



**3** Auto mechanics face multiple problems amid pandemic



**5** Erdogan in Ukraine as Europe seeks to defuse Russia tensions



**11** Iraq struggles to make use of Saddam's crumbling palaces



**16** Bach says Beijing Olympics 'will change winter sports'



# IS chief blows himself up during US raid in Syria

13 killed in operation by US special forces • Biden says 'major terrorist' removed



(Left) A Syrian boy checks yesterday the scene following an overnight raid by US special operations forces against the leader of the Islamic State group Abu Ibrahim Al-Hashimi Al-Qurashi (inset) in Syria's northwestern province of Idlib. (Right) US President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris, with the president's national security team in the Situation Room, monitor the counterterrorism operation in Syria in Washington yesterday. — AFP

WASHINGTON: President Joe Biden said yesterday a global "terrorist threat" was removed when the head of the Islamic State group blew himself up after US special forces swooped on his Syrian hideout in an "incredibly challenging" nighttime helicopter raid. "The United States military forces successfully removed a major terrorist threat to the world, the global leader of ISIS," Abu Ibrahim Al-Hashimi Al-Qurashi, Biden said in nationally televised remarks.

The operation dealt the biggest setback to the jihadist IS organization since Qurashi's predecessor, the better-known Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, was killed in a US commando raid in the same Syrian region of Idlib in 2019. In brief, somber remarks delivered in the White House's Roosevelt Room, Biden said he ordered an assault by troops, rather than merely bombing the house where the IS leader was located, in order to minimize civilian casualties, even though this meant "much greater risk to our own people".

The house contained "families, including children" and "as our troops approached to capture the terrorist, in a final act of desperate cowardice, with no regard to the lives of his own family or others in the building, he chose to blow himself up," Biden said. Qurashi did not merely set off a suicide vest to kill himself, but detonated the entire "third floor" of the residence in the town of Atme, Biden said, "taking several members of his family with him".

An Iraqi from the Turkmen-majority city of Tal Afar, Qurashi was also known as Amir Mohammed Said

Abd al-Rahman Al-Mawla. He replaced Baghdadi after his death in a US raid in Oct 2019, which also ended when Baghdadi blew himself up. The US government had offered a \$10 million reward for information leading to Qurashi, one of the world's most wanted fugitives. The head of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, Rami Abdel Rahman, told AFP that "13 people at least were killed, among them four children and three women, during the operation".

Continued on Page 2

## News in brief

### ADNOC finds offshore gas

ABU DHABI: The United Arab Emirates yesterday announced the discovery of the first gas reserves from its offshore exploration concessions as it seeks to achieve gas self-sufficiency. The Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC) said between 42.5 billion and 56.5 billion cu m of raw gas was found off the oil-rich country. ADNOC CEO Sultan Al-Jaber said the discovery would help "create long-term value for the UAE". — AFP

### Shadowy group claims UAE attack

DUBAI: A little-known militant group has claimed the latest drone attack on the UAE, raising the possibility of widening security risks after a wave of assaults from Yemeni Houthi rebels. Alwiyat al-Waad al-Haq (True Pledge Brigades), which is believed to have ties with pro-Iran armed factions in Iraq, said it launched four drones at dawn on Wednesday targeting the Gulf state. The UAE announced the interception and destruction of three "hostile drones" at dawn on Wednesday. — AFP

### Boy trapped in well

BAB BERRED, Morocco: Moroccans held their breath as emergency services worked yesterday to rescue a five-year-old boy trapped in a deep well for two days. The boy, named as Rayan, had fallen down the narrow 32-m well in his village on Tuesday evening. Five bulldozers have been digging a hole alongside the shaft, so far reaching a depth of 23 m. Rescuers have been able to send oxygen and water to the boy via pipes. — AFP



KUWAIT: The Liberation Tower is seen in this aerial photo taken yesterday. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

## Liberation Tower's observation deck opens from Feb 6

By Shakir Reshamwala

KUWAIT: After years of being closed to the public, the Liberation Tower's observation deck will open to visitors from Sunday, Feb 6, 2022, Communications Ministry Undersecretary Kholoud Al-Shehab announced yesterday. The observation

deck - at a height of 150 meters - offers breathtaking views of Kuwait City and surrounding areas. An exhibition on the history of telecommunications in Kuwait is also being held at the Liberation Tower this month. The exhibition showcases Kuwait's postal services and collections of telecom devices.

Entry to the Liberation Tower is free, but visitors have to register online in advance. They also have to be vaccinated against the coronavirus. The morning session from 9 am to 1 pm is for foreign diplomats, official delegations and students of public, private and special needs schools. The evening session is for the public from 3 pm to 8 pm on weekdays and from 2 pm to 8 pm on weekends.

Continued on Page 4

## Kuwait begins vaccinating kids aged 5 to 11

KUWAIT: The ministry of health began administering vaccines against COVID-19 to children aged between five and 11 from yesterday. The ministry had earlier said that based on results of studies and the approval of concerned authorities, Pfizer-BioNTech vaccines will be given to this age group. The ministry said it will provide the vaccines to all those who have registered in order to protect and ensure children's health and safety.

Kuwait yesterday reported 5,990 new COVID-19 cases, in addition to two deaths and 5,101 recoveries. Meanwhile, the number of patients in ICUs increased from 86 on Wednesday to 89 on Thursday. The number of patients hospitalized increased from 486 to 503, while total active cases rose from 54,171 to 55,058. The ratio of daily new cases to new tests reached 18.1 percent, while the rate of recovery remained at 89.8 percent, according to the health ministry's daily bulletin. — Agencies



KUWAIT: A boy receives a dose of the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine at the Kuwait Vaccination Center at the fairgrounds in Mishref. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat



## Local

# KRCS launches surgical program for Syrian refugees in Jordan

## Kuwaiti medical team to perform more than 90 surgeries

AMMAN: Kuwait Red Crescent Society (KRCS) launched yesterday a medical program to perform surgical operations for Syrian Refugees in Jordan. The Kuwaiti medical team will perform more than 90 simple and delicate surgeries in different specialties over a period of three days for cases that require urgent surgical intervention in cooperation with the Jordanian

Specialized Hospital in the capital Amman.

The launching ceremony was attended by Kuwaiti Ambassador to Jordan Aziz Al-Dehani, senior officials from the Kuwaiti and Jordanian Red Crescent societies, hospital staff, and Kuwait delegation. In a statement to KUNA, Ambassador Al-Dehani said that the launching of this humanitarian initiative reflects how keen

is the State of Kuwait and all of its institutions to cooperate with regional and international efforts to help refugees and needy people worldwide. On his part, KRCS Chairman Dr Hilal Al-Sayer affirmed how the society is ready, throughout the year, to implement all aid activities and programs along with their partners all over the world. The Kuwaiti delegation in

Jordan includes KRCS Secretary General Maha Al-Barjas, Consultant of KRCS board of Directors Dr. Musaad Al-Enezi, and consultant doctors Khaled Al-Subeih, Abdullatif Al-, Ahmad Al-Mullah, Khaled Al-Sabti, and Talal Al-Qoud. The team will provide also winter clothing for refugees, gifts, and relief staff to Syrian families and children. — KUNA

## Missing citizen's body found



KUWAIT: A member of the joint search and rescue team

KUWAIT: Kuwait Fire Force (KFF) said yesterday that the body of the person that went missing in Al-Zoor waters was found by the joint search and rescue teams who worked for four continuous days.

KFF Chief Lt General Khalid Rakan Al-Mikrad thanked those who participated in the search as the body of Muhammad Mazyad Al-Azmi was handed over to forensics at Al-Muhallab Sea Fire and Rescue Station.

## Fire Force holds inspection campaign in Mirqab



KUWAIT: Photos of the inspection campaign carried out by Deputy Chief of the General Fire Force for the Prevention Sector, Major General Khaled Abdullah Fahd in Mirqab area.

KUWAIT: As part of its efforts of the General Fire Force to protect lives and property and preserve social security in the country, the inspection teams, led by the Deputy Chief of the General Fire Force for the Prevention Sector, Major General

Khaled Abdullah Fahd, carried out an inspection campaign on commercial buildings in the Al-Mirqab area.

The inspection was carried out in order to ensure the availability of safety and prevention

requirements in case of a fire breakout. During the campaign, several violations and warnings of administrative closure were issued for many buildings, shops and basements for violating safety and fire prevention conditions.

## Pause, even end of pandemic seen for Europe: WHO

COPENHAGEN: The World Health Organization yesterday offered Europe hope of a "long period of tranquility" and even "enduring peace" in the war on coronavirus, with a growing list of nations lifting almost all COVID curbs. WHO Europe director Hans Kluge spoke of "a ceasefire that could bring us enduring peace", with high vaccination rates, the milder Omicron variant and the end of winter in sight.

"This context leaves us with the possibility for a long period of tranquility," he told reporters. This was "not to say that (the pandemic) is now all over", but "there is a singular opportunity to take control of the transmission", he added. "Even with a more virulent variant (than Omicron) it is possible to respond to new variants that will inevitably emerge - without re-installing the kind of disruptive measures we needed before", Kluge said.

He cautioned that the optimistic scenario required countries to pursue vaccination campaigns and surveillance to detect new variants. Sweden joined the move towards scrapping most coronavirus restrictions, setting Feb 9 as the date with the pandemic entering a "whole new phase". Stockholm will end 11:00 pm closing for bars and restaurants, and limits on crowd numbers.

Vaccine passes for indoor events will go and face masks will no longer be recommended on crowded public transport. "The pandemic is not over, but we are entering a whole new phase," Swedish Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson announced. Her Health Minister Lena Hallengren said the government would remain "vigilant" about the pandemic's progress.

Sweden made headlines early in the pandemic for choosing to not impose lockdowns. With over 16,000 fatalities so far, its death toll is in line with the European average, but is far higher than those of neighboring Norway, Finland and Denmark. After Britain

and Ireland, Copenhagen on Tuesday lifted most domestic COVID-19 restrictions, followed later in the day by Norway.

France on Wednesday loosened several restrictions imposed to curb the latest COVID-19 surge, with authorities hoping a small decline in huge daily case numbers will soon ease pressure on overburdened hospitals. And New Zealand is to start easing some of the toughest pandemic border restrictions yet seen, but will not fully reopen until October. "It's time to move again," Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said yesterday unveiling a five-step plan to reconnect to the rest of the world.

Hotel quarantine requirements for New Zealanders stranded overseas will be lifted this month. Ardern had been under pressure to relax border policies that have been largely unchanged since the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis almost two years ago. "Families and friends need to reunite, our businesses need skills to grow, exporters need to travel to make new connections," she said.

But Germany is still grappling with record infection numbers fueled by Omicron and now recommending a fourth vaccine for at-risk groups, following in the footsteps of the Zionist entity and several European nations. Germany's STIKO vaccine commission said yesterday that data showed "that protection against the currently circulating Omicron variant wanes within a few months of the first booster vaccination".

The Zionist entity last month became the first country to roll out fourth COVID-19 shots, initially to the elderly and healthcare workers, and since to all vulnerable people over 18. Denmark, Hungary and Spain are also offering fourth jabs to high-risk groups, as are others including Chile and Brazil. The move has not been universally welcomed, with the WHO repeatedly warning wealthier nations they cannot boost their way out of the pandemic.

Coronavirus has killed at least 5,698,322 million people since the outbreak emerged in China in Dec 2019, according to an AFP tally from official sources. Taking into account excess mortality linked to COVID-19, the WHO estimates the overall death toll could be two to three times higher. — AFP

## Scraping a living: Salt offers women lifeline in Yemen

AL-MUKALLA, Yemen: Scooping up handfuls of white crystals from coastal pools, a group of women in Yemen harvest salt - a traditional industry proving to be a lifeline after seven years of war. Zakiya Obeid is one among nearly 500 women who work in the industry in a village overlooking the Gulf of Aden, on Yemen's southern coast. "We cooperate and take shifts because it is a sisterhood and we know each others' difficult circumstances," Obeid told AFP.

Employment is so scarce that the women work in rotation to allow more people to benefit. She said the women are divided into two groups, with each working for 15 days while the others rest. In bare feet and mud-spattered abaya robes, the women dig basins at low tide and return when the seawater has evaporated to dredge up the salt for packaging and selling.

The time-honored livelihood has been passed down from generation to generation. It is now a means of survival, providing many families with their only source of income. The women earn about \$100 per month for harvesting the salt and packing it in plastic containers. Since the formation of the Al Hassi Association for Sea Salt Production in 2020, the women are able to transport the

salt to be ground, packaged and sold across Yemen. "Before then, we used to do the same work but could only sell the salt raw," Obeid said. "But that is no longer the case, with the association providing us with bags and transport."

### 'Only source of income'

Yemen has been embroiled in a civil war between the government - supported by a Saudi-led military coalition - and Iran-backed Houthi rebels since 2014, pushing the country to the brink of famine. The conflict has killed hundreds of thousands of people and left millions displaced, according to the UN, which calls it the world's worst humanitarian catastrophe.

The head of the Al Hassi Association, Khamis Bahtroush, said the women, who produce between 20-30 tons of salt every three months, have come to rely on this industry. "Production is lower in winter than in summer," he said. "Each bag is sold for approximately 3,000 Yemeni rials (\$12)... but we are struggling with inflation and do not have liquidity to give them raises. "This is their only source of income... they have nothing else. No farms, no livestock."

The United Nations Population Fund has said the loss of male breadwinners in the conflict has added to the difficulties faced by women. "The pressure is even more severe where women or girls suddenly find themselves responsible for providing for their families when they themselves have been deprived of basic education or vocational training," it said. — AFP



AL-MUKALLA, Yemen: Women dig salt extraction basins at the Brom Mayfa mining area in this southern coastal district of east central Hadramawt province on Nov 1, 2021. — AFP

## IS chief blows himself up...

Continued from Page 1

Initial reports that followed the operation near the town of Atme had suggested the target might have been a senior jihadist close to IS' rival group Al-Qaeda. AFP correspondents were able to visit the house thought to be where Qurashi blew himself up. Before the identity of the raid's target emerged, the owner of the building where Qurashi was staying described his tenant as leading an ordinary life. "This guy lived here for 11 months. I didn't see

anything suspicious or notice anything," the landlord, who gave his name only as Abu Ahmad, told AFP. "He would come and pay the rent and leave. He lived with his three children and his wife. His widowed sister and her daughter were living above them," he said.

A witness told AFP he woke to the sound of helicopters. "Then we heard small explosions. Then we heard stronger explosions," Abu Ali, a displaced Syrian living in Atme said, adding that US forces told residents "not to worry". "We're just coming to this house... to rid you of the terrorists," the man quoted the US forces as saying in their loudspeaker messages.

The American helicopters took off from a military base in the Kurdish-controlled city of Kobani, Abdel Rahman said. Elite, US-trained members of

the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces joined the operation, he added. Farhad Shami, who heads the media office of the US-backed SDF, said the operation targeted "the most dangerous international terrorists". Kurdish forces had also taken part in the raid against Baghdadi in 2019.

The two-storey building of raw cinder blocks bore the scars of an intense battle, with torn window frames, charred ceilings and a partly collapsed roof. In some of the rooms, blood was splattered high on the walls and stained the floor, littered with foam mattresses and shards from smashed doors. US special forces have carried out several operations against high-value jihadist targets in the Idlib area in recent months.

The area, the last enclave to actively oppose the government of Bashar Al-Assad, is home to more

than three million people and is dominated by jihadists. The region is mostly administered by a body loyal to Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, a group led by former members of what was once Al-Qaeda's franchise in Syria. Atme is home to a huge camp for families displaced by the decade-old conflict and which experts have warned was being used by jihadists as a place to hide among civilians.

