

4 Street cleaner juggles jobs in Kuwait to send money home



7 Afghanistan universities reopen with trickle of women attending



13 Queen Elizabeth II to mark 70 years on the throne



16 Iran female skier cuts icy path to Beijing Olympics



60+ expat annual health insurance set at KD 500

MPs call to lift COVID curbs • Speaker hails medics • Health minister urges caution



KUWAIT: Health Minister Khaled Al-Saeed speaks during a National Assembly session yesterday. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: Expatriates aged over 60 without a university degree will have to pay KD 500 in annual health insurance to go with the KD 250 annual fee for the renewal of their work permits, the Insurance Regulatory Unit said yesterday. The insurance charges were set following meetings by the Insurance Regulatory Unit, which groups insurance companies, with the Public Authority for Manpower, the agency that regulates the affairs of foreign workers in the private sector, the unit said.

The insurance policy will cover the medical treatment of insured residents at private hospitals and clinics for a maximum amount of KD 10,000 per year, KD 8,000 of which is for coverage at hospitals. The insured residents are fully covered for treatment at hospitals, which includes hospital stays, cost of doctors' consultations, surgeries and radiology services. The policy covers the treatment of chronic diseases.

The policy allocates KD 1,500 annually for treatment at outpatient clinics including medicines - at a maximum of KD 300 per year, medical examinations, one-day surgeries and others. The policy also allo-

cates KD 500 for primary dental treatment that includes fillings, lab tests, drugs and gum treatment. According to the policy, treatment at hospitals is fully covered, but patients are required to pay 10 percent for each doctor's visit, diagnostic tests and medicines at outpatient clinics, along with 10 percent for dental treatment.

Meanwhile, MPs yesterday called on the health authorities to ease coronavirus restrictions including lifting restrictions on unvaccinated people and replace it with a PCR test to enter facilities. They also demanded to stop asking citizens to undergo PCR tests while returning from abroad. The calls came during a special debate called by lawmakers on the measures taken during the coronavirus pandemic and its harmful impact on the country.

Assembly Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem sent warm greetings to the health minister, medical staff and the former health minister for their great efforts in fighting the pandemic. He denied allegations that the pandemic has been exploited for political purposes in the Assembly, adding the pandemic should not be misused to destroy education, health or the economy.

Continued on Page 2

News in brief

12 migrants die on Turkey border

ISTANBUL: Twelve migrants froze to death after being stripped of their clothes and 'pushed back' by Greek border guards, Turkey's interior minister said yesterday. Suleyman Soylu posted blurred images on Twitter showing bodies lying by the side of the road. The "EU is remediless, weak and void of humane feelings", he added. — AFP (See Page 5)

Subvariant in 57 countries

GENEVA: A subvariant of the highly contagious Omicron coronavirus strain, which some studies indicate could be even more infectious than the original version, has been detected in 57 countries, the WHO said yesterday. It said there has been a clear rise in cases involving the BA.2 subvariant, including on the spike protein that dots the virus' surface and is key to entering human cells. — AFP

Egypt signs \$1.7bn howitzer deal

CAIRO: Egypt has signed a \$1.66 billion deal for South Korean howitzers, the military said yesterday, a week after Washington approved a major arms sale to Cairo. The memorandum of understanding was signed on Tuesday during a ceremony attended by Defense Minister Mohamed Zaki and the head of South Korea's Defense Acquisition Program Administration, Kang Eun-Ho. — AFP

Commanders new name of Redskins

WASHINGTON: Commanders will be the new name of the NFL's Washington Football Team, the club announced yesterday, completing a name change after dropping the controversial "Redskins" in 2020 over racist connotations. The reveal was made at FedEx Field, the team's home stadium, before a national television audience on NBC's Today show. The move comes 20 months after the club "retired" the name Redskins after sponsors began pressuring the team to make a change. It opted for Washington Football Team for the past two seasons while a decision on a new name was considered. — AFP

US to send warship, fighter jets to UAE after Yemen attacks

DUBAI: The United States will send a warship and fighter jets to help defend the United Arab Emirates, officials said yesterday, after a series of missile attacks by Yemeni rebels left three dead in the wealthy Gulf state. The deployment, to "assist the UAE against the current threat", follows a phone call between Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, the US embassy in the UAE said.

OPEC+ backs another modest oil output hike

LONDON: Top oil-producing countries led by Saudi Arabia and Russia announced another modest increase in output yesterday despite soaring crude prices and geopolitical tensions rattling the markets. The 23-nation OPEC+ group said in a statement that it will increase production by 400,000 barrels per

day in March, the same amount as in previous months. The group, which includes the 13 members of the Saudi-led Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and their 10 allies, including Russia, has resisted US pressure to further boost production to tame prices. OPEC+ said in its statement following a ministerial videoconference that the decision was made "in view of current oil market fundamentals and the consensus on the outlook".

The alliance's prudent approach dates back to the spring of 2021 as demand recovered after drastic 2020 cuts in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. The announcement yesterday "was hardly surprising, as the group has rigidly followed this



This US Air Force file photo shows an F-35 Lightning II jet assigned to Hill Air Force Base, Utah flying above an undisclosed location. — AFP

approach since it was first agreed upon, even in December when oil prices plunged following the emergence of Omicron," said Edward Gardner, commodities expert at Capital Economics. "What matters going forward is whether OPEC+ can keep up with its planned production increases," he said.

Oil prices hit seven-year highs in January, with the main international crude contract, Brent, topping \$90. Prices are now hovering under \$90. Victoria Scholar, an expert at Interactive Investor, said she expected "further gains" due to solid demand and "drip-feed production increases" by OPEC+. OPEC+ is already struggling to meet its

Continued on Page 2

Turkey strikes Kurd targets in Iraq, Syria

BEIRUT: Turkey said yesterday it launched deadly strikes against Kurdish targets in Iraq and Syria, where Kurd forces have been left reeling from the largest Islamic State group attack in nearly three years. The raids on Tuesday night targeted shelters, tunnels, caves, ammunition depots, bases and training camps operated by the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the People's Protection Units (YPG) which Ankara views as terrorist groups, the Turkish

defense ministry said. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights war monitor said the Syria strikes hit a Kurdish-run power station near the town of Al-Malikiyah in Hasakeh province, where a brazen jailbreak attempt by IS jihadists last month sparked days of clashes that have left hundreds dead. "At least four people were killed in the strike targeting a power station near Al-Malikiyah," the Britain-based Observatory said.

The US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the Kurdish administration's de facto army, said four of its fighters died in the attack and vowed vengeance against Turkey. Later yesterday, shelling on the Turkish-held city of Al-Bab in northern Syria killed

Continued on Page 2



QAMISHLI, Syria: People take part in a funeral yesterday for Syrian Democratic Forces fighters killed in clashes during a jailbreak by Islamic State fighters at the Ghwayran prison. — AFP

Local

Health Minister says dealing with COVID needs adaptability, flexibility

Assembly refers Amiri speech to parliamentary response committee



KUWAIT: A general view of the parliamentary session yesterday. — Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat and Fouad Al-Shaikh



National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem speaks during the session.

KUWAIT: Dealing with continuous ramifications of COVID-19 required adaptability and flexibility via following health procedures and precautions, including speeding up vaccinations and PCR tests, Health Minister Dr Khaled Al-Saeed said yesterday. Addressing a National Assembly session on the government's workplan to curb the spread of the coronavirus, Dr Saeed affirmed that the upward trend of infection during the current wave indicated that the pandemic was "far from over".

The capacity in various medical wards has increased during the pandemic, in addition to the number of medical staff from several fields, affirmed Dr Saeed. He revealed for example that the bed capacity in ICU units jumped to 260 percent to help address the challenges posed by COVID-19. Dr Saeed stressed the importance of

being vaccinated especially amongst members of the ministry's medical staff, noting that prior to the pandemic, a considerable number of doctors and nurses lost their lives due to COVID-19 and not being vaccinated. He also revealed that the government had worked its hardest to make vaccines and PCR test available to the masses both in the public and private medical practices to better address the pandemic and help curb its spread.

MPs meanwhile called on the government to reduce health restrictions, including the adminis-

tration of booster jabs. Speaking during the session, they underlined that physical, rather than

online, classes should continue, and that all lockdown measures have to be scrapped. They charged that now that heard immunity has been attained by vaccinating over 80 percent of the country's population, Kuwait, just like other countries, should ease

out virus-bearing restrictions, calling for not compelling the unvaccinated to get shots. They further urged the government to soften health

measures on children and to provide virus testing centers in all governorates.

National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem adjourned the session after discussing the government's workplan. Ghanem expressed his deep appreciation to Minister Saeed and the medical staff for their efforts and what they provided. He also thanked and appreciated the former Minister of Health Sheikh Dr Basel Al-Sabah.

Also during the session, the National Assembly approved referring the Amiri speech of the opening of the second ordinary session of the 16th legislative term, with the MPs notes, to the committee responsible for responding to the speech. This step came after finishing discussion on the Amiri speech that took place on Tuesday. — KUNA

“The pandemic is far from over”



Health Minister Dr Khaled Al-Saeed and his team attend the session.



A member of the health ministry's team addresses the session.

OPEC+ backs another modest...

Continued from Page 1

quotas with some members, such as Angola and Nigeria, unable to scale up their production and others, such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, unwilling to do so, said Carsten Fritsch of Commerzbank.

In December, the total volume of OPEC+ output increased by only 90,000 barrels per day, far short

of the 400,000 target, according to a survey by the Bloomberg news agency. The market has been further boosted by soaring geopolitical tensions plaguing stalwarts of oil production - Russia, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The United Arab Emirates on Monday intercepted another ballistic missile launched by Yemen's Houthi rebels, the latest attack on the Gulf country, which is part of a Saudi-led military coalition.

In Europe, tensions between Moscow and Western allies are at their highest point since the Cold War after Russia massed troops on its border with Ukraine. "Ukraine-Russia (tensions) can only keep pushing it up as long as the situation keeps getting worse," said Neil Wilson, analyst at Markets.com. — AFP

Turkey strikes Kurd targets...

Continued from Page 1

eight people, including five civilians, according to the Observatory. The war monitor didn't specify who was responsible but Kurdish forces and Syrian regime troops are both deployed in the region.

In northern Iraq's autonomous Kurdistan region, Turkish strikes on Tuesday hit PKK positions in the Makhmur and Sinjar regions, where bombardment caused "human and material losses", Kurdish authorities said, without specifying a casualty toll. As part of the attack, which drew condemnation from Baghdad, Turkish "military aircraft bombarded six PKK positions in the Karjokh mountains", which overlook a camp for Kurdish refugees from Turkey, Kurdish counter-terrorism services said in a statement.

A PKK-linked group that oversees management of the camp reported "the death of two combatants and dozens of injuries among camp residents". In a statement, Iraqi security forces condemned the attack which they called a violation of Iraqi airspace. It called on Ankara "to put an end to these violations," and said "Iraq is fully prepared to cooperate (with Ankara) to stabilize the situation on the border."

Designated as a terrorist group by Ankara and its Western allies, the PKK has been waging an

insurgency against the Turkish state since 1984. The YPG - which forms the backbone of the SDF fighting IS in Syria - is viewed by Ankara as the PKK's Syria offshoot. Washington relied heavily on the SDF to defeat IS jihadists who overran large swathes of Syria and neighboring Iraq in 2014.

The SDF said 40 of its fighters as well as more than 70 prison guards and staff were killed in the weeklong IS attack on Ghwayran jail, the group's largest Syria operation since 2019. The YPG condemned the latest Turkish strikes. "Turkey tries to continue what ISIS started," it said on Twitter, using a different acronym for IS. "Everyone has to take action against this attack now."

The Turkish strike came hours after hundreds of mourners gathered in Al-Malikiyah for mass funerals honoring Kurdish fighters killed in a week of battles with IS jihadists who had attacked the Ghwayran jail on Jan 20. Since the start of its military intervention in Syria in 2016, Ankara has sporadically bombed the YPG and carried out military operations on the ground targeting IS and Kurdish forces.

Turkey also routinely carries out attacks in Iraq, where the PKK has bases and training camps in the Sinjar region and on the mountainous border with Turkey. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who has threatened to "clean up" parts of northern Iraq, accuses the PKK of using the border area as a springboard for its insurgency. In December, Turkey carried out retaliatory air strikes in northern Iraq after three Turkish soldiers died in a PKK attack. — AFP

60+ expat annual health insurance...

Continued from Page 1

MP Abdullah Al-Mudhaf wondered why people who have received two doses of the vaccine are being treated like unvaccinated people, adding that restricting the freedom of people is a criminal act. MP Hamad Al-Matar said more freedom must be given to unvaccinated people and complained that limited-income people cannot pay the heavy cost of institutional quarantine for their maids or other workers. MP Osama Al-Munawer said that the health ministry says 85 percent of the people had been vaccinated, and accordingly "we should stop forcing people to get vaccinated".

Health Minister Khaled Al-Saeed said the PCR test

is available for free at the ministry and its cost has been reduced substantially, but it is very important and necessary. The minister said Kuwait is looking to return to normal life but all are required to comply with health conditions, emphasizing the need for vaccination. He added that it's time to amend all decisions issued with relation to the pandemic, "but we have to remain cautious".

The minister also said the continuity of the pandemic requires that we live with it. He said during the pandemic, 1,000 doctors, 250 technicians and 2,000 nursing staff were added to the medical body. The minister also announced that the financial rewards for frontline workers will be paid in the coming days. Public health specialist Mohammad Al-Saeedan stressed that coronavirus measures are regularly assessed and reviewed, adding that precautions against unvaccinated people are in place because they can spread the virus more than vaccinated people.

US to send warship, fighter jets to UAE...

Continued from Page 1

forces stationed at Al Dhafra air base," the embassy added. The rebel attacks on the UAE have added a new dimension to Yemen's seven-year war, which has killed hundreds of thousands directly or indirectly and displaced millions.

Three foreign workers were killed in a drone and missile assault targeting Abu Dhabi's oil facilities and airport on Jan 17, triggering a salvo of deadly air strikes in retaliation. On Jan 24, US forces stationed at Abu Dhabi's Al Dhafra air base fired Patriot interceptors and scrambled to bunkers as two ballistic missiles were shot down over the city. And on Monday, a third missile attack was thwarted during a visit to the UAE by Zionist President Isaac Herzog.

The US, a staunch Saudi and UAE ally, intends the deployment to be "a clear signal that the United States stands with the UAE as a long-standing strategic partner", the embassy said. President Joe Biden withdrew US support for the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen after taking office early last year,

reversing his predecessor's policy of providing logistical assistance.

However, the US State Department announced in November the approval of the sale of \$650 million worth of air-to-air missiles to Saudi Arabia to help the country protect itself from Houthi drone attacks. A \$23 billion US arms package to the UAE, including F-35 fighter jets, has yet to be finalized, with the Emiratis threatening to scrap the deal over stringent conditions.

The rebel attacks have increased Gulf tensions at a time when international talks over Iran's nuclear program are stumbling, and have helped push oil prices to seven-year highs. They began after a series of defeats on the ground in Yemen, inflicted by the UAE-trained Giants Brigades militia. In early January, the rebels seized a UAE-flagged ship in the Red Sea, saying it was carrying weapons - a claim denied by the Emiratis.

Yemen's civil war began in 2014 when the Houthis seized Sanaa, prompting Saudi-led forces to intervene to prop up the government the following year. The UAE, one of the world's biggest arms buyers, announced a redeployment from Yemen in 2019 but remains an influential player. The country has called on Biden to redesignate the Houthis as a terrorist organization after he delisted them in response to aid group concerns over what the UN calls the world's worst humanitarian crisis. — AFP

Local

Many prefer online education amid pandemic despite govt reluctance

Kuwait Times survey shows 65% support remote learning

By Ahmad Jabr and Ben Garcia

KUWAIT: The issue of education in Kuwait amid the COVID-19 pandemic was back in the forefront yesterday when MPs charged during a National Assembly session that closing schools or a return to online education should never be in consideration. "The pandemic must not be used as an excuse to stop education," MP Mubarak Al-Hajraf said during the session, adding that closing schools should be considered a thing of the past.

In the meantime, MP Dr Hamad Al-Matar demanded a clear response from the health ministry on the situation in schools, saying that the health and future of 650,000 students is at stake. "We don't want to go back to online education," he stressed. Public, private and foreign schools reopened this academic year after more than a year of closure due to the pandemic, during which schools resorted to online education.

The ministry set the maximum capacity for any classroom at 20 students, and students must sit two meters apart. For schools with more than 20 students per class, the class is divided into two groups: The first group goes to school on Sunday, Tuesday and Thursday while the second group goes on Monday and Wednesday. In the next week, groups will swap attendance with the second group going on Sunday, Tuesday and Thursday and the first on Monday and Tuesday.

65 percent

The health and education ministries insist that they are working together to monitor the situation in schools and make sure that health protocols are followed. However, the rise in daily COVID-19 cases since the start of 2022 has caused concern for

students, parents and teachers alike, and reignited debate about whether education should return online or not. A Kuwait Times survey on social media showed 65 percent of respondents support going back to online education in Kuwait, while 35 percent are against it.

"I support online education because cases are rising, and we will get COVID if we go to school for sure. No matter how much precautions schools will take, you never know who has COVID," one student commented. "Please make final exams online for our own safety." "I don't like having online classes too, but I would rather pick protecting my family than going to school," one commenter wrote.

"No one is asking to stop education; just make it online for the safety of children," another commentator said, arguing that it was difficult to make sure that health protocols are followed strictly, especially after school when "there is always a big crowd of students". A teacher meanwhile was skeptical about whether the precautions are enough. "They need to implement stricter rules. They cannot put so many teachers' lives at risk," they wrote.

On the other hand, many believe that e-learning has a negative impact on education that far outweighs the positives. In a survey carried out by Ipsos last year, 65 percent stated that they prefer remote learning over face to face, although 67 percent believe that having children study at home has been impacting the household negatively. "Education has been damaged by going online for so long and we have to put an end to it," said one parent who participated in the Kuwait Times survey, while another argued that "kids don't study at home, they only play video games."

A student meanwhile mentioned the negative psychological impact they faced while undergoing online education last year. "I myself want to go to school and have fun rather than the depressing six hours in the morning of online education," they commented.

Testing positive

Many students and parents alike are also worried about the potential of kids catching COVID-19 ahead of major exams, for example. The current protocol requires schools to reschedule tests for students who test positive. However, there is concern that some schools may not follow through. Recently, some posts emerged on social media claiming that students at a local school were told that they may fail their final exams if they do not show up to school on test day due to COVID-19. When contacted for comment, the principal of the school in question vehemently denied the allegation, insisting

that they abide by the Ministry of Education's regulations and will schedule a new date for students who test positive to take their exams.

Asked whether the school may allow students to take their tests online instead, the principal explained that this option is not available. "We have instructions from the Ministry of Education with regards to the final exams, that they must be held offline on campus," said the principal. "If a student is infected with the virus, we can reschedule the exams for them as instructed by the ministry."

Around 15,000 children contracted the virus in Kuwait since February 2020, Dr Mohammad Al-Ghunaim said during yesterday's parliament session, adding that seven children were among total deaths from the virus during the same period. The health ministry has announced that vaccination of children aged 5 to 11 will start this week.



Kuwaiti minister says strong demand drives oil markets' recovery



KUWAIT: Minister of Oil Mohammad Al-Fares attends the meetings via videoconference. —KUNA

KUWAIT: The oil market is witnessing a positive recovery due to the improvement of global economy and the continuous oil reserves withdrawals, said Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Oil and Minister of Electricity and Water and Sustainable Energy Mohammad Al-Fares. This came by the minister in the 37th meeting of the Joint Ministerial Committee for Monitoring Production and the 25 ministerial meeting of OPEC and OPEC+, the oil ministry said in a statement yesterday. Fares also said that OPEC works hard in taking decisions based on the interest of all parties and ensuring the

growth of the global economy and the balance of oil markets.

