draft instructions, which may be accessed through the CBK website (<http://www.cbk.gov.kw>)

admitted he had been impatient about the long negotiating process to get the project off the ground, but said the pipeline could become a "nucleus" for East African oil. The project has been hit by various obstacles including wrangling over tax agreements and a change of heart over the location of the pipeline which was initially due to go through Kenya.

Museveni also dismissed the concerns of environmental groups. "Let the NGOs go and sleep in the bush if they want... There is nothing we are hiding," Lake Albert lies atop an estimated 6.5 billion barrels of crude, of which about 1.4 billion barrels are currently considered recoverable. Uganda's first oil is expected to flow in 2025 — almost two decades after the reserves were discovered—with full-scale commercial production planned for the following year when 230,000 barrels a day of the particularly viscous crude are expected to be pumped.

'Devastating' impact

In Uganda, the drilling is located in several nature reserves, one of which extends to Murchison Falls, the country's largest national park. TotalEnergies, formerly Total, said last year it had taken steps to reduce the project's impact on people and the environment, but conservation groups charge it will be devastating. The pipeline project would be "displacing thousands of households, endangering water resources for millions of Ugandans and Tanzanians, devastating vulnerable ecosystems and pushing the world further into climate chaos," campaign group 350Africa.org's regional director Landry Ninteretse said in a statement.

A report last year by the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) based on studies with Oxfam said the project would affect more than 12,000 families and communities had no idea if their land would be lost. A consortium of Ugandan and French NGOs filed a lawsuit in 2019 against the French company accusing it of failing to abide by legal obligations to protect the environment and the rights of the people affected by the project. In December, the Court of Cassation, France's highest, ruled the case should be heard in a civil court rather than assigned to a commercial tribunal, in what the activists said was an important victory. — AFP

Chinese, French giants seal \$10bn deal for Uganda oil project

KAMPALA: Chinese and French oil giants finally sealed a \$10-billion deal yesterday to unlock Uganda's energy resources and build a vast regional oil pipeline, a mega-project that has incensed environmental groups. The so-called Final Investment Decision should pave the way for the export of millions of barrels of black gold that was first discovered in 2006 in Uganda, one of the world's most biodiverse regions.

The decision gives the final go-ahead to the long-delayed project and was hailed by Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni as a major economic boost for the landlocked East African country where many live in poverty. Critics charge however that the ambitious scheme threatens the livelihoods of tens of thousands of people and fragile ecosystems in the heart of Africa.

The \$10 billion investment deal was announced at a ceremony in Kampala by the heads of France's TotalEnergies and the local arm of the China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC).

The companies want to extract the huge crude oil reserves under Lake Albert, a 160-kilometre (100-mile) long natural border between Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

'A masterpiece'

The oil would be pumped from Uganda in a 1,443-kilometre (900-mile) heated pipeline—said to become the longest of its type when completed—through Tanzania to the Indian Ocean port of Tanga.

TotalEnergies chairman and CEO Patrick Pouyanne described the controversial pipeline as a "masterpiece". "Today is the day we commit to invest \$10 billion in the Tilenga and Kingfisher projects and the 1,443-km long pipeline," he said. "From today with the FID, the project will fully enter into the construction phase." Museveni



Upstream development costs at Lake Albert are estimated at \$10 billion and would require a 1,443km electrically heated pipeline.



Unemployment hits historic low in Eurozone

BRUSSELS: The eurozone's unemployment rate fell to a historic low in December, official figures showed yesterday, as hiring in Europe rode a solid recovery and shrugged off the explosive spread of the Omicron coronavirus variant. The seasonally adjusted jobless rate stood at seven percent in December, the lowest level since the official Eurostat statistics agency began compiling data in April 1998.

In the 27-member European Union, which includes countries such as Poland not in the single currency bloc, unemployment fell to 6.4 percent in December, also a low since records began. "The eurozone ended 2021 — the year after the worst recession since World War II—with its lowest ever unemployment rate. A testimony to the success of our collective response to this crisis," said Paolo Gentiloni, the EU economics affairs commissioner. Previously, the lowest unemployment rates for both the 19 countries sharing the single currency and the EU-27 — of 7.2 percent and 6.5 percent respectively—had been recorded in March 2020. Year-on-year, the picture also improved significantly, with a drop from 7.5 percent in the eurozone, equating to 1.8 million fewer people seeking work. The positive development on the labor market represents a marked difference from the eurozone debt crisis, in which the bloc struggled for years to bring unemployment down to pre-crisis levels. EU officials attribute the difference to a radical change in approach in which the EU jointly agreed on a massive spending push at the worst of the crisis, instead of the austerity path chosen in 2010-2015. This would also help explain Europe's economic burst in 2021, in which the eurozone economy grew by a record 5.2 percent.

Divergences remain

Eurostat said that some 13.6 million people were unemployed in the EU in December, including 11.5 million in the eurozone. Despite the unprecedented low, wide divergences remained across the eurozone with jobless levels ranging from 3.2 percent in Germany to 13 percent in Spain.

France has seen unemployment steadily drop over the past months, but at 7.4 percent, still remains above the eurozone average. Italy's jobless rate stood at nine percent. Analysts said very low levels of unemployment in certain countries pointed to hiring struggles and could soon spark demands for higher wages. This would weave into the increasingly heated debate over the sharp rise in consumer prices seen in Europe, with bigger paychecks and higher demand adding to the upward pressure. European Central Bank chief Christine Lagarde insists that high inflation is crisis-linked and temporary.

But the ECB will come under further pressure to raise interest rates and cut back on stimulus if wages go up. "There is very little the ECB can do against the current inflation drivers, but once inflation expectations start to move up and wage growth accelerates, a rate hike will no longer be far away," said Carsten Brzeski of ING bank.

A rise in rates would be bad news for the eurozone's most indebted governments, such as Italy, France, Greece and Spain, as it would put added strain on their budgets. They will back Lagarde in her belief that inflation is a short-term phenomenon and that the eurozone remains economically fragile and needs the ultra-low borrowing price and stimulus. — AFP

Mozambique looks to revive gas deals stalled by unrest

JOHANNESBURG: Global energy giants were quick to halt their Mozambican gas projects when jihadist violence erupted on their doorsteps. After months of calm, reviving those multi-billion-dollar projects is a much slower job. TotalEnergies CEO Patrick Pouyanne visited Maputo on Monday, saying he was optimistic about the \$20-billion project.

"A lot of progress has been done, let me be clear," Pouyanne said, but added more work was needed to ensure lasting peace. "Security is not only a matter of armed forces," he said. "It's also a question to work together with the population."

Vast natural gas deposits were discovered in the northern province of Cabo Delgado in 2010, the largest ever found south of the Sahara. Once tapped, Mozambique could become one of the world's 10 biggest exporters. Since then, the Muslim-majority province has attracted three mega-projects: TotalEnergies' Mozambique LNG; ExxonMobile's Rovuma LNG; and ENI's Coral-Sul FLNG.

But in late 2017, armed insurgents began launching raids in the region, located near the Tanzanian border. Jihadists committed a series of beheadings and torched entire villages, claiming allegiance to the Islamic State. Since then, 3,500 people have been killed, and 820,000 have fled their homes.

Last March, insurgents made a surprise attack on the coastal town of Palma, the gas-hub near the TotalEnergies project, which the company promptly suspended. "TotalEnergies should return this year, if it's going to meet its 2026 production goal," said Borges Nhamirre, a Maputo-based researcher for the Institute of Security Studies. Of the three projects, only ENI's is on track. — AFP

Business

Oil spill in Ecuador pollutes nature reserve in Amazon

River that supplies water to indigenous communities also contaminated

QUITO: An oil spill in eastern Ecuador has reached a nature reserve and polluted a river that supplies water to indigenous communities, according to the country's environmental ministry.

Nearly two hectares (five acres) of a protected area of the Cayambe-Coca national park have been contaminated, as well as the Coca River, the ministry said in a statement on Monday. The park of around 400,000 hectares is home to a wide variety of protected animals and holds important water reserves, while the river is one of the biggest in the Ecuadorian Amazon.

"It hurts the head, it's nauseating, it makes you vomit," Benjamin Landazuri, a worker affected by the spill, told AFP. "I live with my wife and my son, and we couldn't sleep because of the smell," he said, adding his family had been evacuated from the area.

Heavy rains caused a mudslide in the eastern Napo province on Friday, during which a rock struck and ruptured a pipeline owned by private company OCP Ecuador. Neither the government nor OCP Ecuador have quantified the extent of the spill, but the environmental authority has described it as a "major" pollution event. "Our staff are monitoring 210 kilometers (130 miles) of the Coca River and its tributaries and coordinating containment and remediation where traces of hydrocarbon are identified," the ministry said.

Emergency committees, it added, have been deployed to Napo province and neighboring Orellana to "guarantee safe water for con-

sumption of the population".

'Water cannot be used'

OCP Ecuador said Monday that "small traces" of oil had reached water sources. "We are in the process of remediation of the affected soil and also of the vegetation, as well as those small traces that remained in the watercourse," OCP president Jorge Vugdelija said.

The company had built retention pools in which to collect the spilled oil, and managed "to contain the vast majority," he added. The recovered crude was transported in tankers to storage warehouses elsewhere. OCP's pipelines can transport up to 450,000 barrels a day from the Amazon to ports on the Pacific coast, although the company only extracted 160,000 barrels between January and November 2021.

In May 2020 in the same area, a mudslide damaged pipelines, resulting in 15,000 barrels of oil polluting three Amazon basin rivers, affecting several riverside communities. Indigenous organizations and environmental NGOs insist on more information. "We demand to know the number of barrels spilled and what the process of delivery of water and food will be for the communities," the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of the Ecuadorian Amazon (Confeniae) said on Twitter.