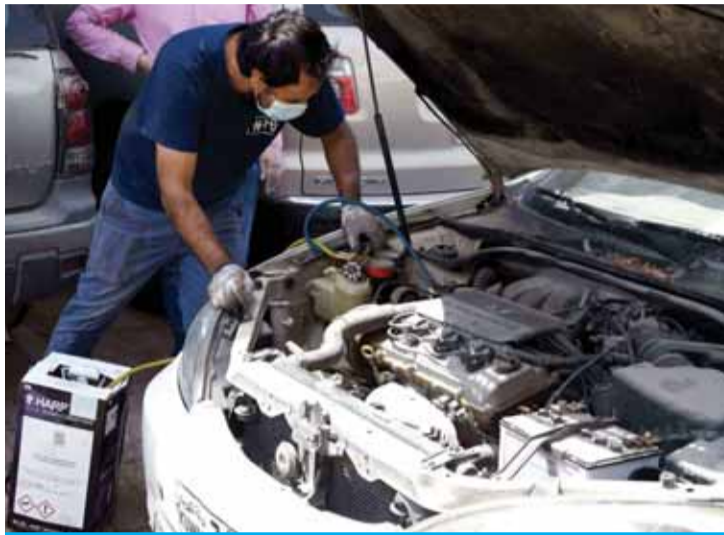
On Oct 23, the US military announced the killing of senior Al-Qaeda leader Abdul Hamid Al-Matar. The death of the jihadist group's top leader comes two weeks after the group staged a huge attack to spring IS fighters from a Kurdish-run prison in northeastern Syria. Hundreds were killed in what was IS's most high-profile operation since the demise of its "caliphate" nearly three years earlier. — AFP



Local

# Car mechanics face multiple problems amid pandemic

Some customers cheat, some bargain while authorities bring in new rule



KUWAIT: A car mechanic inspecting a car. —Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat



Cars outside a garage in Shuwaikh



Customers bargain with a mechanic at a garage in Shuwaikh

By Nawara Fattahova

KUWAIT: Car technicians are facing a variety of problems - some with customers and others with landlords, as well as with the authorities. Yasin, a car mechanic told Kuwait Times about a new rule set by the Municipality. "A few weeks back, a municipal inspector passed by and gave us a warning, saying we are not allowed to open the hood of any vehicle outside the garage. But we have limited space in the garage, and also need to serve customers who come when the garage is full. Also, if a vehicle is overheating, we have to reduce the temperature of the car outside the garage," he explained.

The municipal staff didn't suggest any solution. "We asked for an additional license for the space in front of the garage, as we already pay rent for the whole space including the pavement. But they refused and said the pavement cannot be licensed. The inspectors also said we are responsible for any waste outside the garage, so even if someone passing by throws any rubbish on the street, we have to clean it," added Yasin.

Hasan, a technician at automotive denting and painting shop, complained of not getting paid for his work by customers. "It has happened many

times, and is still happening. Some customers after receiving the car drive away and stop answering my calls. Sometimes they say they will go to the bank to withdraw money or tell me to wait till they get their salary, but they never come back. Some customers are honest and actually come back when they get paid," he told Kuwait Times.

"All those who drove away and didn't come back have been men, as I never faced problems with women. I have never reported any case at the police station, although I know they can be caught, as I don't like to get in trouble, especially with Kuwaitis. I know they can later make problems for me. The highest bill a customer didn't pay was for KD 280," Hasan said.

Abu Shanab, another car mechanic in Shuwaikh, complained competition has increased recently. "We are not doing well. Our revenues have fallen a lot. New garages have entered the business lately and provide very cheap services. Customers are looking for a cheap price, so I had to reduce the charges for my work to face the high competition and be able to work," he pointed out.

Another garage in Shuwaikh complained of the poor quality of some commercial spare parts, saying the market is awash with them. "More than once



A busy street in Shuwaikh

we were embarrassed in front of our customers, as we fixed their cars with these spare parts that were not genuine and broke after two or three months. So now we always ask the customer to buy the parts themselves. We also advise them to buy genuine parts," stressed Bilal, a car mechanic.

"In general, business was much better before the

pandemic. Now it's more difficult as we have less work. Also, rising rent is a problem, as the landlord increased our rent from KD 730 to KD 850. I had to release one of the workers to compensate for the rent increase. If I don't make a profit for a month, I will be paying for two to three months to make up the shortfall," added Bilal.

## Oil Minister, Chinese ambassador hold talks



KUWAIT: Kuwait Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Oil, Electricity, Water and Sustainable Energy Mohammad Al-Fares meets Chinese Ambassador to Kuwait Li Minggang yesterday. —KUNA

KUWAIT: Kuwait Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Oil, Electricity, Water and Sustainable Energy Mohammad Al-Fares and Chinese Ambassador to Kuwait Li Minggang deliberated yesterday ways of boosting collaboration in varying developmental fields.

The Ministry of Oil mentioned in statement that the meeting, held in the ministry headquarters, discussed boosting collaboration in fields of oil, gas, electricity, water, and renewable energy in what supports and bolsters the joint interest of both countries. —AFP

## Deputy FM, British envoy hold talks



KUWAIT: Kuwait Deputy Foreign Minister Magdy Al-Dhafeeri received yesterday British Ambassador to Kuwait Belinda Lewis. —KUNA

KUWAIT: Kuwait Deputy Foreign Minister Ambassador Magdy Al-Dhafeeri received yesterday British Ambassador to Kuwait Belinda Lewis. During the meeting, both sides discussed bilateral ties between the two countries. The meeting was attended by the Assistant Foreign Minister for the Affairs of Deputy minister's office Ambassador Ayham Al-Omar. — KUNA

## Kuwait education official touts UNESCO findings

PARIS: A Kuwaiti education official yesterday commended the outcomes of a UNESCO-hosted international conference to adopt the Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas and Degrees in Higher Education in the Arab states, known as the Arab States Convention.

In a press statement following the wrapping-up of the gathering held in Paris, Director-General of the National Bureau for Academic Accreditation and Education Quality Assurance (NBAQ) Hamad Al-Adwani, said the conference focused on how to revamp high education in the region and create sustainable collaboration between Arab and world countries. He

hoped that the revised convention, which is of paramount significance, would usher in a fresh stage of a more holistic endeavor to apply the 2019 Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education.

The educational official pointed out that the Kuwaiti delegation partaking in the international event had participated in the revision of the Arab States Convention. The 1978 Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas and Degrees in Higher Education in the Arab States, known as the Arab States Convention, was the only UNESCO regional recognition convention that had not been revised to take into account transformations in higher education systems, policies and environments. The International Conference of States to adopt the revised Convention, which took place at UNESCO Headquarters from 1 to 2 February 2022, was co-chaired by Egypt and Morocco. In 2017, two consultation meetings to revise the Convention took place between UNESCO and higher education experts from the region (Sharm El Sheikh, March 2017, and Cairo, October 2017).

On the occasion of the



Subscribe or renew your subscription  
KD 20 instead of KD 30 for 1 year

For individuals only

Tel: 24833199 ext: 353-355-356



kuwaittimes.net



## Local

**Kuwait Times**  
Established 1961  
The First Daily in The Arabian Gulf

THE LEADING INDEPENDENT  
DAILY IN THE ARABIAN GULF  
ESTABLISHED 1961

Founder and Publisher  
**YOUSUF S. AL-ALYAN**

Editor-in-Chief  
**ABD AL-RAHMAN AL-ALYAN**

EDITORIAL : 24833199-24833358-24833432  
ADVERTISING : 24835616/7  
FAX : 24835620/1  
CIRCULATION : 24833199 Extn. 353 - 356  
ACCOUNTS : 24833199 Extn. 125  
COMMERCIAL : 24835618  
P.O.Box 1301 Safat, 13014 Kuwait.  
Email: info@kuwaittimes.com  
Website: www.kuwaittimes.com

## NBK Academy welcomes first batch of trainees for 2022

KUWAIT: NBK Academy recently welcomed the 26th wave, the first in 2022, of newly hired employees who have successfully met the admission criteria of this intensive program specifically designed for Kuwaiti fresh university graduates. The NBK Academy program, launched 13 years ago, has been supporting NBK's strategy to solicit and recruit national cadres, by developing and qualifying Kuwaiti fresh graduates to start their career in the banking sector.

The welcome ceremony of the new trainees was attended by Faisal Al-Hamad, CEO - Global Wealth Management at National Bank of Kuwait - Kuwait,

Emad Al-Ablani, GM - Group Human Resources, Mohamed Al-Othman, GM- Consumer Banking Group, Ahmed Bourisly, GM - Corporate Banking Group, Mohammed Al-Kharafi, GM - Head of Group Operations, in addition to several officials from Training and Development division at the bank.

The ceremony was organized following all precautionary measures including social distancing for the safety of all. The program will host 16 participants for a period of 5 months, covering various areas of the banking business including: banking principles, risk management, financial accounting, marketing, negotiation, consumer and commercial lending, in addition to creativity, innovation and design thinking training.

On this occasion, Najla Al-Sager, Head of Talent Management, Group Human Resources at National Bank of Kuwait, said: "NBK Academy's training content undergoes continuous enhancements as per the latest international research and studies in the banking sector and management science."

"The Academy's training program trainees' will be rotating between different departments in the Bank to ensure they develop better understanding of the functions of those departments, with the aim of upskilling them in all the areas of the banking business," she added.

Al-Sager mentioned that for the first time, the Academy is witnessing the launch of the "Innovation Project Challenge", which is an incubator aiming to stimulate the trainees' creativity and abilities to develop innovative solutions for the various areas they are trained on in the Academy. In an advanced stage of this project, the participants will present their projects and innovative ideas and present them to the Bank's executive management who will select the best ideas to reward, implement and develop.

NBK Academy reflects NBK's vision to support sustainable human capital development as one of its top strategic priorities and a shared responsibility between the various governmental institutions and the private sector. The Academy was inaugurated in 2008 with the aim of paving the way for Kuwaiti fresh university graduates to join the banking sector. It provides graduates with the best training programs developed in cooperation with leading international institutions and universities to meet the demands of the labor market.



## PAM head meets Indian ambassador

KUWAIT: Indian Ambassador Sibi George called on Ahmed Al-Mousa, DG, Public Authority of Manpower (PAM) yesterday. They discussed, among other things, ways of enhancing bilateral cooperation in area of human resources, matters pertaining to nurses, implementation of the memorandum of understanding on domestic workers and other diaspora matters, according to a press release issued by the Indian embassy.

## Photo of the Day



KUWAIT: Different views of the Liberation Tower, the iconic landmark in the heart of Kuwait City. Owned and operated by the Ministry of Communications, the tower is a splendor of engineering and architectural design and a unique landmark in Kuwait. The Liberation Tower's observation deck will open to visitors from Sunday, Feb 6, 2022. — Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat



Ministry of Communication officials

## Liberation Tower's...

Continued from Page 1

A maximum of five tickets can be selected per booking. Each ticket contains a unique QR code to enter the Liberation Tower, in addition to the ticket number. A copy of the ticket will also be sent to the visitor's email and can be downloaded in pdf format. The COVID vaccination certificate has to be presented at the entrance and all

health ministry safety guidelines and regulations have to be followed. Parking spaces will be allocated for visitors behind the tower and buses will take them to the entrance.

The Liberation Tower is an iconic landmark in the heart of Kuwait City, owned and operated by the ministry of communications. It is a splendor of engineering and architectural design, and a masterpiece and unique landmark in Kuwait. Tickets can be booked at [www.liberationtower.com](http://www.liberationtower.com) or by contacting the public relations department of the ministry of communications at 99805770 for reservations.



Communications Ministry Undersecretary Kholoud Al-Shehab is seen with Turkish Ambassador to Kuwait Ayse Hilal Sayan Koytak at the Liberation Tower's observation deck yesterday.

# Zain participates in Kuwaiti Army's Annual Sports Day

## Event held by medical services unit at Jaber Al-Ahmad Armed Forces Hospital

KUWAIT: Zain, the leading digital service provider in Kuwait, took part in the Annual Sports Day of the Kuwaiti Army's medical services unit. The event was held for the first time in the unit's headquarters at Jaber Al-Ahmad Armed Forces Hospital in Sabhan and featured the participation of medical and administrative staff along with army personnel.

The event was attended by the Director of Kuwaiti Army's Medical Services Unit Sheikh Dr Abdullah Meshal Al-Sabah, Director of Jaber Al-Ahmad Armed Forces Hospital Dr Nawaf Al-Dosari, as well as Zain's team and officials from both the unit and hospital.

The Annual Sports Day, organized by the Kuwaiti Army's Medical Services Unit for the first time this year, featured a number of sports competitions, including a walkathon, football and volleyball matches, and more. Many of the unit's members, from medical and administrative staff to army personnel, took part in the competitions, where Zain presented prizes to the winners and participants in a joyous family atmosphere.

Zain considers itself an active partner of the country's various institutions, where it directly contributes to social and recreational programs held by ministries and public sector organizations throughout the years. The company is also an active supporter of any initiatives and programs that aim at



KUWAIT: Sheikh Dr Abdullah Al-Sabah recognizes Zain for its participation

enriching national unity. Through such interactive contributions, Zain is keen on sharing joyous occasions with the community, especially during such positive times where the nation is gradually return-

ing to normal life after the pandemic. The company believes such efforts, which come under its sustainability strategy, are a clear reflection of the rich traditions and values of the Kuwaiti people.





US Army to discharge soldiers who refuse COVID vaccine

## Taleban closer to international recognition: Foreign minister

Page 7

Page 6



KYIV: Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky (2ndR), his wife Olena, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan (2ndL), his wife Emine listen to their national anthems during a welcoming ceremony prior to their talks in Kyiv yesterday. —AFP

# EU pushes to defuse Russia tensions

## Erdogan visits Ukraine to mediate crisis with Moscow

**KYIV:** Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan headed to Kyiv yesterday in an effort to mediate the crisis with Russia, as EU leaders stepped up outreach to the Kremlin to defuse fears Moscow could invade Ukraine. The diplomatic offensive came as Russia accused the United States of ratcheting up “tensions” by sending 1,000 soldiers to Romania and 2,000 to Poland to bolster NATO’s eastern flank.

As Moscow refuses to pull back over 100,000 troops from Ukraine’s borders, the leaders of European powerhouses Germany and France said they were eyeing possible visits to Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow.

French President Emmanuel Macron was set to hold his third phone call in a week with Putin later and also talk to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. Western powers have been engaged in intense diplomatic efforts-coupled with the threat of sanctions against Putin’s inner circle-to deter any further attack on ex-Soviet Ukraine, despite strenuous denials from Moscow.

Erdogan is looking to pursue his own diplomatic track when he meets Zelensky, by leveraging his special relations with Putin and strong support for Kyiv to set up a three-way summit. But his attempts to host peace talks between Putin and Zelensky have been stymied by Kremlin anger over NATO member Turkey’s supply of combat drones to Kyiv.

**‘Destructive steps’**  
Amid the diplomatic flurry, Washington angered Moscow by announcing the new troop deployments to two of NATO’s eastern members. “As long as (President Vladimir Putin) is acting aggressively, we are going to make sure we reassure our NATO allies in eastern Europe that we’re there,” President Joe Biden said Wednesday.

The Kremlin urged the US to “stop escalating tensions” after Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Grushko warned the “destructive” move would make it harder for a compromise between the two sides. Pentagon spokesman John Kirby stressed the US troop movements were to demonstrate commitment to the NATO alliance, and that no US soldiers would be sent to fight in Ukraine.

But that is unlikely to assuage Putin, who has accused the United States and NATO of seeking to “contain” Russia by placing troops and strategic arms on its border. Putin has demanded guarantees that Ukraine will not join NATO and has implicitly threatened the former Soviet state with the massive military build-up.

Russia also wants NATO and the United States to forswear the deployment of missile systems near Russia’s borders and to pull back NATO forces in eastern Europe. Putin has left the door open to talks, saying he was studying Western proposals set out last month in response to Russia’s demands, and that he hoped for a “solution.”

But in a call with British Prime Minister Boris Johnson on Wednesday, he noted “the unwillingness of NATO to adequately respond to the well-founded Russian concerns”. The Kremlin also claimed it had China’s support in the standoff-backing that would be demonstrated when Putin meets President Xi Jinping in Beijing on Friday at the opening of the Olympics.

### US change of language

While the United States and Britain have sounded the most strident warnings over a potential Russian attack, there are divisions over how likely it may be. Kyiv has warned against “panic” as it seeks to protect its economy and some European allies are far more guarded over the prospect of looming war.

Ukraine’s Defence Minister Oleksiy Reznikov insisted

yesterday that “the probability of a significant escalation as of today is considered low” as Kyiv had not seen Moscow move “strike groups” to the border. In a change of language, the White House said Wednesday that it would no longer refer to a Russian invasion of Ukraine as “imminent”—explaining that the word implied Putin had already made a decision to attack.

But tensions have been aggravated by plans for joint military exercises between Russia and neighbouring Belarus, where Washington claims Moscow is preparing to send 30,000 troops. Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu arrived in Belarus on Thursday for talks with strongman leader Alexander Lukashenko and troop inspections ahead of the joint drills with Belarus later this month.