He also praised the results of OPEC plus meeting, which follows the strategy of increasing production since August 2021, as it proved its effectiveness in the market, based on its monthly review to achieve stability. The Kuwaiti delegation, which was headed by minister Al-Fares, included the Governor of Kuwait to OPEC, Mohammad Al-Shatti, and the National Representative of Kuwait to OPEC Sheikh Abdullah Sabah Salem Al-Homoud Al-Sabah. —KUNA

Kuwait, US officials discuss bilateral ties, military cooperation

KUWAIT: Kuwait Army Chief of Staff Lieutenant-General Khaled Saleh Al-Sabah met yesterday with the US 55th Chief of Engineers, Lieutenant-General Scott Spellmon, and his delegation, currently on an official visit to the country. Kuwait Armed Forces stated in a press release that the two ranking military officials discussed bilateral ties, cooperation, and issues of common interest, especially in the military field and ways of boosting military coordination. Several senior officials attended the meeting. —KUNA



KUWAIT: Kuwait Army Chief of Staff Lieutenant-General Khaled Saleh Al-Sabah meets US 55th Chief of Engineers Lieutenant-General Scott Spellmon. —KUNA

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Photo of the Day



KUWAIT: Birds are pictured at a beach north of Kuwait City on Tuesday. —Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat

Kuwait reports
6,592 new COVID
cases, two deaths

KUWAIT: Kuwait reported 6,592 new COVID-19 cases yesterday in addition to two deaths and 4,886 recoveries. Meanwhile, the number of patients in ICUs went down from 90 on Tuesday to 86 yesterday. The number of patients hospitalized increased from 482 to 486, while total active cases rose from 52,467 to 54,171. The percentage of daily new cases to new tests increased from 17.7 percent to 18.4 percent, while the percentage of recovery dropped to 89.8 percent, according to the health ministry's bulletin. Some 35,827 swab tests were conducted over the same period out of a total of 6,985,251 so far, the ministry noted. Yesterday's figures bring total cases to 558,745, total deaths to 2,501 and total recoveries to 502,073.

Street cleaner tells
story of how he
made it to Kuwait

By Ben Garcia

KUWAIT: Zakir, a Bangladeshi cleaner who works hard to keep Kuwait's streets tidy, was 17 when he arrived in Kuwait in June 2016. He applied for the job in Bangladesh and paid a handsome amount to an agent, who adjusted his age on his passport to 25 years. When he was accepted, he immediately embarked on his journey to Kuwait. He is now 23, but in his passport his age is 31.

Zakir revealed he wasn't the only person to apply for a job in Kuwait as a minor. "We were three teenage boys at that time, all 17 years old. We are friends, and I convinced them to join me in applying for a job, as my father was in Kuwait. We paid a big amount of money to be able to work here. All three of us were hired and are helping our families now," he told Kuwait Times.

Kuwait relies heavily on cleaners and menial laborers from Bangladesh and other Asian countries. Thousands of them work the streets of Kuwait. But most take only a small salary and work

extra jobs on the side to supplement their income. "I am drawing a salary of KD 75 per month from my company and earn an additional KD 65 at my five-hour job at the ministry (of defense) as a porter," Zakir said.

"I have a plan to have my own business in Chattogram (Chittagong), maybe a clothing shop a few years from now. All my earnings I send back home. I only keep KD 20 for food and KD 5 for Internet. The rest I send to my mother, who deposits the money in the bank. She sends me the receipts of the bank deposits, so I know how much money I have," he said. "I also clean Kuwaiti homes on my day off from my ministry job. They pay well - sometimes KD 10, sometimes even more. I am happy because I am earning extra. I also make money cleaning cars, which I also send to my mother."

Zakir works as street cleaner from 3 am to 11 am, and has no choice but to deal with the harsh weather and all kinds of people. "At 4 am I am at my station gathering the garbage and putting it in trash bins. The supervisor will leave us in the area, with the only instruction to make the place look neat," he said. Once in a while, some people in the area give the cleaners 250 or 500 fils.

When done with the street cleaning job, he goes home, takes a shower and has lunch. "At 2 pm, I go to my ministry job and work until 7 pm. There, I only take documents from one office to another. Sometimes people there are generous too and give



KUWAIT: Cleaning workers are gathered near a beach in Kuwait. —Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

250 or 500 fils. In a month I can collect up to KD 20 - it helps a lot," he said.

Zakir is preparing for marriage and wants to be successful. "My parents are searching for a girl. They told me I can marry whoever I want, but I prefer a girl chosen by my parents. I trust their wisdom on this, because my parents had an

arranged marriage too. They are happy and contented, so I know I can be happy too. All I know is that I have to work hard for my future," he said. "When I have a regular income from my business, I will settle down and have my own family. Until I have this dream business, I won't marry," he added.

Dasman Diabetes Institute participates in Expo 2020 Dubai



KUWAIT: Dasman Diabetes Institute (DDI) visited Kuwait's pavilion at Expo 2020 Dubai and showcased some of its efforts in combating diabetes in Kuwait. During the Institute's participation, Dr Qais Al-Duwairi,

Director-General of Dasman Diabetes Institute, said that the institute's participation was not limited to highlighting the country's efforts to combating diabetes, but also to shed light on this disease which the World

Health Organization declared as a global epidemic that requires concerted efforts by the whole world to address it. Dr Duwairi added that the Institute's participation in the pavilion came also to contribute to

spreading awareness about the causes of diabetes in Kuwait, in addition to presenting Kuwait's global efforts to combating the disease through structured research and studies.





Three people killed in two shootings at US schools

Afghan universities reopen with trickle of women attending



US, NATO offer Russia trust-building steps

Ukraine or any sovereign country has a right to apply to join the alliance

BRUSSELS: Washington and its NATO allies have offered Moscow arms control and trust-building measures to defuse the threat of a new Russian offensive against Ukraine, according to documents published by El Pais yesterday. The proposals, set out in letters by NATO and the United States last month in response to Russian demands, remain firm on insisting that Ukraine and any other sovereign country has a right to apply to join the alliance.

But the reported US response-posted to the Spanish daily's website-suggests "reciprocal commitments by both the United States and Russia to refrain from deploying offensive ground-launched missile systems and permanent forces with a combat mission in the territory of Ukraine". Both the US and NATO documents urge Russia to restore diplomatic ties with the alliance and to renew and renegotiate nuclear missile control treaties with the United States.

Moscow is urged to re-engage with the NATO-

Russia council, a diplomatic body "offering dialogue and partnership in place of conflict and distrust." A NATO official refused to confirm the text, saying: "We never comment on alleged leaks." Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Moscow was aware of the report but added: "We didn't publish anything, and I don't want to comment on this."

Huge Russian force
President Vladimir Putin's government has deployed a huge force-more than 100,000 strong-on its territory near the Ukraine border and in Crimea, a Ukrainian region that Russia annexed in 2014. The Kremlin has demanded that NATO

guarantee that Kiev never be allowed to join NATO and that the alliance withdraw forces from eastern member states that were Soviet allies or republics during the Cold War.

The western allies have dismissed calls to slam shut NATO's door, but the leaked letters call for "meaningful arms control discussions and dialogue with Russia on mutual transparency and confidence-building measures." "No other partner has been offered a comparable relationship or a similar institutional framework,"

the allies said of the NATO-Russia council, in the letter released by El Pais.

"Yet Russia has broken the trust at the core of

our cooperation and challenged the fundamental principles of the global and Euro-Atlantic security architecture," it says. The US document stresses: "We are ready to consider arrangements or agreements with Russia on issues of bilateral concern, to include written, signed instruments, to address our respective security concerns."

It suggests renewing the US-Russian Strategic Stability Dialogue on arms control agreements to "limit ground-based intermediate and shorter-range missiles and their launchers". But it repeats Washington's warning that Russia is already in breach of the now suspended 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, which the US withdrew from in 2019, accusing Moscow of deploying a banned type of missile.

And it warns: "Further Russian increases in force posture or further aggression against Ukraine will force the United States and our Allies to strengthen our defensive posture." — AFP

12 migrants blocked by Greece die at border: Turkey

ISTANBUL: Turkey yesterday accused Greece of allowing 12 migrants to die in the winter cold after stripping them of their clothes and then pushing them back across the Turkish border. The charges from Turkish Interior Minister Suleyman Soyly threaten to escalate simmering tensions between the rival members of the NATO defence alliance.

They also highlighted Ankara's concern that the European Union was not doing enough to support Turkey-which hosts an estimated five million refugees and migrants-in the face of a potential new flow of people from Afghanistan. Soyly posted blurred images on Twitter showing partially naked bodies lying by the roadside.

"Twelve of the 22 migrants pushed back by Greek border units" froze to death after being "stripped (of) their clothes and shoes", Soyly wrote in English. The "EU is remediless, weak and void of humane feelings", he added. Soyly said the pictures were

taken near Turkey's western border town of Ipsala. The regional governor's office said 11 of the migrants were discovered frozen to death. Another person who was rushed to hospital with frostbite "could not be saved and died", the governor's office said without identifying the nationalities of the migrants. Greek officials were expected to issue an official statement later.

East Mediterranean collision
Ankara's uneasy relations with Athens plunged into crisis in 2020 as Turkey began exploring for natural gas in eastern Mediterranean waters claimed by Greece and its fellow EU member Cyprus. The conflict threatened to spill over into all-out war when their naval warships collided in disputed circumstances near one of the contested Mediterranean energy fields.

NATO then set up a telephone hotline aimed at addressing immediate security concerns. But the sides continued to accuse each other of trying to escalate tensions by staging air and sea exercises around a string of islands whose ownership has been under dispute for most of the past century.

These tensions have been compounded by Ankara's claims that Greece is violating international conventions by intercepting migrant boats in the

and long-range ballistic missile," in its first test since 2017 of a weapon that powerful. Earlier Tuesday, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres denounced the launch as "a clear violation of Security Council resolutions."

"At least what we should insist upon is that the Council would urge DPRK to respect UN Security Council resolutions," the anonymous diplomat added, referring to the country's official name of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. "If the Council is not even able to call for respect of its own decisions, we have a problem."

North Korea is "making steady progress on ballistic, improving the range, the precisions and the lethality of its missiles," he said. The country has both nuclear and ballistic missile technologies, the diplomat said. "At some stage if you mix the two technologies, which they don't seem to have been able to manage until now...the threat will be absolutely intolerable," he said. US envoy to North



ARBIL, Iraq: Women, relatives of five Kurdish migrants who died a month prior as their boat capsized while attempting a crossing of the Aegean Sea, react as they await the arrival of the remains at Arbil airport in the capital of Iraq's northern autonomous Kurdish region on February 1, 2022. —AFP

Aegean and then sending them back to Turkey. Turkey's coast guard service said last month it had rescued more than 15,000 migrants pushed back by Greece last year. Rescuers recovered the bodies of 15 migrants. — AFP



UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres

Korea Sung Kim has discussed the latest launch with South Korean and Japanese authorities in recent days, State Department spokesman Ned Price said in a statement. — AFP

US calls for emergency UN Security Council meeting on N Korea

UNITED NATIONS, United States: The United States has requested an emergency meeting today of the UN Security Council on North Korea, which launched its most powerful missile since 2017 last weekend, diplomatic sources said Tuesday. The meeting is expected to be held behind closed doors. It is up to Russia, the president of the Security Council for the month of February, to confirm the timing.

"We really do hope that the Council will be able to speak with one voice" with a declaration, a diplomat speaking on the condition of anonymity said. North Korea confirmed on Monday it had fired a Hwasong-12 "ground-to-ground intermediate-

Over 40 civilians killed in DR Congo machete attack

BUNIA, DR Congo: At least 40 people were killed when machete-wielding militiamen attacked a site for displaced people in strife-torn eastern DR Congo, a monitoring group and local sources said yesterday. "At least 40 civilians were killed with edged weapons last night in Plaine Savo" in Djugu territory, the US-based Kivu Security Tracker (KST) said on Twitter.

Local officials and civil society sources put the toll at more than 50 dead, while the army's spokesman in Ituri province, Lieutenant Jules Ngongo, gave provisional figures of 21 dead. The KST said the suspected attackers were from a notorious armed group called CODECO, blamed for a string of ethnic massacres in the area.

The Djugu area, bordering Lake Albert and Uganda which lie to the east, is the theatre for a bloody, long-running feud between the Lendu and Hema communities. Fighting between the two groups flared between 1999 and 2003, claiming tens of thousands of lives before being quelled by a European Union peacekeeping force, Artemis.

Violence then resumed in 2017, blamed on the emergence of CODECO-the Cooperative for the Development of the Congo (CODECO) — which claims to defend the Lendu. Since then, CODECO attacks have caused hundreds of deaths and prompted more than 1.5 million people to flee their homes, while half of the region's population faces food insecurity, says the Danish Refugee Council. Attacks on camps for displaced people over an eight-day period in November-December left 123 dead, according to the KST.

Jean Richard Dhedda Lenga, the senior administrator in Bahema Badjere district, said CODECO raiders attacked the site "at around 9pm, 10pm" on Tuesday. "We have a provisional total of 59 dead" and around 40 wounded," he told AFP by phone. "I have just left the area-young people are looking for other bodies in huts and in the bush." — AFP

Three people killed in two shootings at US schools

‘Bridgewater is shocked by today’s senseless violence’

WASHINGTON: Two campus police officers were shot and killed at a college in the US state of Virginia Tuesday, while one student was killed and another wounded in a shooting at a school in Minnesota the same day. Two agents, a campus law enforcement officer and a campus safety officer, were shot before the suspect fled the scene at the college in Virginia, Virginia State Police said in a statement on Twitter.

Multiple law enforcement agencies arrived on the campus of Bridgewater College around 1:20 pm (1820 GMT) in response to active shooter reports, according to the same statement, which the school also posted to its website. The suspect, a 27-year-old man named Alexander Wyatt Campbell, was later apprehended, Virginia State Police said, adding that he had a “non-life-threatening gunshot wound.”

It was not yet clear if he had been shot by police or if the wound was self-inflicted. He has already been charged with murder, police said. The town of Bridgewater, about two and a half hours south of the US capital of Washington and where Bridgewater College is located, sent out an alert around 1:30 pm warning of an active shooter situation, local media reported.

The school issued an all-clear notice on its website around 4:30 pm. One student, 21-year-old, Kasey Truslow, told the Washington Post she heard a gunshot outside the window of a classroom building. “After the second shot, we got on the floor. We remained on the floor for an hour,” she said. Virginia Governor Glen Youngkin tweeted, “I have been briefed on the situation at Bridgewater College. The shooter is in custody and state and local police are on the scene.”

‘Sickening’

The officers were identified by the school as John Painter and J.J. Jefferson. The pair “were shot and killed on campus while protecting us,” a statement from college president David Bushman on its website said. “These officers were close friends, known to many of us as the ‘dynamic duo.’ John was J.J.’s best man in his wedding this year. They were beloved by students, faculty and staff. I hurt for their families and loved ones, as I know we all do,” the statement continued.

Bridgewater Mayor Ted Flory posted a statement on the small town’s website. “Bridgewater is

“ We remained on the floor for an hour ”

shocked by today’s senseless violence at Bridgewater College,” Flory said. “We are heartbroken by the needless injuries and loss of life.” President Joe Biden, who has called on Congress to enact tougher gun control laws, tweeted about the shooting, saying he and his wife “are praying for the families of those lost.”

“Gun violence against law enforcement officers is sickening, and it must end,” he said. The shooting in Minnesota occurred in the town of Richfield just



RICHFIELD, United States: South Education Center Academy students and local activists participate in a candlelight vigil for the victims of a school shooting in front of South Education Center Academy in Richfield, Minnesota. — AFP

outside of Minneapolis around noon, officials said, leaving one student dead and another wounded.

The attackers opened fire on the students on a sidewalk outside the South Education Center before speeding away in a car, Richfield Police Chief Jay Henthorne told the StarTribune newspaper. Two suspects were later arrested, the paper said, noting that friends of the victim had identified

the slain student as Jamari Rice, who some local journalists said was the son of Black Lives Matter activist Cortez Rice. Cortez Rice was arrested last year and charged with attempting to intimidate a judge handling the trial of ex-police officer Kim Potter officer who killed a Black man in April when she said she mixed up her taser with her pistol during a traffic stop. — AFP

Australia says warship did not bring COVID to eruption-hit Tonga

NUKU’ALOFA, Tonga: Australian defence chiefs yesterday said a warship delivering aid to Tonga was not the source of an outbreak that has plunged the previously coronavirus-free Pacific kingdom into lockdown. Residents of the remote island nation, struggling to recover from a deadly volcanic eruption that triggered huge tsunamis, were ordered to stay at home yesterday after two port workers tested positive in the capital Nuku’alofa.

They were the first community cases recorded in the nation of 100,000 people, with officials later confirming another three family members, including two children, also had the virus and were in isolation. Tongans have feared losing the country’s virus-free status since foreign ships began delivering humanitarian aid in the wake of the January 15 eruption.

Australia, New Zealand, the United States, China, France, Fiji and Britain have all sent ships carrying relief supplies including drinking water, medical kits and engineering equipment. Australia’s HMAS Adelaide docked in Nuku’alofa to unload supplies last week, despite a coronavirus outbreak among its crew.

All offshore deliveries are subject to strict “no-contact” protocols in a bid to keep the virus at bay, including leaving goods in isolation for three days before they are handled by Tongans. The Australian Defence Force’s operations chief, Lieutenant General Greg Bilton, said the Nuku’alofa outbreak “doesn’t appear to have evolved from the Adelaide”.

‘Unprecedented disaster’

Bilton said the warship, which has recorded 51 COVID-19 cases among its 630-strong crew since leaving Brisbane last month, berthed in a different area of the harbour from where the two local men were working. “We unloaded in a manner that was COVID-friendly, contactless, in line with arrangements made with Tongan officials at the wharf,” Bilton told Sky News Australia. “So I don’t think there’s any connection, there’s no evidence of that.”

He said the Tongan government had asked the Australians to take samples from the infected men away for analysis to identify the strain of coronavirus and help identify its source. Prime Minister Sioosi Sovaleni announced late Tuesday that Tonga would enter a national lockdown at 6:00 pm (0500 GMT) yesterday, with the situation reviewed every 48 hours.

Large queues formed at supermarkets in the capital as residents prepared to hunker down for an extended period. The stay-at-home order means all businesses and schools must close, with only essential services allowed to operate. Tonga closed its borders in early 2020 as the coronavirus pandemic swept the globe. Until this week, it had recorded just one case of COVID-19, a man who returned from New Zealand last October and has since fully recovered.

The blast from the Hunga Tonga-Hunga Ha’apai volcano, which lies about 65 kilometres (40 miles) north of Nuku’alofa, forced a slight relaxation of the border rules to deal with a situation the Tongan government has described as an “unprecedented natural disaster”. The eruption, one of the biggest recorded in decades, generated massive tsunami waves and blanketed the island nation in toxic ash, claiming three lives. — AFP

Torture trail raises questions on Kazakh terror claims

ALMATY, Kazakhstan: As Kazakhstan witnessed its worst unrest in 30 years of independence this month, Aset Abishev was grabbed off a bus and locked away by police who he said tortured him for a week. Abishev—a longtime opposition activist in the Central Asian country—was arrested on January 4, just hours before thousands took to the streets of the former capital Almaty, sending a political crisis that authorities said left 225 people dead and thousands injured towards a bloody crescendo.

The 44-year-old was held without charge or access to communications and finally released a week later, his body covered in bruises. His account to AFP of the violations inflicted on him and other detainees is one of several that call into question a state investigation into the unrest that has seen hundreds charged with terrorism and other serious crimes.

Abishev said he spent his first three nights “as a hostage” in a room in the police station, including the night of January 5, when police used guns and stun grenades to repel attacks by unidentified assailants during chaos in the city of 1.8 million. He was then transferred to a formal detention facility where he shared a cell with seven others and, he said, they were severely beaten.

‘No mercy’

“The chest they did with fists. On the back and arms it was batons and rifle butts,” Abishev said, pointing to purple and greenish-yellow markings on

Rape stalks women in CAR’s dirty war

PAOUA, Central African Republic: Maia looks down at her expanding belly, her eyes welling with tears. Four months ago, an armed man grabbed and raped the 15-year-old, attacking her as she was harvesting cassava roots.

In the remote northwest of the Central African Republic (CAR), sexual violence targeting women, adolescents and even younger girls is on the rise.