"It is clear that the river water cannot be used or consumed," it added. OCP said it had begun providing clean water to affected communities, and would follow up with food and medical care shortly. Crude petroleum is



PIEDRA FINA, Ecuador: Aerial view of a sinkhole and the oil spill in Piedra Fina, Amazonian province of Napo, Ecuador on January 31, 2022.

Ecuador's biggest export product. Between January and November 2021, the country extracted 494,000 barrels per day. The oil leak is the second to mar South American ecosystems in two weeks, after nearly 12,000 barrels of crude spilled into the sea off Peru on January 15. That spill, described as an "ecological disaster" by the Peruvian government, happened when a tanker was unloading oil at a refinery owned by Spanish company Repsol. It polluted

beaches, killed wildlife and robbed fishermen of their livelihood.

On Monday, the government in Lima ordered Repsol to freeze the transfer of oil between ships and the refinery "until technical guarantees are given that no other damage will occur in the Peruvian sea." On Friday, the Peruvian justice system banned four Repsol executives from leaving the country for 18 months and ordered the seizure of the tanker involved. —AFP



Company builds retention pools

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Daimler completes Mercedes-Benz rename after truck split

FRANKFURT: German auto manufacturer Daimler officially changed its name to Mercedes-Benz yesterday after splitting with its truck subsidiary in a major corporate shakeup. Re-branding under the name of the well-known luxury make reflects the group's new "strategic focus", chief executive Ola Kallenius said in a statement. "We want to make clear where we see the core of our company—building the most desirable cars in the world," Kallenius said. The former Daimler group revealed plans to spin off its heavy goods vehicles division in February last year, with the plans approved by shareholders in October. The new company Daimler Truck rolled onto the Frankfurt Stock Exchange in December and is targeting an entry into the blue-chip DAX index, where it would join Mercedes-Benz. Internally, Mercedes employees have been using the name since Saturday, the anniversary of Carl Benz's application to patent his motor vehicle in 1886.

The reorganization was carried out with an eye to taking on the different technological challenges faced by the two companies as the auto sector moves away from combustion engines.

stc bags 'Outstanding Leadership and Growth Award'

KUWAIT: Kuwait Telecommunications Company - stc, a world-class digital leader providing innovative services and platforms to customers, enabling the digital transformation in Kuwait, announced that it has won the 'Outstanding Leadership and Growth' award from MEA Business, the region's first augmented reality enabled business magazine, in recognition of the Company's various achievements and initiatives. The award was presented to stc during the Technology Achievements Awards 2021, after the Company met and exceeded the criteria set by the judging panel.

stc received the award after submitting all the supporting documents requested by MEA Business, in addition to the independent process executed by the MEA Markets team of gathering and assessing information from a variety of publicly accessible sources. The recognition also reflects the wide range of innovative offerings introduced by stc, including new-to-market solutions that leverage the Company's strong and widespread 5G network. Through its strategic vision of enabling digital transformation in Kuwait, stc focused throughout the past several years on investing in developing and enhancing its 5G infrastructure, providing individual customers and corporates with the highest quality solutions through its reliable high-speed connectivity.

Despite the unprecedented circumstances witnessed since the onset of the pandemic, stc managed to successfully market its offerings and continuously develop its

data showed Monday. Gross domestic product (GDP) fell by 0.1 percent in the three months to December from the previous quarter, when the economy had shrunk 0.4 percent, national statistics institute INEGI reported. The data "confirmed that the economy slipped into a recession over the second half of 2021, and we think growth this year will be weaker than most expect," consultancy firm Capital Economics warned.

A technical recession is generally defined as two straight quarters of falling GDP. Analysts surveyed by the central bank expect the economy to grow 2.7 percent in 2022. The Mexican economy contracted by 8.4 percent in



STUTTGART: The letters Mercedes-Benz are displayed in front of the former Daimler AG headquarters in Stuttgart, southern Germany. —AFP

While battery technology is essential to the future of passenger cars, "hydrogen will play an important role in the truck department", Kallenius said when

Daimler Truck launched on the stock market. The Mercedes-Benz group continues to hold a 35-percent stake in Daimler Truck after the spin-off. —AFP

network to provide the latest fifth generation technology both on a local and regional level. stc also strengthened its network through a parallel frequency spectrum, which in turn enriched the user experience in terms of coverage quality, speed and latency on local and international servers, ensuring seamless usage of its premium solutions.

The Company had also successfully complete the commercialization step of implementing end to end 5G Stand Alone (SA) as the 2nd most disruptive development of the comprehensive 3GPP 5G compliant network. The Company also accomplished its vision of offering the widest network coverage of 5G Sub 3GHz, while accelerating digital transformation through advanced Business Support Systems to fulfill a wide range of industry focused solutions. 5G SA delivered multiple benefits by including enhanced coverage, increased uplink bandwidth and improved network latency with international servers.

On the enterprise level, 5G SA enabled the possibilities of new services such as a 5G Dedicated Line, 5G Live Bus, cloud-based surveillance and artificial intelligence, as well as other solutions that provide a well-rounded experience, leveraging the savvy attributes of stc's world-class network and IT infrastructure. The end-to-end SA architecture paved the way for stc's deployment of Multi-Access Edge Computing (MEC) to become not only Cloud Native, but Edge Native as well. This evolution to 5G slicing based private networks aims to serve customers' needs by realizing innovative solutions such as enterprise campus, industry control, and massive IoT for an enhance experience with efficiency improvements and monetization capabilities.

Commenting on the award, stc CEO, engineer Maziad Al-Harbi said, "When considering the diverse needs of our customers, we aim to take on a leadership role in the market by offering flexible, automated, and reliable solutions that can accelerate their digital strategies. Our

range of solutions provide start-ups, SMEs, and enterprises with new-to-market products that enhance efficiency in operational functions, while streamlining the transformation of traditional ways into digitized concepts. This award recognizes the effort and hard work from the stc and solutions by stc teams in identifying lucrative and innovative solutions that greatly benefit the Company's diverse customer base."

Al-Harbi added, "We are proud to receive this award which recognizes stc's leading position in the market and identifies the various areas of growth the Company has focused on in the recent term. On behalf of stc, I would like to thank all those who played a role in implementing the Company's growth strategy, especially the Technology team, which led to this recognition. I would also like to thank the MEA Business team for their diligent assessment process and cooperation. stc will continue to leverage its digital solutions, strong network infrastructure, and network of international partners to deliver exceptional offerings to its valued customers."

It is worth mentioning that MEA Business Technology Achievement Awards is a multi-sector recognition awards agency that highlights significant achievements within the region. The award nomination process is organized by MEA Business Magazine, a leading regional business publication. MEA Business Magazine is part of Creative Middle East Event Management & Publishing, and official Media partner of Gitex Technology wec 2021.



Maziad Al-Harbi

Huawei ranked 9th on Brand Finance's world's top 10 most valuable brands 2022

KUWAIT: Brand Finance, a leading brand valuation and strategy consultancy, named Huawei one of the top 10 most valuable brands for 2022 in its recently published Brand Finance Global 500 2022 report. The report showed staggering year-on-year growth of 29 percent in Huawei's brand value to \$71.2 billion, allowing the company to rise more than twofold from its previous position of 21 in Brand Finance's 500 ranking last year, to 9th this year.

Every year, Brand Finance puts 5,000 of the biggest brands to the test, and publish nearly 100 reports, ranking brands across all sectors and countries. The world's top 500 most valuable and strongest brands are included in the annual Brand Finance Global 500 ranking - now in its 16th year.

As a whole, the tech sector is once again revealed to be the most valuable industry, with a cumulative brand value of close to \$1.3 trillion in the Brand Finance Global 500 rankings.

Huawei managed to reclaim its place amongst the top 10 brands, despite its smartphone business suffering heavily from multiple US sanctions. Brand Finance attributes Huawei's brand growth to its commitment to innovation, by heavily investing in domestic technology companies and R&D, as well as turning its focus to the electric car business while continuing to strengthen its cloud services.

Huawei continues to provide various innovative products to global consumers, including its latest flagship smartphones. The Huawei P50 Pro brings a new generation of imaging technology that breaks physical boundaries, while the Huawei P50 Pocket opens a new chapter in the history of foldable phones.

Mexico economy grew 5% in 2021, but ended in recession

MEXICO CITY: Mexico's economy grew by five percent in 2021 but headed into technical recession at the end of the year, as Latin America's second-biggest economy contracted for a second straight quarter, preliminary official

data showed Monday. Gross domestic product (GDP) fell by 0.1 percent in the three months to December from the previous quarter, when the economy had shrunk 0.4 percent, national statistics institute INEGI reported. The data "confirmed that the economy slipped into a recession over the second half of 2021, and we think growth this year will be weaker than most expect," consultancy firm Capital Economics warned.

A technical recession is generally defined as two straight quarters of falling GDP. Analysts surveyed by the central bank expect the economy to grow 2.7 percent in 2022. The Mexican economy contracted by 8.4 percent in

2020 — the worst slump since the Great Depression some nine decades ago, as soaring coronavirus infections led to mass shutdowns.

Mexico has been particularly hard hit by the pandemic, with 4.9 million Covid-19 cases and more than 300,000 deaths in the nation of 126 million. It is now experiencing a slower economic recovery than the United States and also facing soaring consumer prices, noted Gabriela Siller, head of analysis for the financial group BASE. The second straight quarterly contraction "confirms that Mexico fell into the so-called double dip or 'W' shaped recovery," she tweeted. "High inflation and the drop in GDP in the second half of

2021 suggest that the Mexican economy is going through stagflation, a situation that has not been seen in Mexico since the 1980s," she added. Mexican inflation hit 7.37 percent year-on-year in November—the highest since 2001.