The Russian military said its aviation had held anti-submarine drills in the North Atlantic that had seen British and Norwegian jets scrambled to accompany its aircraft. Moscow seized the Crimean peninsula from Ukraine in 2014 and has fuelled a simmering separatist conflict in the east of the country since then that has cost over 13,000 lives. A leading humanitarian organisation warned that any escalation in the conflict risked displacing up to two million people along the front line. “The lives and safety of millions of people in eastern Ukraine hang in the balance,” Jan Egeland, head of the Norwegian Refugee Council, said. —AFP



### Moscow refuses to pull back over 100,000 troops

## Twenty dead in Argentina after taking laced cocaine

**BUENOS AIRES:** At least 20 people died and 74 more were hospitalized in a northwestern suburb of Buenos Aires after consuming cocaine cut with a toxic substance, possibly opioids, authorities said Wednesday. Officials said they are working quickly to determine what the cocaine was mixed with, but warned those who have bought the drug over the last 24 hours to dispose of it.

Sergio Berni, the security chief for Buenos Aires province, told the television channel Telefe authorities were trying to locate the toxic substance “to remove it from circulation.” About 10 people were arrested after police raided a house in the poor Tres de Febrero neighborhood where they believe the cocaine was sold. Packets of cocaine similar to those described by the victims’ families were seized. The drugs were taken to a laboratory in La Plata, the capital of Buenos Aires province, for analysis. Authorities issued an urgent warning early

Wednesday after three separate hospitals reported several deaths and serious cases of poisoning.

Several of those being treated told doctors they had taken cocaine together. Early reports said victims suffered convulsions and sudden heart attacks. Health authorities said at least four of the victims were men aged between 32 and 45.

“There is a key ingredient that is attacking the central nervous system,” Berni said. His office said late in the day that emergency services were reporting new patients in “critical condition” being brought to hospital.

### Cut with harmful substance

Berni explained that “every dealer that buys cocaine cuts it. Some do it with non-toxic substances such as starch. Others put hallucinogens in it, and if there is no form of control, this kind of thing happens.” He said that on this occasion, however, the drug was cut with a harmful substance as part of a “war between drug traffickers.” The San Martin public prosecutor, Marcelo Lapargo, told Radio Mitre that authorities’ main concern “is to be able to communicate, so that those who are in possession of this poison know that they should not consume it.”

Investigators fear the toll could rise, with some

state-owned broadcaster-has services in 30 languages, including Russian.

The moves come after Germany’s broadcasting regulator on Wednesday announced it was banning the transmission of the channel “RT DE” over the lack of a broadcasting licence. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said the move was an “infringement” on freedom of speech, while RT editor-in-chief Margarita Simonyan called the decision “complete nonsense.”

### Moves against Russian reporters

RT DE—the German-language branch of RT—was blocked from Europe’s satellite network on December 22 at the request of German authorities, less than a week after going on air. But it was still available over the internet and via a mobile app.

In its response to the suspension, RT DE said it was broadcast from Moscow and had a Serbian broadcasting licence, which it said gives it the right to broadcast in Germany under European law. But the German regulator said the channel was based in Berlin and did not have a “legitimate permit under European law.”

Launched in 2005 as “Russia Today”, state-funded RT has expanded with channels and websites in languages including English, French, Spanish and



HURLINGHAM, Argentina: Relatives of people hospitalized after consuming cocaine cut with a toxic substance are seen at San Bernardino Hospital in Hurlingham, Buenos Aires province, yesterday. —AFP

people who bought the cocaine unable to reach a care center in time.

Lapargo said that this case was “absolutely exceptional.” He also said that the idea of a battle between drug traffickers was “conjecture” at this point. Police clashed briefly with residents in a part of Tres de Febrero who were protesting the arrest of local young people in the drug raid. —AFP

## Moscow shutting down Deutsche Welle bureau in Russia

**MOSCOW:** Russia said yesterday it is closing the Moscow bureau of German broadcaster Deutsche Welle and revoking staff accreditations in Russia, in response to Berlin’s ban on the German-language channel of Russian state TV network RT. The announcement comes with tensions mounting between Russia and the West, particularly over fears of a Russian invasion of Europe’s ally Ukraine.

The closure also highlights the Kremlin’s increasingly hostile position towards foreign media in the wake of several high-profile expulsions of prominent foreign journalists. The Russian foreign ministry said in a statement yesterday it will also “terminate the satellite and other broadcasting (output) of Deutsche Welle” on Russian territory.

It added that it was initiating the process of designating the German media a “foreign agent” and said that further reciprocal measures will be announced in the future. Deutsche Welle—a German

Arabic. It has been accused by Western countries of distributing disinformation and Kremlin-friendly propaganda. It has generated controversy in many countries, including the United States, where it was required to register as a “foreign agent”, and in Britain, where authorities have threatened to revoke its broadcasting licence.

The channel has been banned in several countries, including the ex-Soviet republics Lithuania and Latvia. In September, Google-owned YouTube issued a warning to RT DE for violating its coronavirus disinformation guidelines and then shuttered two channels for breaching user terms.

A third channel was blocked in December for trying to circumvent the earlier terminations. In August, Moscow expelled a veteran BBC correspondent in retaliation for a Russian correspondent being denied accreditation by London. Three months later, a Dutch correspondent was expelled on years-old administrative violations.

The decision to shut down the German media outlet comes following months of unprecedented pressure on independent media from Russian authorities. Russia last year slapped a number of media outlets and journalists with the “foreign agent” label that requires them to carry out tedious administrative procedures. —AFP

## Zionist entity signs defence deal with Bahrain

**MANAMA:** The Zionist entity signed a defence agreement with Bahrain yesterday, its first such deal with a Gulf country since establishing diplomatic ties with Manama and Abu Dhabi more than a year ago. Defence Minister Benny Gantz, making his first visit to Bahrain, said the memorandum of understanding, that covers intelligence, procurement and joint training, takes the countries’ relationship to “new heights”.

Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) normalised relations with the Zionist entity under the US-brokered Abraham Accords agreements in September 2020, defying decades of Arab consensus that ruled out ties in the absence of a solution to the Zionist-Palestinian conflict.

“Only one year following the signing of the accords, we have achieved an important defence agreement, which will contribute to the security of both countries and the stability of the region,” Gantz said in a statement.

Gantz earlier called for deeper cooperation with Gulf partners to confront “maritime and aerial threats”, as he toured the US Fifth Fleet headquarters based in Bahrain. The defence minister toured the guided missile destroyer USS Cole, which is set to make its way to Abu Dhabi to help defend the UAE against attacks by Yemen’s Iran-backed rebels. The USS Cole was the target of an Al-Qaeda suicide bombing in the southern Yemeni harbour of Aden in October 2000 that killed 17 sailors.

The US base in Bahrain lies just across the Gulf from Iran. The waters are crossed by hundreds of oil and cargo vessels every day. There has been an increase in attacks on shipping in recent years that the United States and its allies have blamed on Iran. The Islamic republic denies the allegations.

“Against a backdrop of increasing maritime and aerial threats, our ironclad cooperation is more important than ever,” Gantz tweeted.

“We reaffirmed our commitment to stand united in defence of the sovereignty of our regional partners as well as peace and stability in the region.” A US-led maritime exercise involving 60 countries and organisations is under way in and around the Gulf, with the Zionist entity joining in for the first time alongside countries that do not recognise the Zionist entity, including Saudi Arabia.—AFP



## International

# President Biden tries to navigate crime wave in New York visit

## 'Our cities are war zones and police officers are being hunted in the streets'

WASHINGTON: President Joe Biden wades into the politically treacherous issue of crime and guns with a trip yesterday to New York, where recent shootings of police have highlighted a growing fear of violent disorder in America's big cities. Biden, who is traveling with Attorney General Merrick Garland, will meet with newly sworn-in mayor and rising Democratic star Eric Adams at New York Police Department headquarters, and then visit community intervention leaders in Queens.

The moving sight on Wednesday and last week of thousands of New York police officers massing in Manhattan to honor two fellow officers killed while answering a domestic call in January underlined the pressure he will face. Six officers in the Big Apple have been shot just this year, and they're among the nearly three dozen shot across the country in January, according to the Gun Violence Archive.

Major crimes in the city are up 38 percent this year so far, reflecting spikes in most major urban areas. A January study by the Council on Criminal Justice showed homicides in 22 cities increasing five percent in 2021 over 2020 — and a whopping 44 percent over 2019.

And whether it's carjackings around Washington, DC, or smash-and-grab raids on San Francisco department stores, news bulletins paint a grim picture of a country struggling to regain its

footing in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The crime wave, which still leaves US cities generally far safer than in the 1980s and '90s, has been connected by experts to a combination of social disruption linked to the pandemic and fallout for police departments in the aftermath of a spate of botched arrests in which Black people were killed or badly injured.



### Major crimes in the city are up 38 percent

But Biden is increasingly taking the blame. According to an ABC/Ipsos poll released last week, 69 percent of Americans disapprove of Biden's policies on gun violence and 64 percent his handling of crime.

"Our cities are war zones, our country is in turmoil and police officers are being hunted in the streets. Where are you, Mr. President?" the Fraternal Order of Police's national vice president, Joe Gamaldi, said on Fox News last week.

### Treading the line

Biden is under pressure not just from the right, which labels him as weak on crime, but also the left, which wants reform-and even dismantling-of police departments. Republicans hoping to get control of Congress in November midterm elections see blaming Biden and the "defund the police" wing of the Democrats as a winning target. But teaming up with Adams gives Biden a chance to show he can tread the line between his leftist supporters and right-wing critics.

Biden will discuss his vision for "smart policing," a senior administration official told reporters, describing the president's attempt to balance strong law enforcement with the kind of reforms demanded by the Black Lives Matter movement.

On one hand, he will call in his speech for half a billion dollars in new funding to support both hiring of more police and boosting of community violence intervention groups-civilians on the ground who work with potential victims and perpetrators.

Biden will also lay out initiatives to crack down harder on the illegal gun trade, especially "ghost guns," which are firearms made from untraceable home kits. Biden has always "been a forceful advocate for accountable community policing. He does not think



US President Joe Biden

the answer is to defund our police, but instead to give them the tools and the resources... so that they are able to build trust with the community, so they treat everyone with dignity and respect," the senior official said.

It's the kind of centrist approach that Adams himself is modeling. A former New York police officer, Adams took office in January after winning election on a platform that included tougher policing tactics, such as redeploying a disbanded undercover unit. Yet as an African-American

Democrat with a growing national profile, he has plenty of political capital in the bank-and seems happy to share some with Biden.

Adams, who has previously dubbed himself the "Biden of Brooklyn," praised the president Monday as "my dude." The admiration is mutual. Biden picked New York for his speech, the senior official said, because it has seen "a spike in gun violence," but also because it's somewhere that "has successfully deployed many strategies like those the president supports." —AFP

## German new chancellor under fire

BERLIN: Two months into the job, the honeymoon is already over for German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, with critics accusing him of being "invisible" on the Ukraine crisis and the coronavirus pandemic. The hashtag #woistscholz ("Where is Scholz?") is doing the rounds on Twitter, and some say the famously taciturn politician needs to start speaking up.

Scholz was sworn in as chancellor on December 8 after leading his Social Democrats (SPD) to a sensational election win, ending 16 years in power for Angela Merkel's conservatives. But a Forsa survey this week showed the SPD behind Merkel's CDU-CSU in the polls for the first time since the election-on 23 percent compared with 27 percent for the conservative bloc, which is now the main opposition party.

Scholz himself, feted for winning the September 26 election with a campaign that played on his calm demeanor and meticulous approach, is also seeing his popularity wane. In a recent survey by public broadcaster ZDF on Germany's most popular politicians, Scholz found himself lagging behind Merkel—who has retired from politics-and Health Minister Karl Lauterbach.

### 'Scholzomat'

Scholz, who will fly to Washington to meet US President Joe Biden on Monday, has long been known for his understated style. He was once dubbed "Scholzomat" for his dry, robotic speeches. Merkel was hardly known for her media presence or rousing speeches, but Scholz "seems to want to surpass her in the art of disappearance," according to Der Spiegel weekly, which accused him of being "almost invisible, inaudible".

"The way the chancellor speaks and communicates seems inappropriate," political scientist Ursula Muench told AFP. "He is heard and seen very little, and when he does speak, he often does so in riddles and not in a clear and pointed manner as required by the current media world," she said.

Though Scholz makes a habit of thanking journalists for their questions at press conferences, he often avoids answering the questions directly. The chancellor may be trying to create an impression of "professionalism and seriousness" in a media environment "where everyone speaks and comments on everything", according to Muench.

But if concrete results come too slowly or not at all, his "can-do" image-so skilfully harnessed during the election campaign-could be in danger. "Telling people 'You can rely on me, I am experienced and I know what I am doing' is simply not enough in a pandemic or an international crisis," political scientist Hajo Funke told AFP. Scholz's communication style leaves "a lot of room for improvement", he believes.

Germany had vaccinated just 75.8 percent of its population against the coronavirus by the end of January, falling short of an 80 percent goal set by Scholz's government. Compulsory vaccination, first mooted by Scholz last year with a view to implementation by February or March, has still not been voted on in parliament and is looking an increasingly remote prospect. —AFP

## US Army to discharge soldiers who refuse COVID vaccine

WASHINGTON: The US Army announced Wednesday it will begin discharging soldiers who refuse to comply with a mandatory COVID-19 vaccination rule. "Unvaccinated Soldiers present risk to the force and jeopardize readiness," Secretary of the Army Christine Wormuth said in a statement. "We will begin involuntary separation proceedings for Soldiers who refuse the vaccine order and are not pending a final decision on an exemption."

More than 3,000 soldiers could be discharged, according to the statement. The army had 482,000 active duty personnel at the end of 2021. As of January 26, six high-ranking officers-including two

battalion commanders-had been removed from their posts for refusing to get vaccinated against COVID-19.

The army has issued written "reprimands" to 3,073 soldiers who have also refused to get vaccinated. The US Navy announced in mid-October that personnel who declined vaccination against COVID-19 would be expelled from the force.

It has been particularly sensitive to the pandemic because of the risk that a single Covid case could infect an entire ship or submarine at sea, forcing it out of action. In a press release Wednesday, the navy said that about 8,000 active duty and reserve service members remained unvaccinated, and that to date, 118 people had been dismissed for refusing the vaccine. The Marine Corps previously said it had discharged more than 300. Around 97 percent of the approximately 1.4 million active-duty US military personnel have received at least one dose of COVID-19 vaccine, according to the Pentagon. —AFP



FORT KNOX, Kentucky: File photo shows Preventive Medicine Services NCOIC Sergeant First Class Demetrius Roberson administers a COVID-19 vaccine. The US Army announced it will begin discharging soldiers who refuse to comply with a mandatory COVID-19 vaccination rule. —AFP

## Biden battles accusations of 'weakness' against US rivals

WASHINGTON: Is Joe Biden "weak" in the face of Russia, Iran or North Korea? This is the accusation leveled by opponents of the US president, who is trying to balance a firm hand with pragmatism to overcome multiple international crises and focus on a rising China.

"Is it any surprise that Chinese planes are flying over Taiwan? Or that North Korea is testing missiles again? Or that Iran is ramping up its nuclear program? They all sense Biden's weakness," Nikki Haley, who served as UN ambassador under Donald Trump, tweeted this week, summing up grievances of Republican hawks.

The standoff with Russia over its buildup of troops on Ukraine's borders fanned the flames of these accusations, which broke out in earnest amid the chaotic US withdrawal from Afghanistan in late August.

The Democratic president may have adopted a martial tone, amped up

warnings and even sent troops to Eastern Europe this week, but his resolve is being called into question. The Republican opposition, including its moderate fringe, have reproached Biden for ruling out preemptive sanctions against Moscow to discourage an attack on Ukraine.

The choice is, in fact, in the hands of Biden's administration, which is betting that the threat of "devastating" punitive measures in the event of an invasion will dissuade Russian President Vladimir Putin.

### 'Minor incursion'

Some of the most hawkish in Washington have criticized the president for ruling out the option of direct military intervention to defend Ukraine. But criticism came from many more corners when Biden made an apparent gaffe in mid-January.

The 79-year-old leader had sowed confusion by suggesting a "minor incursion" by Russia would prompt less pushback from the West, and indicated divisions between NATO countries on the scale of response that such an invasion would warrant.

Republican lawmakers quickly blasted Biden, accusing him of having tacitly "green-lighted" an invasion and

forcing the White House to backpedal. "It's typical of Biden: he responds often more like an analyst than a president," said Celia Belin, a researcher at the Brookings Institution think tank in Washington.

She nonetheless deems the US handling of the Ukraine crisis effective so far. But his analytical responses are "a mistake as a leader," she said, especially as "Republicans harp on the idea of weakness because it resonates with the general perception of Biden as elderly, frail and not determined enough."