Brutal acts are committed by rebels, militiamen and security forces alike, according to the United Nations. In Paoua, about 500 kilometres (300 miles) northwest of the capital Bangui, more than a dozen rape victims turn up every day at a clinic run by the Danish Refugee Council (DRC). The distraught teenager struggles to put her feelings into words. “I was alone in the fields when an armed man wearing a turban grabbed me,” she says in a near-whisper. “I told him I was a virgin and begged him not to hurt me,” Maia says, unable to utter the word “rape”, even as she bears the unborn child of the man who assaulted her.

Like Maia, Marie was harvesting cassava to feed her family when two armed men appeared. Her husband fled the scene, but she reacted too slowly.

“They tied my hands, tore my clothes and took turns raping me,” says the 23-year-old, who was wearing a traditional gown in the purple, green and white colours of International Women’s Day.

The rape victims interviewed by AFP all had similar stories. Most said they had been assaulted in the fields by rebels of a powerful local militia known as the 3R, a name derived from the French words for Return, Reclamation and Rehabilitation.

‘Easy target’

“In this area, it is mainly women who farm and take care of feeding the family,” says Lola, an employee at the centre whose name has been changed for her safety, like Maia’s and Marie’s.

his upper body, just over a week after he was released without charge on January 10.

“With the younger men arrested on January 5 and 6, (police) showed no mercy. Plastic bags over the head, throwing them on the floor, jumping on them. They had broken ribs but received no medical attention,” he recalled.

Officials in Kazakhstan including President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev have blamed unspecified “bandits” and foreign extremists for hijacking protests over a new year increase in the price of car fuel. The foreign ministry last week described a European Parliament resolution that condemned rights violations during the violence as “not only biased but also based on prejudiced opinions and assumptions”.

Elvira Azimova, Kazakhstan’s state-appointed rights commissioner, told AFP alleged violations during detentions were “the priority question” in her office’s consultations with prosecutors and that she had received complaints about torture. But the office has no power “to interfere in judicial processes”, she added. The unrest eased after more than 2,000 troops from the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) deployed in the country of 19 million on January 6, staying almost two weeks. Kazakhstan’s allies Russia and China backed the security crackdown.

Broken ribs

But neighbour and fellow CSTO member Kyrgyzstan raised concerns after several of its citizens were detained in the “counter-terror operation” that came after strategic sites—including Almaty’s airport—were seized and looters went on a rampage amid an internet blackout on the night of January 5. During a media appearance from a hospital bed in Kyrgyzstan’s capital Bishkek last week,

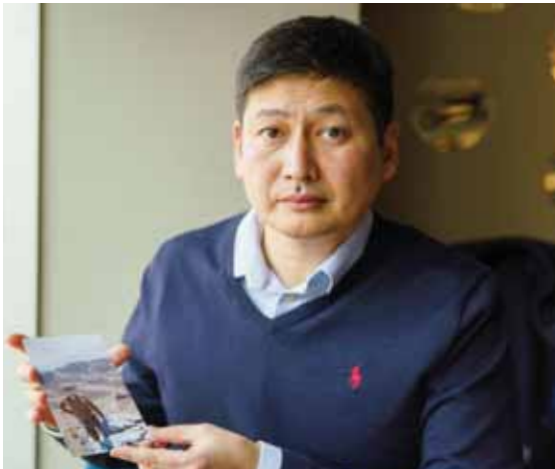


PAOUA, Central African Republic: A woman who got pregnant after having been raped by rebels in the northwest of CAR is photographed at a counseling center on December 6, 2021. —AFP

“Alone and helpless in the fields, they are an easy target for the rebels.” A civil war in the CAR that began in 2013, pitting myriad militias against a state on the verge of collapse, had lessened considerably in recent years.

But about a year ago, fighting resumed abruptly when rebels launched an offensive to overthrow President Faustin Archange Touadera. At the time, armed groups controlled two-thirds of the CAR’s territory. But they ceded most of it when the army, backed by hundreds of Russian paramilitaries, mounted a massive counter-offensive against the rebels.

Today militia forces are confined to the countryside and have switched to guerrilla tactics — and harassment and abuse of civilians are on the rise. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) recorded 6,336 cases of gender-based violence between January and July 2021 across the deeply poor country. The agency identified a quarter of such cases as sexual violence, an increase of 58 percent compared with the first half of 2020. Rebels and militiamen are more active in the Paoua region. —AFP



ALMATY, Kazakhstan: A photograph taken on January 21, 2022 shows Nurlan Zhagiparov showing a picture of his killed brother Yerlan Zhagiparov, 49, during an interview with AFP in Almaty. Aset Abishev was grabbed off a bus and locked away by police who he said tortured him for a week. —AFP

Kyrgyz citizen Cholponbek Sydykov alleged that police beatings in Kazakhstan left him and another compatriot with broken ribs and legs.

Another Kyrgyz detained in the violence, jazz pianist Vikram Ruzakhunov, said he had suffered multiple injuries including broken ribs, but that he had been asked not to give interviews on his detention. “All my public statements are made with consideration of those who are still held hostage in Kazakhstan... Every word can affect them,” Ruzakhunov said in a post Sunday on Instagram, without saying who had asked him not to speak. — AFP

Zionist army to strip officers over death of Palestinian-American

JERUSALEM: The Zionist army is to strip two officers of their commands and reprimand a third following the death of an elderly Palestinian-American detained during a security operation in the occupied West Bank, it said on Tuesday.

The Zionist entity army said his death during a late-night security operation in the village of Jiljilya, north of Ramallah, on January 12 was a result of “moral failure and poor decision-making”.

The Palestinian Authority welcomed the investigation into the circumstances surrounding the death last month of 78-year-old Omar Assad, but called on the Zionist entity to probe all Palestinian deaths at the hands of Zionist troops, not just those involving US passport holders.

In Washington, the State Department noted the Zionist military’s report and conclusions on the incident, but called for further investigation. “We continue to be deeply concerned by the circumstances of the death of Omar Assad,” said spokesman Ned Price.

“The United States expects a thorough criminal investigation and full accountability in this case,” Price said in a statement. “We continue to discuss this troubling incident with the Zionist government,” he said. The army said Assad had no identification and “refused to cooperate” when he was stopped by troops. Soldiers tied his hands and gagged him and took him to a nearby building with three other detainees.

When troops released the detainees, they thought Assad was “asleep” and left him where he was, the army said. A post-mortem found he died of a “stress-induced heart attack caused by the circumstances of his detention by Zionist soldiers,” the Palestinians’ official news agency Wafa reported. — AFP

International

Afghan universities reopen with trickle of women attending

‘It’s a moment of joy for us that our classes have started’

MIHTARLAM, Afghanistan: Some public universities opened in Afghanistan yesterday for the first time since the Taliban seized power in August, with a trickle of women attending classes that officials said would be segregated by sex. Most secondary schools for girls and all public universities were shuttered when the hardline Islamist group stormed back to power, sparking fears women would again be barred from education — as happened during the Taliban’s first rule, from 1996-2001.

“It’s a moment of joy for us that our classes have started,” Zarlashta Haqmal, who studies law and political science at Nangarhar University, told AFP. “But we are still worried that the Taliban might stop them.” One analyst said the reopening of universities was a “critical marker” on the Taliban’s road to international recognition.

Officials said universities in Laghman, Nangarhar, Kandahar, Nimroz, Farah and Helmand provinces opened yesterday. More were scheduled to resume operations elsewhere in the country later this month. An AFP correspondent saw one small group of women, wearing the all-covering burqa, enter Laghman University early yesterday.

The men who attended — ferried to the campus in local taxis and buses — were dressed in traditional tunics known as shalwar kameez. Attendance was very light and Taliban fighters guarded the entrance, a tripod-mounted machine gun resting on a boom gate. Most students

declined to offer their thoughts on returning to class, with some saying they had been warned by authorities not to speak to the press. Journalists were prevented from entering the Laghman campus and universities in other provinces.

‘Critical marker’

The Taliban have said they have no objection to education for women, but want classes to be segregated and the curriculum based on Islamic principles. “We were told that the classes will be held according to the Sharia law,” said Malik Samadi, a 23-year-old mathematics student.

“I hope that they keep all the courses, because society needs them.” “Education is the foundation of a country,” said civil engineering student Munsefullah at Helmand University, expressing joy at returning to his studies.

Still, while happy to be returning to lectures, one student looked beyond her studies with pessimism. “We are also sad because being political and law students, our future is at risk as we won’t be able to get jobs under this regime,” said Khadija Azizi from Nangarhar University. “It’s no more pleasant for us because we have lost hope for our future.”

On Tuesday, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan said the reopening of universities was an “important step” as it offered equal access to education for all. The reopenings come a week after a Taliban delegation held talks with Western officials in Norway, where they were pressed on improving the rights of

Authorities warn not to speak to the press



LASHKAR GAH, Afghanistan: Students attend a class in the Helmand university in Lashkar Gah yesterday, after the Taliban reopened public universities across some provinces. —AFP

women to unlock billions of dollars in seized assets and frozen foreign aid.

The halting of aid has triggered a humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan, which has already been devastated by decades of war. No country has yet recognised the new Taliban regime, which has promised a softer version of the harsh rule that characterised their first stint in power.

The regime has imposed several restrictions

on women, including banning them from many government jobs. The Taliban say all girls’ schools will reopen by the end of March. “The reopening of public universities... would bode well for the return of girls (to school) around the country,” United States Institute of Peace analyst Andrew Watkins told AFP. “This is the Taliban taking a step that would be a critical marker in moving closer towards recognition.” —AFP

Myanmar’s Suu Kyi: Prisoner of generals

YANGON: Myanmar’s latest democracy struggle enters its second year with its best-known figurehead, Aung San Suu Kyi, isolated from the fight, a prisoner of the generals behind the coup and facing the rest of her life in prison. The Nobel laureate has been held since the putsch that ousted her government in the early hours of February 1 last year, ending a brief democratic interlude for the country and sparking huge protests.

Months before, her National League for Democracy (NLD) had swept nationwide elections and she had been preparing to begin another five-year term as the nation’s de facto leader. The daughter of an independence hero, Suu Kyi spent nearly two decades enduring long stretches of house arrest under the former military regime.

She has been jailed by the current junta for six years after being found guilty of illegally importing and possessing walkie-talkies, flouting coronavirus rules and incitement against the military. She will remain under house arrest as she battles a slew of other charges, including a new trial for allegedly influencing electoral officials during the 2020 polls.

While Suu Kyi remains immensely popular in Myanmar, her legacy abroad was deeply tarnished

by her government’s handling of the Rohingya crisis. There was global revulsion at a 2017 military crackdown that saw about 750,000 members of the stateless Rohingya minority flee burning villages to neighbouring Bangladesh.

And for many still fighting in Myanmar, the revolution must now go further than the movement that Suu Kyi led decades ago and permanently root out military dominance of the country’s politics and economy.

Daughter of a hero

Suu Kyi was born on June 19, 1945, in Japanese-occupied Yangon during the final weeks of World War II. Her father, Aung San, fought for and against both the British and the Japanese colonisers as he jostled to give his country the best shot at independence, achieved in 1948. Suu Kyi spent most of her early years outside of Myanmar—first in India, where her mother was an ambassador, and later at Oxford University, where she met her British husband.

After General Ne Win seized full power in 1962, he forced his brand of socialism on Myanmar, turning what was once Asia’s rice bowl into one of the world’s poorest and most isolated countries. Suu Kyi’s elevation to a democracy champion happened almost by accident when she returned home in 1988 to nurse her dying mother. Soon afterwards, at least 3,000 people were killed when the military crushed protests against its authoritarian rule.

The bloodshed was the catalyst for Suu Kyi. A charismatic orator, the then-43-year-old found



NAYPYIDAW, Myanmar: File handout photo shows, detained civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi (L) and detained president Win Myint attend their first court appearance in Naypyidaw, since the military detained them in a coup. —AFP

herself in a leading role of a burgeoning democracy movement, delivering speeches to huge crowds as she led the NLD to a landslide 1990 election victory. The generals were not prepared to give up power, ignoring the result and confining Suu Kyi to her home in Yangon, where she lived for around 15 of the next 20 years.

She was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize while detained in 1991. The junta offered to end her imprisonment at any time if she left the country for good, but Suu Kyi refused. That decision meant not seeing her husband before his death from cancer in 1999 and missing her two sons growing up. —AFP

UN seeks \$169m aid for Philippine typhoon victims

MANILA: The United Nations has increased its fundraising target for victims of Typhoon Rai to \$169 million as the Philippines struggles to recover from the devastating storm, the organisation’s resident coordinator said yesterday. More than 400 people were killed and hundreds of thousands left homeless after Rai hit the archipelago as a super typhoon in December, ripping off roofs, shredding wooden houses and wiping out crops.

The UN initially sought \$107.2 million for 530,000 people in the hardest-hit areas in central and southern regions of the country flattened by the typhoon. But UN Resident Coordinator in the Philippines Gustavo Gonzalez said more than 70 field assessments showed “humanitarian needs remain very high”.

The new target of \$169 million would assist the 840,000 “most vulnerable people” in dire need of

shelter, food, drinking water and sanitation facilities, Gonzalez said. About 30 percent of the revised amount had been received, Gonzalez told AFP. Humanitarian groups have been working with the government to distribute aid.

But the challenges were “enormous”, said Gonzalez. “Affected regions bore massive damage to infrastructure, agricultural land and the fishing sector, with local economies and livelihoods hit hard,” he said.

Around 1.7 million houses were destroyed or badly damaged in the typhoon — 600,000 more than in 2013’s Super Typhoon Haiyan—and tens of thousands of people remain in evacuation centres seven weeks after Rai made landfall.

Power disruptions or outages continued to plague 80 municipalities, he said. The response effort had been hampered by an Omicron-driven surge in COVID-19 infections, Gonzalez said, describing it as a “crisis within a crisis”.

Rai, the strongest typhoon to hit the Philippines last year, intensified faster than expected, officials said previously. Scientists have long warned that typhoons are strengthening more rapidly as the world becomes warmer because of human-driven climate change.

while covering protests.

On Monday Ariana TV reporters Waris Hasrat and Aslam Hijab were detained by the Taliban, according to the Afghan Media Association, a newly founded journalists’ rights group. A Taliban spokesman said he did not have any information on the pair, but both the United Nations and Amnesty International blamed the hardline Islamist group for their abduction.

Ali Asghari, news editor of Ariana News, told AFP both had been released “after being found guiltyless”. He said no further details could be released for security reasons. Their arrest came two weeks after a pair of female activists went missing after participating in



MANILA: This photo taken on November 30, 2021 shows people crowding a street market to shop at a popular shopping centre in Manila. The Philippine economy rebounded stronger than expected in 2021 after a relaxation of COVID-19 rules. —AFP

The Philippines-ranked among the most vulnerable nations to its impacts—is hit by an average of 20 storms every year. In 2013, Typhoon Haiyan was the strongest storm ever to have made landfall, leaving over 7,300 people dead or missing. —AFP

a Kabul protest calling for women’s rights.

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has expressed concern for them and four of their relatives, who all remain missing. The Taliban have denied any knowledge of their whereabouts and say they are investigating the matter. And last month a prominent university lecturer and regime critic was also detained, before being released days later following outrage in Afghanistan and abroad.

Having ruled with an iron fist during their first stint in power from 1996 to 2001, the Taliban have promised a less repressive form of government this time around. But they have slowly ramped up restrictions, particularly against women. —AFP

News in brief

Man disrupts pope audience

VATICAN CITY: A shouting man denouncing the Church disrupted an audience by Pope Francis at the Vatican yesterday, before being escorted outside by police. “The Church is not the way God wants it,” the man repeated in English, as he stood in the back of the audience hall holding his mask in his hand and gesticulating. The man, who also spoke in Spanish and Italian, appeared distraught and concerned as he implored the pope: “Please.” While being led out of the hall by two Vatican police and a Swiss Guard without resisting, the man yelled, “God rejects you, Father. You’re not a king”. The disturbance came near the end of Francis’ weekly general audience with the faithful in the large Paul VI hall. The 85-year-old pope, who had continued to deliver his address during the shouting, asked the audience to pray for the man. “We heard, a few minutes ago, a person who was yelling, scolding, who had a problem—I don’t know if it’s physical, psychic or spiritual, but it’s one of our brothers, in difficulty,” said the pontiff. “I would like to conclude by praying for him, our brother who suffers. Poor man, he’s shouting because he’s suffering.” “Let’s not be deaf to the needs of this brother”. —AFP

Haiti floods kill at least four

PORT-AU-PRINCE: Flooding triggered by torrential rain in Haiti left four people dead and one missing, authorities said Tuesday. Violent weather affected at least 20 districts across Haiti in recent days, flooding more than 2,500 homes and completely destroying three. Three of the deaths and the missing person were reported in the northwest of the impoverished Caribbean country. The fourth fatality was in the northeast, civil defense officials said. At least 20 municipalities in the country were affected by the bad weather. Haitian authorities estimated that more than 2,500 houses had flooded, with three completely destroyed. Cap-Haitien, Haiti’s second largest city with 300,000 inhabitants, was hit particularly hard, with a number of neighborhoods flooded. A bridge serving a small town in the northeast was damaged and an industrial park was flooded in the same area, bordering the Dominican Republic. —AFP

Colombia army raid kills 9

BOGOTA: At least nine people were killed Tuesday in northwestern Colombia in an army raid on the Gulf Clan drug cartel, whose commander was captured last October. The operation began early Tuesday and was still underway in the evening when Defense Minister Diego Molano announced that “so far nine deaths have been identified in operations” against the drug gang. The bodies were found in a rural area in the municipality of Ituango, a stronghold of the Gulf Clan, whose leader Dario Antonio Usuga, also known as Otoniel, was arrested in October in a raid involving 500 police and military personnel. After the arrest of Otoniel, considered the most wanted drug trafficker in Colombia, President Ivan Duque declared the “end” of the Gulf Clan, which the government said was responsible for 30 percent of the cocaine being smuggled out of Colombia. Otoniel is being held in a prison in Bogota pending his extradition to the United States, which had offered a \$5 million reward for information leading to his capture. —AFP

Afghan journalists released after Taliban detention

KABUL: Two Afghan journalists detained by the Taliban earlier this week were released yesterday, the news editor of their media organisation said. Since returning to power in August the Taliban have increasingly cracked down on dissent, and local journalists have been beaten and intimidated

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 3, 2022

Business

Eurozone inflation soared to new record high in January

Data adds pressure on ECB ahead of a monetary policy meeting

BRUSSELS: Inflation in the eurozone soared to a new record high in January, official data showed yesterday, adding pressure on the European Central Bank ahead of a monetary policy meeting this week. The figure hit 5.1 percent last month, a first since the official Eurostat agency started to compile the data in 1997.

The European Central Bank, in charge of euro monetary policy, has a medium-term inflation target of two percent. Its board meets today and observers expect the ECB to stick to its current rates, which are historically low in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, despite the inflationary pressure.

Any tightening could threaten economic recovery, and weigh down indebted companies and governments. "January's inflation data support our view that the ECB will soon forecast inflation to be at its target over the medium term," the firm Capital Economics said in response to the latest data.

"Accordingly, we think that policymakers will end net asset purchases completely this year and prepare to start raising interest rates in

early 2023, if not sooner," it said. ECB chief Christine Lagarde has insisted inflationary pressure is "transitory" and should ease over the course of the year. She says the sudden bounceback of economies from COVID restrictions has caused the steep energy price rises.

Inflation had already hit a record five percent in December.

Energy prices soar

Energy accounted for 28.6 percent of the inflation surge seen in the eurozone in January, Eurostat said. That weight has grown since December, when it was represented 25.9 percent of the overall price jump. Food, alcohol and tobacco accounted for 3.6 percent, also an increase over the previous month, while services jumped 2.4 percent. Inflation for non-energy industrial goods rose 2.3 percent in January, lower than the 2.9 percent seen in December.

Inflation is becoming a point of increasing anxiety in the eurozone, as in other economies around the world facing supply constraints and sudden demand for energy as businesses try to jump back into pre-pandemic mode. The EU is



also confronted with other variables weighing on its energy market.