In response, the central bank raised its benchmark interest rate for a fifth consecutive time in December, to 5.5 percent, to try to rein in consumer prices. INEGI said industrial activity, which represents close to a third of GDP, grew by 6.8 percent last year. Services, worth 60 percent of GDP, rose by 4.2 percent while so-called primary activities—such as farming, fisheries and natural resources extraction—grew just 2.7 percent. —AFP

Business

Gulf Bank in 2021: Leaders in training, employment and Kuwaitization

Gulf Bank's HR dept plays a pivotal role in consolidating position among Kuwaiti banks

KUWAIT: As part of its role in implementing Gulf Bank's 2025 strategy, Gulf Bank's Human Resources department year 2021 spearheaded various initiatives designed to consolidate the Bank's position as the leading Kuwaiti Bank of the Future. This year, Gulf Bank is wrapping up yet another successful year, highlighted by record growth in training, employment, upskilling, and Kuwaitization.

Gulf Bank's General Manager of Human Resources, Salma Al-Hajjaj, commented: "From the very start of the recruitment process, Gulf Bank is known for setting only the highest standards for our employees, a convention we adhere to throughout all stages of our employees' career progression. By continuously promoting training, development and continuing education opportunities, we aim to keep exceeding the levels of excellence that our clients desire and expect from Gulf Bank."

She added: "With the banking sector heading towards a new era of digitization, Gulf Bank has shown great dynamism in responding quickly to the requirements of technological development, aimed at transforming Gulf Bank into an integrated digital bank that rises to the level of the aspirations of future generations, and will even exceed them with the implementation of our slogan 'With you for the next 60 years.'" She stated that in 2021, the bank appointed 302 recent Kuwaiti graduates, including 133 women, and offered 29 part-time opportunities for local youth as part of the Bank's endeavor to creating a sustainable Kuwaiti workforce.



Salma Al-Hajjaj

Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and as part of Gulf Bank's 2025 Strategy, of which a primary pillar focuses on achieving social sustainability at the internal and external levels.

Female empowerment in the workplace also increases the caliber of talent and expertise within the Bank, including those of their male colleagues. Female empowerment also helps all employees build on ideas and create positive competition in pursuit of leadership positions. In turn, all of these efforts support the Bank's ability to make decisions that contribute to achieving its strategic plans and desired goals.

AJYAL Tech

Gulf Bank launched its new AJYAL Tech program in partnership with CODED, the first coding bootcamp in the Middle East. The program is a comprehensive coding and digital technology learning journey for Kuwaiti youth who have a passion for technology.

Euromoney Learning

Gulf Bank has partnered with Euromoney Learning to offer its employees access to industry-leading learning

Fitch education

In collaboration with Fitch Education and in line with Gulf Bank's strategic objectives, 35 Gulf Bank Priority and Wealth Relationship Managers received the Fitch Wealth Management Certificate, after passing a two-month program aimed at enhancing services for the high wealth client segment.

Partnership with PwC

In partnership with PwC, Gulf Bank also organized a six-month "Beyond Generations" program for middle management. The program aimed to empower 20 Kuwaiti employees in leadership positions, in line with Gulf Bank's objective of developing leadership across the bank, and at all levels.

Regulatory training

As part of its commitment to employee upskilling, Gulf Bank held an intensive in-house training on the latest Capital Market Authority requirements for all employees to ensure they are kept up to date. All employees, including members from various departments, took part in this training to promote a culture of compliance and continuous learning.

Employees, along with staff members from the Investments, Board Affairs, Internal Audit, and Legal departments, all participated in the initiative as part of the Bank's keenness to train employees on the latest regulatory requirements, and provide them with the neces-

sary expertise to perform their role effectively and efficiently.

Collaboration with NUKS

This year, and as part of its ongoing corporate social responsibility commitment to support and empower Kuwaiti youth, Gulf Bank sponsored the annual National Union of Kuwaiti Students (NUKS) conference. During the event, the National Union of Kuwaiti Students expressed their appreciation for Gulf Bank's sponsorship of this year's new student orientation for high school graduates who are planning to study in the United States.

40 field trainees

Gulf Bank also hosted a celebratory event for 40 field trainees who successfully completed their internship program across various departments in the Bank. This event was held in celebration of the employees' successful completion of Gulf Bank's integrated training program, which wrapped up in August 2021. The training program encompasses the basics of banking, and prepares trainees for their future banking careers, highlighting the different functions of the Bank's various departments.

INJAZ partnership

Gulf Bank sponsored INJAZ Kuwait's annual "Company Program" competition for the 16th year in a row, as part of the Bank's long-standing partnership with the non-profit organization. In light of the ongoing pandemic, this year's competition was held virtually over Zoom. Gulf Bank also participated in the JAHEZ career forum, which was launched by INJAZ Kuwait for high school and university students, in addition to recent graduates. The program showcases local and international community leaders' work experiences to the local youth, with the aim of educating them on the requirements for the modern day workforce.

Youth employment

As part of its commitment to social sustainability, Gulf Bank also hosted its first career fair since the pandemic. The event took place last week in the Manpower and Government Restructuring Program (MGRP) building, and came as part of Gulf Bank's commitment to offering employment opportunities to local youth. This year, Gulf Bank also successfully wrapped up the American University of the Middle East's first virtual career fair. As a gold sponsor of the AUM career fair which was launched last week for university students, Gulf Bank is affirming its commitment to creating job opportunities for Kuwaiti youth in an effort to realize the national development plan, Kuwait Vision 2035 "New Kuwait."



Salma Al-Hajjaj and Gulf Bank management team



Gulf Bank management team during a job interview

Gender equality in employment benefits

One of Gulf Bank's most important achievements in 2021 has been affirming its commitment to abolishing all kinds of gender discrimination between its employees, with the promise of full gender equality between female and male employees in terms of employment benefits, thereby consolidating the bank's position as a leading institution in Kuwait. As the first bank in Kuwait to implement this decision, Gulf Bank's announcement came as part of the Bank's commitment to the United

programs spanning various topics in the banking and finance sectors. Over the last five years, Euromoney has provided training programs for the world's top 10 largest banks, reaching over 25,000 professionals residing in over 80 countries. Access to Euromoney Learning's on-demand platform will encourage Gulf Bank employees to take ownership of their training with a simple-to-use, financial e-learning platform which encourages learning autonomy, and provides on-demand education that is accessible anytime, anywhere.

challenges, as well as providing on-the-ground opportunities for innovating and implementing a range of practical solutions for clean and efficient water supply.

As a CSR-focused project, My Mai supports UN Sustainable Development Goals 6 and 17, which promote access to clean, reliable, and affordable water supply, to help build resilient communities. Additionally, this project will divert approximately two million plastic water bottles from landfills and reduce water pollution by replacing bottled water with filtered tap water.

Carina Maceira, Co-Founder, TrashTag Kuwait, said: "This project will have long-term benefits for the health of the community and the environment. Kuwait tap water adheres to the highest WHO international standards. However, as contaminated household water sources require water filters, the public becomes forced to turn to purified bottled water, which generates substantial plastic waste and long-term environmental costs."

Yassine Lafhail, General Manager of Engie Solutions Kuwait, said: "We endeavor to contribute to the wellbeing of the communities where we operate as part of our CSR programs. Our engagement with the 'My Mai Project' leverages our expertise in energy and water solutions to improve the lives of residents through the provision of clean water. We look forward to expanding this project to more areas in Kuwait to help ensure community wellness, contribute to environmental sustainability by reducing plastic pollution and the associated carbon footprint."

Nehad Al-Hajj Ali, GM of Corporate Excellence at Al-Sayer commented: "My Mai Project reflects the importance of bringing stakeholders together to innovate and find new ways to address lack of access to clean water, environmental protection, and provide support to communities facing economic challenges."

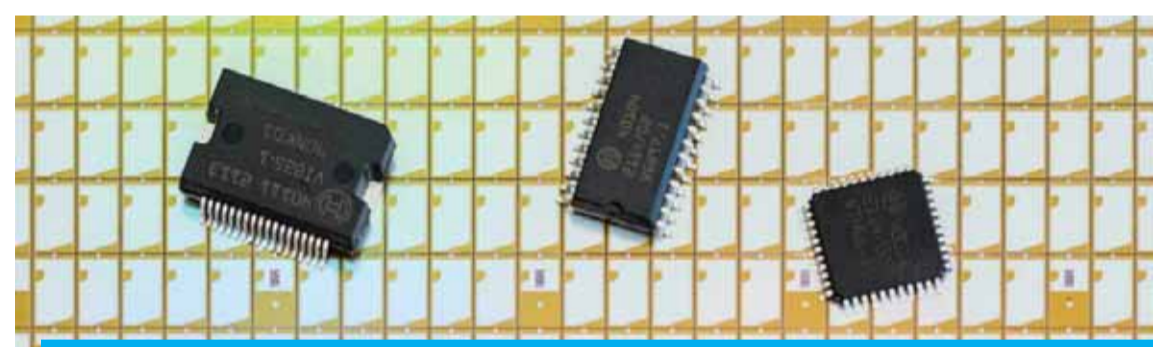
The TrashTag Kuwait, ENGIE Solutions, and Al-Sayer Holding partnership has established an innovative, sustainable and comprehensive model for addressing community concerns, by fostering volunteering and inclusiveness programs for the people, protecting the environment, delivering green energy and services and developing sustainable infrastructure and smart mobility solutions to support positive social and environmental change.

Al-Sayer, TrashTag Kuwait and Engie Solutions to offer safe drinking water

KUWAIT: The NPO TrashTag Kuwait, Engie Solutions and Al-Sayer Holding have teamed up for 'Project My Mai', an initiative that aims to build a sustainable, safe and clean drinking water supply system among low-income communities in Kuwait. This collaboration will include new tap water filter systems to be installed, or provide periodical replacements to filter cartridges for the health and wellbeing of the community. Employees, volunteers and partners have installed 250 water filters to provide over 2,500 people with safe and secure access to water.