However, she underscored that this "trial of weakness" is typical of America, with a "constant" push and pull between a neoconservative bent toward the use of force to re-establish order and a camp that prefers to "choose its battles."

For Kori Schake, Director of Foreign and Defense Policy Studies at the American Enterprise Institute, a right-leaning think tank, these disparities don't negate that the US government is doing a "pretty good job balancing the competing demands" in the crisis.

### Hesitation

US intelligence agencies quickly identified the "pattern of Russian aggression," allies were consulted ear-

ly enough to "come to consensus," and the Pentagon has displayed "steadiness and readiness," she told AFP. Biden entered the White House with a promise to US allies that "America is back," indicating a willingness to seek compromise at the risk of giving an impression of hesitation.

But this re-investment in the international arena, after the unilateralism of the Trump era, does not mean that Washington intends to play policeman everywhere at all times. Democrats want to extract the United States from protracted conflicts and concentrate on a rising China, which the Biden and Trump administrations characterized as the top challenge of the 21st century.

Though Belin warned that pulling out isn't without consequence, like the withdrawal from Afghanistan "at the cost of a debacle," which she said may have pushed "Putin to legitimately say, 'I'm taking advantage of this.'"

And there is no shortage of challenges to divert the 46th US president from this priority, both new and protracted. Iran looms large, with Biden in need of a deal to round off long-running multilateral talks with Tehran aimed at salvaging a 2015 nuclear deal and avoiding another crisis. —AFP

## Canada Conservatives dump leader O'Toole

OTTAWA: Canada's Conservative MPs voted by secret ballot Wednesday to oust their leader Erin O'Toole, amid infighting over the party's future direction and loss to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's Liberals in snap elections last year.

Forty-five Tory members of parliament endorsed O'Toole's leadership, while 73 voted to replace him in the caucus vote, the main opposition party said in a statement. Wednesday evening, they chose Candice Bergen, an MP from the central province of Manitoba, to be the interim Conservative leader until a permanent replacement is decided at a party convention.

O'Toole's ouster ends a bitter internal feud over his year-and-a-half tenure and forces a third Conservative leadership race since 2015. "This afternoon I stepped down as leader of Her Majesty's loyal opposition and leader of the Conservative Party of Canada following a vote in our caucus," O'Toole said

in a parting video message.

He also said he would stay on as an MP. O'Toole, 49, fell out with a section of the party for tracking too much to the political center in the last election. He has faced a barrage of criticism from colleagues for shifting the party's positions on carbon pricing, balancing the federal budget and firearms restrictions-sometimes seemingly on the fly.

"This country needs a conservative party that is both an intellectual force and a governing force," O'Toole said Wednesday in defense of the positions he'd taken. "Ideology without power is vanity. Seeking power without ideology is hubris." He urged partisans and others to "hear the other side, listen to all voices, not just the echoes from your own tribe."

In parliament, Trudeau—who was participating remotely, as he is in isolation with Covid-19 — thanked O'Toole for his public service. "There is a lot we do not agree on for the direction of this country, but he stepped up to serve his country and I want to thank him for his sacrifice," Trudeau said.

The Conservatives won 119 seats out of 338 in the September election, down two from a previous ballot in 2019. Prior to the caucus vote, O'Toole this week



OSHAWA, Ontario, Canada: File photo shows Conservative leader Erin O'Toole speaks to supporters on election night in Oshawa, Ontario. —AFP

denounced his critics, saying the path they wished to take the party on was "angry, negative and extreme."

"It is a dead end," he said, adding that "a winning message is one of inclusion, optimism, ideas and hope." —AFP



## International

# Taleban closer to international recognition: Foreign minister

## Muttaqi urge Washington to unlock Afghanistan's assets

KABUL: The Taleban are inching closer towards international recognition but any concessions Afghanistan's new rulers make will be on their terms, the regime's foreign minister said in an interview with AFP. In his first interview since returning from talks with Western powers in Oslo, Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi also urged Washington to unlock Afghanistan's assets to help ease a humanitarian crisis.

No country has formally recognised the government installed after the Taleban seized power in August as US-led forces withdrew following a 20-year occupation. But Muttaqi told AFP late Wednesday that Afghanistan's new rulers were slowly gaining international acceptance. "On the process of getting recognition... we have come closer to that goal," he said.

"That is our right, the right of the Afghans. We will continue our political struggle and efforts until we get our right." The talks in Norway last month were the first involving the Taleban held on Western soil in decades. While Norway insisted the meeting was not intended to give the hardline Islamist group formal recognition, the Taleban have touted it as such.

Muttaqi said his government was actively

engaged with the international community—a clear indication, he insisted, of growing acceptance. "The international community wants to have interaction with us," he said. "We have had good achievements in that."

### Under pressure

Muttaqi said several countries were operating embassies in Kabul, with more expected to open soon. "We expect that the embassies of some of the European and Arab countries will open too," he said. But Muttaqi said any concessions the Taleban made in areas such as human rights would be on their terms and not as a result of international pressure.

"What we are doing in our country is not because we have to meet conditions, nor are we doing it under someone's pressure," he said. "We are doing it as per our plan and policy." The Taleban have promised a softer version of the harsh Islamic rule that characterised their first stint in power from 1996 until 2001.

But the new regime has been swift to bar women from most government jobs and close the majority of girls' secondary schools. Still, despite clear evidence to the contrary, Muttaqi insisted the new regime had not sacked any employees of the previ-



KABUL: In this picture taken on February 2, 2022, Afghanistan's Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi (L) arrives for an interview with AFP at his office in the foreign ministry in Kabul. — AFP

ous US-backed government.

"None of the 500,000 employees of the previous regime, men or women, have been fired. They all are getting paid," he said. But on the streets of Kabul and elsewhere in the country, thousands of people say they have lost their jobs or that they have not been paid for months.

Long dependent on international aid, Afghanistan's economic crisis has been made worse by Washington freezing nearly \$10 billion in state assets held abroad. With poverty deepening and a drought devastating farming in many areas, the United Nations has warned that half of the country's 38 million population faces food shortages this winter. — AFP



### Country faces food shortages this winter

## Pakistan says 4 troops killed in southwest

ISLAMABAD: Four Pakistani soldiers and at least 15 militants were killed in clashes in restive Balochistan province, the country's interior minister said yesterday, while separatists claimed dozens more had died in fighting that was still ongoing. Baloch separatists have stepped up attacks against Pakistan forces in recent weeks—including with a deadly bomb blast in the eastern megacity of Lahore last month.

Interior Minister Sheikh Rashid Ahmad said Pakistan forces came under attack late Wednesday in the Naushki and Panjgur districts of Balochistan, an oil- and gas-rich province bordering Iran and Afghanistan. He said four soldiers "embraced martyrdom" in Naushki while a total of 15 assailants were killed in the twin assaults.

But in a statement on their Telegram channel, the Baloch Liberation Army claimed to have killed dozens of Pakistani troops and said separatist forces still held military posts they had captured. "A large part of the military camps at Panjgur and Naushki are still under the control of the martyrs of the Majid Brigade of the Baloch Liberation Army," the group said. "Baloch martyrs have so far killed more than 100 occupying troops and destroyed the



NUSHKI, Pakistan: Security personnel (L) stand beside a destroyed security post following overnight attacks by militants on security camps in Naushki district of Balochistan province yesterday. — AFP

interior of the camp." Baloch separatists frequently exaggerate their battlefield successes, while the Pakistan military's public relations department also plays down losses, or delays reporting them.

The interior minister's video statement said a group of six militants were "surrounded" by troops and would be defeated. "This is a great victory which the army has, as usual, achieved in its fight against terrorism," he added.

Balochistan is the largest, least populous and poorest province in Pakistan. It has abundant natural resources, but locals have long harboured resent-

ment, claiming they do not receive a fair share of its riches. Tensions have been stoked further by a flood of Chinese investment under Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative, which locals say has not reached them.

China is investing in the area under a \$54-billion project known as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, upgrading infrastructure, power and transport links between its far-western Xinjiang region and Pakistan's Gwadar port. Pakistani forces in Balochistan also face attacks from the domestic chapter of the Taliban, Tehreek-e-Taleban Pakistan. — AFP

## Armenia, Turkey resume first flights in two years

ISTANBUL: Historic rivals Turkey and Armenia on Wednesday resumed their first commercial flights in two years as part of cautious efforts to warm their frozen ties. Armenia and Turkey have no diplomatic relations, a closed land border and a deep-seated hostility rooted in the mass killing of Armenians under the Ottoman Empire during World War I. But in December, the two countries appointed special envoys to normalise relations, spurred by support from regional powerbroker Russia and Armenia's arch-foe Azerbaijan.

The push came after a year after Azerbaijan used the help of Turkish combat drones to recapture most of the territory it lost to ethnic Armenians in a 1990s war in the dispute region of Nagorno-Karabakh. A Russian-brokered truce that ended the second conflict removed Turkey's main objection to talking to Armenia—namely, Yerevan's support for the local Nagorno-Karabakh government's claim of independence from Azerbaijan.

The special envoys met in Moscow

last month for a "constructive" first round of talks that skirted the issue of Turkey's refusal to recognise the 1915-16 killings of more than a million Armenians as genocide. The neighbours agreed to resume flights at around the same time.

### 'Positive but not revolutionary'

The first flight operated by Modlova's low-cost carrier FlyOne landed in a cold and drizzly Istanbul to a warm reception from airport officials, who welcomed passengers with flowers and chocolates. "We think these flights are important for preserving ties between the Armenian community in Istanbul and Armenia," FlyOne's Armenia branch chief executive Aram Ananyan told reporters after disembarking the flight.

An overwhelming majority of the 50,000-70,000 Armenians in Turkey live in Istanbul, a megalopolis of 16 million people. A flight run by Turkey's Pegasus Airlines took off from another Istanbul airport for Yerevan a few



ISTANBUL: Passengers wait before boarding for the Pegasus Airlines flight departing from the Sabiha Gokcen International Airport for the first time to land in the Yerevan International Zvartnots Airport, in Istanbul. — AFP

hours later, watched by a swarm of Turkish and Azerbaijani reporters. But an AFP reporter said some of the 100 or so ticketed passengers were turned away due to a lack of Armenian visas, which they had expected to purchase on arrival in Yerevan.

The budget Turkish airline will fly three flights to and from Yerevan a week. FlyOne plans two weekly return flights. Analysts called the resumption

of flights a positive but cautious first step in the difficult journey of normalising relations. "This is of course good news but it's also just a restoration of a previous situation," Thomas de Waal, a senior fellow at Carnegie Europe think-tank, told AFP. "The involvement of Pegasus, a regular Turkish carrier, rather than charter flights as previously is a positive step but not a revolutionary one," he said. — AFP

unprecedented step of barring junta leader Min Aung Hlaing from a summit in October.

It represented a rare rebuke from ASEAN, long seen as a toothless talking shop, but which has sought to lead diplomatic efforts to tackle the Myanmar crisis. Myanmar is increasingly isolated on the international stage, with Cambodian strongman ruler Hun Sen's January visit the first by any foreign leader since the generals seized power.

But violence has continued, with anti-junta groups clashing regularly with the military, and the World Bank has warned Myanmar's economy likely contracted by almost a fifth last year. In a statement on Wednesday, ASEAN called for an immediate end to violence and for its special envoy to be allowed to visit the country soon. — AFP

## Myanmar foreign minister barred from ASEAN meet

PHNOM PENH: Myanmar's junta suffered a fresh diplomatic blow yesterday as regional bloc ASEAN barred its top diplomat from attending an upcoming meeting of foreign ministers. Cambodia, which currently holds the bloc's rotating chairmanship, said there had been too little progress on a "five-point consensus" agreed by leaders last year to try to defuse the crisis gripping Myanmar.

The country has been in turmoil since the mili-

tary ousted Aung San Suu Kyi's civilian government a year ago, with more than 1,500 civilians since killed in crackdowns on anti-junta protests, according to a local monitoring group. "Since there has been little progress in carrying out ASEAN's Five-Point Consensus, the ASEAN member states did not reach a consensus to invite Myanmar SAC's foreign minister [Wunna Maung Lwin] to participate in the upcoming foreign ministers' retreat," Cambodia foreign ministry spokesman Chum Sounry told AFP.

Myanmar's military government calls itself the State Administration Council, or SAC. "We have asked Myanmar to send a non-political representative instead," Chum Sounry said. The snub comes after the 10-nation Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) took the

### News in brief

#### Guinea pardons officers

CONAKRY: Guinea's strongman Colonel Mamady Doumbouya has pardoned two army officers jailed in 2013 for attacking the residence of ex-president Alpha Conde, who was ousted in a coup last year. Gunmen attacked Conde's residence in the suburbs of the West African country's capital Conakry in July 2011. The move — following Conde's election to office in December 2010 — triggered a wave of arrests of soldiers perceived as close to General Sekouba Konate. Konate briefly ran a transition government before staging the 2010 election that Conde won. Two army officers, Commander Alpha Oumar Diallo and Jean Guilavogui, were arrested for their alleged role in the attack on Conde's home, and sentenced to life in prison in 2013. — AFP

#### Royal Mail probes stoned staff

LONDON: Britain's Royal Mail said yesterday it has launched an investigation after a viral social media video showed postal workers worse for wear after eating cannabis brownies from an unclaimed package. "Today almost all the posties in Clapham (south London) accidentally ate hash brownies and I had to pick them up one by one cause they were so high," read a text on the now-deleted video. The short film shows a postman having difficulty pushing his mail trolley with a colleague saying "you're just really high" after eating the brownies from a package labelled "Edibles by Pablo Chocobar". What appears to be the same postman is then shown sitting down inside the collection office where a colleague says: "He had two of them." — AFP

#### Scientist to go on trial

BERLIN: A Russian scientist accused of spying for Moscow on Europe's Ariane space rocket programme while working at a German university is to go on trial in Munich this month. The accused, identified only as Ilmur N., was arrested in June 2021 — the latest in a string of alleged Russian spies uncovered on German soil at a time when tensions between Russia and the West are at their worst since the Cold War. The trial will open on February 17, with 12 hearings initially planned until April 8, the Munich court said yesterday. Prosecutors allege that Ilmur N. was contacted by Russian agents in autumn 2019 or earlier, when he was working at an unnamed Bavarian university. — AFP

#### Oil vessel catches fire

PORT HARCOURT: A floating oil vessel with 10 crew members on board has caught fire following an explosion in southern Nigeria's Delta region, its operator said yesterday. The Shebah Exploration & Production Company said in a statement that "a fire engulfed our offshore facility... following an explosion during the early hours of Wednesday." Chief executive Ikemefuna Okafor said that an investigation was underway to determine the cause of the accident and that the company was working to "contain the situation." "At this time, there are no reported fatalities, but we can confirm that there were 10 crewmen onboard the vessel prior to the incident," Okafor said. The facility, located at the Ukpokiti Terminal, has processing capacity of 22,000 barrels per day and storage capacity of two million barrels. — AFP



# Business

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 4, 2022

## BoE agrees second rate hike in row as inflation skyrockets

### Desperate bid to tackle decades-high inflation in UK

**LONDON:** The Bank of England yesterday lifted its main interest rate for the second time in a row in a bid to tackle decades-high inflation. The BoE also said Britain's annual inflation rate would peak at 7.25 percent in April, compared with 5.4 percent last December which was already near a 30-year high.

The central bank slashed its interest rate dramatically in 2020 to help the economy weather the effects of the COVID pandemic. With soaring prices now threatening the economic recovery, the BoE decided Thursday to raise borrowing costs again by a quarter point to 0.5 percent.

It had already increased interest rates from a record-low 0.1 percent to 0.25 percent in December—the first monetary policy tightening in more than three years. Minutes of the regular meeting said all nine policymakers judged that a further increase was warranted given a tight labor market and “continuing signs of greater persistence in domestic cost and price pressures”.

Policymakers were divided however on the size of the increase. A majority five members, including governor Andrew Bailey, voted for a rise to 0.5 percent, while the remaining four wanted a larger increase to 0.75 percent. It is the first time that the BoE has increased its policy rate in two successive meetings since June 2004.

The European Central Bank, which is also holding its regular policy meeting yesterday, is expected to leave its key interest rates

unchanged. ECB chief Christine Lagarde has downplayed inflation concerns, arguing that the forces pushing up prices across the eurozone are expected to ease over 2022.