In the short-term, there are climbing tensions with Russia-its main natural gas supplier-

over Ukraine. Over the longer-term, there is the bloc's transition towards a net carbon-zero future that will require shifting away from fossil fuel sources to renewable ones. —AFP

Sri Lanka gets urgent \$500m Indian loan to pay for oil

COLOMBO: Sri Lanka was handed temporary relief from energy shortages and rolling black-outs yesterday with a \$500 million loan from India to finance urgent oil purchases for the cash-strapped nation.

The island's economic woes have left thermal power generators unable to keep the lights on and disrupted transport networks, as traders run desperately low on foreign currency to fund imports. Frequent breakdowns at a huge coal power plant have compounded unannounced electricity cuts and households are also struggling to source cooking gas and kerosene.

Officials said a formal agreement was being signed on Wednesday after two weeks of talks, in addition to a recent \$915 million in foreign exchange support. An Indian diplomat said talks were underway on another \$1 billion credit line to fund urgently needed food and medicine imports from India.

"The \$500 million is for Sri Lanka to purchase petroleum products from Indian suppliers," the official said. Sri Lanka's economy is also seeing a scarcity of rice, automotive parts and cement, with supermarkets forced to ration some staple foods.

The shortages pushed food inflation to a record 25 percent last month. Tourism is a key foreign exchange earner for Sri Lanka but the sector has collapsed in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The government has shut overseas diplomatic missions to save money and a broad ban on imports has been in effect for nearly two years to conserve foreign currency. Three international rating agencies have downgraded the island since late last year on fears it may not be able to service its \$35 billion sovereign debt.

Sri Lanka has sought more loans from Beijing to help repay its existing Chinese debt, which accounts for about 10 percent of the country's external borrowings. Authorities have borrowed heavily from China for infrastructure projects in the past, some of which ended up as costly white elephants. —AFP

CBK governor issues guidelines for digital banks

KUWAIT: As tech-based business models are becoming increasingly vital within the banking and finance sector to support and enhance services offered to customers and contributing to overall economic growth, the Central Bank of Kuwait (CBK) said yesterday as it issued guidelines specifying requirements for establishing digital banks. This falls within CBK's overall effort to utilize the latest advancements to bolster financial stability, encourage innovation, and meet future economic needs.

Central Bank Governor Dr Mohammad Y Al-Hashel stressed that guaranteeing the smooth operation of the banking business is among top CBK priorities, as mandated by the relevant law. As the banking industry undergoes transformation, new business models enable better and more accessible

Taco-a-day or meal-a-month: US restaurants join new craze

NEW YORK: For Jebin Tuladhar, the past two years have been like walking a tightrope as he tried to steer Shanti, the Indian restaurant chain he manages in Boston, through the pandemic.

To cope, Shanti in June started offering customers at the restaurant's three locations in and outside the city a subscription deal where a gourmet meal for two costs \$80 each month.

The plan now has about 80 subscribers, and Tuladhar estimates that if he adds about 10 additional accounts each month, Shanti can soon reach the breakeven point of 160 subscription.

From those offering fast food to others where white tablecloths are the norm, restaurants across the United States are rolling out subscriptions to bolster their damaged businesses and lure back customers who were scared off by the pandemic.

In Washington, Italian restaurant La Collina

to show weak hiring of less than 200,000 in January as Omicron caused businesses to struggle anew. Small businesses bore the brunt of the job-shedding, losing 144,000 positions, the ADP data said, which Richardson said had erased most of the job gains made in December 2021.

Large-business employment fell 98,000, while medium-sized businesses lost 59,000. The service sector accounted for the majority of the job losses, with overall employment falling 274,000.

Most severely hit was the leisure and hospitality sector, which has borne the brunt of past layoff waves and lost 154,000 position in January. Ian Shepherdson of Pantheon Macroeconomics said ADP can differ widely from the government payroll data, and Omicron's severity is influencing the latest reports. "These data, and probably February's too, will always be asterisked; they tell us nothing about the underlying state of the labor market," he wrote in an analysis.

"The first fully post-Omicron report will be for March, and recent history suggests all the lost ground won't be recovered immediately." —AFP

services to customers thanks to the immense potential of digital technology. Thus, the CBK was keen to develop a digital banking framework to enable and support digital banks. This was accomplished after benchmarking regulatory approaches of 25 central banks studying use cases from 40 digital bank business models.

The governor added that digital banks function within three main models: as a unit within a traditional bank, or as a partnership between such bank and a digital institution where the bank handles core banking operations while the second party handles relations with customers, trademark, and other areas of operation and service. The third model is establishment of a standalone digital bank.

Dr Al-Hashel stated that CBK issued comprehensive guidelines for establishing new digital banks, and has opened the application process. The CBK will receive and collect all completed application forms and documents as of the date of issue of the guidelines until 30/6/2022. During said period, the CBK shall reply to all queries it receives. The applications will be evaluated against specific objective criteria over a period of six months, and initial approval shall be granted by year-end.

launched a "Pasta Club" where, for \$85 a month, customers receive two deliveries of pasta with sauce homemade by chef Katarina Petonito. About 60 households have been won over so far. "There is no denying that the pandemic has caused restaurants to pivot and learn new ways to connect with guests," said Danya Degen, director of operations for Eastern Point Collective, the company of which La Collina is a part.

Building loyalty

Cafe chain Pret a Manger is offering US customers as many as five coffee drinks a day for \$19.99 a month, a program that started last September after a successful trial run in Britain. In January, Taco Bell rolled out the "Taco Lover's Pass," which allows you to order one taco a day over a 30-day period for \$10.

The fast-food giant is presenting the program as time limited but has set no deadline for it to end and is more or less treating it as an experiment. "Our goal for the Taco Lover's Pass test is to examine how our consumers engage with this unique offering that ultimately pays for itself in just a few visits," Taco Bell's Chief Digital Officer Zipporah Allen said. David Henkes, senior principal at restaurant consultancy Technomic, said these subscriptions can be both profitable and helpful to companies looking to expand their customer base.

The governor added that the guidelines come in five parts covering the definition of digital banks, their legal framework, and licensed activities, as well as phases and procedures for establishment of digital banks as per the application form available through the CBK website, www.cbk.gov.kw, and the supervisory and regulatory instructions and controls, also available through the website.

The governor concluded that CBK anticipates that digital banks will create added value through innovative business models geared to the service of the economy and the public good through targeted access and responsible use of innovative financial solutions, giving utmost care to the integrity and stability of the banking and financial system in Kuwait.



Dr Mohammad Y Al-Hashel



NEW YORK: Restaurants across the United States are rolling out subscriptions to bolster their damaged businesses and lure back customers who were scared off by the pandemic.

"You want to remain top of mind with your loyal customers," he said. "What you're really hoping to do is drive that engagement with the consumer." Besides fast food, most outlets that have launched subscriptions rely primarily on home deliveries because of the pandemic, but they don't plan to stop there. The Wells, a bar owned by Eastern Point Collective, has created "Gin Society," whose members get the ingredients for a cocktail sent to their homes each month, and also priority reservations and exclusive access to new drinks and food when visiting the bar. —AFP

US private hiring fell 301,000 amid Omicron surge

WASHINGTON: Private US businesses shed 301,000 jobs last month as the Omicron variant of COVID-19 disrupted activity, payroll services firm ADP said yesterday in a report that was far worse than expected.

"The labor market recovery took a step back at the start of 2022 due to the effect of the Omicron variant and its significant, though likely temporary, impact to job growth," ADP Chief Economist Nela Richardson said. The decline in payrolls was the first since December 2020, while the data also revised lower by 31,000 the job gains reported in the final month of 2021.

The ADP report is considered a preview of Friday's government jobs report, which is expected



HALLANDALE BEACH, US: In this file photo, a "We Are Hiring" sign hangs near the entrance to Mo's Bagels & Deli in Hallandale Beach, Florida. —AFP

Business

2021 a year of achievements for stc

Net profit KD 44.9 million, 60 fils cash dividends and 100% bonus shares

KUWAIT: Kuwait Telecommunications Company (stc), a world-class digital leader providing innovative services and platforms to customers and enabling the digital transformation in Kuwait, announced its financial results for the financial year ended 31 December 2021. stc highlights the financial and operational performance in addition to the social initiatives that the company took during the year 2021 amid COVID-19's difficulties, challenges and negative economic consequences which affected most companies within various sectors.

Commenting on the announcements of these results, Dr Mahmoud Ahmed Abdulrahman, stc's Chairman, stated: "2021 was a year full of operational and financial achievements for stc, in spite of the stiff working environment imposed by the COVID-19 crisis on the Kuwaiti telecommunications market, which in turn demonstrated its resilience and flexibility in addressing economic risks. stc has also updated its business model and strategy to meet the continuous and massive growth in the digital communications services. Accordingly, stc is committed to provide integrated technical solutions and corporate database solutions that would enable as well as support the economic and social recovery process of the COVID-19 crisis. This would, in turn, enhance stc's operational and financial performance, with the aspiration to achieving an outstanding performance in the coming periods".

He pointed out: "Despite the continuing negative repercussions of the current economic crisis due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which affected most sectors on a global level, we are optimistic about the future of businesses. Therefore, we constantly seek to provide our customers with new and innovative products and services in addition to expanding easy and accessible communication channels that would enable us to provide better and faster services. stc has also greatly ensured providing integrated, advanced and innovative digital as well as technology solutions for both individuals and enterprises. Whereby, stc has been able to achieve these results by adopting a flexible operating model besides being flexible in implementing the company's digital transformation strategy. Not to mention stc's keenness to provide integrated advanced technical solutions to serve the Kuwaiti government's outlook with regards to the social distancing protocols imposed on the individual and enterprise segments".

Dr Abdulrahman commented on stc's social initiatives since COVID-19's outbreak: "Since the onset of the pandemic, stc has been fully committed to improving the public health situation of the local community in addition to reducing the environmental impact through initiating and participating in a number of activities that contribute to the health care, sports,



education and private enterprise sectors. Driven by stc's continued focus on adhering to the rules and regulations of the Kuwaiti government, we are developing the company's corporate social responsibility programs in the most effective way to make a positive impact on current and future generations in Kuwait".

Commenting on the stc's financial position as of December 31, 2021, Dr Abdulrahman said: "Company's total assets reached KD 393.8 million at the end of 2021, while the total shareholders' equity increased by 7 percent reaching KD 237.2 million. Moreover, the company has a strong solvency position among its peers in the Middle East.

stc's Board of Directors has recommended distributing cash dividends to respective shareholders of 60 fils representing 60 percent of the share's nominal value for the year ended 2021. stc's Board of Directors has also recommended distributing 100 percent free bonus shares from the issued and paid in capital by issuing 499,366,852 new shares to be distributed as free grant shares to the shareholders. This recommendation is subject to the approval of the Annual General Assembly".

Dr Abdulrahman commented on recommended cash dividends distribution: "These distributions are considered amongst the highest in the region in light of the continuous repercussions of the COVID-19 crisis and the arising concerns about maintaining the liquidity levels. However, stc has demonstrated its capacity by maintaining good cash flows resulted from adopting its successful business model as well as financial planning that ensure good financial returns and results that would enable the company to distribute sustainable cash dividends on an annual basis, and in the best interest of the company's valued shareholders".

Commenting on stc's most important achievements in 2021, Eng Maziad Al-Harbi, CEO of stc said: "Despite all the challenges, 2021 was an exceptional year across all the standards, due to the company's advanced strategy and the dedication of its employ-

ees to deliver their best in order to achieve company's desired goals, meet the individuals and enterprise customers' needs, as well as creating an added value and achieve better returns for its shareholders. In this regard, the digital transformation strategy that was developed and implemented by stc over the past few years has also been a key success factor that helped the company in its many contributions to the local economy, government initiatives and the growing demand for digital solutions and information technology.

In addition to our numerous successful achievements that reflect the company's position as a leader in telecommunications and digital solutions sector, this year, stc has made a major breakthrough in obtaining the approval from the Communication and Information Technology Regulatory Authority's (CITRA) to launch the first-of-its-kind mobile virtual network operator (MVNO) license to launch Virgin Mobile Kuwait in partnership with Virgin Mobile Middle East & Africa. Through this license, Virgin Mobile Kuwait will be able to operate using stc's network, with stc acting as a Host Facilities Based Provider "FBP" with Virgin Mobile Kuwait, offering prepaid plans to users, which makes it the first company to provide a virtual telecommunication service in the country.

In line with the company's corporate strategy which focuses on expanding its activities and shifting from the traditional telecommunication services to the digital services as well as the advanced integrated communications information solutions and advanced technical solutions, at the end of 2021, stc announced signing a binding agreement to fully acquire e-portal Holding Company and its subsidiaries. This acquisition of e-portal, one of the most prominent ICT companies, would enhance stc's internal ICT capabilities to cope with the recent rapid global".

Commenting on the announcement of company's financial results for the year ended December 31, 2021, Eng Al-Harbi, stated: "stc was able to achieve good financial results that meet the aspirations of the company's shareholders during the current circumstances and intense competition. Whereby, stc's total revenue grew by 4.6 percent to reach KD 296.3 million in 2021, compared to KD 283.2 million last year. This increase is mainly attributed to the services and smart packages that are created to meet most of the individual sector's needs, in addition to the growth in the enterprise sector through the implementation of the digital transformation strategy and providing integrated technical solutions to the private and government sectors. stc also ensured pushing its business into new areas of sustainable growth through a series of innovative initiatives aimed at upgrading the operational efficiency



and delivering the best in-class services and products that cater to customers' needs and meet their anticipations in light with COVID-19 crisis and its consequences. This was accompanied with stc's support to business operations through its advanced infrastructure with the best and widest coverage of the 5G network".

Al-Harbi added: "These outcomes resulted in the growth of EBITDA by 8.5 percent KD 79.6 million in 2021 compared to KD 73.4 million in 2020. Whereby, EBITDA margin reached 27 percent during the year ended in 2021 compared to 26 percent in the previous year. As a result, the company's net profit during the FY2021 recorded a growth of 40 percent to reach KD 44.9 million (earnings per share 90 fils) compared to KD 32.1 million (earnings per share 64 fils) recorded by the company in 2020, as the financial impact of litigation had a significant impact on this growth in 2021. stc's customer base reached approx. 2.0 million customers at the end of December 2021".

Al-Harbi noted: "In stc, we are working on implementing a balanced cost-efficiency policy to achieve the best results and enhance profitability through adopting effective financial plans to direct our operational and capital expenditures. Whereby, stc was able to structure its capital expenditures, especially after the negative impact of the current economic crisis, to ensure liquidity of its cash flows under the current circumstances. stc's financial results throughout FY2021 also reflected its competitiveness and strengthened its position as the second largest telecommunications company in terms of its market share of revenue in the Kuwait telecommunications sector with a market share of approx. 36 percent".

Ahli United Bank reports net profit of KD 31.2m in 2021

KUWAIT: Ahli United Bank K.S.C.P. (AUBK) announced its results for the fiscal year ended 31 December 2021. The bank has recorded a net profit for 2021 amounting to KD 31.2 million which is higher by 5.1 percent than KD 29.7 million of 2020.

The bank's total assets has recorded KD 4.57 billion at the end of December 2021. The financing receivables portfolio has grown by 7.4 percent to reach KD 3.34 billion as of December 2021 (2020: KD 3.11 billion) while customer deposits have also grown to reach KD 3.11 billion against KD 3.01 billion reported last year representing a growth of 3.3 percent. The shareholders equity stood at KD 467 million at the end of 2021 while Earnings Per Share (EPS) stood at 11.5 fils at the end of the year, compared to 12.3 fils in 2020.

In addition to the foregoing achievements, the bank maintained a solid capital adequacy ratio (CAR), before dividend, of 18.2 percent as of 31 December 2021 exceeding the level required by the regulator. Further, the Bank has maintained a conservative approach of risk management, which contributed to improving the quality of its assets and reducing the irregular financing ratio to 1.87 percent with 229 percent coverage ratio including collaterals as of the year-



end 2021.

The distributions to depositors also declined by 33.7 percent compared to last year due to the increased reliance on individual deposit accounts. Likewise, provisions for financing receivables declined by 11.5 percent compared to last year, in an indication of the improvement in the quality of assets.

The Board of Directors has recommended a distribution of cash dividend of 5 percent (5 fils per share) and bonus share of 5 percent, representing five shares for every hundred shares held at the record date. The proposed cash and stock dividends are subject to the shareholders' approval at the Annual General Meeting expected in March 2022.

Commenting on the results, Dr Anwar Al-Mudhaf, Chairman of Ahli United Bank said, "We have achieved satisfactory results for the year 2021, which reaffirm the bank's increased resilience to shocks, the solidity of its financial position, and maintenance of an appropriate level of profitability, relying on a conservative strategy and lower risk appetite. This is in addition to the Bank's balanced performance and profit growth that is in line with a low risk degree.

Dr Al-Mudhaf said that the great success achieved by the Bank in its second issue of non-callable Mudarabah Sukuk to Additional Tier 1 (AT1) bonds, which received great demand from investors mirrors

the Bank's solid financial position and the confidence of investors in its performance. Al-Mudhaf reiterated that Ahli United Bank is keen to apply the highest standards of corporate governance, stressing that CSR and sustainability come at the top of the Bank's priorities.

Optimism

Al-Mudhaf expressed his optimism about the economic condition in 2022, underlining that this optimism relies on several factors, including oil prices rebound which positively reflected on the FY 2022-2023 draft budget with 74.2 percent fall in deficit compared to last year's budget. He added that this is expected to be followed by an improvement in government spending and resumption of vital projects that will benefit the banking sector. For her part, Jehad Al-Humaidhi, Chief Executive Officer of Ahli United Bank said, "AUB has achieved steady results despite the ongoing uncertainty and the new COVID variants. We are pleased to announce profit growth driven by our strong operational performance. We continue to implement the Bank's work strategies and plans for growth and provided the best banking services and transactions. We will continue developing all areas of business, especially digital transformation. Moreover, attracting Kuwaiti expertise and competencies remains at the top of our priorities."

Stocks advance on strong earnings, oil flat before OPEC+

LONDON: European stock markets rose yesterday following strong global earnings that lifted Asian and Wall Street equities overnight. Soaring profits at Google parent Alphabet and an upgraded earnings forecast by Sony helped lift sentiment ahead of monetary policy announcements today from the European Central Bank and Bank of England.

Before then, all eyes will be on the OPEC+ oil cartel, which yesterday is expected to stick to its guns and increase output only modestly after the price of crude recently soared to multi-year highs.