Project My Mai applied an innovative "bottom-up" approach to guarantee mission success while ensuring viable access to clean water to beneficiaries. 15 volunteers contributed 550 hours after receiving training from 3 water filtration technicians. Meanwhile, local purchase of equipment has contributed to a circular economy while enriching local communities with knowledge and expertise on addressing water security



GlobalWafers makes tiny wafers used in semiconductors, like these manufactured by Bosch. — AFP

Taiwan chip firm's bid to buy German rival collapses

TAIPEI: A Taiwanese semiconductor technology company's \$4.5 billion deal to acquire a German rival collapsed yesterday after a deadline for Berlin to approve the bid passed without a decision.

The demise of GlobalWafers' attempt to buy Siltronic was welcomed by German politicians, who said the country had to protect its security interests. The Taiwanese firm makes wafers, one-millimeter-thick sheets of silicon necessary for the manufacturing of semiconductors that are the backbone of the global technology sector.

GlobalWafers had signed an agreement with Siltronic in December 2020 to acquire all of the German company's outstanding shares at a 10 percent premium worth roughly \$4.5 billion (4.0 billion euros).

But the deal needed regulatory approval from Berlin, which was not obtained by the January 31 deadline. "Therefore, the takeover offer by GlobalWafers and the agreements which came into existence as a result of the offer will not be completed and will lapse," GlobalWafers said.

CEO Doris Hsu called it "disappointing" and said the Taiwanese company will work to "analyse the non-decision" by Berlin. A spokeswoman for the German ministry for the economy and climate said in a statement that "not all the necessary investment review steps could be completed before the end of the period". Siltronic said GlobalWafers will pay the German company a termination fee of 50 million euros (\$56.1 million).

German politicians voiced support for the government's decision to drop the deal, according to local business newspaper Handelsblatt. "We do not gain technological sovereignty by selling off our silverware," said Hannes Walter, vice chairman of the Economics Committee.

Julia Kloeckner, an economic policy spokeswoman for center-right CDU/CSU parliamentary group, said the move was right to "keep our security interests in mind".

Governments are increasingly scrutinizing huge takeovers in the global technology industry, rattled by growing national security concerns and supply chain crunches due to the pandemic.

US regulators filed a December lawsuit to block a \$40 billion merger of graphics chip star Nvidia with mobile chip tech powerhouse Arm Ltd. The Federal Trade Commission said it was fearful it could provide one of the largest semiconductor companies with control over computing technology and designs "that rival firms rely on to develop their own competing chips". — AFP

Australia to end stimulus but holds rates

MELBOURNE: Australia's central bank moved to end multi-billion-dollar pandemic stimulus yesterday, but kept interest rates at a record low despite rising inflation. As the economy shows signs of recovery from the COVID-19 crisis, the Reserve Bank of Australia said it would wind up its unprecedented Aus\$350 billion (US\$250 billion) bond-buying program on February 10. But it did not fully slam the breaks on stimulus, holding off on an interest rate rise for now.

Borrowing will remain unchanged at 0.1 percent "until actual inflation is sustainably within the two to three percent target range", bank chief Philip Lowe

said yesterday. The bond-buying program, which was launched in late 2020, saw the RBA pour Aus\$4 billion into government bonds each week to prop up the stalled economy during the pandemic.

In deciding to end the scheme, Lowe cited Australia's strong employment figures and other domestic indicators. He also noted that monetary policy by other central banks was moving away from quantitative easing as inflation surges globally.

Canada's central bank was the first to end its program in October, while the US Federal Reserve began tapering its own in November. Over the 12 months to the December 2021 quarter, Australia's consumer inflation rose 3.5 percent with home buyers leading the jump.

But Lowe signaled the inflation spike may be short-lived as the "supply-side problems" that have plagued Australia during the pandemic — from empty supermarket shelves to vital medical supplies — are resolved. With a federal election looming, the RBA is expected to hold off on any interest rate rise until later this year at the earliest. — AFP



SYDNEY: Australia's central bank moved to end multi-billion-dollar pandemic stimulus yesterday, but kept interest rates at a record low despite rising inflation.



Lebanese people sit with their laptops at a cafe in Beirut. — AFP photos



A woman sits with her laptop at a cafe in Beirut.



A man sits with his laptop at a cafe in Beirut.

Lebanon power cuts turn cafes into co-working spaces

The music is often hushed and the atmosphere studious for the patrons filling Beirut's cafes these days, the most important things are good lighting and stable wi-fi. That's because they now serve as substitute workplaces for people grappling with drastic electricity shortages and internet cuts stemming from Lebanon's unrelenting economic crisis. Aaliya's Books, in the heart of the capital's once-fabled nightlife spot of Gemmayzeh, is one such sanctuary.

"Most of the time, if I come here, it's because I don't have electricity at home," said Maria Bou Raphael, nestled on a sofa. The power cuts, extending to 23 hours a day, have left many already deprived of an office by Covid restrictions with no option but to plant themselves in

cafes all day, especially as the quality of many internet connections has also plummeted. Generators—the only way to keep devices charged and connected—are too expensive for many Lebanese, as they grapple with an economic crisis that has seen the local currency lose more than 90 percent of its black market value in recent years. Cafes are therefore among the few businesses to have largely bucked the wider meltdown driven by corruption, capital flight and would-be donors' reluctance to throw good money after bad. Aaliya's Books manager Niamh Flemming Farrell said that on weekdays her establishment feels more like a co-working space, with some customers staying for a full day. The sense of community created by the service that she provides to the neighborhood is

reviving a cafe culture that had faded in recent years.

Doubling up as a bookshop, the cafe takes its name from Aaliya Saleh, the central character in "An Unnecessary Woman", a novel by acclaimed Lebanese-American author Rabih Alameddine. The narrative focuses on a 72-year-old who lives secluded in her Beirut flat, in the sole company of her books while the 1975-1990 civil war rages outside.

'Relaxed spot'

"We noticed that... our customers started working additional hours in our branches, fancying the locations that provide a higher level of comfort," said a spokesman for Cafe Younes, a roastery with 10 coffee shops mostly in the capital. Cafe Younes

opened a new large branch in Beirut's central Hamra district a year ago that includes a multi-purpose study room with large desks each equipped with power sockets. Barzakh is another multi-purpose cafe that opened recently on the first floor of a busy building on the Hamra thoroughfare.

Hamra used to epitomize a Beirut cafe culture that had its heyday in the 1960s but was gradually wiped out by bars conducive to more boisterous socializing. "I can see people running and yelling (outside) but I'm sitting here quietly in a relaxed spot," said fashion design student Mustafa al-Sous said, sitting beside a large window. The young man sees Barzakh as a haven from the doom and gloom that has been so pervasive across Lebanon in recent years, but also as a place where he can work.

Notebooks and laptops clogged the tables in this cafe, while tangled charger cables strewn across the floor threatened to trip waiters. "Originally we wanted to ban laptops," Mansour Aziz, the founder of the cafe-cum-library, which also hosts live shows in the evenings, recalls with a disbelieving smile. Many here, dragged out of their homes by the electricity crisis, now rely on the cafes for their social life, especially those who can no longer afford to party in the evenings. At Barzakh, patrons will often greet each other with a nod from across the room and come to know each other gradually. "I'm a very sociable person," Mustafa said. "I like it when people walk over to ask me what I'm working on."—AFP

Traditional UK sweet factory enjoys global sugar rush

Edward Gray sweet factory in central England evokes a bygone age where brass cauldrons steam with molten sugar and workers wrestle with huge chunks of gooey treacle, but its handmade produce now enjoys a global demand. The company—also known as "Teddy Grays"—dates back to 1826 when John Gray went house-to-house in a horse and cart buying homemade sweets,

before selling them to retailers. But it was his son Edward, an entrepreneur in the mold of Willy Wonka and Colonel Sanders, who built the business's name.

The small factory in Dudley now makes around five tons of boiled sweets a week, with products including rhubarb and custard, pineapple rock, strawberries and cream, pear drops, toffee and chocolate-coated coconut ice. But the jewel in the crown is its "Herbal Tablet", a menthol sweet that it claims has provided relief from "cold nights and mornings" for more than 100 years. "It's an acquired taste, but with COVID now, it relieves coughs and colds," explained Dave Healy, the company's marketing manager.

Secret recipe

The secret recipe is locked in a vault in a nearby bank. Two descendants of the founder are the only people alive aware of its contents. "They wouldn't tell me because I talk in my sleep," joked Healy. "It's all down to the blending, if you don't get the blend correct, you get an oily



Members of staff at the traditional sweet manufacturer Edward Grays of Dudley gather freshly-made Grays Herbal Tablets.

taste." The sweet was only really known in the surrounding area, known as the Black Country because of the smoke and soot of its industrial past. But the fashion towards local and artisan produce, coupled with endorsements from celebrities such as actor and writer Stephen Fry, has seen its fame spread.

"When COVID kicked in we opened an online sweet shop... just to basically generate some sort of movement of the stock," said Healy. "But we've had requests from America, Korea, Japan, Australia." A lot of the interest comes from those who moved long ago out of Dudley, some 10 miles (16 kilometers) west of Birmingham, and who are yearning for a taste of nostalgia. "They say in their emails they used to live in Dudley, used to love the smell of the factory," he said.

Another fine mess

Despite the incessant demand, the factory has no plans to expand, preferring to maintain its intimate feel and traditional

ethos. "Because the old-fashioned machines only go so fast, the only way you're speeding up is by putting on a smaller cog so it spins faster. "But you can't expand the factory because it's in a residential street. It is a museum-status factory... you couldn't develop it."