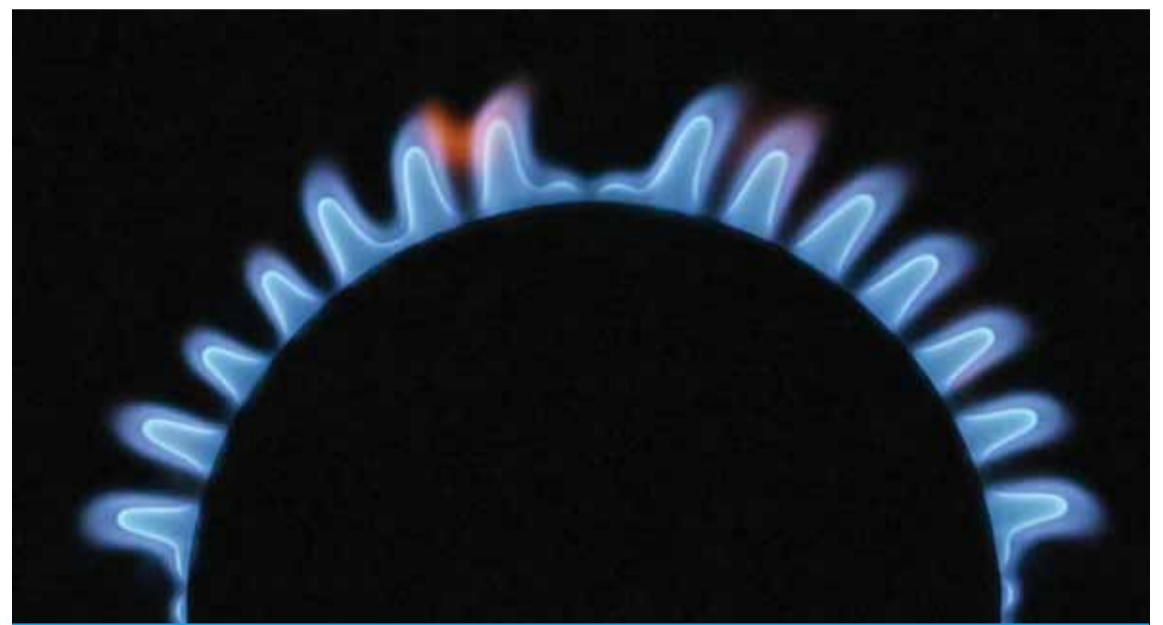
Official data on Wednesday showed that eurozone inflation soared to a record high of 5.1 percent in January. On the other side of the Atlantic, the US Federal Reserve is expected to hike borrowing costs as many as seven times before 2023, with an initial 50-basis-point move pencilled in for March.

#### Rising costs

Britain's soaring inflation has stoked fears about a cost-of-living squeeze as wages fail to keep pace. And UK inflation is forecast to move even higher in the coming months with domestic energy prices set to surge. The BoE's chief task is to keep inflation close to 2.0 percent. At the same time, Britain's economy has surpassed its pre-pandemic level after recording strong growth in November.

Since then, however, retail sales suffered a record drop in December as consumers shunned bricks-and-mortar shops owing to concerns over the Omicron coronavirus variant. While higher interest rates increase costs for borrowers, including homeowners and businesses, they improve returns on savings.

As the pandemic erupted in early 2020, the BoE slashed its key interest rate from 0.75 percent and also began pumping massive sums of new cash into



**BRIGHTON, UK:** A photo illustration shows gas burning on a domestic hob in Brighton, southern England on Wednesday. —AFP

the economy. It has created £450 billion (540 billion euros, \$610 billion) under its quantitative easing (QE) program since March 2020, when Britain imposed its first coronavirus lockdown. Prior to that, it had pumped hundreds of billions of pounds

worth of QE into the UK economy over a decade following the 2008-09 global financial crisis and Brexit. The central bank's total emergency stimulus package stands at £895 billion, an amount kept on hold yesterday. —AFP

### ECB sits tight as inflation pressure rises

**BRUSSELS:** The European Central Bank stuck to its ultra-loose monetary policy yesterday, despite record inflation in the eurozone putting the Frankfurt-based institution under mounting pressure.

The inflation rate unexpectedly rose to 5.1 percent in the euro area in January, official data showed Wednesday. The figure is an all-time high since records for the currency club began in 1997, 0.1 points higher than the figure for December and well above the ECB's two-percent target. The steep rise in prices seen globally has induced other central banks to act, with the Bank of England announcing it would raise its main rate by a quarter point to 0.5 percent at a meeting yesterday. The US Federal Reserve is widely expected to follow suit soon after signaling multiple rate hikes this year.

But ECB policymakers left its rates at record lows, including a negative deposit rate that charges financial institutions to park their cash with the central bank overnight.

While the decision to stand pat was expected, the pressure on the ECB to tighten policy would grow “in the course of the year”, said Fritzi Koehler-Geib, chief economist at the German public lender KfW.

Observers will be scouring ECB chief Christine Lagarde's planned remarks later for any indication of a change in thinking within the central bank. The former French finance minister has increasingly acknowledged the risk that inflation could be higher than the ECB expects but has so far said any rate hikes this year were “very unlikely”.

#### Gas peak

The ECB must tread a fine line between the “falling necessity to continue stimulating the economy and actually bringing higher inflation down”, said Carsten Brzeski, head of macro at the ING bank. The eurozone economy reached its pre-coronavirus pandemic level in the fourth quarter of 2021, but tightening too quickly could threaten to derail the recovery. The surge in inflation in Europe has been driven by a range of factors, but mostly on the supply side rather than the demand side, where the ECB has fewer levers to effect change.

Widespread shortages of raw materials and key components—everything from wood to semiconductors—have weighed on production and added to the upward pressure on prices. In addition, energy prices have spiked, hitting multi-year highs towards the end of last year.

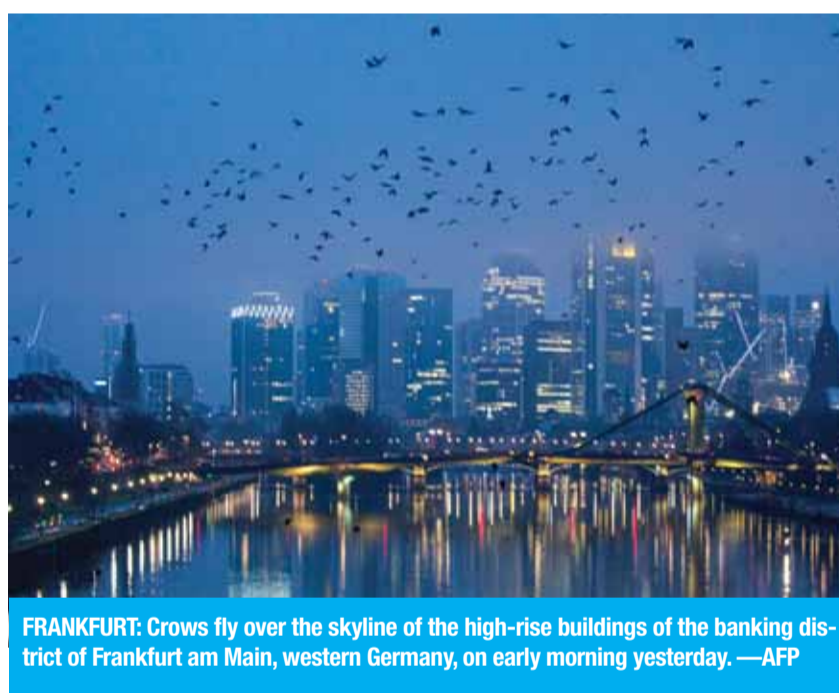
In Europe, the market has become captive to rising tensions between Moscow and the West over the massing of Russian troops on the border with Ukraine. Any escalation in the conflict could cause prices to shoot up further.

re-election in 2023.

Independent data collected by Turkish economists suggest that the annual rate of inflation rose to more than 110 percent in January. Although inflation is rising across the world, thanks in part to cheap money policies adopted to cushion the blow of the coronavirus pandemic, Turkey's problems are dramatically more acute because of Erdogan's unorthodox economic approach.

Erdogan rejects the idea that inflation should be fought by hiking the main interest rate, which he believes causes prices to grow even higher—the exact opposition of conventional economic thinking. He admitted on Monday that Turks would “have to carry the burden” of inflation for “some time”.

“God willing we have entered a period where each month is better than the previous one,” he added. Turkey has suffered from persistently high inflation for years, experiencing two currency crises since 2018. The second last year came after Erdogan orchestrated sharp interest rate cuts that put them far below the rate at



**FRANKFURT:** Crows fly over the skyline of the high-rise buildings of the banking district of Frankfurt am Main, western Germany, on early morning yesterday. —AFP

#### Second round

While tightening monetary policy could do little to bring gas prices down or avoid a conflict in Ukraine, the ECB would be keeping a close eye on “second-round effects”, ECB executive board member Isabel Schnabel told the German daily Sueddeutsche Zeitung in January.

Higher energy prices could mean goods and services “become more expensive and wages would start rising”, she said. On the other side of the Atlantic, wage increases have been more visible, contributing to driving US inflation to as high as seven percent in December.

That and the comparatively lower importance of energy prices have encouraged the Federal Reserve to take tough action. The ECB's more cautious response is predicated on its forecasts that see inflation dropping below the central bank's two-percent goal in 2023 and 2024 and a promise to end stimulus bond purchases before hiking rates.

At its last meeting in December, the ECB announced a “step-by-step” reduction in its pandemic emergency bond-buying program. It will not update its growth and inflation projections until its next meeting in March. —AFP



**ANKARA:** Turkey's inflation hit a two-decade high near a whopping 50 percent in January, official data showed yesterday.

which prices were rising, eroding Turks' purchasing power and savings.

This prompted Turks to stock up on gold and foreign currency, resulting in a crash that saw the lira lose 44 percent of its value against the dollar in 2021, with most of the losses coming in

the last two months of the year.

Turkish Finance Minister Nureddin Nebati told Nikkei Asia in an interview published yesterday that inflation would peak in April before falling to the single digits by the June 2023 general election. —AFP

### European oil port terminals hit by cyberattack

**BRUSSELS:** Major oil terminals in some of Western Europe's biggest ports have fallen victim to a cyberattack at a time when energy prices are already soaring, sources confirmed yesterday.

Belgian prosecutors have launched an investigation into the hacking of oil facilities in the country's maritime entryways, including Antwerp, Europe's second biggest port after Rotterdam. In Germany, prosecutors said they were investigating a cyberattack targeting oil facilities in what was described as a possible ransomware strike-one in which hackers demand money to reopen hijacked networks.

Oil prices hit a seven-year high last month amid diplomatic tensions with gas supplier Russia and energy bills are fuelling a rise in inflation that has spooked European policy-makers.

According to a specialized broker, the alleged hacking is affecting several European ports and is disrupting the unloading of barges in this already strained market. “There was a cyberattack at various terminals, quite some terminals are disrupted,” said Jelle Vreeman, senior broker at Riverlake in Rotterdam.

“Their software is being hijacked and they can't process barges. Basically, the operational system is down,” he said. The EU's Europol police agency said it was aware of the incidents in Germany and had offered support to authorities.

“At this stage the investigation is ongoing and in a sensitive stage,” Europol spokeswoman Claire Georges said. One of the main victims seems to be the cross-border Dutch and Belgian Amsterdam-Rotterdam-Antwerp oil trading hub, where company IT systems were affected by the attack. SEA-Tank Terminal, which has storage facilities in Antwerp, was hit, Belgian daily De Morgen reported. In Germany, two oil supply companies said they were victim to the cyberattack since Saturday January 29.

#### ‘Not grave’

Both Oiltanking Deutschland GmbH and Mabanaf declared force majeure, an emergency legal clause that is used when a company cannot fulfil its supply contracts because of an unforeseeable event, a joint statement said. “We are committed to resolving the issue and minimizing the impact as quickly and effectively as possible,” they said. The head of Germany's IT security agency, Arne Schoenbohm, said at a conference on Tuesday that the incident was serious but “not grave”, German media reports said. According to the German newspaper Handelsblatt, an initial report from German security services identifies the BlackCat ransomware as the tool used in the cyberattack in Germany.

BlackCat emerged in mid-November 2021 as a software tool to allow hackers to seize control of target systems and demand payment, and has quickly gained notoriety for its sophistication and innovation. —AFP

### Turkey inflation surges to near 20-year high

**ISTANBUL:** Turkey's inflation hit a two-decade high near a whopping 50 percent in January, official data showed yesterday, as a currency crisis decimated people's purchasing power and complicated President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's path to re-election. The stronger-than-expected 48.7 percent rate followed a year-on-year rise of 36.1 percent in December, according to Turkey's statistics agency, although some independent estimates put the real figure substantially higher.

The reading came out just days after Erdogan changed the head of the state statistics agency for the fourth time since 2019. Turkish media reported that Erdogan was unhappy with agency data showing inflation reaching the highest level since his Islamic-rooted party stormed to power two decades ago, complicating his path to



Business

# US private hiring slumps in ominous labor market sign

## Data a potential harbinger of bad news for upcoming employment report

WASHINGTON: US private companies shed jobs last month for the first time since December 2020 as the Omicron coronavirus variant again complicated business—a potential harbinger of bad news for the upcoming government employment report. Data from payroll services firm ADP released Wednesday said private employment declined by 301,000 in January, far worse than analysts expected, which the survey blamed squarely on the new virus strain.

“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 data bolstered fears that the Labor Department employment report due out Friday will indicate weak hiring in January, perhaps as low as 200,000 or even a contraction, caused by the renewed onslaught of COVID-19 infections hitting the world’s largest economy.

“We forecast the US payroll count turned negative in January with a net loss of 45,000 jobs—the first decline in over a year,” Lydia Boussour of Oxford Economics said, although she expects that seasonal adjustment factors will “soften the blow.” Beyond a gauge of the labor market’s recovery from the mass layoffs that marked the start of the pandemic, the government report will also be watched to see if it changes minds at the Federal Reserve.

Central bank officials have strongly indicated they will hike interest rates in March for the first time since the pandemic began, in a bid to fight inflation that hit a record high last year. However, Boussour predicted that “a temporary pullback in the payroll count won’t alter the Fed’s bullish view of the labor market,” where wages have grown and the unemployment rate has declined.

### Service sector hit

On top of the fall in January payrolls, ADP revised hiring in December down by 31,000. Small businesses bore the brunt of the employment downturn last month, losing 144,000 positions, the ADP data said, which Richardson noted erased most of the job gains made in December 2021. Large-business employment fell 98,000, while medium-sized businesses lost 59,000 positions. 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 industry, which has borne the brunt of past layoff waves and lost 154,000 positions in January. Ian Shepherdson of Pantheon Macroeconomics however said ADP’s data can differ widely from the government payroll report, and Omicron’s severity is likely to influence both.

“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.”

Economist Joel Naroff said the private sector jobs data does not point to a sustained slowdown in the labor market, but rather a reversion to a more normal pace of hiring as the economy gets over the COVID-19 downturn. “I don’t expect a negative employment number to print on Friday. It looks like hiring and spending are starting to settle down to more typical growth rates,” he said in a note. Pointing to recent data showing an increase in job openings, Naroff said: “With demand for workers still robust, it is hard to argue that hiring would suddenly fall off the cliff.” — AFP



## Deutsche Bahn promises record rail investment

BERLIN: German rail operator Deutsche Bahn will put a record sum into renovating and expanding its network in 2022, the company said yesterday, as Europe’s largest economy seeks to decarbonize transport. Deutsche Bahn and the federal and regional governments will together invest 13.6 billion euros (\$15.4 billion) in rail infrastructure, the group said in a statement.

The figure is 900 million euros higher than the investments made in 2021. The funds would go “above all to increasing the capacity” and towards the “digitalization” of the rail network, said the

operator, whose stock is completely held by the state. “Every euro invested in rail is a euro that goes towards the protection of the environment,” said Ronald Pofalla, the Deutsche Bahn executive responsible for infrastructure.

The investments will be made in close cooperation with the federal government, which sees rail expansion as a top priority as part of its plan to green the transport network. In 2020, the government then led by Angela Merkel set a target to double rail passenger numbers by 2030, a goal which has been embraced by the new government led by Social Democrat Olaf Scholz, in power since December.