"European (stocks) markets continue their February ascent, attempting to build on recent bullish momentum after January's rout," noted Victoria Scholar, head of investment at Interactive Investor. Oil prices steadied after recent strong gains as Russia-Ukraine tensions fanned supply worries, adding to expectations that a global economic recovery will spur further demand improvements. As in January, analysts expect

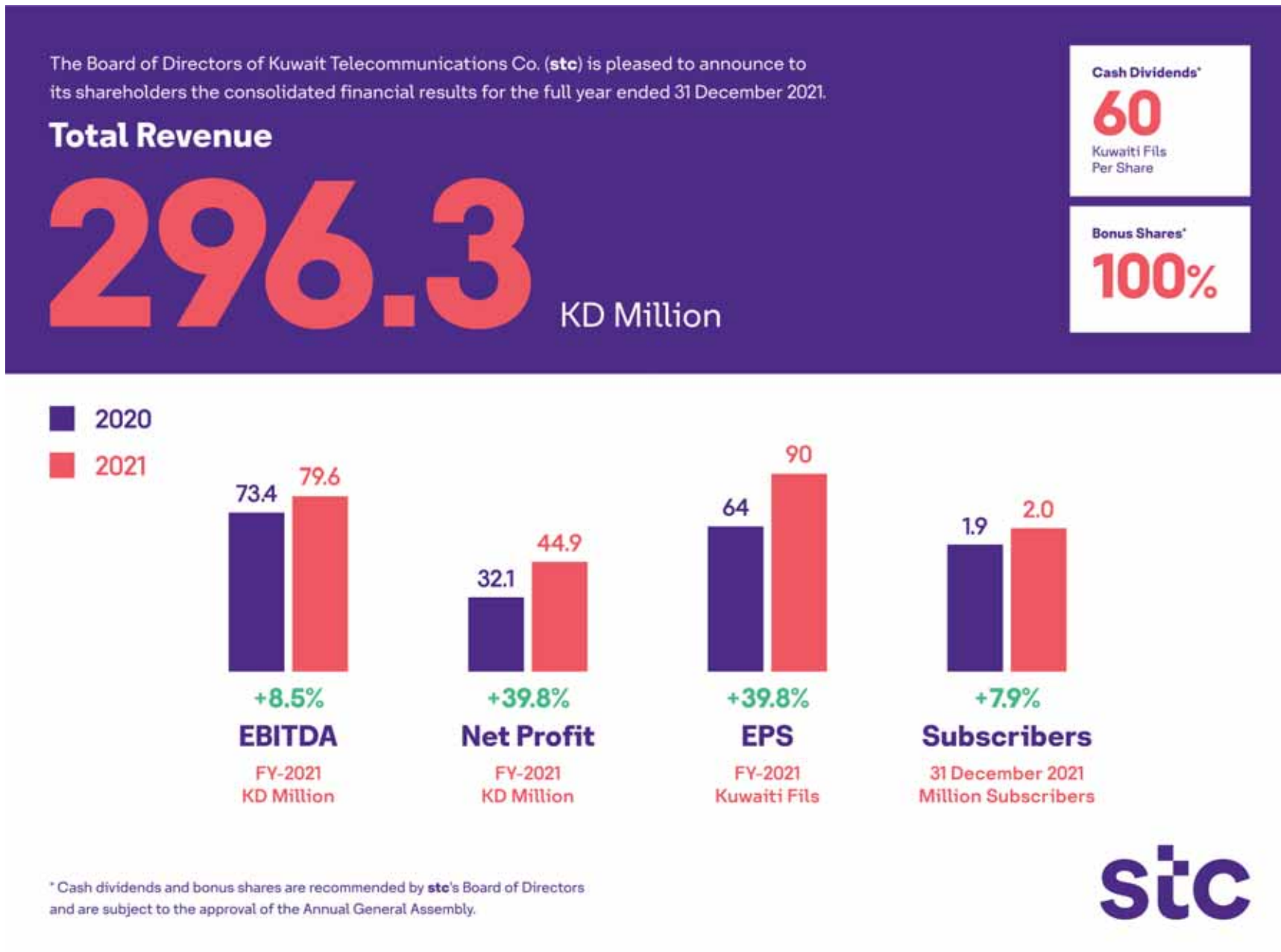
the 23 member nations forming OPEC+, led by Saudi Arabia and Russia, to announce additional output. "Anything other than a decision to raise output by a further 400,000 barrels per day would come as a big surprise," said Commerzbank analyst Carsten Fritsch.

He added there was speculation "OPEC+ could opt to scale up its oil supply to a greater extent in response to the high prices and tight market".

Lunar New Year

Asian stock markets closed higher as investors become less worried about the Federal Reserve's plans to tighten monetary policy, while strong corporate results lifted optimism about the outlook. And while there remains plenty of volatility and uncertainty on trading floors owing to geopolitical tensions and the Omicron spread, analysts remain upbeat for the year.

Asian equities trading remained thin owing to the Lunar New Year break. Of the markets that opened yesterday, Tokyo, Sydney, Wellington, Jakarta and Manila all gained more than one percent. After a torrid January, world stock markets have enjoyed a strong start to February as investors hunt for bargains, according to analysts. As well as today's European updates on interest rates, traders await the pre-weekend release of US jobs data providing the latest snapshot of the world's biggest economy.—AFP



Business

Brussels labels gas, nuclear as sustainable investments

‘Energy taxonomy’ to help set a global standard for investment projects

BRUSSELS: The European Commission defied protests from green campaigners and dissent in its own ranks yesterday to give a sustainable finance label to investments in both gas and nuclear power.

Opponents of gas want to discourage investment in a fossil fuel technology they say only fuels the climate change crisis, while critics of nuclear energy point to the threat posed by accidents and nuclear waste. But the EU executive, under pressure from nuclear-powered France and gas-reliant Germany, argues that both have a role to play as cleaner power sources during the transition to a net-zero carbon future.

“The end is a low-carbon future powered by renewable energy. We do not have the capacity for that yet, but we still need to act urgently with all the means at our disposal,” EU commissioner Mairead McGuinness said. “We need to move as fast as we can from the highest carbon energy sources like coal during this transition. That may mean accepting imperfect solutions. Today’s delegated act may be imperfect, but it is a real solution.”

Green activists expressed outrage. Greenpeace sustainable finance campaigner Ariadna Rodrigo said: “I’d like to report an attempted robbery, please. “Someone is trying to take billions of euro away from renewables and sink them into technologies that either do nothing to fight the climate crisis, like nuclear, or which actively make the problem worse, like fossil gas.”

The debate over the bloc’s so-called “taxonomy”—its classification of “green” energy sources—had raised opposition in the European Parliament where there is an outcry over including gas and nuclear.

Even within EU president Ursula von der Leyen’s commission backing was not unanimous for the

decision—the 27 members had to hold a vote before making the announcement.

Carbon emissions

But McGuinness defended the decision, arguing that the plan imposes safeguards on how nuclear and gas projects are conducted under sustainable finance rules. The fight over the European Union’s classification of power sources is the latest dust-up in discussions between the member states on how to achieve a net zero-carbon economy by 2050.

Brussels had high hopes that the EU would help set a global standard on determining sustainable projects and direct big flows of Wall Street money towards saving the planet. But EU member states often have widely differing energy mixes, with France, for example, proudly reliant on nuclear power—which has negligible carbon emissions once built—for its electricity needs.

Germany, meanwhile, is highly dependent on natural gas piped in from Russia. It is also in a small group of nations that believe nuclear energy is unsafe while gas could help coal-hungry economies like Poland’s to turn the page. Berlin and Paris were adamant that their chosen energy industries are fit to receive the Green label and the commission—the EU executive—was handed the politically poisonous task of reconciling the positions. To win the label, gas and nuclear projects are subject to constraints: projects must be approved by 2030 and 2045 respectively, as well as meet a long list of sector-specific criteria.

‘Gold standard’

Four more EU member states on Tuesday came out firmly against the inclusion of gas projects, arguing that the bloc’s promise to set a “gold stan-



BRUSSELS: European Commissioner for Financial Stability, Financial Services and the Capital Markets Union, Mairead McGuinness (right) holds a press conference on EU Taxonomy for sustainable activities in Brussels yesterday. — AFP

dard” for investors on how to classify energy sources was compromised. Even with conditions, calling gas sustainable “is largely incompatible” with the goals of the Paris climate agreement, said a letter to the commission from Denmark, Sweden, Austria and the Netherlands.

Opponents of nuclear energy have been just as vocal. In a rare move, Austria’s representative to the commission had threatened to vote against his col-

leagues when the label comes for approval. That proposal will now be subject to a possible veto by a super majority of member states or by the European Parliament, though insiders believe this is unlikely. Meanwhile, the head of the European Investment Bank, an EU institution, last month said his bank may sidestep the bloc’s taxonomy given the widespread opposition to gas and nuclear amongst Green investors. — AFP



KFH measures society’s interaction with ‘Diraya’ banking campaign

KUWAIT: Kuwait Finance House (KFH) organized an innovative social experiment to measure university students banking awareness and provide awareness advice on cyber risks to protect their banking accounts and information. The experiment comes as part of the awareness campaign “Be Aware” launched by the Central Bank of Kuwait in collaboration with the Kuwait Banking Association, and part of the bank’s social responsibility.

The experiment focused on testing the banking information of some university students to enhance their banking awareness and shed light on the fraudulence acts which customers may be exposed to through various methods including SMS, e-mail, phone calls or social media channels.

KFH conducted the awareness experiment in Kuwait University campus. The experiment took the form of a competition requiring participants to enter their information to be able to enter the draw, win a cash prize and share the one-time OTP with KFH employee. Students had different reactions. KFH officer confirmed to the participating students that KFH would not ask for the personal information of any of its customers through e-mail, SMS, or phone calls. He reiterated that such messages should be ignored and avoided as they represent fraudulence attempts to obtain their banking information and steal their funds or information.

He reiterated that they should not share the OTP with anybody and to beware of e-links as the mere click on the link may jeopardize their confidential banking information. He gave them some advice which, if applied by customer, could protect his bank account e.g., not to store any confidential information (ATM No., Credit Card No., personal identification No.) on mobile or to write the password on the card or share it with any party. Also, he advised them to log out from the bank’s application or the website once transaction is completed.

Students, followers, and the public reacted significantly and positively with the experiment. Several official authorities praised the experiment. The Central Bank of Kuwait praised the quality of the content, idea, execution of the experiment and reposted it on its social media channels.

KFH is continuing to support the “Be Aware” campaign to protect customers rights, spread awareness in this respect, enhance best practices and spread awareness on the banking services provided by the bank. The bank supports various related campaigns by posting educational videos and materials and awareness messages on KFH social media channels and various communication points with the public. Also, the bank explains the mechanisms of filing complaints and protecting customers rights.

The campaign ‘Be Aware’ comprises various topics: recognizing the bank’s role as a financial mediator, the significance of saving and investment, how to benefit from products provided by banks, awareness on customer’s rights when obtaining individual finance facilities e.g. consumer or residential finance, services provided to persons with special needs, the mechanism to file complaints regarding banking services, various banking cards, the most important steps to be applied to avoid being exposed to fraud, and other topics to ensure providing integrated awareness to the public and customers.

mostly from online search and its video platform, while its cloud business grew by 45 percent to \$5.5 billion in revenue.

Google’s dominance online has powered it to new heights during the pandemic period, but has also left it in the sights of regulators around the world.

Pichai said during an earnings call that Alphabet is open to “sensible” regulation by Congress but is “genuinely concerned that they could break a wide range of popular services we offer to our users.”

Some regulatory proposals could have unintended consequences such as weakening privacy and safety, or putting US companies at a disadvantage, according to Pichai. Alphabet’s strong earnings come after Apple, another pandemic-era winner, reported record revenue last week as markets were jittery about tech’s future as well as geopolitical risks like the Ukraine crisis.

However, regulators’ scrutiny around the world is stacking up as one of the most significant risks for the Silicon Valley giant. “Google has the biggest uphill battle in terms of antitrust issues among all of the Big Tech companies,” Third Bridge analyst Scott Kessler wrote. “Despite Apple’s bigger size and Meta/Facebook’s bad publicity, Google is seen most at risk in terms of US antitrust law,” he added.— AFP

NBK succeeded in achieving strategic goals despite challenges: Al-Sager

KUWAIT: Isam Al-Sager, the CEO of National Bank of Kuwait (NBK) Group, said: “The strong growth and financial performance that was delivered in 2021 across all business lines has further improved the Bank’s bottom line.” On the sidelines of the Analyst Conference for the results of FY 2021, Al-Sager mentioned that despite the continued state of uncertainty stemming from the repercussions of the pandemic, the bank maintained its commitment towards achieving its strategic objectives. “Our digital transformation continues to top our strategic agenda and we laid the foundation for future growth by launching “Weyay”, Kuwait’s first digital bank, to better attract and serve the needs of the youth,” he noted.

Promising prospects

Al-Sager stated that Kuwait’s economy witnessed a moderate rebound that was characterized by higher consumer spending, improvement in business activity and volumes as well as gradual recovery in government spending and project awarding, which is estimated to have reached KD 1.5 billion in 2021. “The operational environment in Kuwait is promising in 2022 and we are positive with regards to the opportunities that will emerge: in light of the high vaccination rates which would eventually enhance business sentiment and contribute positively to economic growth. This will also be supported by the state’s improving fiscal standing from the recovery of oil prices,” he explained.

Comprehensive sustainability

Al-Sager accentuated that sustainability has become a comprehensive approach for NBK which is embedded in all its strategies and operations, saying: “NBK will remain agile in positioning



and endorsing ESG as a core principle to the way we conduct and operate our business.”

We have regular efforts to identify, quantify, and manage ESG practices in place while committing and delivering on others across various sustainability areas, Al-Sager continued. “Our commitment is ongoing, with special focus on assessing the direct and indirect environmental impact of our operations, especially as the risks of climate change continue to emerge,” he added.

Public debt law

Giving his take on public debt law, Al-Sager said: “We are still of the view that the law will eventually be passed with some commitment from the government to rationalize the proceeds in more productive spending towards longer term economic development.”

From a budget deficit point of view only, now there is less pressure on the Government considering the recent increase in oil prices. That said the deficit will continue so the government has no choice but to seek the approval of the law, Al-Sager noted. “There is sort of an agreement between the parliament and the government that should help in the dialogue to approve the law,” he added.

Mortgage law

“On the mortgage side, I think it is more or less the same thing, it is necessary to approve the mortgage law. It is a very important topic considering the commitment of the state to provide residential housing in Kuwait, especially for the young population that is more than 60 percent of the total Kuwait population,” Al-Sager said.

The existing subsidized structure to finance housing by Kuwait Credit Bank has worked historically but there is more burden on the bank and also there is no other alternative but to get the law approved, he elaborated.

In an answer to a question about the impact of the re-capitalization of Kuwait Credit Bank (KCB), Al-Sager said that there is a huge estimated volume of funding needed over the next ten years.

“So it is really hard to say if the re-capitalization will cancel or delay the mortgage law. Passing the mortgage law will be more feasible to the government in our opinion,” he added.

diplomatic source in Mexico told reporters on condition of anonymity. A row between the neighboring countries would have potential consequences for wider cooperation in key areas such as trade, migration and fighting drug cartels.

The reforms would ensure that the state-owned Federal Electricity Commission (CFE) has at least 54 percent of the electricity market—compared with 38 percent now—and the private sector no more than 46 percent. The government says the move is to prevent soaring power prices—a hot-button political issue given inflation has hit a 20-year high above seven percent.

The reforms also aim to move towards a state monopoly in the exploration and mining of lithium, a vital material in the production of electric car batteries. In January several US Democratic party senators urged President Joe Biden’s administration to “more forcefully express concerns about President Lopez Obrador’s detrimental fossil fuel agenda.”

The blunt call came in a letter to Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Secretary of Energy Jennifer Granholm from Senate Foreign Relations Committee chairman Bob Menendez and three other members of Congress. “If enacted, the Mexican government would cancel renewable energy permits, contracts, and certificates,” they warned.— AFP

Google parent Alphabet nearly doubles annual profit

SAN FRANCISCO: Google’s parent firm Alphabet announced quarterly profits Tuesday that beat expectations and nearly doubled in 2021 — after a booming holiday season for the online ads giant facing anti-trust regulation scrutiny.

The tech giant had net income of \$20.6 billion on revenue that grew 32 percent to \$75 billion in the final quarter of 2021, ending the year with a total of \$76 billion in profit. That was nearly double the \$40 billion annual profit reported for 2020, as the pandemic had already accelerated a shift to online shopping, working and learning that also benefited fellow giants like Amazon and Facebook.

Alphabet CEO Sundar Pichai cited “strong growth in our advertising business... a quarterly sales record for our Pixel phones despite supply constraints, and our cloud business continuing to grow strongly” for the success. In all, Google earned more than \$61 billion in advertising revenue,

Mexico’s energy reforms test relations with US

MEXICO CITY: Relations between the United States and Mexico are under strain as the Mexican government pushes ahead with planned energy sector reforms that have alarmed Washington and foreign investors. President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador wants to strengthen the state-owned electricity provider and roll back the effects of liberalization under previous governments that he says favored private companies.

That has prompted warnings that Mexico is in danger of violating its commitments under a North American trade deal with the United States and Canada by prioritizing state-run entities heavily dependent on fossil fuels. In November, Lopez Obrador’s ruling party pushed back its deadline for the approval of a constitutional reform bill until April, following a backlash from the United States, Canada and foreign investors.

The next few months “will be critical,” a US

Lifestyle | Gossip



Mel B was horrified to discover daughter was aware of domestic abuse

Mel B was horrified when she discovered her oldest daughter Phoenix knew about the domestic abuse she endured at the hands of her ex-husband. The Spice Girls singer filed for divorce from Stephen Belafonte in March 2017 and has accused him of emotional and physical abuse throughout their relationship - allegations which he has denied - documenting the incidents in her tell-all 2018 book 'Brutally Honest', which journalist Louise Gannon helped her research and write. During that process, the 'Wannabe' singer found

out that Phoenix - whose father is Mel's first husband Jimmy Gulzar - was aware of what her mother had been through, something that hurts her deeply. Recalling the process of writing the book, she wrote in The Sun newspaper: "There was a problem. The massive hangover of trauma from that relationship meant there was so much I could not remember. "My writer had to piece so much together from talking to my close friends, family and colleagues to fill in the gaps from my memory. "To my horror I found out what my daughter, Phoenix, had wit-

nessed. Knowing what my daughter saw kills me." In a joint piece for The Sun, Phoenix reflected on her experiences growing up after hearing her parents fighting "two floors above" her basement bedroom. She claimed: "I sneaked out of my room and looked through a gap in the stairs just to check Mum was OK. "Then I went back to my room in the basement. But a few minutes later, I heard more screaming and shouting. She was yelling, 'Stop, get off!' Then I heard some thumps. "I went upstairs again and saw Stephen with his pants down and my

mum pushed over the couch. I froze but I knew there was nothing I could do." Phoenix - who turns 23 this month - admitted she struggled to sleep despite having to go to school the next morning. She added: "I was too frightened, too young, too helpless. So I went back to my room and lay on my bed staring terrified into the darkness. "I had school the next day but I knew I wouldn't be able to sleep. Back then, this was my family life."

Cowell 'promises to stay away from e-bikes' after latest crash

Simon Cowell has reportedly vowed to stay away from bikes after breaking his arm. The 62-year-old star - who came off his e-bike last week - is said to have narrowly avoided serious injury after flying over his handlebars in the "horror" crash, which comes 18 months after he broke injured his back following a similar fall. A source told MailOnline: "Simon has vowed not to go on a bike again. It was a horror show but fortunately it looked worse than it actually is." The 'Britain's Got Talent' boss - who



wasn't wearing a helmet - was taken to hospital after the incident with suspected concussion, cuts on his face and a broken arm. It's said Simon is "lucky to be alive" after slipping on a "wet patch" in the road near his London home, and he has since been spotted in a yellow cast. A source told The Sun newspaper: "Simon is lucky to be alive. "He was pedalling along, with his electric motor on, when the wheels suddenly went from under him after hitting a wet patch. "He slipped and went flying over the handlebars into the middle of the road." It's said Simon - who apparently "wasn't wearing a helmet" - was helped by three passers-by as they made sure he was safe from oncoming traffic. The source added: "Three kindly passers-by jumped into action, and stopped the traffic so he wouldn't be run over. "After being ambulated to hospital and given an X-ray, Simon was eventually released that evening - his arm in a yellow cast all the way up to the shoulder - and told to rest." Meanwhile, it's said the media mogul is "absolutely fine" after the scary incident. A different source told PEOPLE magazine: "He fell off his bike and broke his arm. He's absolutely fine." The incident comes 18 months after Simon broke his back after coming off his bike in Los Angeles, which led to a metal rod being inserted into his back. He said at the time: "It could have been a lot worse. When I saw the X-ray, I really nearly could have smashed my spine to pieces, so I literally wouldn't have been able to walk."

Megan Thee Stallion 'manifesting' a Super Bowl halftime show performance

Megan Thee Stallion will "manifest" performing at the Super Bowl halftime show. The 26-year-old rapper is determined to perform at the huge sporting event, while Dr Dre, Snoop Dogg, Eminem, Kendrick Lamar and Mary J. Blige take to the stage during this year's game on February 13. Asked if she could appear, she told 'Entertainment Tonight': "I don't know what you want me to say. Like a surprise is supposed to be a surprise. "We're gonna manifest that Megan Thee Stallion will be performing at the Super Bowl halftime show soon, whenever they will have me. "But we will manifest that so remember this day, hotties! We said we were gonna perform at halftime." Megan - who has worked on a Super Bowl commercial for Frito-Lay's Flamin' Hot brand - is delighted to be involved in some way, even if she doesn't appear during the halftime show itself. She added: "Being

in a Super Bowl commercial in 2022, I feel like everybody keeps asking me, 'OK, Megan when did you feel like you made it?' "I mean, now I feel like maybe I am kinda famous. "All the men in my family, like, maybe if they don't listen to my music, I feel like when they watching the Super Bowl they can [be] like, 'Yeah, this is my niece! This my cousin, yes! I wasn't listening to that song, but you see my niece up there!' " Regardless of whether or not she takes part herself, the 'Hot Girl Summer' hitmaker is excited to see everyone involved in the halftime show as she hailed it as a "big moment for hip-hop". She said: "I am very excited for the Super Bowl halftime show, this will be my first year actually attending the Super Bowl too. "Like this is such a historic event. I'm so ready, like, this is such a big moment for hip-hop, so I'm excited."