Healy warned that counterfeit herbal pills were on the market, and to look out instead for the logo of a Wirehaired Fox Terrier on the packet. The logo harks back to Edward "Teddy" Gray, who was also a champion dog-breeder and once won the world-renowned Crufts dog show. "In them days, the old Mr Gray was very much like a celebrity in his area," said Healy. "They were proper well-to-do, mixing with the stars like Laurel and Hardy," he added. "Apparently, the story goes that Laurel and Hardy actually stopped at the factory. "There's a house in the middle of the factory. When Laurel and Hardy came to perform at the Hippodrome, Ted Gray offered them somewhere to stop for the night." While having to sleep overnight in a sweet

factory might sound like a preamble to one of their calamitous adventures, the pair reportedly had a pleasant time and "wrote to say thank you for being such a wonderful host".

Soaring costs

Although demand is soaring, the firm is suffering from the current supply chain issues and soaring inflation. "We had terrible problems getting the sugar in October, then it went from sugar to glucose in December," explained Healy. "Glucose is going up 50 percent. Their gas bill has gone up 300 percent, the glucose people. "We couldn't put our stuff up 50 percent, they wouldn't stand it." Whatever the supply constraints, it is unlikely he will go without his fix. "I eat them all the time. Someone's got to test them, it's like a quality control. It's not a bad thing, though I wish it was a brewery."—AFP



'Sugar Boilers' employed at the traditional sweet manufacturer Edward Grays of Dudley make Grays Herbal Tablets in their factory.



A 'Sugar Boiler' employed at the traditional sweet manufacturer Edward Grays of Dudley makes Grays Herbal Tablets in their factory.



A member of staff at the traditional sweet manufacturer Edward Grays of Dudley places freshly-made Grays Herbal Tablets into jars in their factory in Dudley.



A machine in their factory of traditional sweet manufacturer Edward Grays of Dudley, or better known locally as 'Teddy Grays', automatically bags freshly-made Grays Herbal Tablets, in Dudley, central England. — AFP photos

Lifestyle | Features



This photo shows a 'shop cat' at a dried seafood shop in the Sheung Wan area of Hong Kong - a city where nearly 10 percent of all households have a cat or dog. — AFP photos



A pet dog being taken for a walk along the Central and Western District Promenade.



A pet dog being taken for a walk along the Central and Western District Promenade.

PET OWNERS GO PRIVATE TO JET 'FUR BABIES' OUT OF HONG KONG

Bags packed and ready to go, Hong Kong house cats Teddy and Newman were all set for leaving on a private jet plane—an expensive last resort for their owners as the city piles on pandemic restrictions. China remains one of the few places left in the world pursuing a strict “zero-COVID” policy, transforming Hong Kong, a one-time aviation hub, into a city where thwarted travel plans and cancelled flights are the norm. The emergence of the highly transmissible Omicron variant in recent weeks has also seen authorities ban incoming flights and transit passengers from numerous countries—pending plans for the already limited number of carriers still entering the city.

For Lee, a Hong Konger emigrating to Britain, it also meant that ferrying his beloved elderly cats Teddy and Newman out by commercial airline was no longer possible. “It is an exceptional situation,” Lee told AFP ahead of last week’s flight, providing only his family name. “If it was just my wife and I travelling, of course we wouldn’t take a private jet. It’s only because of our cats.” Typically favored by the ultra-rich, private planes are now a mode of transport desperate pet owners are turning to when departing the increasingly isolated city.

Animal travel company Pet Holidays said December’s flight suspensions alone left 3,000 to 4,000 cats and dogs stranded. “No amount of money can buy them a seat” on a commercial flight, said Fanny Liang, the company’s pet emigration consultant. For a chartered private jet, an all-inclusive package for a house cat and their human—runs to about \$23,100 at Pet Holidays, though Liang said the costs vary based on the animal’s size.

‘People have become desperate’
Once an international gateway, Hong Kong’s staunch adherence to mainland China’s “zero-Covid” strategy has disincentivised travel, including among its well-heeled finance community, with long mandatory quarantines in expensive

The impact of December’s flight suspensions was immediate for Olga Radlynska, founder of private aviation company Top Stars Air, who said she now receives dozens of phone calls from frantic pet owners. “This year in January, I can see that people have become des-

perate, and they are leaving,” she said. “Basically every flight is one-way only.” Over the past year, her clientele has shifted from the ultra-rich travelling for pleasure to departing pet owners trying to relocate their “fur babies”. Top Stars Air—which has a starting price of \$19,700 for one pet and its owner—last year chartered an average of two private jets a month. For February, Radlynska said she already had five flights planned to London, Singapore and Los Angeles. To

meet the costs of a privately chartered jet, pet owners are also flocking to Facebook groups to discuss common flight routes, hoping to corral others to help alleviate the hefty fee. “I’m wondering if anyone is aware of a jet leaving from HK to the UK next month? I’m trying to get two French Bulldogs home,” said one on January 13, posting a fingers-crossed emoji.



A cat sitting on a cardboard box at a flower market in the Prince Edward area of Hong Kong.



A pair of dogs on a lead in the Prince Edward area of Hong Kong.

hotels. Earlier this month, the government ordered a mass cull of pet store hamsters and other small mammals after one tested positive for Covid-19, adding fresh uncertainty for pet owners. More than 40 percent of foreign residents said they are likely to leave the city due to the travel and COVID restrictions, according to an American Chamber of Commerce survey.

Over 25 percent of companies said they were considering relocating offices.

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‘Do whatever it takes’
The jump in departing residents has also coincided with an uptick of abandoned dogs, said Hong Kong Dog Rescue communications manager Eva Sit. “We definitely think the emigration wave is part of the reason,” she told AFP, citing a 48 percent increase in

canines rescued in 2021 compared with the year before. “Dogs are our families and they shouldn’t be left behind like pieces of furniture,” Sit said. “Challenges can be expected and costs will be involved, but it’s always a matter of will to move with your dogs.”

Sarra O’Hara was initially “shocked” when she heard about people flying their pets out on chartered jets. Now she and her husband are considering it in anticipation of their own move to the UK in March, as cargo space for her two rescue dogs—Milo and Manda—remains up in the air. “I would never leave our dogs behind. You do whatever it takes,” she said.—AFP



Tiger breeding, exports flourish in S Africa

South Africa’s legal lion breeding has spawned a tiger farming industry for commercial exports, potentially posing a threat to the species already in decline, an animal welfare group warned yesterday. Breeding lions for commercial hunting and for bone exports towards Asia is legal in South Africa, but in recent years tiger breeding for similar purposes has become more common. A report by global animal rights charity, Four Paws, showed that 359 tigers—almost a tenth of the global tiger population—were exported from South Africa from 2011-2020. Around 255 of them were sold to zoos.

Tigers are not native to South Africa and enjoy no legal protection in the country, the organization said. There were “loopholes that were allowing the business model to change,” Paws’s wildlife expert Kieran Harkin told AFP. “The market being in Asia was already

there, demand was there, so it made perfect sense for the (breeders) to move over to the tiger, which was again even more lucrative than lions,” he said. South Africa has no official count of its tiger population. Four Paws is asking South Africa to halt the commercial breeding of all big cats, whose populations are declining partly due to trade to Asian countries.

“We are asking South Africa to stop supporting that trade... and be a defender of the wildlife, and not perpetuating the trade in species on the decline,” Harkin said in an online interview from London. He accused South Africa of flouting international laws that dictate that tigers should not be bred for trade in their parts. As the largest exporter of big cat parts, South Africa is being urged to “reverse that role and take on a leading position in protecting wildlife... iconic species,” Harkin said. Fiona Miles, director of Four Paws in South Africa, called for national legislation and international agreements to be “re-examined since they are clearly not working”. She warned in a statement that unless the threatened species were protected, “we put all big cat species at risk of one day, only existing behind bars.” — AFP

More than 9,000 tree species still undiscovered

Researchers estimate there are significantly more species of trees on Earth than currently known, with more than 9,000 species yet to be discovered, according to a study published Monday. “Estimating the number of tree species is essential to inform, optimize, and prioritize forest conservation efforts across the globe,” said the study, which was published in the US National Academy of Sciences journal PNAS and involved dozens of scientists. About 64,100 tree species have already been identified. But according to the study, which is based on a more complete database and uses a more advanced statistical method than previous ones, the total number of tree species is about 73,300 — 14 percent more. That means about 9,200 species have not yet been discovered.

Overall, the study said that “roughly” 43 percent of all tree species are found in South America, followed by Eurasia (22 percent), Africa (16 percent), North

America (15 percent) and Oceania (11 percent). Half to two-thirds of all known species are found in tropical or subtropical rainforests on five different continents, the researchers estimated. A large proportion of the species yet to be discovered should therefore be found in these same regions, where fewer surveys are conducted. Additionally, nearly a third of the world’s tree species are scientifically classified as rare, with low populations in limited regions. These species are therefore more vulnerable to the threat of extinction.

Only 0.1 percent of species are found in all five of the regions identified by the study. South America also has the highest proportion of endemic species, or species only present on that continent, at 49 percent. “These results highlight the vulnerability of global tree species diversity,” the study authors said, especially in the face of changes to the land due to human activity, and “future climate.” “Losing regions of forest that contain these rare species will have direct and potentially long-lasting impacts on the global species diversity and their provisioning of ecosystem services.” Species surveys are very time-consuming and present many challenges, including lack of access to certain areas and consistency of identification, and several botanists may characterize the same species slightly differently. — AFP



Dolce & Gabbana joins fur-free club

Italian fashion house Dolce & Gabbana announced yesterday it would no longer use fur in its collections from this year, joining a long line of luxury brands seeking more humane alternatives. “Dolce & Gabbana is working towards a more sustainable future that can’t contemplate the use of animal fur,” communications officer Fedele Usai said in a statement. But to preserve the skills of the master furriers, the company said it would “continue to collaborate with these artisans in the creation of eco-fur garments and accessories, a sustainable faux fur alternative that uses recycled and recyclable materials”.