The state has committed to putting 62 billion euros into the rail network over 10 years. Deutsche Bahn announced earlier in the week that it was purchasing 43 new high-speed trains from Siemens for 1.5 billion euros. The new units will bring Deutsche Bahn’s high-speed fleet up to “450 trains... by the end of the decade”, it said. — AFP



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



شركة الصفاة للاستثمار  
AL SAFAT INVESTMENT COMPANY

## KUWAIT BOURSA WEEKLY REPORT

WEEK ENDED ON 03 FEBRUARY 2022

(965) 22 675 140  
Al-Safat Tower, Hawalli, Beirut St.  
alsafatinvest.com  
research@alsafatinvest.com  
alsafatinvestment  
al-safat-investment-company

No.	Ticker	Sector	Price Movement & Performance										Valuation Multiples *				
			Open Price	Close Price	Week High	Week Low	Range	Volume	WTD Change	WTD %	YTD %	Support Level	Resistance Level	P/E	P/B	Yield	Beta
101	National Bank of Kuwait	Banking	1045	1040	1045	1035	10	17,096,127	-3	-0.29%	4.31%	1040	1052	22.5	2.17	2.9%	1.26
102	Gulf Bank	Banking	294	304	307	292	15	17,696,731	12	4.11%	8.96%	303	310	24.4	1.42	1.6%	1.13
106	Kuwait International Bank	Banking	223	225	225	221	4	16,069,260	2	0.90%	3.21%	224	227	79.1	0.98	0.0%	1.01
107	Burgan Bank	Banking	265	275	275	263	12	12,721,679	10	3.77%	9.56%	271	275	20.8	1.25	1.5%	1.05
108	Kuwait Finance House	Banking	906	908	910	905	5	22,124,966	3	0.33%	9.13%	908	919	35.6	3.97	1.0%	1.40
109	Boubyan Bank	Banking	805	807	812	800	12	4,132,618	2	0.25%	2.15%	803	813	59.6	4.66	0.6%	1.05
204	National Investments	Financial Services	266	280	283	265	18	15,031,828	15	5.66%	27.85%	267	282	8.9	1.18	3.6%	1.25
205	Kuwait Projects	Financial Services	166	162	168	161	7	23,950,396	-3	-1.82%	14.08%	161	168	36.9	2.00	2.3%	0.59
252	Al Imtiaz Investment	Financial Services	123	126	128	122	6	39,221,403	3	2.44%	6.78%	125	128	NM	0.77	6.5%	1.00
401	Kuwait Real Estate	Real Estate	191	182	192	179	13	50,679,899	-8	-4.21%	1.68%	181	187	28.1	1.32	0.0%	0.97
413	Mabaneer	Real Estate	815	813	825	804	21	2,629,331	-6	-0.73%	2.52%	807	814	18.0	1.85	0.7%	1.10
501	National Industries	Financial Services	296	292	301	285	16	23,887,019	-5	-1.68%	3.18%	281	295	5.7	1.05	0.0%	1.44
505	Gulf Cable	Industrials	925	982	989	921	68	3,110,432	62	6.74%	12.74%	979	990	34.7	1.00	5.1%	0.93
514	Boubyan Petrochemical	Basic Materials	92	911	922	910	12	947,931	-8	-0.87%	6.92%	900	915	25.9	2.14	5.9%	0.74
526	Al Qurain	Basic Materials	390	385	392	383	9	12,398,718	-2	-0.52%	10.95%	382	388	NM	1.04	3.9%	0.75
603	Agility	Industrials	990	1000	1,008	990	18	9,252,878	12	1.21%	5.82%	995	1005	2.3	1.08	0.9%	1.48
605	Zain	Telecommunications	595	601	602	594	8	21,753,209	5	0.84%	1.01%	599	602	13.8	2.19	3.3%	1.34
623	Human Soft Holding	Industrials	3,188	3,148	3,190	3,006	184	2,500,061	-32	-1.01%	-2.36%	3006	3160	6.9	3.44	12.6%	0.49
642	ALAFCO	Industrials	219	218	222	216	6	4,870,288	-1	-0.46%	0.00%	217	222	NM	0.70	0.0%	0.88
818	Ahli United Bank	Banking	280	283	283	279	4	37,631,943	4	1.43%	1.80%	282	287	19.4	2.19	1.3%	1.15
821	Warba Bank	Banking	280	281	284	278	6	7,618,490	3	1.08%	2.55%	278	286	21.4	2.78	0.0%	1.00
823	Mezzan Holding	Consumer Staples	588	599	599	585	14	4,229,732	8	1.35%	1.70%	596	600	18.7	1.69	2.9%	0.43
824	Integrated Holding	Industrials	372	392	408	371	37	11,557,091	20	5.38%	5.95%	388	398	NM	1.64	0.0%	0.47
826	Shamal Az-Zour	Utilities	224	223	225	222	3	4,928,992	0	0.00%	-2.19%	222	227	18.9	3.95	4.0%	0.62
827	Boursa Kuwait	Financial Services	2,022	2,124	2,160	2,022	138	1,618,839	89	4.37%	5.15%	2106	2150	27.2	7.55	1.9%	0.63

\* As of end of week closing



## Business

# Russian invasion or not, Ukraine's economy is already paying price

## Currency plunges, inflation soars amid looming banking crisis

**KYIV, Ukraine:** In his open-plan office in the center of Kyiv, tech executive Dmytro Voloshyn lists off the tricky questions he's dealt with over the last weeks as fears have soared over a possible Russian invasion. What will happen if things escalate? What to do with foreign staff? What will happen if martial law is declared? What if the banking system collapses? What if the internet gets cut?

"We've basically had to prepare a contingency plan with answers to all of these questions," he told AFP, showing a chart on his laptop detailing different options for different scenarios.

Preply, the company co-founded by Voloshyn in 2013, bills itself as one of the main online platforms connecting language students to teachers across the world. It employs some 400 people in Kyiv and Barcelona.

With its sleek office design, plants creeping up the walls, cafe for employees, it looks like a Silicon Valley start-up and is considered one of the successes of Ukraine's high-tech sector.

But like the rest of the Ukrainian capital it is currently living a strange double life. Work is going on as normal, people are carrying on with everyday tasks, and nothing seems out of the ordinary.

At the same time as Western leaders warn about the threat from Moscow's troops massed on the border—some people are bracing for the worst. According to a survey by the European Business Association, which includes many multinationals operating in Ukraine, 40 percent of its members have already prepared emergency plans and 40 percent intend to do so.

"We have a plan, but we don't execute it because we are very confident the situation will stay as it is," Voloshyn, 34, says. Voloshyn points out that Ukrainian businesses, like the broader population, have got used to living in a state of heightened alert since the Kremlin seized Crimea in 2014 and began fuelling a separatist conflict in

the east that has killed over 13,000 people.

"We are not panicking because we know that this situation lasts for eight years already for us," he says.

"It was always that kind of tension here in Ukraine, and now it's more immediate and it escalates obviously, but we are not in a panic mode." In fact, the crisis in 2014 spurred his company on. It pushed them to grow the business abroad as Ukraine's economy melted down and they sought to protect themselves from the turbulence.

### Weak currency, inflation

The risk of a Russian invasion, which Moscow denies it is plotting, has not yet caused such catastrophic consequences as it did back then. But it is already having a very real impact, freezing projects and scaring off some investors. The central bank has lowered its growth forecast for 2022 to 3.4 percent from 3.8 percent.

It has also had to spend more than \$1 billion since the beginning of the year to keep the local currency, the hryvnia, afloat as worried investors have moved money out of the country.

Despite that, the currency has still fallen to its lowest level in four years, fuelling inflation and undermining the purchasing power of households in one of Europe's poorest countries.

The situation has pushed President Volodymyr Zelensky to try to counter some of the more alarmist warnings coming from the West, insisting the priority was to stabilise the economy rather than stir "panic". For Sofya Donets, an economist at investment firm Renaissance Capital, Ukraine is currently in a stronger position than in 2014 to withstand financial pressure.

It has more than doubled its reserves and is due an influx of Western assistance, with the European Union pledging a further 1.2 billion euros and talks ongoing to unlock new funds from the International



**KYIV, Ukraine:** Ukrainian capital is currently living a strange double life. Work is going on as normal, people are carrying on with everyday tasks, and nothing seems out of the ordinary.

Monetary Fund. "However, this only works to smooth the effect of the prolonged turbulence, but not the full-scale military conflict," she said.

### 'Permanent threat'

Currently unable to borrow on international markets, the Ukrainian state remains dependent on its international donors. The government complains the country is suffering from a geopolitical situation beyond its control despite economic "fundamentals" that it insists are solid.

"We have been living since 2014 in a state of permanent threat from Russia, and now this is becoming news to the world," Finance Minister

Sergiy Marchenko said in an interview with the Ekonomichna Pravda website. "Tension cannot increase permanently," he insisted in a bid to reassure. In the meantime, companies like Voloshyn's are getting ready.

But even if the worst does not happen, economists warn that the spike in tensions further dents the country's longer-term prospects. "The risk premium for doing business in Ukraine has certainly increased," Lilit Gevorgyan, an economist at IHS Markit. "This risk perception will not significantly come down unless tangible progress is made between Ukraine and Russia to solve the conflict. Chances of the latter are slim." —AFP

## Dutch probe Tata Steel for 'intentional' pollution

**THE HAGUE:** Dutch prosecutors opened a criminal probe Wednesday into "intentional and unlawful" pollution by steel giant Tata at a plant near Amsterdam, saying the public's health could potentially be in danger. The massive plant at the mouth of the IJ river has come under increasing fire from residents and health authorities, who accuse it of being the main source of air, soil and water pollution in the area and of causing illness.

"The public prosecutor's office has informed Tata Steel... that it has opened a criminal probe into the intentional and unlawful introduction of hazardous substances into the air, soil and surface water," it said in a statement. "This could potentially place the public's health in danger," the prosecutor's office said, adding it was also probing Harsco Metals, which also operated on Tata Steel's premises.

Prosecutors decided to open the investigation following charges laid in May last year by a lawyer representing at least 800 plaintiffs.

"At the end of the investigation an announcement will follow whether the Tata inquiry will lead to prosecutions," the statement said. The criminal probe is the latest in the saga around Tata Steel, which directly employs some 9,000 workers — many who live nearby — and is a major player in the Dutch economy.

Two weeks ago, the country's National Institute for Public Health (RIVM) released a report which confirmed Tata was the main source for the PAH air pollutants and metal pollution in the IJmuiden region. Polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons are ubiquitous environmental pollutants, generated primarily during the incomplete burning of organic materials like coal, oil and gas, according to the Centres for Disease Control. —AFP

## ING profits rocket on global recovery

**THE HAGUE:** Dutch banking giant ING yesterday reported nearly doubling its profit for last year, saying results were buoyed by a recovering world economy learning to live with the coronavirus pandemic.

Amsterdam-based ING posted 4.7 billion euros (\$4.2 billion) in profit for 2021, up 92 percent from the year before. In 2020 profit slumped to 2.5 billion euros in the first year of the global COVID-19 pandemic, as strict lockdowns pushed down the demand for loans, while capital had to be placed in reserve for possible loan defaults.

"I'm pleased with our performance," said ING chief executive Steven van Rijswijk. Despite challenging conditions including the ongoing pandemic, supply chain pressures and rising energy prices and inflation, "we achieved good results," he said. "I'm encouraged by increased lending volumes and strong fee income growth in the final quarter of 2021, a sign of growing confidence in the economy as the world seeks ways to live with the coronavirus," Van Rijswijk said. —AFP

## Cuba runs out of milk, breaking Castro's promise

**HAVANA:** In the early days of communism in Cuba, Fidel Castro had pledged that every child under seven would have a liter of subsidized milk every day. For some time, they did but today, many go without. To circumvent the US embargo against Cuba and lagging domestic production, milk has to come from the other side of the world in an obstacle race that deprives many on the island of the staple.

Regla Caridad Zayas, a 59-year-old diabetic, said the milk powder that the Cuban state supplies monthly to her and others with special dietary needs dried up months ago. She is supposed to get a kilo of powder, which makes 10 liters (2.6 gallons) of milk, every month.

Sitting at a rickety table from which she sells coffee outside her house, Zayas said the bodegas, or subsidized food stores, no longer

carry the commodity. In the supermarket, it is also nigh impossible to find: milk has become the latest casualty in a long history of chronic food shortages in Cuba, which on Monday marks six decades of US sanctions.

And it will continue to be in short supply in Havana and four other provinces, due to a lack of "financing, boats and suppliers," Internal Trade Minister Betsy Diaz said in October. To find milk powder, Cuba looks all the way to New Zealand—its main supplier with 18,470 tons in 2020 — as well as Belgium (6,628 tons) and Uruguay (3,695 tons), according to specialized export and import data site Trade Map.

### Containers stuck

Official Cuban data shows that the island produced 455 million kilograms of fresh milk in 2020, far short of what it needs. According to the Pan-American Dairy Federation, each person should have access to 150 liters of milk per year—some 1.6 billion liters, and about the same in kilograms, for Cuba's 11.2 million inhabitants.

The cheapest and easiest would be



**BATABANO, Cuba:** A woman pushes a cart with milk for neighbors amid the COVID-19 pandemic in Batabano, Mayabeque province, Cuba. —AFP

to get the milk from the United States—one of the world's largest exporters and less than 200 kilometers (124 miles) from Cuba's coastline.

Since 2000, food products have been excluded from the US embargo on trade with Havana. But Cuba must pay cash and in advance—onerous conditions for a country in deep eco-

nomics crisis, with little foreign exchange and no access to loans. Getting products from the other side of the planet is not easy, either: more than 10,000 containers of food and other products were stuck last month in ports around the world due to pandemic supply chain issues, the government said. —AFP

## German car sales improve in January after 2021 struggles

**BERLIN:** Sales of German cars rose year-on-year in January, official figures published yesterday showed, after the flagship industry was plagued by supply problems in 2021. New car registrations were up 8.5 percent in January in Europe's largest economy, the federal transport agency said in a statement.

"The car industry has little grounds at the beginning of the year to breathe," the president of the VDIK car importers' federation, Reinhard Zirpel, said in a statement. The numbers were rosier than those for

December, when sales fell by 26.9 percent year-on-year, but "the market was still a way off its pre-crisis level in January," Zirpel said. In 2021, sales fell by 10.1 percent in Germany as a shortage of semiconductors, a key component in both conventional and electric vehicles, strangled production.

The result followed a drop of 19 percent in 2020, when the industry was contending with the economic impact of lockdowns at the start of the coronavirus pandemic.

Sales of electric cars out-performed the market as a whole, with sales increasing 28.1 percent on January last year. After seven months in a row in which production figures fell by double digits, carmakers turned out eight percent more units in January this year than in 2021, the auto industry association VDA said.

Survey data from the Ifo Institut think tank also showed that auto businesses saw the supply situation



improving. In January, 77.9 percent reported problems procuring materials and components, down from 92.9 percent in the same survey in December. —AFP

## Brazil hikes key interest rate to double digits

**BRASILIA:** Brazil's central bank hiked its benchmark interest rate by 1.5 points Wednesday to 10.75 percent, bringing it into double digits for the first time in nearly five years to fight rampant inflation. The eighth straight increase to the Selic rate, which was in line with forecasts, comes as Latin America's biggest economy struggles through a recession and stubbornly high inflation that the bank's monetary policy committee said "continued to be a negative surprise." The nine-member committee, which made the decision unanimously, hinted it would soon slow the tightening cycle, saying it "currently foresees a slowdown in the pace (of rate cuts) as the most adequate policy."

Brazil has responded to pandemic-dri-

ven inflation with one of the most aggressive tightening cycles in the world, rapidly raising the key interest rate from an all-time low of two percent in March 2021. The last time the Selic rate was in the double digits was in May 2017.

Brazil's inflation rate came in at 10.06 percent for 2021, crashing through policymakers' target range — currently 3.5 percent, plus or minus 1.5 percentage points. But the hawkish monetary policy is putting the brakes on economic growth.

The economy fell into recession last year, contracting 0.4 percent in the second quarter and 0.1 percent in the third. Analysts polled by the central bank are currently forecasting economic growth of a lackluster 0.3 percent for this year.

### Election year

The weak economy has emerged as a major headache for far-right President Jair Bolsonaro, who is up for reelection in October and badly trails his nemesis, leftist ex-president Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, in the polls. Election-year and pandemic-related uncertainties loom large for Brazil's

economy, but there are tentative signs of improvement.

The monthly inflation rate slowed at the end of the year, from 0.95 percent in November to 0.73 percent in December. And industrial production came in at a stronger-than-expected 3.9 percent growth for 2021, according to figures released Wednesday — though it remains 0.9 percent below its pre-pandemic level.

Central bank chief Roberto Campos Neto recently said he expected the rate-tightening cycle was "reaching its end." The bank's next meeting is set for mid-March. Many analysts forecast the last rate hike will come in May, bringing the Selic to around 12 percent.