Hailey Bieber rules out having children this year

Hailey Bieber has ruled out the idea of having children in 2022. The 25-year-old model - who has been married to popstar Justin Bieber since 2018 - thinks that the pair will start trying for children in the "next couple of years", but claimed that starting a family in 2022 would be a "little hectic". She said: "I think ideally in the next couple of years we would try. But there's a reason they call it try, right? You don't know how long that process is every going to take. Definitely no kids this year, that would be a little hectic, I think!" The socialite - who recently launched skin care brand Rhode -

explained that despite initially believing she would want to start a family soon after getting married, she now realises that she is "super, super young" and wants to concentrate on her business. She told the Wall Street Journal: "There's this thing that happens for women when you get married. Everybody assumes it's: 'First comes love, then comes marriage, then comes the baby. Well, what about the things I want to accomplish in my business? I think I had it ingrained in my head that I was going to want to have kids right away and I was going to have kids super, super young. Then I turned 25 and I'm like, I'm still super, super young." Hailey's admissions come just months after an insider told Us Weekly that the pair were "definitely ready" for the challenge of parenthood. The insider said: "Babies are definitely on the brain. They both feel like it's their destiny to have kids together and they are definitely ready."



"Congratulations Billy Crystal! The legendary actor will receive the Lifetime Achievement Award at this years 27th annual #CriticsChoice Awards LIVE on @thecw and @tbsnetwork on Sunday, March 13 ." The 'When Harry Met Sally' actor joins an exclusive list of just five other stars who have also been given the Lifetime Achievement honor throughout the near-three decades of the Critics Choice Awards, including Lauren Bacall, Kevin Costner, Clint Eastwood, Eddie Murphy and Robert Wise. Billy said that he was "honored" to join such a "select" group of names as he thanked the CCA organization for the award. He tweeted: "I am honored to receive this award and join such a select group. Thank you @CriticsChoice!" Throughout a career

which has lasted almost 50 years, Billy has also received five Primetime Emmy Awards, a Tony Award, and a Drama Desk Award as well as multiple Golden Globe Award and Grammy Award nominations. With his role on 'Soap', Billy - who is father to Jennifer, 49, and Lindsey, 44, with wife Janice - made history as he one of the first openly gay characters on television. He went on to voice Disney character Mike Wazowski in Pixar hit 'Monsters, Inc' and Broadway debut in 2004 with the original production of his one-man show '700 Sundays.' The star is set to make a return to The Great White Way later this year as he takes to the stage once more in 'Mr. Saturday Night', a musical comedy he wrote based on his 1992 film of the same name.



Holland admits it would be 'an honor' to host Oscars with Garfield and Maguire

Tom Holland admits hosting the Oscars with Tobey Maguire and Andrew Garfield would "be a huge honor". The 'Spider-Man: No Way Home' actor teamed up with the two stars - who had previously played Peter Parker's web-slinging alter ego in their own big screen franchises - in the Marvel blockbuster, and while he'd love a reunion at the Academy Awards, his schedule wouldn't allow it. He told Extra: "It would be a huge honor, but unfortunately I just don't have time. "I don't have time to do it to the capacity that I would like to do it. "If I was gonna do something as big as that, I really would like to take the time to make sure I got it right." Meanwhile, the 'Uncharted' star admitted sharing the screen with the two stars seemed "felt impossible" before it finally happened. He added: "Having Tobey Maguire, Andrew Garfield, and myself come together was always a concept that felt impossible, but the fact that they

were able to pull it off and do it in such a tasteful way was awesome." The crossover was kept a secret before the film hit the big screen, and 'The Amazing Spider-Man' star Andrew repeatedly denied rumors he was going to return to the comic book world. He has since admitted it was "fun" keeping his appearance a secret, comparing the experience to organizing a surprise party for someone. He recently said: "I lied to people for a good two years and it felt great. "My dad and my brother [knew] and my [late] mother at the time. Just kind of us. It was fun to keep it secret because you know when you're planning a surprise birthday party for someone? "And they're like, 'I hate surprises. Tell me, is the party happening?' So it felt like I was part of organizing a surprise birthday party for a bunch of people who I knew would appreciate it."

Lopez feels 'lucky and proud' to be back with Affleck

Jennifer Lopez feels "lucky and proud" to be back in a relationship with Ben Affleck. The 52-year-old pop star originally dated Hollywood actor Ben between 2002 and 2004 but the pair reunited in 2021 thinks it is "beautiful" that they have given their romance another chance. She said: "I've never been better. It's just that we're all in a very beautiful moment I feel so lucky and happy and proud to be with [Ben]. It's a beautiful love story that we got a second chance." Jennifer then went on to explain that this time round she and Ben - who was married to fellow Hollywood star Jennifer Garner between 2005 and 2018 - have made a conscious decision to keep their relationship private. She told PEOPLE: "Before we kind of put [our relationship] out there and we were naÖve and it got a little trampled. We both were like, 'Wow, we're so happy and we don't want any of that to come into play again.'" The 'Love Don't Cost a Thing' hitmaker - who has twins Emme and Maximilian, 13, from her previous marriage to Marc Anthony, whilst Ben has Violet, 16, Seraphina, 13 and Samuel, nine, with ex-wife Jennifer Garner - added that having children has made them "protective" of how they por-



tray their relationship in the media. She said: "We're older now, we're smarter, we have more experience, we're at different places in our lives, we have kids now, and we have to be very conscious of those things. We're so protective because it is such a beautiful time for all of us."

— Bang Showbiz

Crystal to receive lifetime achievement honor at Critics Choice Awards

Billy Crystal is to receive Lifetime Achievement honor at Critics Choice Awards. The 73-year-old star - who shot to fame as Jodie Dallas on the ABC sitcom 'Soap' before going on to host 'Saturday Night Live' - will receive the award at the 27th annual ceremony, set to take place in March. A statement posted on the CCA's Twitter page read:





This file photograph taken in 1962, shows Italian actress Monica Vitti acting in a scene of the film *L'Eclisse* (*L'Eclisse*) directed by Michelangelo Antonioni. —AFP photos



This file photo taken on May 7, 1966 shows Italian actress Monica Vitti arriving at the Carlton hotel during the 19th Cannes Film Festival in Cannes.

Italian film icon Monica Vitti dies aged 90

Italian actress Monica Vitti, an icon best known for her starring roles in films by Michelangelo Antonioni, has died aged 90, the culture ministry said yesterday. “Goodbye Monica Vitti, goodbye queen of Italian cinema. Today is a truly sad day, we have lost a great artist and a great Italian,” Culture Minister Dario Franceschini said in a statement. Vitti shot to international fame with the 1960 drama “*L’Avventura*” (“*The Adventure*”) in which she plays a tormented woman who dallies with the lover of her missing friend.

Born in Rome on November 3, 1931, Vitti-whose real name was Maria Luisa

Ceciarelli-discovered her passion for the theatre during World War Two, when she entertained her family with puppets to relieve boredom. “As the bombs fell, when we had to take refuge in the shelters, my little brother and I would improvise little plays to entertain those around us,” she would recount years later. After graduating from Rome’s National Academy of Dramatic Arts in 1953, she began her career in the theatre, where she stood out for her comic talent.

She was spotted by Antonioni, with whom she quickly developed an artistic and sentimental relationship. “I was lucky

enough to start my career with a man of great talent”, but who was also “spiritual, full of life and enthusiasm”, Vitti said in an interview on Italian television in 1982. Former Italian culture minister Walter Veltroni broke the news of Vitti’s death with a tweet. He said he had been asked to do so by Roberto Russo, Vitti’s husband, and expressed his “pain, affection and regret”. The actress, who had been suffering from a degenerative disease, had withdrawn from public life in recent years. —AFP



This picture shows a screen displaying the Joe Rogan podcast and a smartphone displaying the Spotify’s logo. — AFP

‘Necessary evil’: Some artists say can’t quit Spotify

After music legends Neil Young and Joni Mitchell quit Spotify over a COVID misinformation row, some lesser-known artists have said they simply couldn’t afford to leave the world’s largest music streamer-despite their concerns. The row sparked a discussion about other artists exiting the platform of more than 170 million subscribers in a stand against Spotify’s partnership with podcaster Joe Rogan, who has been accused of promoting vaccine falsehoods on his show.

But the opportunity for less well-known artists to reach a large audience and potentially get paid for streams of their music means they feel obligated to stick with Spotify, even though many say the streaming giant unfairly compensates them. “For me, Spotify is kind of a necessary evil,” said Leo Sidran, musician and host of the podcast “*The Third Story*.” “To leave Spotify would be a decision to eliminate an enormous potential for people to find me.”

The music business has always been a tough one for performers, but the decline in major record labels’ absolute power as industry gatekeepers has given rise to a new landscape that has its own pitfalls. Acts with smaller followings have to do a lot of their own promotion, which makes platforms like Spotify or other streaming programs-and their music-hungry audiences-a way to get onto listeners’ playlists. “It’s crucial to be heard,” said New York-based jazz guitarist Michael Valeanu. “I think those platforms are how people consume music these days.”

Valeanu had not listened to the Rogan podcasts in question and so was undecided on the controversy at hand-but said he was willing to quit Spotify simply because he says the platform does not fairly distribute revenue among artists. For example, Valeanu said he has been paid only about \$500 across platforms, largely from

Spotify, for his roughly 10-year-old first album that has been streamed “thousands” of times.

Going to be discovered

Spotify told AFP that as of 2020, it has paid over \$23 billion in royalties to rights holders-including over \$5 billion in 2020 alone. Artists’ streaming payments are tied to how in-demand they are, so there will be a financial impact for popular performers such as Mitchell and Young-and for their record companies. Billboard magazine estimates Young’s decision to pull his music from Spotify will cost him personally around \$754,000 annually, while the impact will be a roughly \$272,000-per-year loss for Mitchell.

Young’s Twitter account directed fans to head to Amazon Music to stream his tunes, providing a link and noting “all new listeners will get four months free.” “He is standing up to Spotify... (And) now he’s pointing people to Amazon Music, which actually doesn’t make any difference,” said a singer-songwriter who performs under the name Pilsner Man, noting both are streaming platforms that don’t favor less famous acts.

The 29-year-old Pennsylvania-based artist said he makes less than \$200 a month via Spotify, noting that losing that money by leaving the app would hurt his professional prospects-but maybe not as much as losing the exposure. “A lot of it has to do with algorithms as well-people find music on playlists,” he added. “So if you’re on (Spotify), you’re going to be discovered by people who aren’t even really looking for you.” Some artists complained that bigger acts like Young, Mitchell and others had stepped away from the platform over misinformation, not in support of criticism of streaming pay rates.

While singer-songwriter India.Arie cited Rogan in her social media post announcing her departure from Spotify, she went a little further. “Paying musicians a fraction of a penny? And (Rogan) \$100 million?” she wrote. “This shows the type of company they are and the company they keep.” Sidran, the musician and podcast host, said the only way he sees the current system changing is for the biggest names in music to withdraw their work-and so far, they haven’t. —AFP

Women’s clothing store bans men in Brazil

Sick and tired of men harassing her clients and employees, the owner of a women’s clothing store in Brazil decided to take matters into her own hands and ban them from her shop. “No men allowed,” reads the sign that entrepreneur and model Andrea Costa hung in the window of her store in a shopping mall in Sao Jose dos Campos, a city of 700,000 people in the southeastern state of Sao Paulo. “Your pet is welcome,” it adds. Another sign posted in the store, Mr Luxos, asks men: “Please contribute to women’s privacy and wait on the bench outside the store.”

Costa told AFP she made the decision after countless cases of men making untoward comments and casting lascivious looks at clients and employees in her store, including when she and her staff would shoot photos for online sales in a small studio inside the shop. “Ninety-nine percent of men behave inappropriately, and it’s impossible to tell which ones just by looking at them. So they’re all banned,” she said via WhatsApp. Costa, who has more than 250,000 followers on Instagram, has tried to draw attention to the problem of in-store sexual harassment by posting pictures to the social network of men behaving badly.

Men in her store often tried to spy on women in the dressing rooms, or greeted partners trying on clothes with lines such as, “That looks horrible on you,” “You’re not going out looking like that,” Costa said. She said she previously tried luring men away from the dressing rooms by offering beer and video games, to no avail. The ban has drawn backlash in Brazil, a country with a deeply rooted culture of machismo. Costa said she and her store had been the target of aggressive comments from men on social media, and one aggrieved male went to the store to tell her off in person. She isn’t backing down, she said. “We women all dream of an environment where we can try on clothes and look in the mirror without being harassed,” she said. —AFP



Art sleuth returns statue to France almost 50 years after heist

A Dutch art detective has returned a rare Roman statue that was considered one of France’s most important treasures to the museum from which it was stolen nearly 50 years ago. Arthur Brand, dubbed the “Indiana Jones of the Art World” for his exploits, handed back the 1st century bronze sculpture statue of the god Bacchus to the director of the Musee du Pays Chatillonnais in eastern France. It was from there on a cold evening in December 1973 that thieves smashed a window, crawled through the bars and pilfered the 40 centimeter (15.7 inch) statue of the god of wine.

“The criminals made off with some Roman antiquities, around 5,000 Roman coins-but more importantly, the bronze statue of Bacchus as a child,” Brand told AFP. “The loss to the museum and the community was enormous. One of their most precious antiquities has been stolen,” said Brand, moments before handing back the statue in a ceremony at an Amsterdam hotel. “Because back then there was no proper catalogue for stolen art, the statue disappeared into the underworld and was thought to have been lost for ever.” The director of the museum-famed for its collection of Roman artefacts from the nearby archaeological dig site of Vertillum, an ancient Gallo-Roman village first excavated in 1846 — said it was an emotional moment. “When I saw it now for the first time, I just realised how much more beautiful it is than the copy we have had on display” since the original was stolen, Catherine Monnet told AFP.

‘Hunt was on’

The statue resurfaced through sheer chance two years ago when an Austrian client contacted Brand, whose previous finds include a Picasso painting and “Hitler’s Horses”, sculptures that once stood outside the Nazi leader’s Berlin chancellery. The client asked the Dutchman to investigate a statue of a little boy he bought legally on the art circuit. “When we could find no reference for such an important work existing anywhere, we realized that the work could have been stolen-and the hunt to find out what it is was on,” said Brand. After months of sleuthing, an obscure entry in a 1927 edition of a French archaeological magazine finally revealed a clue: the sculpture depicts Bacchus as a child and belonged to a French museum.

Further enquiries with French police

revealed it was stolen on 19 December 1973, according to an official police report of which AFP has seen a copy. “This means we had to make a deal. The Austrian collector bought it legally on the open market where it had probably been sold more than once over the last few decades,” the detective said. Furthermore, the statute of limitations in France was five years, meaning that no criminal case could be opened, Brand said. “But the



Dutch art detective Arthur Brand (right) hands over the retrieved Roman statue of Dionysus from the first century to Catherine Monnet (left), director of the French museum of Pays Chatillonnais, from where it was stolen in 1973 in Amsterdam. — AFP

owner was shocked to learn that the piece had been stolen and wanted to give it back to the museum. Under French law, he had to be paid a small amount-a fraction of the statue’s price which could be millions of euros-for ‘safekeeping’,” Brand said.

‘French heritage’

Brand tapped into his extensive network, and two British art collectors, Brett and Aaron Hammond, sponsored half of the amount, while Chatillon’s council paid the other of the undisclosed sum of money. “After 50 years, it’s extremely rare for a stolen object to surface. Especially such an important one, that’s now going back to the museum where it belongs,” Brand said. Museum director Monnet was delighted to have the sculpture back. “This is a particularly important art piece, because they are so rare and of such great quality,” she said. The statue was discovered by archaeologists in 1894 during a dig at the Vertillum site, already declared a historical monument two decades prior.

In 1937, the Bacchus statue formed part of an exhibition in Paris consisting of what was regarded as the 50 most beautiful art treasures of France, Monnet said. “This just tells you how important this piece of art is as a part of France’s heritage,” she said. “As for Arthur-he has free entrance to the museum for life,” a beam- ing Monnet added. — AFP



In this file photo Cypriot mouflons (*Ovis orientalis ophion*) are seen. — AFP

Wildlife rebounds in divided Cyprus ‘dead zone’

In a long-abandoned village in the UN buffer zone that divides Cyprus, an endangered curly-horned wild sheep offers hope not only for wildlife but that bitter ethnic divisions might slowly be healed. The mouflon, a majestic breed endemic to the Mediterranean island, is one of many species flourishing in the no-man’s-land created when inter-communal strife sliced Cyprus in two in the 1960s. “Without human influence, the wildlife and plant life have flourished,” said Salih Gucel, director of the Institute of Environmental Sciences at Near East University in the breakaway Turkish Cypriot north.

“It is like stepping back in time to what our grandparents would have seen 100 years ago,” Gucel said, after spotting an orchid growing amid the tumbled ruins of a farmhouse in the village of Varisha, some 55 kilometers (35 miles) west of the capital Nicosia. Cyprus has been split since 1974 when Turkish forces occupied the northern part of the island in response to a Greek-sponsored military coup. The buffer zone covers some three percent of the island, is 180 kilometers (112 miles) long and up to eight kilometers (five miles) wide.

Rare species ‘haven’

Many call it the “dead zone”, a tragic reminder of a frozen conflict where bullet-riddled buildings crumble back into the dust. Yet it is far from empty. Farmers with permits can enter, while United Nations peacekeepers patrol the line, monitoring soldiers, watching for smugglers or for refugees hoping to cross.

But it has also become a “haven” for rare plants and animals, a “wildlife corridor” linking otherwise fragmented environments right across the island, said ecologist Iris Charalambidou, from the University of Nicosia. “It’s an area where species can escape intensive human activity,” Charalambidou said, noting that there were some 200-300 mouflon in the Variseia area alone, a tenth of the estimated 3,000 population.

“These are areas where biodiversity flourishes... core populations of species that, when populations become larger, disperse to other areas.” Warily watching the rare human visitors, a pair of mouflon peer through an overgrown olive grove, turning tail long before wildlife experts-accompanied by Argentinian troops of the United Nations peacekeeping force-come close. The mouflon, a national symbol once hunted to the brink of extinction, is not the only species thriving here. Charalambidou said there were also threatened plants including orchids as well as rare reptiles and endangered mammals such as the Cyprus spiny mouse.

The experts said it shows how an embattled environment can recover if given a chance. “When human activity is not so intense in a certain area, you see that nature recovers,” said Charalambidou, a Greek Cypriot from the government-controlled south of the island. Gucel echoes her comments. —AFP

Lifestyle | Features



In this file photo Britain's Queen Elizabeth II attends the State Opening of Parliament in the Houses of Parliament in London. — AFP photos



In this file photo taken on June 02, 1953 Britain's Queen Elizabeth II (center) sits in Westminster Abbey, on her coronation day in London.



In this file photo Britain's Queen Elizabeth II sits on the Sovereign's throne in the House of Lords as she delivers the Queen's Speech at the State Opening of Parliament in the Houses of Parliament in London.

Queen Elizabeth II to mark 70 years on the throne

Queen Elizabeth II on Sunday becomes the first British monarch to reign for 70 years, heralding the start of her Platinum Jubilee year despite her retreat from public view. But the landmark date this weekend will see little fanfare, as the 95-year-old monarch traditionally spends the anniversary of the death of her father in private. The sovereign's record-breaking reign as head of state began when she was aged 25 and watching wildlife in a remote part of Kenya with her husband, Prince Philip.