Once a statement of wealth and status, animal fur has fallen heavily out of favor among designers in recent years, with fashion giants Chanel and Gucci among those stopping its use. Some like Armani have also halted the use of Angora wool due to concerns about cruelty in raising Angora rabbits and harvesting their fur. — AFP

Sports

Norwegians expected to top the medals table at Winter Olympics

Winter Olympics superpower Norway fears bittersweet backlash

OSLO: When does Olympic dominance risk undermining the very sport that conferred that status? The answer is when Norway's cross-country ski squad win a huge haul of medals at one Games after another. The Norwegians are expected to again top the medals table at the Beijing Winter Olympics, but in the Nordic country, fears are mounting about the potentially disastrous consequences of its utter dominance of cross-country skiing.

According to sports statisticians Gracenote, Norway is expected to take home 45 medals in Beijing, including 21 golds - almost as many as its two closest rivals together, Russia (11) and Germany (12). That would shatter its record of 39 medals, from Pyeongchang in 2018.

While that kind of success is cause for celebration in the country that invented the words "ski" and "slalom", some see dark clouds on the horizon. "What is the point of watching sports on television if there's no real competition? If there are three, four or five Norwegians who always finish on top, along with maybe a Finn or Russian in the best of cases, it's extremely boring," Halvor Hegtun, an editor-in-chief at the Aftenposten daily, told AFP.

Hegtun raised the alarm about the total dominance of cross-country skiing in a March 2020 piece headlined: "Norway has to become more mediocre". He told AFP: "Cross-country skiing, the discipline Norwegians love the most, is in the process of being destroyed by Norway's hegemony, ever since we've gone from being a charming little nation challenging big nations to becoming a crushing superpower"

Why?

Because there's a risk other countries may get fed up and stop broadcasting races, quashing interest in the sport and draining it of money and future talent.

TV silence

In 2019, Russian television stopped airing women's cross-country races, which was seen as a sign of frustration over Therese Johaug's almighty supremacy. "I try 365 days a year to become a better skier, to progress", said Johaug several months later after another slew of victories. "And then I'm told that I'm ruining the sport, that there's no sus-

pense, sometimes it's depressing when you have to defend yourself all the time." Norway has long been home to legendary skiers, including Bjorn Daehlie, Petter Northug and Marit Bjorgen who outshone the competition the same way Johaug and men's champion Johannes Kjaeabo do today.

Bjorgen, who has the most Winter Olympic medals of any athlete in history, is also "concerned" about the future of her sport. "It's very important that we have other countries from Central Europe and the rest of the world with us. It's not a good thing if there's only Norway, Sweden and Russia who are interested in the sport", Bjorgen told Swedish agency TT last year. Global warming is not helping either. "The less snow there is, the harder it is to recruit", she stressed.

Waxing in the 'Transformer'

While they may not be born with skis on their feet, as a local saying goes, Norwegian kids do start skiing very early. The country of 5.4 million people is home to no less than 1,000 cross-country skiing clubs. The first king in modern times, Haakon VII, even ensured he was photographed on skis early in his reign to

establish his legitimacy among Norwegians.

Nowadays, Norway's skiing omnipotence is attributed to a mix of individual talent, strong tradition, and money. "There's a large base of skiers and it's undoubtedly due to the fact that we have oil, we're a rich country", Vegard Ulvang, a star from the 1980s and 1990s said. "A lot of us can afford to devote ourselves full-time" to the sport, said Ulvang, who won three golds at the 1992 Winter Olympics. In a sign of its resources, the cross-country team has an enormous truck that serves as a mobile waxing station.

Like a Transformer, the trailer unfolds to provide a workspace of 110 square meters, and features floor heating, TV screens and a small kitchen. In fact, sharing Norway's waxing expertise is one of the proposals put forward to help other nations close the gap. "It's an idea that has crossed many people's minds, because we want the competition to take place on the ski trails and not in the (waxing) cabin", said Ulvang, now in charge of cross-country skiing at the International Ski Federation. "I really hope that in Beijing, we'll have as many multi-colored podiums as possible". — AFP

The annual Shooting Tournament begins

By Abdellatif Sharaa

KUWAIT: With the support of the family of the late Sheikh Sabah Al-Salem Al-Humoud Al-Sabah, Kuwait Shooting Sport Club will organize the annual Late Sheikh Sabah Al-Salem Al-Humoud Al-Sabah Shooting Tournament starting from Thursday Feb 3.

Secretary General of Kuwait and Arab Shooting Federations Obaid Al-Osaimi said Kuwait Shooting Sport Club "will not hesitate to immortalize those who served our beloved country and left clear contributions to the sport - which is an integral part of our heritage". He said the Late Sheikh Sabah Al-Salem Al-Humoud Al-Sabah was one of the pioneers of the sport and laid down the foundations of Kuwait shooting.

Osaimi lauded the major support Kuwait is receiving from the Honorary President of KSSC, President of Asian Shooting Confederation Sheikh Salman Sabah Al-Salem Al-Humoud Al-Sabah - who along with his family are keen on organizing the tournament annually to encourage and motivate shooters. Al-Osaimi said this year's tournament will be highly competitive especially with the participation of Kazakhstan's shooters who are holding a training camp in Kuwait as part of mutual cooperation between the Kuwait and Kazakh Shooting Federations.

Senegal beginning to live up to billing after slow AFCON start

YAOUNDE: After a slow start to their Africa Cup of Nations campaign, Sadio Mane's Senegal are finally starting to justify their tag as pre-tournament favorites heading into today's semi-final against Burkina Faso. The west African rivals meet in Yaounde with Aliou Cisse's team looking for the victory that would take them through to a second consecutive AFCON final, two and a half years on from their defeat to Algeria in Cairo.

The Lions of Teranga carry the pressure of being Africa's top-ranked national team and perhaps feel the weight of history more heavily too: Senegal have never been continental champions, while on the other side of the draw stand Egypt and Cameroon, the two most successful nations in the tournament's history with a combined 12 titles.

Senegal are fresh from seeing off a spirited Equatorial Guinea in Sunday's quarter-final, winning 3-1 in a game that showcased the strength in depth available to Cisse. After they had been pegged back to 1-1 early in the second half, Cisse looked to his bench and sent on two Premier League players in Cheikhou Kouyate of Crystal Palace and Watford's Ismaila Sarr.

Both went on to score. It was a first appearance at the tournament for the gifted winger Sarr, who Senegal brought to Cameroon despite him not having played for Watford since November due to injury. "I insisted that he should be in the squad and we had to fight with Watford for two months to get him," Cisse said. "He has worked hard to be fit and come back but I'm not sure if he is ready to start a game yet. We will go one step at a time with him."

Senegal's AFCON campaign began in underwhelming fashion as they topped their group despite scoring just one goal, and that was a 97th-minute penalty by Mane to beat Zimbabwe. However, they were affected by COVID-19 cases with Chelsea goalkeeper Edouard Mendy and defensive rock and captain Kalidou Koulibaly sitting out their first two games after testing positive. Midfielder Nampalys Mendy - who has only made one appearance all season for his club Leicester City - is another who did not feature in the opening two outings but has since come in and was the man of the match against Equatorial Guinea. — AFP



KUWAIT: Chairman of Mubarak Al-Kabeer Disabled Sports Club Ibrahim Al-Mashaan and Head of the Paralympic Seated Volleyball committee Nayef Saad Al-Bathaly visited Mubarak Al-Kabeer governor Major General (R) Mahmoud Bushihri to thank him for his support.

Conflict zone to slalom for India's only Olympian

NEW DELHI: At the age of four, Arif Mohammad Khan put on skis for the first time, just a few kilometers from the Line of Control that divides the disputed, conflict-ridden region of Kashmir. It was to be the start of a difficult journey that will culminate in him being the only athlete from India, a country of nearly 1.4 billion people, when the Beijing Winter Olympics begin on Friday. Skiing is in the family. Arif's father runs a ski shop and tour company in Gulmarg in Indian-administered Kashmir, one of the world's highest ski resorts that offers the chance to ski deep, fresh powder. It is reachable only by helicopter and the Himalayan views are breathtaking.

But the Muslim-majority region has been split between India and Pakistan since independence in 1947, with the nuclear-armed neighbors both claiming it in full and fighting two of their three wars over it. Territory controlled by Pakistan is visible from Gulmarg's highest sections and the area has seen violence in the past. "There have been real difficulties going through the long-lasting conflict and many other issues," said Arif, 31. "But if you have a dream and you want to live with your dream, nobody could stop you really," he added, speaking from training in Austria.

"You have to be brave," Arif showed early promise on the slopes, winning gold in his first appearance at the national junior championship at 12. Despite being home to part of the world's highest mountain range, winter sports barely figure in cricket-obsessed India's sporting interests. The country has previously sent only 15 athletes to the Winter Games. Usually short of the money needed for travel, Arif's training and competitive activities in Europe have been largely funded by friends and family.

And the conflict affects everyone who lives in



GULMARG: Indian skier Arif Mohammad Khan skies down a slope during a training session at a ski resort in Gulmarg, some 55 km north of Srinagar. — AFP

Kashmir. Rebel groups have fought Indian forces for over three decades, demanding independence or merger with Pakistan, while Delhi accuses Islamabad of facilitating cross-border attacks in the territory, something it denies. The insurgency erupted in 1989 - at times gunfights and deaths occurred on what are now Gulmarg's slopes - and for around 15 years tourism was reduced to a trickle, hammering the Khan family business.