Meanwhile, Brazil's industrial production rebounded strongly in 2021, but is still not back to pre-pandemic levels, the government said Wednesday, as Latin America's biggest economy struggles with high inflation and slumping growth. Industrial production rose 3.9 percent in 2021 compared to 2020, said the national statistics institute, IBGE.

The year-end figure was driven by a

monthly jump of 2.9 percent in December, thanks mainly to strong vehicle production, up 12.2 percent month-on-month, it said.

Brazil's industrial production shrank 1.1 percent in 2019 and a painful 4.5 percent in 2020 as COVID-19 wrought havoc on the world economy.

Industrial output "remains 0.9 percent below the level of February 2020, before the effects of the pandemic began, and 17.7 percent below the record level of May 2011," IBGE said.

Brazil's industrial production shrank from June to October 2021, and was flat in November. The December rebound is a welcome bright spot for an economy battered by a recession — GDP contracted 0.4 percent in the second quarter and 0.1 percent in the third — and surging prices.

The "much stronger-than-expected 2.9-percent month-on-month increase in industrial production in December... means that the economy may have just exited from its technical recession in the fourth quarter," William Jackson, chief emerging markets economist at Capital Economics, said in a note. —AFP





Pictures show one of former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein's palace complex near Baghdad International Airport. — AFP photos

# Iraq struggles to make use of Saddam's crumbling palaces

Scattered across Iraq lie more than 100 opulent palaces and villas built by former dictator Saddam Hussein—some in use, many in ruins like much of the war-scarred country. With their marble columns, ornate carvings and gaudy furniture, they reflected the megalomania and delusions of grandeur of Saddam, who visited some of them only once or twice. In his Babylon residence, the feared strongman's profile is engraved in bas-relief like that of the Mesopotamian emperor he idolized, Chaldean dynasty king Nebuchadnezzar II.

In many places, the initials "S.H." are still visible as reminders of the despot who was toppled by the 2003 US-led invasion, captured later that year and executed in 2006. Most of his palaces were looted during the chaos of the invasion, when thieves scavenged all they could carry, even ripping electric cables out of walls. Since then, only a handful of the palatial residences have been given a second lease of life, often as military bases or public administrations, more rarely as museums. Most lie empty, in part because the cost of renovating them is prohibitive.

"We can turn palaces into museums, at least in Baghdad—a tapestry museum, for example, or on the royal family or Islamic art," said Laith Majid Hussein, director of the Iraqi State Board of Antiquities and Heritage. But he conceded that rehabilitating many of Iraq's "gigantic castles" would require "astronomical sums". Red tape and entrenched graft spell other hurdles, said a senior government official, speaking on condition of anonymity. "Bureaucracy and corruption hinder the restoration of these palaces to turn them into tourist complexes or heritage centres," he said.



'Symbol of dictatorship'

Saddam, during his more than two decades in power in the oil-rich country, had many monuments and palaces built while cheerfully defying the Western embargo of the 1990s. In the turmoil of war, many were damaged in fighting or used as bases by US and other foreign

forces. In Baghdad, three palaces now house the presidency and the prime minister's offices. The sumptuous Al-Faw complex—encircled by an artificial lake—has since 2021 housed the private American University, built by an Iraqi investor. Al-Faw, situated near the airport for Saddam's VIP guests, once served as an American base. Now its stone and marble buildings house auditoriums, amphitheatres and a food court.

The university's president Michael Mulnix voiced pride about the project which saw "the palace of a former dictator and a fairly ruthless man" become an institution of higher learning. While the main palace had survived relatively intact, he said, "all of the other buildings ... were really destroyed. "The windows were all broken out, there were birds flying around, snakes on the floor, literally. So it was very messed up. We had to go in and do substantial renovation."

In the southern city of Basra, three



palaces remain. Two are used by the Hashed al-Shaabi, a pro-Iranian paramilitary alliance now integrated into the Iraqi regular forces. The third has become a prestigious antiquities museum. "We have managed to transform this symbol of dictatorship into a symbol of culture," said Qahtan al-Obeid, the provincial head of antiquities and heritage.

### 'In a deplorable state'

To date, he said, Basra is the only Iraqi province "to have transformed a palace into a heritage building". Iraq has a total of Saddam-era 166 residences, villas and other complexes, he added. An architect from the former regime, also asking not to be named, said that since 2003, Iraqi governments had built little and proven unable "to match what Saddam erected". Majid Hussein said that in Babylon province, authorities plan

to turn a palace overlooking the UNESCO World Heritage site there into a museum. The imposing palace sits atop a hill of the city whose history dates back 4,000 years.

After years of neglect the walls are covered in graffiti and chandeliers have been broken, but some outer buildings now house a hotel complex. "When we first came in 2007, the site was in a deplorable state," said its director, Abdel Satar Naji, who added that local authorities "have decided to turn it into a recreational centre". The Iraqi city known as the "city of palaces" was Tikrit, the despot's home town northwest of Baghdad on the Tigris river. The presidential complex boasted some 30 villas, but they too are now an abandoned memorial to excess.

One area there, however, does draw visitors—albeit for another, tragic reason that dates to the post-Saddam era. It was here that Islamic State group jihadists in 2014 executed up to 1,700 air force cadets in what came to be known as the "Speicher massacre". Mourners now visit a memorial set up on site, on the bank of the Tigris which once carried away the bodies of the murdered young men. — AFP



## 'Dune' leads the nominations for the BAFTA Film Awards with 11

Denis Villeneuve's sci-fi epic is up for a string of prizes at next month's ceremony, including the prestigious Best Film accolade and Best Adapted Screenplay for the director, with the majority of its shortlisted places coming in technical categories such as Editing, Production Design, and Costume Design. The 'Power of the Dog' follows with eight nods, just ahead of 'Belfast' with six nominations and 'Licorice Pizza', 'No Time to Die', and 'West Side Story'. As well as 'Dune', 'The Power of the Dog', 'Belfast' and 'Licorice Pizza' are nominated for Best Film, as is 'Don't Look Up'.

In the Outstanding British Film category, 'Belfast' and 'No Time To Die' will fight it out for the honour alongside 'After Love', 'Ali & Ava', 'Boiling Point', 'Cyrano', 'Everybody's Talking About Jamie', 'House of Gucci', 'Last Night in Soho', and 'Passing'. The Leading Actress prize will go to either Lady Gaga ('House of Gucci'), Alana Haim ('Licorice Pizza'), Emilia Jones ('Coda'), Renate Reinsve ('The Worst Person in the World'), Joanna Scanlan ('After Love'), or Tessa Thompson ('Passing'), while Adeel Akhtar ('Ali & Ava'), Mahershala Ali ('Swan

Song'), Benedict Cumberbatch ('The Power of the Dog'), Leonardo DiCaprio ('Don't Look Up'), Stephen Graham ('Boiling Point') and Will Smith ('King Richard') are shortlisted for the Leading Actor award.

All of the performers in the Supporting Actor category are first-time nominees, with a total of 19 out of the 24 nominees up acting accolades earning their place on the shortlist for the first time. Amanda Berry, CEO of BAFTA, said: "Congratulations to all our nominees, whose extraordinary talent and achieve-

able range of creative work in-front of and behind the camera. We know that by celebrating outstanding achievement today, we are inspiring future generations for years to come. Two years ago, we launched a wide-ranging review into our voting, membership and campaigning processes and I want to thank the BAFTA members and the wider industry for embracing these changes. Our goal is to level the playing field for awards entries so that more films and the true diverse range of exceptional creative talent in the UK and internationally is represented and cel-



ments have shone through in another incredible year for film. "BAFTA celebrates its 75th anniversary this year, so it is a particularly special year for us and we are proud to be announcing the nominations from our recently redeveloped home at 195 Piccadilly.

"We look forward to celebrating our nominees' incredible talent in person when we welcome everyone to London's Royal Albert Hall for the EE British Academy Film Awards on 13 March." Krishnendu Majumdar, Chair of BAFTA, added: "This year's nominations showcase a remark-

able range of creative work in-front of and behind the camera. We know that by celebrating outstanding achievement today, we are inspiring future generations for years to come. Two years ago, we launched a wide-ranging review into our voting, membership and campaigning processes and I want to thank the BAFTA members and the wider industry for embracing these changes. Our goal is to level the playing field for awards entries so that more films and the true diverse range of exceptional creative talent in the UK and internationally is represented and cel-

brated. With 48 films nominated today, we're delighted to be able to shine a spotlight on such phenomenal breadth of stories and performances." The nominations were announced yesterday by AJ Odudu and Tom Allen at BAFTA 195 Piccadilly in London. They came just two days after it was revealed Ariana DeBose, Harris Dickinson, Lashana Lynch, Kodi Smit-McPhee, and Millicent Simmonds are up for the publicly-voted EE BAFTA Rising Star Award. The EE British Academy Film Awards take place on 13 March at London's Royal

Albert Hall and will be hosted by Rebel Wilson. BAFTA Film Awards 2022 selected list of nominees:

### Best Film

'Belfast'  
'Don't Look Up'  
'Dune'  
'Licorice Pizza'  
'The Power of the Dog'

### Outstanding British Film

'After Love'  
'Ali & Ava'  
'Belfast'  
'Boiling Point'  
'Cyrano'  
'Everybody's Talking About Jamie'  
'House of Gucci'  
'Last Night in Soho'  
'No Time To Die'  
'Passing'

### Animated Film

'Encanto'  
'Flee'  
'Luca'  
'The Mitchells Vs The Machines'

### Director

Aleem Khan - 'After Love'  
Audrey Diwan - 'Happening'  
Paul Thomas Anderson - 'Licorice Pizza'  
Julia Cameron - 'The Power of the Dog'  
Jane Ducourmau - 'Titane'

### Original Screenplay

Aaron Sorkin - 'Being the Ricardos'  
Sir Kenneth Branagh - 'Belfast'  
Adam McKay - 'Don't Look Up'  
Zach Baylin - 'King Richard'  
Paul Thomas Anderson - 'Licorice Pizza'

### Adapted Screenplay

Sian Heder - 'Coda'  
Ry'suke Hamaguchi - 'Drive My Car'  
Denis Villeneuve - 'Dune'  
Maggie Gyllenhaal - 'The Lost Daughter'  
Jane Campion - 'The Power of the Dog'

### Leading Actress

Lady Gaga - 'House of Gucci'  
Alana Haim - 'Licorice Pizza'  
Emilia Jones - 'Coda'  
Renate Reinsve - 'The Worst Person in the World'  
Joanna Scanlan - 'After Love'  
Tessa Thompson - 'Passing'

### Leading Actor

Adeel Akhtar - 'Ali & Ava'  
Mahershala Ali - 'Swan Song'  
Benedict Cumberbatch - 'The Power of the Dog'  
Leonardo DiCaprio - 'Don't Look Up'  
Stephen Graham - 'Boiling Point'  
Will Smith - 'King Richard'

### Supporting Actress

Catriona Balfe - 'Belfast'  
Jessie Buckley - 'The Lost Daughter'  
Ariana Debose - 'West Side Story'  
Ann Dowd - 'Mass'  
Aunjanue Ellis - 'King Richard'  
Ruth Negga - 'Passing'

### Supporting Actor

Mike Faist - 'West Side Story'  
Ciaran Hinds - 'Belfast'  
Troy Kotsur - 'Coda'  
Woody Norman - 'C'mon C'mon'  
Jesse Plemons - 'The Power of the Dog'  
Kodi Smit-McPhee - 'The Power of the Dog'

—Bang Showbiz



## Lifestyle | Features

Crosby, Stills  
and Nash follow  
Young's lead in  
Spotify row

Neil Young's former bandmates from Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young said Wednesday they had asked their labels to remove their recordings from Spotify, making them the latest musicians to take a stand over misinformation on the

platform. Last week, Young made good on his vow to have his music removed from Spotify after demanding that the streaming service choose between him and controversial podcaster Joe Rogan, with fellow folk rock superstar Joni Mitchell following suit.

"We support Neil and we agree with him that there is dangerous disinformation being aired on Spotify's Joe Rogan podcast," the joint statement from David Crosby, Stephen Stills and Graham Nash read. "While we always value alternate points of view, knowingly spreading disinformation during this global pandemic has deadly consequences. Until real action is taken to show that a concern for humanity must be balanced with commerce, we don't want our music-or the music we made together-to be on the same plat-

form."

Young was a part of the folk rock supergroup for a few years straddling the 1960s and 1970s, with their hits including "Woodstock," "Our House" and "Teach Your Children." Crosby, Stills and Nash said that in addition to the band's recordings being removed, Nash has started the process to take down his solo recordings. Crosby and Stills are also requesting the removal of their solo projects, the statement said. In response to the controversy, Spotify—which has a \$100 million multi-year exclusive deal with Rogan, who has discouraged vaccination in young people—said over the weekend that it would add a "content advisory" to podcast episodes that discuss COVID-19.—AFP



In this file photo (from left) Musicians Stephen Stills, Graham Nash and David Crosby of Crosby, Stills and Nash perform at a 'No On Proposition 32' concert at the Nokia Theatre LA Live in Los Angeles, California.—AFP



In this photograph a dog looks on in front of a dilapidated mansion in Kanadukathan town in India's Tamil Nadu state.—AFP photos



People ride a motorcycle past the Kanadukathan Palace in Kanadukathan town in India's Tamil Nadu state.

# INDIA'S CHETTINAD MANSIONS A TESTAMENT TO PAST GLORY



A court hall of the Chettinadu Mansion is seen in Kanadukathan town in India's Tamil Nadu state.



An aerial view shows mansions in Kanadukathan town in India's Tamil Nadu state.



An antique radio kept on display is seen at Visalam mansion in Kanadukathan town in India's Tamil Nadu state.

Thousands of mansions in a remote corner of India once housed some of the nation's wealthiest bankers and traders but a century later most of them lie abandoned, their desolate remains a mute testament to lost riches. The tycoons of Chettinad, near the country's southern tip, made their fortunes trading precious gems and spices across sprawling business empires that stretched as far as Malaysia and Singapore during the era of British colonial rule.

Much of their wealth was channeled into the construction of resplendent homes, embellished with stucco figurines, colorful glass windows and cornices. Historians say they sourced chandeliers from Venice, giant mahogany-framed mirrors from Belgium and glazed ceramic tiles with intricate patterns from Birmingham. "At that time there was a competition between the Chettiars themselves to create the most beautiful building—more beautiful than the brother, the cousin, whatever," Bernard Dragon, a French architect working in the region, told AFP.

But time has not been kind to the nearly 11,000 palatial homes built across the region and many now appear dilapidated and overgrown with vegetation, their current owners either unable to pay for upkeep or mired in property disputes. "We worry about the state of conservation," said Dragon, who has worked to restore one property in the area to its former glory for service as a boutique hotel. "In some villages, the owners are more present and more committed. (But) in some of the villages, you enter... and you realize nobody is taking care of the properties."

Chettinad's residents belonged to a caste of Tamil merchants, and the location was an ideal staging post for a maritime merchant empire. Its residents were able to leverage their networks into sprawling banking operations and landholdings, in a commercial partnership with British traders seeking markets and financing for trade in tea, coffee and rubber. But after World War II their holdings were thrown into disarray, as independence movements gained ground regionally and socialist-inspired economic policies at home clamped down on moneylending and foreign trade. Many families, forced to tighten their belts or seek other opportunities, moved to the nearby city of Chennai, leaving their homes in the custody of caretakers or simply abandoning them.

### 'I expect a revival'

Today the dozens of villages that make up Chettinad region are far from the beating heart of commercial life in southern India, while Chennai has become an important hub for finance and the automotive industry. With the nearest airport more than two hours away and the mansions—some with up to 100 rooms—needing staggering sums for upkeep, there is little appetite for local real estate. But emotional attachments from the descendants of



An aerial view shows mansions in Kanadukathan town in India's Tamil Nadu state.

earlier inhabitants and passionate architects extolling the supreme craftsmanship of the homes have helped fuel some efforts to preserve these marvels.

"The new generation is earning a lot of money and they are interested in these properties," said A. Chandramouli, the eld-

Other properties have largely retained their gleaming marble floors, crystal chandeliers and carved mirrors while adding modern amenities catering for wealthy sightseers attracted to the area's faded grandeur. "These homes need to be restored for our future generations to see



A view of Visalam mansion is seen in Kanadukathan town in India's Tamil Nadu state.

erly proprietor of the Chettinadu Mansion. "I expect a revival shortly," he added, sat on an antique chair in a tiled courtyard awash with afternoon sunlight. "They want to preserve this unique heritage for future generations." The Chettinadu Mansion, spread over 40,000 square feet (3,700 square meters), has been renovated into a heritage resort and has been featured as a backdrop for Bollywood movies.

how people used to live here," tourist Malini Bharathy told AFP, in between snapping selfies from one of the sun-drenched balconies of Chandramouli's property. "I want my son (and) my son's son to come here and enjoy this, and relish this." — AFP



Lifestyle | Features



A man visits the empty Le Rif cinema in the western Moroccan city of Casablanca. — AFP photos



Yahla Yahla, who worked as a projectionist in Morocco for 35 years, visits the empty Le Rif cinema.