She has since become the one constant in an era of rapid social and political change, a figurehead of modern Britain and a living link to its post-war and imperial past. The Queen—who regularly tops surveys as the most popular royal—on January 23 flew by helicopter to her sprawling Sandringham estate in eastern England. She had been due to stay at Sandringham House with close family over Christmas and the New Year but the annual visit was postponed because of surging cases of Omicron. No public engagements are expected on Sunday, in keeping with previous years. But four days of festivities are planned for early June, including a military parade and a music concert, street parties, a mass attendance



In this file photo taken on June 02, 1953, Britain's Queen Elizabeth II poses with Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, before her coronation, in London.



In this file photo taken on April 21, 1944 Britain's King George VI, and his wife Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon, the Queen Mother (right), pose with their daughter Princess Elizabeth, as they celebrate her 18th birthday at Windsor Castle.

picnic and a "Platinum Pudding Competition". Commemorative coins have been minted to mark the unprecedented milestone.

Retreat

At Sandringham, the queen is staying at Wood Farm, a five-bedroom cottage that was favored by her late husband after he retired from public life in 2017. According to British media, Prince Philip spent his time there reading, painting and walking, in more modest surroundings

away from liveried servants and royal pomp. The queen travelled to Sandringham by helicopter and was photographed in the back of a Range Rover, wearing a silk headscarf printed with birds. The 20,000-acre (8,100-hectare) estate, near the north Norfolk coast, is dear to her heart. Not only was it a retreat for Philip until he joined her in COVID isolation at Windsor Castle in 2020, but also for her father, George VI, who died there of lung cancer, aged 56. It was also a favored residence for her grandfather, King George V,

who also died there, and her great-grandmother, Queen Alexandra. After Philip's death in April last year, the queen returned to public and official engagements, including hosting world leaders at the G7 summit in Cornwall, southwest England. But she has been forced to slow down on advice from doctors, after an overnight hospital stay in October sparked public concern.

Since then she has largely stayed at Windsor and made few public appearances. The last dates back more than a

month to her annual-recorded-Christmas message, where she paid a rare personal tribute to her husband of 73 years and his "mischievous inquiring twinkle".

Respite

Only three monarchs in global history have reigned for more than 70 years. France's Louis XIV reigned for 72 years, 110 days from 1643 to 1715. Thailand's king Bhumibol Adulyadej was on the throne for 70 years and 126 days from 1946 to 2016. Johann II, prince of Liechtenstein, ruled for 70 years, 91 days from 1858 to 1929. Sandringham could give Elizabeth some respite from a scandal involving her second and reportedly favorite son Prince Andrew that has cast a shadow over her jubilee year. In mid-January, she stripped him of his honorary military titles and charitable positions as he battles a US civil case for sexual assault.

The move effectively removes him from public life, and is designed to insulate the royal family from any damaging revelations and repercussions. Andrew, 61, vehemently denies the accusation but he has been tainted by his associations with the convicted sex offenders Jeffrey Epstein and Ghislaine Maxwell. — AFP



A life-sized cutout of Britain's Queen Elizabeth II is seen on display inside the Cool Britannia souvenir shop close to Buckingham Palace in central London. — AFP

Fell asleep a princess, awoke a queen: Elizabeth in Kenya

Princess Elizabeth was deep in the Kenyan forest on the adventure of a lifetime, spotting wildlife from high up in the treetops, when her father died and she became queen. The world awoke on February 6, 1952, to the death of King George VI, who had succumbed during the night to lung cancer at the royal Sandringham residence in Norfolk. His 25-year-old daughter and heir to the throne only heard the news later the same day, when word reached Elizabeth thousands of miles from home in the wilderness of the Aberdare Range.

Kenya, then a British colony, was the first stop on Elizabeth's tour of the Commonwealth she had embarked upon with her husband, Prince Philip, in place of her ill father. The royal couple had taken a night out of their official engagements to stay at a one-of-a-kind game-watching lodge perched in a tree in the Aberdares interior. It was during their night at the Treetops hotel that the king would die, and Elizabeth would become queen. Jim Corbett, the naturalist and hunter who accompanied the royal couple to Treetops, is credited with writing in the visitor book: "For the first time in the history of the world, a young girl climbed into a tree one day a Princess and, after having what she described as her most thrilling experience, she climbed down from the tree next day a queen."

'Most wonderful experience'

In fact, the Duke of Edinburgh broke the news to Elizabeth after they had left Treetops but the story stuck and the hotel became the fabled locale where a princess became a queen. First opened in 1932 as

an overnight stay for wealthy and intrepid visitors, Treetops overlooked a watering hole from its position in a giant fig tree. In its day, there wasn't really anything like it.

A private setting among branches, remote in the African bush, Treetops offered the privileged elite a chance to encounter wildlife up close, and in safety, as they grazed below. Elizabeth and Philip kept a handwritten tally of what they saw, recorded on a sheet of paper framed still today inside Treetops. Large herds of elephant—"about 40" in one sighting—were spotted at the watering hole, along with baboons and waterbuck. "Rhinos all night", read the list dated February 5/6, 1952 and signed by the Princess and Prince, and "in the morning, two bulls fighting".

An aide to the royal couple, instructed to write and thank the hotel's owners, described a "tremendous experience of watching the wild game in its natural surroundings" and day and night "packed with interest". "I am quite certain that this is one of the most wonderful experiences that either The Queen or The Duke of Edinburgh have ever had," read the letter framed in Treetops dated February 8, 1952.

Faded memories

Two years after the historic visit, with Elizabeth having assumed the throne, Treetops burned down in what was rumored to be an arson attack by anti-colonial Mau Mau rebels. A new, much larger hotel was built on elevated wooden stilts on the opposite side of the watering hole to the original setting, where it still stands today. The royal visit—and the legend to go with it—made Treetops among the most famous hotels in the world. Well-heeled guests could stay in the Princess Elizabeth Suite, peruse royal memorabilia in the dining room, or gaze upon a portrait of the Queen framed by the tusks of an elephant shot by hunters in the 1960s. Elizabeth and Philip returned in 1983 — more formal than safari, with the queen in a knee-length dress, the duke in a blazer and tie—to find Treetops very much changed in the 31 years between visits. — AFP

Brits on platinum pudding quest for queen's jubilee

"It would be such an honor!": Amateur British cooks are battling to create the best Platinum Jubilee pudding to mark 70 years of Queen Elizabeth II's reign. Any baker without professional qualifications living in the United Kingdom and aged eight or over can take part. The aim is to create a pudding worthy of the queen that is at the same time simple enough to be recreated by millions of Britons celebrating the historic event at street parties throughout the realm. Party plum trifle, raspberry and white chocolate cheesecake or royal lemon tart: social media is already awash with novel ideas from proud chefs.

Samantha Smith, 31, has created the "Elizabeth Sponge", a crown-shaped cake topped with blueberries and raspberries, inspired by the classic Victoria Sponge, itself named after another monarch. "I kept it quite basic and then just spiced it up a bit with soaking the fruit in Dubonnet which is apparently the queen's favorite tippie," the lawyer based in Rugby, central England, told AFP.

Queen's taste

The main challenge facing budding bakers is to know just which flavors the queen prefers. "No one knows for sure what she likes," said culinary historian Regula Ysewijn, also one of the competition's judges. "It's something that people, the press in the UK have been trying to find out for as long as she has been on the throne, it's a closely guarded secret." The rumor is that Her Majesty was particularly fond of the "Groom's Cake" served at the wedding of her grandson William and Kate Middleton in



Baker Claire Ptak prepares a coconut pudding cake.

2011. "That's like a cake made with biscuits and then chocolate in between," Ysewijn told AFP. "So we know that she likes that, so she probably really does like chocolate."

Being the Queen of England "she must love a British pudding, traditional pudding. So people can really go very traditional and have a steamed pudding if they want to," notes Ysewijn. Besides taste and originality, judges are hoping that "people will look at the long and exciting life that the queen has already led and all the achievements that she has done and take inspiration from that in the pudding," she said. "And of course it has to be fit for the Queen so it has to

look pretty too," Ysewijn said. "We want the queen to be completely amazed when she sees the pudding."

weet immortality

Claire Ptak has already had the honor of coming up with a pudding idea for the marriage of William's brother Harry, to Meghan Markle in 2018 after she was invited by Kensington Palace. She came up with six ideas, including chocolate, rhubarb, fruit cake and vanilla, with the royal couple eventually opting for a lemon elderflower cake. "I was pretty excited about all of the people that were going to be at that wedding, eating my cake and to have the queen eat my cake was pretty remarkable," Ptak, who runs bakery-cafe Violet in East London, told AFP.

Now it's the food writer's turn to give advice to up-and-coming chefs: "Just research on what she loves to eat. Do some research on colors that she likes." The winner gets a selection of products from Fortnum and Mason, the famous London food shop that is organizing the competition. But more importantly, the winning chef's recipe has the chance of entering into cooking history, joining such immortals as Coronation Chicken, invented for when Queen Elizabeth took the throne in 1953 and still popular today. "If I was to win, it would be completely surreal seeing my entry at everyone's street parties in the summer!" said Smith. "The platinum jubilee celebrations are our opportunity to thank her Majesty for the past 70 years of leadership and really come together as a country after a difficult couple of years," she said. — AFP



Baker Claire Ptak prepares a coconut pudding cake during an interview with AFP at her Violet Bakery in east London. — AFP photos



Sports

Pellistri inspires Uruguay, Sanchez reignites Chile's World Cup hopes

Brazil thrash Paraguay 4-0; Argentina beat Colombia

MONTEVIDEO: Young winger Facundo Pellistri stole the show on only his second appearance for Uruguay as the twice former World Cup winners boosted their hopes of reaching Qatar 2022 with a 4-1 win over Venezuela on Tuesday. Chile also gave themselves a lifeline as Alexis Sanchez scored a brace in a 3-2 win at Bolivia in South American World Cup qualifying. Ecuador inched closer to qualification with a 1-1 draw in Peru, who dropped into the inter-continental play-off spot. Colombia's hopes all but died after failing to score for a seventh consecutive match in a 1-0 defeat in Argentina.

Goals from Rodrigo Betancur, Giorgian de Arrascaeta, Edinson Cavani and a Luis Suarez penalty saw Uruguay romp to a second successive victory under new coach Diego Alonso that propelled them into the final of four automatic qualification berths in the single South American group in which Brazil and Argentina have already booked their tickets to Qatar.

But it was Manchester United youngster Pellistri, who has spent the last year on loan at Spaniards Alaves, who shone brightest. His mazy run set up the second goal and his trickery won the penalty converted by Suarez. "He has what it takes to help us ... pace when one on one, the craftiness to exploit the defensive position," said Alonso.

Venezuela's tormentor

With two qualifiers left at home to Peru and away to Chile, Uruguay's World Cup destiny remains in their own hands. They had a dream start in Montevideo as Cavani's first minute cross was half cleared to the edge of the box where new Tottenham signing Betancur hit a sweet half volley that clipped a heel and skidded past

Wuliker Farinez in the Venezuela goal.

Uruguay were dominant and doubled their lead on 23 minutes after Pellistri showed great trickery to beat three players on the right and cut the ball back for De Arrascaeta to slot home from close range. Cavani, who had a second half goal ruled out for offside, all but sealed the victory in first half stoppage time with an opportunistic overhead kick from six yards out as Uruguay's players were lining up to finish off their weary opponents.

Pellistri continued to torment Venezuela down the right in the second half and won a penalty off Nahuel Ferraresi. Farinez saved Suarez's spot kick but referee Bruno Arleu ordered it be retaken due to encroachment and the Atletico Madrid striker made no mistake the second time. Josef Martinez netted a consolation on 65 minutes after a defensive mistake from Jose Gimenez.

Sanchez stunner

In La Paz, veteran Sanchez scored a brilliant brace to relaunch Chile's hopes of reaching Qatar after Thursday's 2-1 defeat at home to Argentina. The win left them three points behind Uruguay and two off Peru with two to play. Former Barcelona and Manchester United star Sanchez, 33, rolled back the years by opening the scoring on 14 minutes with a wicked swerving free-kick before netting the killer third goal five minutes from time. Marc Enoumba equalized for Bolivia in the first half before Marcelino Nunez gave Chile the lead again after the break. Marcelo Moreno rounded off the scoring late on but defeat leaves Bolivia all but mathematically eliminated.

"It's still not over, we've got two important games left," said Sanchez. "It was vital to win today in La Paz against tough opponents." Third-



MONTEVIDEO: Uruguay's Edinson Cavani shoots to score a goal against Venezuela during the South American qualification football match for the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 on February 1, 2022. —AFP

placed Ecuador would have secured qualification with a victory in Peru as Michael Estrada gave them a second minute lead after a mistake by Alexander Callens. But he missed the target when one-on-one with goalkeeper Pedro Gallese in the second half and Edison Flores made Ecuador pay with a far post header from Luis Advincula's cross on 69 minutes.

Colombia's miserable record-equalling seven-

match goalless streak has left them with little chance of even making the inter-continental play-off. Argentina dominated throughout in Cordoba and deserved more than Lautaro Martinez's 29th minute winner. Brazil ended Paraguay's hopes of going to Qatar with a 4-0 thrashing in Belo Horizonte. Philippe Coutinho scored the pick of the goals with Raphinha, Antony and Rodrygo also on target.—AFP

Flores sues NFL, alleging racist hiring practices

LOS ANGELES: Brian Flores, who was passed over for a job with the New York Giants last week, has sued the National Football League, accusing the league and its owners of running their operation "like a plantation." The former Miami Dolphins coach has filed a class action lawsuit in the US courts and seeks unspecified damages from the league, the Giants, the Miami Dolphins and the Denver Broncos.

The 58-page suit was filed in United States District Court Southern District of New York on Tuesday. Flores, who is Black, is represented by Wigdor Law and the firm of Elefterakis, Elefterakis & Panek. "In certain critical ways, the NFL is racially segregated and is managed much like a plantation," the lawsuit said. "Its 32 owners - none of whom are Black - profit substantially from the labor of NFL players, 70 percent of whom are Black.

"The owners watch the games from atop NFL stadiums in their luxury boxes, while their majority-Black workforce put their bodies on the line every Sunday, taking vicious hits and suffering debilitating injuries to their bodies and their brains while the NFL and its owners reap billions of dollars."

Flores was fired last month by Miami after leading the Dolphins to their first back-to-back winning seasons since 2003. He finished with a 24-25 record over three seasons. Flores has alleged the league is purposely denying Black coaches jobs for racial reasons. The lawsuit said that the league has discriminated against Flores and other Black coaches by conducting sham interviews and denying them jobs as head coaches, assistant coaches and general managers.

"In making the decision to file the class action complaint today, I understand that I may be risking coaching the game that I love and that has done so much for my family and me," Flores said in a news release on Tuesday. "My sincere hope is that by standing up against systemic racism in the NFL, others will join me to ensure that positive change is made for generations to come."

The Giants, who hired Brian Daboll as their new head coach last week, released a response to Flores' allegations.

'Most qualified'

"We are pleased and confident with the process that resulted in the hiring of Brian Daboll," the Giants said. "We interviewed an impressive and diverse group of candidates. The fact of the matter is, Brian Flores was in the conversation to be our head coach until the eleventh hour. Ultimately, we hired the individual we felt was most qualified to be our next head coach."

The suit includes text messages between Flores and Bill Belichick where the New England Patriots head coach gets mixed up and congratulates Flores on landing the Giants' job three days before Flores was scheduled to be interviewed for the position.

"I hear from Buffalo & NYG that you are their guy," Belichick texted Flores, mistaking him for Daboll. "Sorry — I f—ed this up," Belichick texts after Flores clarifies which Brian he's talking about. "I double checked & I misread the text. I think they are naming Daboll. I'm sorry about that." Flores also alleges Dolphins owner Stephen Ross offered him \$100,000 for every defeat late in the season which would have improved the club's position in the off season entry draft. —AFP

Sports world hails 'GOAT' Tom Brady

LOS ANGELES: The sporting world hailed Tom Brady on Tuesday as the NFL legend announced his retirement after 22 seasons. Tampa Bay Buccaneers quarterback Brady, a seven-time Super Bowl winner and holder of a slew of records that may never be beaten, confirmed his retirement in a post on Instagram.

The 44-year-old said he was finally retiring after a career he described as a "thrilling ride." Many across the NFL agreed, saluting Brady's competitive spirit and longevity in one of the world's most unforgiving sporting crucibles. "It was an honor and a privilege to compete against him on the field," Brady's great quarterback rival and friend Peyton Manning said. "To do it as long as he did, at the highest of levels is absolutely incredible."

Former Denver Broncos quarterback and Hall-of-Famer John Elway added: "When I think about Tom Brady, he's a true winner who handled

himself with class throughout his entire career. "Even with those seven Super Bowl rings, he never lost that competitive fire to be the best." Another quarterback legend and rival, former Green Bay Packers signal-caller Brett Favre, described Brady as the "greatest ever to play and you did it with class and humility."

"Man, @TomBrady, what a run!" Favre wrote. "God bless you and your family as you begin a new chapter in your life." Atlanta Falcons quarterback Matt Ryan - who finished on the losing side when Brady led the New England Patriots to the greatest comeback in Super Bowl history in 2017 - saluted an "amazing" career. "Seven Super Bowls (wish it was 6) and countless other records will be hard for anyone to pass," Ryan said. NBA icon Magic Johnson said Brady would be remembered as the "G.O.A.T." (Greatest of All Time).

"Thank you @TomBrady for 22 years that gave us 7 Super Bowls, several broken records, and making every teammate you played with better," Johnson said. "That's why you are the GOAT." Los Angeles Lakers legend Shaquille O'Neal meanwhile took issue with Brady's decision to retire. "No man, get your butt up and do one more



Tom Brady

year," O'Neal quipped, before adding: "Love u bro absolute joy to watch." Lakers star LeBron James added: "Hell of a ride my friend! Thanks for the memories & inspiration."

The Golden State Warriors' star Stephen Curry said simply: "Nobody better! Congrats." England soccer captain Harry Kane added: "Congratulations on an incredible career @TomBrady. Your drive, pas-

sion and commitment is inspiring. "You're the main reason I started following the sport and love the @NFL. Thank you!" Olympic swimming legend Michael Phelps said simply: "Congrats bro! Enjoy the next chapter." Golfer Justin Thomas said Brady had been an "inspiration to so many." "You're the best TB. Nobody better in so many facets of life!" Thomas said. —AFP

Japan's ski-jumping duo poised to soar

ZHANGJIAKOU: Japan are pursuing a ski-jumping double when the Beijing Games start this week and victory would be especially sweet for Sara Takanashi as she looks to lay her Olympic demons to rest. Four-time overall World Cup champion Takanashi is one of the most decorated jumpers of all time but Olympic success has eluded her and she admits being "swallowed up" at past Winter Games.

Now the 25-year-old is looking to win her first gold in Beijing and team-mate Ryohei Kobayashi is hoping to make it a one-two for Japan when he goes into the men's event as favorite. Kobayashi has been in red-hot form this season and almost claimed a sweep of the Four Hills competition last month.

Only two Japanese ski jumpers have ever won individual Olympic gold and Takanashi and Kobayashi have the chance to become the first to manage the feat on foreign snow.

"It looks like a really flashy jump and I'm looking forward to it," Kobayashi said of the competition venue in Zhangjiakou, about 180 kilometers northwest of Beijing. The addition of a mixed team event at the Beijing Games gives Japan even more chance of success. In the women's event Norway's Maren Lundby has opted not to defend her title. Austria's Marita Kramer has dominated the World Cup circuit this season and was the favorite going in to the Games - but after testing positive for COVID-19 at the last minute she will not now be going to Beijing.

That puts Takanashi, with a record 61 World Cup victories and 110 individual podium finishes to her name, in a strong position heading to her third Olympics. —AFP

Over 300 participate in shooting tournament

By Abdellatif Sharaa

KUWAIT: The tournament of the Late Sheikh Sabah Al-Salem Al-Humoud Al-Sabah continued at the Sheikh Sabah Al-Sabah Olympic shooting complex with the participation of a large number of shooters from the Shooting Club, Kuwait National Guard and Kazakh Federation. The organizing committee completed preparations and made sure all shooters requirements and needs are available.