Gulmarg itself is heavily militarized, with several Indian military and border guard units permanently stationed in the resort town and multiple checkpoints on the road from Srinagar, Kashmir's main city. Its highest gondola reaches 3,950 meters on Mount Apharwat, home to the Indian Army's elite High Altitude Warfare School - with whose soldiers Arif sometimes trains. Arif mostly competes and trains in Europe and has appeared in four world championships, his best result 45th in the giant slalom in Italy last year. — AFP

'Spirited on the slope': Downhill rise of Vlhova

BRATISLAVA: Before she became one of the world's top skiers, Petra Vlhova was a little girl with a speech impediment and a love for riding motorbikes growing up in the shadow of the Tatra mountains in Slovakia. Her father and manager, Igor Vliha, who ran a canteen at the Jasna resort where Vlhova made her first outings on the slopes, remembers that she learned skiing "way before she could talk". "We were not crazy about skiing. She learned to ski on her own, under the supervision of her older brother Boris," he said.

She was just three years old at the time and the family lived near Liptovský Mikulas, a picturesque town in northern Slovakia. Skiing was not her only passion - she also liked climbing trees, building snow forts and playing football and ice hockey. She soon realized she would need to concentrate on skiing to improve. Her first coach, Jan Garaj, remembers her as "spirited on the slope". "I remember her very first competition when she set off, quickly passed the first gate, then the second, and raced down fearlessly without making any turns."

"After crossing the finish line, she raised her arms and cried, lisping: 'I'm first!'," Garaj said. Since then, Vlhova has had a meteoric career and expectations are high for the Beijing Winter Olympics. In 2021, she won the World Cup overall title - the first Slovak skier to do. The 26-year-old specializes in technical events such as the slalom and giant slalom. She has six World Championships medals to her name but, so far, has drawn a blank at the Olympics despite taking part in both the 2014 and 2018 Games.

Screwdriver ritual

As she was growing up, Garaj always carried a screwdriver in his ski boots to tighten a loose ski binding now and then. It was how Petra and her first coach established a ritual. "Before her races, we took turns throwing the screwdriver into the snow with the handle end up. She loved the ritual, and stuck to it for years," Garaj said. From the age of 10 to 15, she trained in the northern city of Martin, coached by Rastislav Mazgut, who called her "open and straightforward."

"If she did not like something during training, she would immediately confront me with it. She only cared about becoming the best," he said. Mazgut revealed that as a teenager, Petra hated running but understood that it was necessary to stay in shape. When it came to ski practice, however, she never complained. "While many youngsters were pushed into skiing by their parents, Petra loved to ski and was keen on learning more," Mazgut said.

Petra grew up close to her brother Boris and his friends, their summers filled with endless shenanigans and their winters spent skiing. "We had a great childhood, we always got along well. We would play soccer or ride motorbikes together," Boris told AFP. "I still look after her," he added, saying he deals with her finances and also serves as a driver and cook for the team. Petra always has the same thing for breakfast, he said - rolled oats, fruit, plain yogurt with peanut butter - while she enjoys pasta for lunch and the occasional steak for dinner. — AFP



KUWAIT: Chairman of the Board of Kuwait Boxing Federation Mohammad Mansi Al-Enezi said Kuwait boxer Yousuf Jassim Al-Fadhli won the bronze medal in the 86 KG Category of the Asian Boxing tournament being held in Uzbekistan. Al-Enezi thanked Director General of Public Authority for Sport Dr Mahmoud Fulaiteh and his Deputy Dr Saqer Almulla for their efforts.

Sports

Premier League clubs spend \$398m in transfer window

Transfer window: The winners and losers

LONDON: Premier League clubs splashed out nearly £300 million in January - the second-highest amount ever spent in the winter transfer window - boosted by a flurry of late big-money moves. The arrivals of Luis Diaz, Bruno Guimaraes and Rodrigo Bentancur in the last few days of the month lifted the league's gross spending to £295 million (\$398 million) according to figures from finance company Deloitte. January 2018's figure of £430 million remains the record but this year's outlay is more than four times higher than last year's figure of £70 million, when the coronavirus crisis hit budgets.

The clubs' net expenditure - player purchases less player sales - of £180 million is the highest since the January transfer window was introduced in 2003. The five clubs currently at the bottom of the Premier League spent around £150 million, more than 50 percent of the total. Among the big moves, Liverpool signed Porto's Colombia winger Diaz for a reported initial fee of £37.5 million while Newcastle paid an initial £35 million for Lyon's Brazilian midfielder Guimaraes.

Newly wealthy Newcastle also paid Burnley £25 million for New Zealand international striker Chris Wood and signed England defender Kieran Trippier for £12 million from Atletico Madrid. Dan Jones, head of Deloitte's sports business group, said: "This transfer window indicates that the financial pressures of COVID on Premier League clubs are easing, with spending firmly back to pre-pandemic levels and remarkably among the highest we've ever seen in January."

"The Premier League continues to lead the way

globally, retaining its status as the world's biggest domestic football league in financial terms, once again supported by full stadia and securing strong overseas broadcast deals. "Other large European leagues are also edging back to higher spending, but it is Premier League clubs that have notched up the largest total spend in this transfer window, spending almost £150 million more than Serie A clubs, the closest competitor."

Total gross spending across Europe's "big five" leagues (the Premier League, La Liga, Serie A, Bundesliga and Ligue 1) reached 735 million euros (\$828 million), exceeding last January's total by 460 million euros. "In stark contrast to January 2021, the wider European transfer market appears buoyant," said Calum Ross, assistant director at the sports business group.

Winners and losers

Clubs spent a total of £295 million (\$398 million) - the second-highest amount ever spent in the winter transfer window - according to figures from finance company Deloitte. The five sides currently at the bottom of the English top flight spent more than 50 percent of the total.

Newcastle were the biggest spenders as they flexed their financial muscle under the club's new Saudi-led ownership while Liverpool were the only side in the top four to significantly strengthen. The most eye-catching move was Brentford's signing of former Tottenham playmaker Christian Eriksen, just seven months after he suffered a cardiac arrest at Euro 2020. AFP Sport looks at the winners and losers from the January window.

Winners

Liverpool: The Reds beat off competition from Tottenham for Colombian international winger Luis Diaz for a fee that could rise to 60 million euros (£50 million, \$67 million). Liverpool's front three of Mohamed Salah, Roberto Firmino and Sadio Mane, who have served Jurgen Klopp so well, are all out of contract in 2023, by which point they will be more than 30 years old. Diaz appears a natural replacement for Mane as a right-footed wide player who plays on the left side of the attack and has an eye for goal. He scored 14 times in 18 league games for the Portuguese giants this season and was top-scorer alongside Lionel Messi at last year's Copa America.

Newcastle

The Magpies were able to put the backing of the Saudi sovereign wealth fund to use to try and dig themselves out of a relegation battle. A series of big names were linked with moves to St James' Park, but in the end it was a rising star and three proven Premier League performers who made the journey north. Bruno Guimaraes' arrival from Lyon for an initial fee of £35 million will bolster Eddie Howe's midfield options. Kieran Trippier, Dan Burn and Matt Targett have been brought in to patch up a leaky defence, while the signing of striker Chris Wood offers injury cover for Callum Wilson and also weakens relegation rivals Burnley.

Aston Villa

Steven Gerrard was backed in his first window as Aston Villa boss and his two major signings

made an immediate impact. Gerrard's former Liverpool teammate Philippe Coutinho scored on his debut to rescue a point against Manchester United after joining from Barcelona on loan. Lucas Digne was frozen out by Rafael Benitez at Everton and came back to haunt the Toffees by setting up the only goal, scored by Emiliano Buendia, in a 1-0 win at Goodison Park before the international break.

Losers

Arsenal: Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang's move to Barcelona on a free transfer ended a stand-off between the Gunners' former captain and manager Mikel Arteta. However, it leaves Arteta desperately short on options up front in the battle for a top-four finish. Alexandre Lacazette and Eddie Nketiah are Arsenal's only remaining centre-forward options and they are both out of contract at the end of the season.

Tottenham

A deadline day swoop for Juventus pair Rodrigo Bentancur and Dejan Kulusevski was a late answer to Antonio Conte's call for reinforcements and is unlikely to satisfy the Italian. Conte, who joined the club in November, has made no secret of his desire to strengthen his squad, even though he has lifted them back into contention for a place in next season's Champions League. Loan moves away from Spurs, with little return, for Tanguy Ndombele, Giovani Lo Celso and Bryan Gil are a reminder of how more than £100 million has been misspent in recent years. —AFP

PSG thwarted in French Cup

PARIS: Paris Saint-Germain were eliminated from the French Cup on Monday as Marcin Bulka, a goalkeeper they loaned to Nice, saved twice in a penalty shootout to put his new team into the last eight. Nice, second to PSG in Ligue 1, won 6-5 on penalties after a scrappy 0-0 draw. That set up a grudge quarter-final against Marseille, third in the league. "It's madness," Bulka said. The last-eight draw, made before Monday's kickoff, also paired the two surviving fourth-tier clubs, Bergerac and Versailles. In both the other ties, a Ligue 1 team will host a Ligue 2 side as Monaco face Amiens and Nantes entertain Bastia.

At the Parc des Princes, both teams struggled to create clear chances, although Kylian Mbappe, who came on for the last 30 minutes, hit the bar in added time. "We were better than Nice," said PSG coach Mauricio

Pochettino. "We deserved better, we deserved to win. But we did not create enough to win. We should have been more efficient." "The penalty shootout is a lottery," he added. In the shootout, Bulka, who PSG loaned to Nice for the season after Gianluigi Donnarumma arrived last summer, had the final word.

The Pole saved the third PSG penalty from Leandro Paredes, but Donnarumma responded by parrying from Andy Delort. Bulka, making a rare start for Nice, then ended the contest by diving to his left to save from 18-year-old Xavi Simons. "I have all the respect for PSG because I am on loan from this club that I love," he said, adding that his familiarity with some players was not an advantage. "I know the players but it's more the feeling, I chose the correct sides and stopped them," he said.