Kuwait Shooting Sport Club Assistant Secretary Engr Mohammad Misfer Al-Ghurba thanked the family of the Late Sheikh Sabah Al-Salem Al-Humoud Al-Sabah for their contribution and motivation. He said competition will be very strong. More than 300 shooters are participating in the event.

Meanwhile, KSSC Assistant Treasurer Adnan Nasser Al-Ibrahim said the tournament of Late Sheikh Sabah Al-Salem Al-Humoud Al-Sabah has a special status in the shooting community, and the club is keen to organize it annually. The shooters will go for the official training rounds in the Trap and Skeet for men, while women will compete in the 10m Pistol and Rifle. Official training for the 50m Rifle will also start today. The closing ceremony will be held on Saturday at Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Olympic shooting complex by 6:00 pm.



Engineer Mohammad Al-Ghurba

Sarah Behbehani shines at Tennis Championship

By Abdellatif Sharaa

KUWAIT: Sarah Behbehani won the title of the Women's Winter Tennis Championship by defeating Yasmeen Al-Shimali in the final match 6-1, 6-2. The President of Kuwait and Arab Shooting Federations Sheikh Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Abdallah Al-Sabah, British Ambassador to Kuwait Belinda Lawis and Deputy Chairwoman of KIF women's committee Dalal Behbehani attended the final and closing ceremony. Rafa Nadal Academy Kuwait General Manager Martijn Belgraver said that the event was a success. He encouraged several talented women. On her part, Dalal Behbehani said the success the tournament enjoyed was a result of great team work and good cooperation.



Sports

Aboubakar, Toko-Ekambi hold key to AFCON's success for Cameroon

Cameroon captain - the tournament's top marksman

YAOUNDE: Forget Mohamed Salah or Sadio Mane, because the most prolific strikers at this Africa Cup of Nations are the two players leading the attack for the hosts as they face Egypt in the semi-finals today. Cameroon captain Vincent Aboubakar is the tournament's top marksman with six, while Karl Toko-Ekambi scored both goals for the Indomitable Lions in their 2-0 quarter-final win over Gambia to move onto five altogether.

Between them they have scored every one of Cameroon's 11 goals so far at the Cup of Nations, the duo emerging as the key men five years after playing bit-part roles in the side that won the title in Gabon. In 2017 both were used almost exclusively from the bench, although Aboubakar came on as a substitute to score the winner in the final against Egypt. "In 2017 I played a bit less but still helped the others in training and during games," recalled Toko-Ekambi after his match-winning display in the quarter-final.

"Now the roles are reversed and it is the same for Aboubakar too, although the main thing is that the squad gets on well together, that we play well and that we win." It would be grossly unfair to reduce Cameroon's success so far solely to the two forwards, with Collins Fai starring at right-back and midfielders Andre-Frank Zambo Anguissa and Martin Hongla both outstanding. "They are the finishers but their goals are the result of the work put in by everyone," says the coach, Toni Conceicao.

The role model

Aboubakar is a star throughout Cameroon, albeit he may never be worshipped in the same way Roger Milla or Samuel Eto'o were before him. However he is certainly a hero in his native Garoua, the main city

in the north of the country. "Before Aboubakar people didn't really believe that the region might produce a top player, but now youngsters look at him and say to themselves that anything is possible," said Djibrilla Kada, who runs the youth academy at Garoua club Cotonsport, Cameroon's leading side.

"He is a role model for all the young players at the club." Aboubakar grew up in a working-class neighborhood described by his brother, Michel Dior, as "a place with a bad reputation". "Vincent was not like us, going out, spending his money. Cotonsport saw his potential right away," he said.

Cotonsport are the only professional club in the north, financed by the insurance company of the workers of cotton company Sodecoton, the main employer in northern Cameroon. "Aboubakar is the best ambassador for the club, a product of our youth academy. We are now looking to develop partnerships with foreign clubs," says Fernand Sadou, Cotonsport's president. Aboubakar started banging in the goals there when he was 17 and was still a teenager when he was called up to the Cameroon squad for the 2010 World Cup.

Former rapper

After a spell in France, he went to Porto. Still just 30, he recently left Europe to go and play in Saudi Arabia for Al-Nassr. But his first coach believes he may soon end up back in Europe. "He has been one of the best players at the tournament. I think big European clubs will come in for him now, and he deserves it," says Kada. Toko-Ekambi, meanwhile, is among the players born and raised in Europe but with Cameroonian heritage.

Now 29, he grew up in Paris in a Cameroonian family. Almost lost to football after suffering a knee injury



DOUALA: Cameroon's forward Vincent Aboubakar (front) is challenged by Gambia's midfielder Sulayman Marreh during the Africa Cup of Nations (CAN) 2021 quarter final football match between Gambia and Cameroon at the Japoma Stadium. — AFP

as a teenager, he was a member of a rap group before returning to the sport and working his way up through the French leagues. After a spell at Villarreal in Spain, he moved two years ago to Lyon, where he has some-

times struggled to win over the doubters. Nobody doubts him in Cameroon now though, as Toko-Ekambi and Aboubakar look to fire the Indomitable Lions to their sixth AFCON crown. — AFP

Vietnam clobbers China in a Lunar New Year upset

HANOI: Vietnam rattled China in a 3-1 upset during a World Cup qualifying match on Tuesday, sparking jubilation among Hanoi crowds as both countries celebrate Lunar New Year. The surprise win gave Vietnam's national team their first scalp in the qualifiers after seven straight losses. It was also the first time the team defeated China. Two goals in the first half by Vietnam's defender Ho Tan Tai and striker Nguyen Tien Linh helped the Southeast Asian underdog set the pace.

The win was sealed in the second half when striker Phan Van Duc scored, prompting cheers from 6,000 local spectators at My Dinh National Stadium. A consolation goal during the second-half extra time by midfielder Xu Xin could not save China's slim hope of qualify for the 2022 World Cup - they are nine points below third-placed Australia. "We always try to gain maximum points when we play our home matches. And fortunately today, we won against China on the first day of Lunar New Year," Vietnam captain Do Hung Dung told reporters.

Beyond the football field, China and Vietnam are arch-rivals - with tensions spanning trade, land and water disputes. "Winning over China has always been Vietnam's aspiration no matter what the match maybe. So I think this match's result means even more for Vietnam than even its leg in the World Cup," football fan Nguyen Nam Long told AFP.

Celebrations of the Golden Star Warriors' triumph were echoed online. "Winning over China is a billion times bigger than winning other teams," football fan Dinh Trung wrote on Facebook. Vietnam is in Group B of the Asian qualifiers and will play their next game at home against Oman on March 24.

S Korea beat Syria

South Korea beat Syria 2-0 in Dubai on Tuesday to reach their 10th straight World Cup finals. The



HANOI: Vietnam's Nguyen Tien Linh (right) heads the ball with China's defender Wang Shenchao during the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 qualifying round Group B football match between Vietnam and China on February 1, 2022. —AFP

Koreans, who have appeared at every finals since Mexico in 1986 and came fourth when they co-hosted the tournament in 2002, go to Qatar alongside Iran, who had already clinched a place from Asia's preliminary Group A.

Even without injured English Premier League star Son Heung-Min, Paulo Bento's side dominated the game but they did come close to scoring until forward Cho Gue Sung's shot from close in went wide in the 43rd minute. Two minutes later, Cho, who got the winning goal in the last match against Lebanon, headed the ball against the post. Kim Jin-Su opened the scoring with a 54th minute shot that gave Syrian goalkeeper Ibrahim Alma no chance. — AFP

Lyon stun Marseille in see-saw replay

LYON: A heavily depleted Lyon came from behind to beat visitors Marseille 2-1 in the French top flight on Tuesday with Xherdan Shaqiri scoring and assisting for the hosts. The defeat meant Marseille missed out on climbing to second place in Ligue 1, led by PSG on 53pts, while Nice have 42 in second and Marseille 40 in third. The game was played with no fans allowed in the stadium after the original game in November had to be abandoned when a player was hit by a projectile from the tribunes. Marseille came

Queiroz eyes glory with Salah, Egypt at Cup of Nations

YAOUNDE: Carlos Queiroz won the Under-20 World Cup with Portugal, lifted the Champions League trophy as an assistant to Alex Ferguson at Manchester United and has twice taken Iran to the World Cup. The vastly experienced Portuguese coach now stands just one game away from the Africa Cup of Nations final, as he leads Egypt into a last-four tie against hosts Cameroon today.

The 68-year-old, born in Mozambique before the southern African country gained independence from Portugal, had sampled football in most corners of the globe before arriving on the banks of the Nile. Appointed by Egypt last September, Queiroz is hoping to lead Mohamed Salah and his teammates to what would be the country's record-extending eighth AFCON crown.

He also has his sights set on taking the Pharaohs to the World Cup in Qatar later this year for what would be their fourth appearance at the finals after 1934, 1990 and 2018. To do that they will have to beat Senegal in a play-off in March, a match-up that will see Salah and his Liverpool colleague Sadio

into the game on the back of five away victories and were heavy favorites due to injuries and absences for international duty in Lyon's depleted squad.

Matteo Guendouzi gave visitors a 1-0 lead heading in a corner on ten minutes, but Shaqiri leveled on 76 before his pass found Moussa Dembele for a tap in on 86 minutes. Former Celtic forward Dembele had been slated as sick, but was drafted in to the threadbare line up in a gamble that paid off. Marseille looked exhausted at the end and coach Jorge Sampaoli said he saw much he didn't like. "We'll see first wh we can count on for the next match," he said of their Ligue1 game at home to Angers on Friday. Lyon climbed to seventh, but are just a point from fourth placed Strasbourg. — AFP

Mane go head to head. Before that, though, comes the climax of this Cup of Nations for a man straight out of the renowned Portuguese school of coaching.

Queiroz led Portugal to back-to-back FIFA World Youth Championship titles, in 1989 and then again in 1991 with a side featuring the likes of Luis Figo and Rui Costa. After failing to take Portugal's senior side to the 1994 World Cup, he set off on his tour of the world, coaching in New York, succeeding Arsene Wenger at Nagoya Grampus Eight in Japan and having a spell in charge of the United Arab Emirates. He managed South Africa at the 2002 Cup of Nations and qualified them for that year's World Cup, only to leave before the tournament in Japan and South Korea.

Instead he went on to enjoy great success at Old Trafford alongside Ferguson, either side of a spell as coach of Real Madrid. "There are many Portuguese people in football, but I have the best one here in Carlos Queiroz," Ferguson said in 2005 after Queiroz returned to United.

"It needed someone with a good working capacity, technical knowledge, who could speak in various languages, had a European culture and was able to bridge the different nationalities. Queiroz is the perfect man for the job." Queiroz won the 2008 Champions League with Ferguson and then coached at three consecutive World Cups, with Portugal in 2010 followed by taking Iran to the tournaments in Brazil and Russia. — AFP

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
Al-Razi Hospital	24846000	Nuzha	22526804
Physiotherapy Hospital	24874330/9	Industrial Shuwaikh	24814764
		Qadsia	22515088
		Dasmah	22532265
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Rajan Benny S/o Benny born on 04/02/1992 residing at Edazhath House, Kumbalanghi P.O., Ernakulam District, Pin-682007, have changed my name to Muhammed Isa. Having passport No: T4491595 (C 1419) 1-2-2022

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Beijing Winter Olympics kicks off

Games begin under shadow of COVID, rights fears



BEIJING: Norway's Kristin Skaslien takes part in the mixed doubles round robin session 1 game of the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympic Games curling competition between Norway and the Czech Republic, at the National Aquatics Centre yesterday. — AFP

BEIJING: Curling started the sport at the Beijing Winter Olympics yesterday in front of a smattering of spectators as China tried to move on from the diplomatic boycotts and COVID fears that have dogged the lead-up to the Games. The Olympics do not officially launch until Friday's opening ceremony but the action began with mixed doubles curling at the "Ice Cube" - known as the "Water Cube" when the Chinese capital hosted the 2008 Summer Games - in front of a limited number of masked fans occupying every other seat.

The build-up to these Olympics, which will unfold within a huge COVID-secure "bubble", has been overshadowed by controversies ranging from rights concerns to Peng Shuai and warnings about snooping on competitors by the Chinese government. Adopting the catchphrase "Together for a shared future", China, its ruling Communist Party and the International Olympic Committee hope all the rancor will be forgotten once the Games get into full swing.

China has barred overseas fans because of the pandemic but some spectators will be invited to attend and organizers say venues could be up to 50 percent full. Arenas were mostly empty at last summer's pandemic-delayed Tokyo Games to stop the spread of infection. When Beijing hosted the 2008 Games, the torch relay took in swathes of China and other countries - where it met protests in places -

but this time it will last just three days, ending at the "Bird's Nest" stadium for the opening ceremony.

Beijing 2022 official Cai Qi said at the start of the relay yesterday - which will involve more than 1,000 torchbearers and included former NBA star Yao Ming - that he hoped the Games would help "dispel the gloom of the pandemic". If the 2008 Olympics were the country's coming-out party, these Games will take place in a China under President Xi Jinping which is increasingly belligerent on the global stage and boasting the world's second-largest economy.

When Washington said it would stage a diplomatic boycott because of rights concerns - with Australia, Britain and Canada among those following suit - China warned the United States would "pay the price". The Biden administration will not send diplomatic or official representation over what it called China's "ongoing genocide and crimes against humanity" against Muslim Uyghurs in the region of Xinjiang. Athletes of the boycotting countries will compete at the Games, which run until February 20, but a US rights monitor sounded the

alarm over athletes' safety after the hosts threatened "punishment" for anti-Beijing comments.

Surveillance

There are other controversies. IOC president Thomas Bach says that while in Beijing he will meet Peng, a Grand Slam-winning tennis player who alleged in November that she had been sexually assaulted by a former vice-premier. Peng was not heard from for nearly three weeks, only to reappear,

but there are concerns about how free she really is.

Fearing surveillance, some Western nations have told their athletes to leave their personal devices at home and use temporary burner phones. There are signs that China is tightening the noose on anyone daring to spoil the party, with human rights activists and some academics having their WeChat messaging app accounts restricted in recent weeks. China, where COVID-19 emerged towards the end of 2019, has pursued a zero-COVID policy nationwide and is taking the same approach at the Olympics by cocooning participants inside a "closed loop".

The highly infectious Omicron variant presents a new challenge, both to the Games and the country, putting already jittery authorities further on edge. Cases in Beijing have been ticking upwards, albeit from a low base number. Organizers say they expect cases in the bubble - nearly 250 have already been recorded - but their goal is to keep the spread to a minimum. They hope the bubble will be impregnable, keeping the nearly 3,000 athletes together with thousands of support staff, volunteers and media cut off from the outside world.

Face of the Games

The Games will be held in three zones. In addition to downtown Beijing, the two other areas are outside the capital and will rely on artificial snow to cover what would otherwise be brown mountainsides. Environmentalists have voiced concern. American ski ace Mikaela Shiffrin is chasing a third slalom gold, while Japan's Yuzuru Hanyu is looking to make it a hat-trick of figure-skating Olympic titles.

There will be huge interest in Chloe Kim, the American snowboarder who melted hearts when she won gold aged 17 at the Pyeongchang Olympics in 2018, while Eileen Gu could become the face of the Games. The 18-year-old grade-A student, born and raised in California, switched from the United States to represent China and is hot favorite in freestyle skiing. — AFP



China tries to move on from boycotts

Iran female skier cuts 'icy path' to Beijing Olympics

ABALI: Iranian Atefeh Ahmadi learned to ski not long after she could walk, but the path to the Winter Olympics has not been an entirely smooth run for the 21-year-old. The only Iranian woman to qualify for the Beijing Games, Ahmadi told AFP she was just three when her parents first set her on skis. "I was so small, I didn't understand what these pieces of wood were for, but I learnt," said the athlete, who hails from Abali, east of Tehran.

Her father had been a member of the national skiing team and a trainer for the women's squad, and initially her elder sister Hadis was the one being coached to conquer the slopes. But it was not long before Ahmadi's natural talent grew into an Olympic-sized dream of her own. "When (Hadis) started her first competitions, I would cry because I wanted to follow her," Ahmadi said.

One of the souvenirs her sister brought back from the 2012 Winter Youth Olympics in Austria was the Games' insignia. "That's when I started dreaming about the Olympics. I remember as a child clumsily drawing the five Olympic rings at the back of my notebook," Ahmadi said. "I convinced myself that I would participate, without really knowing what the Games were like."

She said international competitors were often shocked when they heard she was from Iran. "They ask me if we have snow... They think we are a desert country like Saudi Arabia," the skier said. "But even in summer, you can practice the sport in Damavand or Alankouh, glaciers that are 5,600 meters (over 18,000 feet) high." They are also "amazed to learn that women ski in an Islamic country", she added. — AFP

Suns cruise to 11th straight win

LOA ANGELES: Devin Booker scored 35 points and Mikal Bridges tallied a season-high 27 as the league-leading Phoenix Suns dominated the Brooklyn Nets 121-111 to stretch their winning streak to 11 games. Bridges shot 10-of-14 from the field and grabbed eight rebounds as he posted his second-straight season-high total after scoring 26 points against San Antonio on Sunday.

Chris Paul finished with 20 points and 14 assists and Cam Johnson came off the bench to score 16 points for the Suns, who continued their best start to the season in franchise history. They had won 18 games in a row from October to December. "We have a mission to get to the championship," Booker said. "We bring it every day. Even in our losses, we are trying to find ways to improve."

Part-time player Kyrie Irving scored a team-high 26 points, while James Harden had 22 for the Nets, who have lost five straight. Reserve Blake Griffin scored 17 points. This was just the ninth game of the season for Irving, who can only play road games for the Nets because he refuses to get vaccinated. The Suns took a 91-82 lead into the fourth quarter and never looked back.

In Milwaukee, Giannis Antetokounmpo posted his fourth triple-double of the season as the Milwaukee Bucks handed the Washington Wizards their sixth straight loss with a 112-98 victory. Washington erased a 17-point third-quarter deficit and even took an 86-83 lead on Rui Hachimura's three-pointer with 8:28 to play, but the Bucks outscored Washington 29-12 down the stretch.

"We have to realize that in order for us to be great, we've got to play hard. We cannot expect that people are just going to hand us the game when we go out there," Antetokounmpo said. "People are coming for us. People are hunting us right now. They get excited when they see, 'Milwaukee Bucks, world champs.' We've got to play every single night hard and build that habit." Antetokounmpo finished with 33 points, 15 rebounds and 11 assists, the third straight time he has scored at



PHOENIX: Mikal Bridges #25 of the Phoenix Suns drives to the basket during the game against the Brooklyn Nets on February 1, 2022. — AFP

least 30 points when making a triple-double.

The Bucks were coming off a 136-100 home loss to the Denver Nuggets. "That wasn't us as a team," Antetokounmpo said of the Nuggets game. "I don't remember the last time I lost by 36 in Milwaukee. Obviously, that was kind of embarrassing, but at the end of the night, those nights are going to happen. But we were able to come out (tonight), play hard and play together, try to set the tone."

Jrue Holiday scored 22 points, Bobby Portis 17, Khris Middleton 13 and Grayson Allen 10 for the Bucks. Kyle Kuzma had 25 points and 11 rebounds for the Wizards, who were missing all-star guard Bradley Beal, out with a left wrist sprain. Montrezl Harrell came off the bench to score 20 points, and Kentavious Caldwell-Pope added 12 in the loss. Spencer Dinwiddie finished with

seven points, seven rebounds and nine assists.

Elsewhere, Karl-Anthony Towns scored 24 points, grabbed 10 rebounds and dished seven assists and the Minnesota Timberwolves cruised to a 130-115 win over Denver. Taurean Prince added 23 points for the Timberwolves, who have won two games in a row and 10 of their past 15. Jarred Vanderbilt finished with 18 points and nine rebounds, while Malik Beasley and Naz Reid each finished with 12. Nikola Jokic had 21 points, 16 rebounds and eight assists to lead the Nuggets, who had their five-game win streak halted. Will Barton and Monte Morris had 13 points apiece for Denver. In Toronto, Gary Trent delivered his fifth straight game of at least 30 points, finishing with 33 as the Toronto Raptors eased past the Miami Heat 110-106. — AFP