It was Bulka's first appearance at the Parc des Princes, where he had never played for PSG. "My family was here, I'm very happy because it was the first time they saw a game," he said. Nice will next host nearby



PARIS: Nice's Swiss defender Jordan Lotomba (down) falls with Paris Saint-Germain's Portuguese defender Nuno Mendes during the French Cup football match between Paris Saint-Germain (PSG) and Nice on January 31, 2022. —AFP

Marseille in a rematch of a Ligue 1 game on August 22 that was abandoned after home fans invaded the pitch and then a brawl broke out

between the sides. Nice had a point deducted as punishment. The quarter-finals are scheduled for midweek on February 8-9. —AFP

First ever Kuwait Women Football League launched

By Abdellatif Sharaa

KUWAIT: The first ever Kuwait Women Football League was launched Monday evening with six teams: Tadhamon, Salwa Al-Sabah, Fatayat Al-Oyoun, Juventus Academy, Gulf Academy, Schools Sports Association and Higher Education. The league began with a match between Salwa Al-Sabah and Tadhamon

clubs at Abdelrahman Al-Baker field, which ended with Salwa team beating Tadhamon 7-1.

The start of women's league, which was delayed for two years due to the Corona pandemic was attended by member of Kuwait Football Association and the chairwoman of women committee Fatima Hayat who was pleased with the launch of the first women league for the Under-18 in Kuwait's sports history. She said the dream of many of Kuwait girls became a reality following preparations to ensure a successful and sustainable launch for the first ever women's league - in cooperation of KFA committees, clubs, and academies.

Hayat thanked the participating teams for their contributions and positive initiative adding "we hope that more clubs will join the league during next season." She said the launch of the



Fatima Hayat

first women league is a promising start for forming the Women Football National Team based on science and technical standards.



Classifieds

Hospitals & Clinics

Sabah Hospital	24812000	Kaizen center	25716707
Amiri Hospital	22450005	Rawda	22517733
Maternity Hospital	24843100	Adaliya	22517144
Mubarak Al-Kabir Hospital	25312700	Khaldiya	24848075
Chest Hospital	24849400	Kaifan	24849807
Farwaniya Hospital	24892010	Shamiya	24848913
Adan Hospital	23940620	Shuwaikh	24814507
Ibn Sina Hospital	24840300	Abdullah Salem	22549134
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Japan down Saudi Arabia 2-0

Red-hot Japan move closer to World Cup



SAITAMA: Japan's Yuya Osako (bottom right) falls as Saudi Arabia's Abdulrahman Al-Farhan (background center) looks on at Japan's attempt for goal during the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 Asian zone qualification football match between Japan and Saudi Arabia yesterday. — AFP

SAITAMA: In-form Japan took a huge step towards World Cup qualification with a 2-0 home win over group leaders Saudi Arabia yesterday. Liverpool forward Takumi Minamino gave the four-time Asian champions the lead midway through the first half, before Junya Ito bagged another shortly after the break in Saitama, north of Tokyo. The Saudis went into the game four points clear of Japan at the top of Group B, knowing a win would seal their place in Qatar.

But Japan's victory instead set up a tense battle

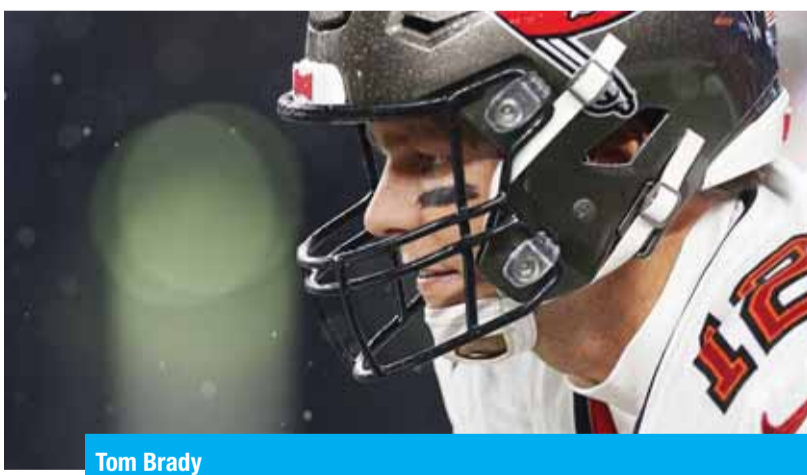
for the two automatic qualifying spots, with two games remaining and Australia also still in the hunt. The Socceroos were in action away to Oman later in the day. Japan face Australia in a high-stakes showdown in Sydney on March 24, before finishing their campaign at home to bottom side Vietnam. "If we keep winning then nothing anyone else does can affect us," said Japan manager Hajime Moriyasu. "I want us to prepare as best we can for the Australia game so that we can win and claim our World Cup spot ourselves."

Japan started the qualifying campaign with two losses from their first three games, but have now won five in a row. Again shrugging off the absence of key defensive pair Maya Yoshida and Takehiro Tomiyasu, the home side started strongly and took the lead in the 31st minute. Ito burst clear of a Saudi defender down the right to square a low cross that Yuya Osako left for Minamino, and the Liverpool man's shot looped up off the goalkeeper and in.

Ito then got himself on the scoresheet-his

fourth goal in four games—slamming the ball home from the edge of the area in the 50th minute. The Saudis, who were rocked by a 23rd-minute injury to midfielder Abdulrahman Al-Malki, next travel to China before finishing their campaign at home to Australia. "We knew before starting these qualifiers that it would be a big fight between these three teams," said Saudi manager Herve Renard. "There are still some very important games for the three teams to make the difference and qualify for the World Cup." — AFP

NFL star Tom Brady confirms retirement



Tom Brady

LOS ANGELES: NFL icon Tom Brady confirmed his retirement from the sport yesterday, officially bringing the curtain down on a glittering 22-season career. The 44-year-old Tampa Bay Buccaneers superstar, widely regarded as the greatest quarterback in history, made the announcement in a post on Instagram.

Brady, winner of a record seven Super Bowls, said he was quitting the sport after deciding he could no longer make the "competitive commitment" to continue. "I have always believed the sport of football is an 'all-in' proposition—if a 100% competitive commitment isn't there, you won't succeed, and success is what I love so much about our game," Brady wrote.

"There is a physical, mental and emotional challenge every single day that has allowed me to maximize my highest potential... This is difficult for

me to write, but here it goes: I am not going to make that competitive commitment anymore. "I have loved my NFL career, and now it is time to focus my time and energy on other things that require my attention." Brady's announcement draws a line under three days of feverish speculation that he was preparing to call time on his career.

News of his imminent retirement had been reported by ESPN citing multiple sources close to the player on Saturday. However Brady did not comment with other reports saying he had not decided one way or another. On Monday, the former New England Patriots star had been coy during an appearance on his own podcast, saying he was considering his future on a day-to-day basis. "I think when the time's right I'll be ready to make a decision one way or another, just like I said last week," he said. — AFP

Red-hot Sixers slip past Grizzlies; Curry powers Warriors

LOS ANGELES: Tyrese Maxey and Tobias Harris combined for 64 points as the Philadelphia 76ers won their fifth straight game with a 122-119 overtime victory over the Memphis Grizzlies in a clash between two of the hottest teams in the NBA on Monday. Maxey scored 33 points and Harris finished with 31 points for the Sixers, who won despite being without their leading scorer Joel Embiid. "Our motto tonight was don't let them punk us," said Maxey.

Maxey, who also had eight assists and four blocked shots, scored the go-ahead basket with 26 seconds left in the fourth quarter in front of a crowd of 20,400 at the Wells Fargo Center in Philadelphia. Ja Morant led the Grizzlies with 37 points and Desmond Bane added 34, including five points in overtime. The Sixers and the Grizzlies have been two of the best teams in the league since Christmas. Embiid has been the catalyst for Philadelphia during the surge which has seen them win 15 of their last 18 games.

He did not play against Memphis on Monday because the team wanted to give him the night off. Tobias Harris produced 31 points and Andre Drummond had 16 points and 23 rebounds in the win. Jaren Jackson tallied 18 and Steven Adams grabbed 12 rebounds for Memphis, who had their three-game winning streak snapped. The Grizzlies have won 12 of 15 in January but their difficult schedule finally caught up with them against the Sixers.

Maxey, who went to the University of Kentucky, says he enjoys the challenge of



PHILADELPHIA: Ja Morant #12 of the Memphis Grizzlies shoots the ball against the Philadelphia 76ers on January 31, 2022 at Wells Fargo Center in Philadelphia. — AFP

going up against an elite guard like Bane, who played college at Texas Christian University. "You circle some of these games on the calendar because it is a marquee match-up," Maxey said. "Bane is a great player. He came out of my class. Today I wanted to get the win and put the world on notice as well."

Elsewhere, Stephen Curry scored 40 points, including 21 in the final quarter, as the Golden State Warriors won their sixth straight contest with a 122-108 blowout victory over the mistake-prone Houston Rockets. Curry also had nine assists and five rebounds and made seven three-pointers en route to posting his sixth 40-point game of the season. Andrew Wiggins had 23 points for Golden State who shot 53.8 percent from the floor and 42.5 percent from beyond the arc.

The Warriors sent Houston to their fourth consecutive loss and 11th straight

defeat on their home court. Curry carried the offensive load in the fourth, shooting seven-of-10 from the field and four-of-seven from three point range. Wiggins grabbed five rebounds and shot eight of 14 in the win. Christian Wood (24 points, 13 rebounds) and Kevin Porter (17 points, 11 assists) posted double-doubles for the Rockets, who dug themselves a huge hole after committing eight third quarter turnovers.

In Boston, Jaylen Brown scored a game-high 29 points and Jayson Tatum contributed 20 points and 12 rebounds as the Boston Celtics thrashed the Miami Heat 122-92. Marcus Smart added 16 points and seven assists and Al Horford contributed 14 points and nine boards for the Celtics, who have beaten the Heat twice this season. Miami struggled to score with forward Jimmy Butler out due to a right toe injury. — AFP