A man sits at the entrance of the ABC cinema, in the western Moroccan city of Casablanca.

# Curtains down on Morocco's ramshackle cinemas

They won't be playing it again at this Casablanca cinema. Rabi Derraj gazed despondently at the ramshackle 1940s movie house, its doors blocked by discarded mannequins from the nearby market. "There's no hope any more. This cinema is dead," said its long-time security guard. Al-Malaki once seated more than 1,000 moviegoers, but like theatres across Morocco, it lies closed and derelict. Enthusiasts are calling for better protection for the buildings, architectural treasures that bear witness to the North African kingdom's past. Al-Malaki, "the Royal" in Arabic, was commissioned by King Mohammed V in the 1940s as a grandiose riposte to cinemas reserved for citizens of colonial power France.

The 1942 Hollywood classic "Casablanca", featuring piano-player Sam, is set in the city. But decades later the cinema building has become a dumping ground for goods from the surrounding market in the working-class Derb Sultan neighborhood. "It's tragic. You can't measure the historical importance of this cinema," said Derraj, who has spent almost half of his 42 years as its guard. In front of the ticket office, a TV almost blocks a list of prices, one of the few indications of the building's function until it closed in 2016.

Like audiences in other countries around the world where historic theatres have also shuttered, Moroccans have turned to streaming services at home, a trend amplified by the coronavirus pandemic. A hundred or so theatres face a similar fate to Al-Malaki's-crumbling for years until they are finally demolished. Morocco's first cinemas were built by the French, who had established a protectorate over the country in 1912. But it was

in the 1940s that theatres were built for Moroccans themselves, setting up a golden age of the silver screen which lasted into the early 1990s.

"The Moroccans had a love affair with cinema," said Francois Beaurain, a French photographer who has produced a book on the subject. "But television, VHS tapes and today streaming have killed that love," he continued.

### 'Unforgettable memories'

One victim of the trend was the Regent cinema in the northern city of Meknes, a baroque-style theatre built in the 1920s. Its demolition was a tragedy for Yahla Yahla, who had been its projectionist for 35 years. "It was very hard for me. It even made me sick," said the sharply-dressed retiree, now in his 70s. "I have unforgettable memories from that cinema. I

learned my trade there." And the closure of the Regent was just the start of his woes. Yahla went on to work at two other cinemas-but by 2020 both had shut. "The younger generation don't understand the value of cinema," he said. Today, just 27 theatres remain open across the country of 37 million. They rely heavily on state funding for renovations and for digitizing films.

### 'Harder and harder'

Casablanca's Le Rif is one of those still in operation. Built in 1957, its walls are lined with purple velvet that contrasts with its 950 red fabric seats. "It's a unique cinema, but I can't hide my concern-the situation's getting harder and harder," said owner Hassan Belkady, 63. And the coronavirus pandemic may have delivered the knockout blow: cinemas across Morocco

went dark for more than a year before reopening in July 2021. Despite nine million dirhams (850,000 euros, \$960,000) of funding for the Moroccan Centre for Cinematography (CCM), which promotes and regulates film, the industry is struggling to extract itself from the crisis.

Belkady said that since 2020, he had been forced to close two other cinemas in the country's commercial capital-the ABC theatre, built in 1948, and the Ritz from 1950. Some of the buildings are officially listed, meaning they cannot be demolished. But, Belkady asks, "what's the point in listing buildings as historic if the authorities don't do anything to protect them?" "It's urgent to mobilize, and to act before it's too late," he said. — AFP



Alina Serban tries a costume during the first rehearsal for the show "The Best Child in the World" in a studio of the National Theater in Bucharest.



Alina Serban (left) poses during a photo session for the poster of her show in Bucharest. — AFP photos

## 'Let the light in': Romanian Roma actress smashes stigma with new play

As a child, Roma actress and playwright Alina Serban didn't see herself represented on television, in movies or books, her stigmatized community shunned from the cultural mainstream. She has dedicated her career to changing that, and last month became the first Roma to stage her work at Bucharest's National Theatre. "I grew up in this country, but I've never been able to recognize myself in the stories," the 34-year-old told AFP. "That's why it's important for me to crack open the door and let the light in. It's like I'm planting a flag," she adds, speaking between rehearsals.

Her show, called "Cel mai bun copil din lume" (The Best Child in the World) and based on her life, opened on January 21 to sold out audiences. It is a moving and at times funny story about a girl who triumphs against all odds, but can't escape the stigma she faces as a Roma. "This is the first time that a Roma story, written, staged and performed by a Roma artist has been welcomed on the national scene," she says.

### 'She's a gypsy'

Romania, one of the poorest countries in the European Union, has the largest

Roma minority in Europe, around two million strong, according to NGOs. But many Roma are reluctant to identify themselves as such for fear of discrimination. Officially they are only 621,000 out of Romania's population of 19 million. Serban says she started to realize her Roma identity at age nine when she and her parents, beset by financial difficulties, had to leave their apartment in a working-class Bucharest district.

They settled in a cob house without running water, alongside her aunts and uncles. That's when she heard a remark at school that will haunt her forever: "She's not Romanian, she's a gypsy". The pejorative word "gypsy" is often replaced by "crow" in Romanian. It's a reference Serban uses in her play: she wears a black feather crow mask that she cannot shake off. Tired of having to hide where she lived, she promised herself she would get out of the "slum". She became the first in her family to graduate from high school and was then admitted to Bucharest's prestigious Academy of Theatre and Cinema.

She followed up with studies in New York and London financed by grants. Serban won acclaim on the international stage, including for her roles in the 2019 movie "Gypsy Queen" about a struggling single mother who fights in the ring, and the 2018 Belgian film "Alone at My Wedding".

### Overcoming self-hate

But "that was not enough", she says. She continued to be shaken by self-doubt. "The problem with racism is that the hate that others project on you becomes self-

hate. And you end up suffering from impostor syndrome," Serban says. Among her many projects is a feature film on Roma slavery—a dark page in Romania's history which Serban has already explored in a play "Marea rusine" (The Great Shame).

For centuries, the traditionally nomadic minority was reduced to slavery—until that was abolished in 1856 — and then subjected to forced assimilation under communism. Even today, racism continues, and Roma access to employment and housing is difficult. According to opinion polls published in 2018 and 2020, seven in 10 Romanians say they "do not trust the Roma".

### 'Change the world'

Despite everything, the artist sees reasons for hope as Roma culture becomes "cool" among the younger generation. More open to diversity, they are interested in Roma music and fashion, while school textbooks have started mentioning the enslavement of Roma, according to sociologist Adrian Furtuna. "There is beginning to be an awareness" of what the Roma have endured, he told AFP. Holding back tears, Serban says that by openly talking about her Roma identity she "endangered" her mother, who could have lost her job as a cleaner or been evicted. "If I continue, it's because at the end of the films or plays in which I act, I see a gleam in the eyes of the spectators," Serban says. "I am convinced that I can change the world with the stories I tell". — AFP

Any sense that last year's prices could not be sustained in 2022 has already been dispelled—to take one example, popstar Justin Bieber paid more than \$1.3

million last week for an NFT from the collection known as "Bored Apes Yacht Club". The collection, which features 10,000 cartoon images of apes with algo-



This file photo shows an illustration picture taken in London of gold plated souvenir cryptocurrency coins arranged by a screen displaying a NFT (Non-Fungible Token) marketplace. — AFP

## Pricey pixels: Why people spend fortunes on NFT art

Thousands of artists beaver away every day creating images to sell as digital tokens (NFTs) in online exchanges. The market is booming, the most popular pieces can sell for millions, but outsiders may wonder why anyone would pay anything at all. No physical pieces of art exchange hands in these transactions. Buyers use cryptocurrencies and receive their NFTs—a unique piece of computer code related to the artwork that is stored on a blockchain, a kind of digital ledger that cannot be changed. Driven by high-profile auctions, the market for NFTs exploded in 2021 with sales worth more than \$40 billion, according to analytics firm Chainalysis.

## The NFT artist who sold a trashcan image for \$252,000

Marcel Duchamp scandalized the art world in 1917 by submitting a urinal as his entry to a prestigious competition. A century later, an American artist known as Robness sparked his own controversy by selling an NFT of a rubbish bin for \$252,000. "I can't even remember where the image came from, I think it was a Google image search," the 38-year-old Los Angeles native tells AFP. NFTs are unique pieces of computer code stored on a longer chain of code known as a blockchain, with a link to an artwork or other item.

The image, called "64 gallon toter", depicts a large plastic trashcan with glitching effects, giving it a psychedelic appearance. There is a lot of money to be made in the NFT art world—auctions and purchases from celebrities contributed to sales worth more than \$40 billion last year, according to analytics firm Chainalysis. Like Duchamp's urinal, Robness's piece gained value as it gained notoriety—NFT marketplace SuperRare removed the image shortly after he created it.

"It was kind of like rage art, I was angry about some things," he says. "So I put that up, and it was removed. They thought I was taking Home Depot's picture and breaking copyright. "They threatened me legally," he says with a laugh. But then, out of the blue, the platform reinstated his work. SuperRare told AFP in an email that "the community didn't consider it as art", but reinstated it after two years because "so much has evolved" in the discussions

around what can legitimately be called art.

### 'Disruptive element'

The bin had become a meme and inspired thousands of tributes and copycats, and collectors were showing an interest. "It was one of three trashcans that were in SuperRare and I sold it to a collector," Robness says. "He called me up because he wanted to know more about the story and we spoke for about 30-45 minutes, and the whole hilarious story and he was laughing most of the time. "So he wanted to collect it, so I gave him a price and that was that." Robness—who only goes by that name—says he was doing odd jobs and sleeping in his car by the beach when he started exploring the world of cryptocurrencies in 2014.

He gradually became hooked on the technology—"just the disruptive element of it to be honest"—and began making NFTs. The bin controversy and his prolific output—he recently posted NFTs of a job application he made to McDonald's—have garnered plenty of fans, his Twitter following breaking the 30,000 barrier. And he sells enough to make a living.

"Per month, it's a lot better than my job I had as a barista," he jokes. He now champions "open-source artistry" where he says anyone should be able to grab any image and do what they like with it. "You can literally steal anything I made, copy and paste it, I don't care," he says. — AFP



rithm-generated variations to the background and other details, enjoyed a record January, shifting dozens of NFTs each day for an average price of roughly \$250,000. Critics say pure profit motivates the big transactions, with major financial players using technospeak and celebrity endorsements to disguise their aims.

But fans have an almost cultish devotion and see the technological complexity as an inherent part of the value. Malaysian artist mumu\_theStan says it is a varied landscape. "You can't treat the whole NFT community as one," she tells AFP in a telephone interview. "The mainstream audience thinks NFTs are about selling a jpeg for millions or making a monkey picture. That's not all it is."

### Punks to apes

Mumu, a 33-year-old illustrator who declined to give her real name, labors over her creations, from constellations of flashing pixels to lush fantasy-style images of women and dragons, selling them for a few hundred dollars a piece. She has worked to create a niche, refusing to sell

on the main exchanges because of their use of the energy-hungry ethereum blockchain. Artist David Leonard collects works by artists like Mumu because he believes she does great work and deserves the support of a community.

"As an artist, I want to be the kind of collector that I wish I had... I wouldn't want my collector base to be thinking about their bottom line," he told AFP. Yet one of the main narratives around NFTs is one of the speculators making crushing profits by flipping their assets. Booms and bubbles are fuelled by social-media hype and celebrity endorsements. Last year, the must-have collection was CryptoPunks—blocky images of 1970s style punks. Some sold for millions, with owners including Jay-Z, Snoop Dogg and YouTuber Logan Paul. Now it is Bored Apes—Bieber posted his ape image to his 200 million Instagram followers, giving powerful promotion to a collection already hyped by the likes of tennis star Serena Williams. Most NFT creators can only dream of that kind of publicity.—AFP



## Sports

# Wizards surprise Embiid's Sixers, Nets slide continues

**LOS ANGELES:** Spencer Dinwiddie delivered a triple-double of 14 points, 12 rebounds and 10 assists to power the short-handed Washington Wizards to a 106-103 NBA victory over the 76ers in Philadelphia on Wednesday. Dinwiddie drove for a layup with 1:33 remaining to break a 98-98 tie, putting the Wizards ahead for good in a game that featured 17 lead changes - though just two in the fourth quarter.

Sixers center Joel Embiid warmed up after a slow start, scoring 27 points and pulling down 14 rebounds. The Wizards, playing without star Bradley Beal, who is nursing a wrist injury, got 24 points from Kyle Kuzma to snap a six-game losing streak.

Embiid, Philadelphia's Most Valuable Player candidate, who averaged 34 points and 10.8 rebounds in January to earn Eastern Conference player of the month honors, came out flat after sitting out Monday's overtime victory over the Memphis Grizzlies. He made just one of six shots in the first quarter before finding his rhythm to lead a 76ers second-quarter rally.

"I thought overall we did a terrific job on (Embiid)," Wizards coach Wes Unseld Jr. said. "He's a tough guard. You have to send multiple bodies for him to get off the ball. I know you look at the numbers and he scored 27, but over the last five, he's averaging close to 40."

Elsewhere, Lu Dort scored 14 of his 30 points in overtime to power the Oklahoma City Thunder to a 120-114 overtime victory over the Mavericks in Dallas. Rookie Tre Mann scored a career-high 29 for the Thunder, who put together their first back-to-back wins since winning three in a row in December.

The Thunder overcame a 40-point performance from Mavs star Luka Doncic. Reggie Bullock came off the bench to score 23 and Jalen Brunson chipped in 18 for the Mavs, who trailed by 12 early in the fourth quarter. Bullock drained a three-pointer to put Dallas up by two with 8.5 seconds remaining in regulation, but Kenrich Williams drove for a layup to tie the game and Doncic missed a three-point attempt at the buzzer to end regulation.

## Nets skid continues

The reeling Brooklyn Nets suffered their sixth straight defeat, falling 112-101 to the Kings in Sacramento. Second-year guard Tyrese Haliburton scored seven of his 12 points in the fourth quarter and handed out 11 assists for the Kings. Harrison Barnes scored 19 points, leading seven Kings players in double figures as Sacramento halted a seven-game losing streak.

Nic Claxton led the Nets with a career-high 23 points and pulled down 11 rebounds. James Johnson scored 18 points, but James Harden, still battling pain in his right hand and a hamstring strain, scored just four points. The Nets, who are still without injured star Kevin Durant, led by eight at halftime and by three going into the fourth quarter. But they are now on their longest losing streak since a seven-game skid over December 2019 and January 2020.

"You add it all up, it looked like a tired team in the second half, and the game swung completely the other way," Nets coach Steve Nash said, adding that he thought Harden was noticeably tired. "He didn't have his legs," Nash said. "It was one of those nights."

It was close in Indianapolis, meanwhile, where



**PHILADELPHIA:** Rui Hachimura #8 of the Washington Wizards elevates for a dunk past Andre Drummond #1 and Matisse Thybulle #22 of the Philadelphia 76ers during the third quarter at Wells Fargo Center on Wednesday. — AFP

Gary Harris scored 22 points and Wendell Carter Jr. had 19 with 18 rebounds to help the Orlando Magic rally for a 119-118 victory over the Indiana Pacers. The Pacers, led by Caris LeVert's 26 points, were up by as much as 17 points in the third quarter.

Harris scored 10 points in the fourth to fuel Orlando's comeback. Memphis schooled the New York Knicks at Madison Square Garden, where

Grizzlies star Ja Morant scored 23 points and handed out nine assists in a 120-108 victory. Julius Randle finished with 18 points, 12 rebounds and nine assists for New York, but was ejected for a second technical foul in the final minute. He received the first for fouling into a Grizzlies huddle during a stop in play, sparking a shoving match with Memphis guard Desmond Bane. — AFP

## NFL 'Rooney rule' ineffective, says Flores after lawsuit

**NEW YORK:** Former Miami Dolphins coach Brian Flores said Wednesday that NFL rules requiring teams to interview minority candidates were ineffective as he prepares for an explosive legal battle against the league. Flores rocked the NFL on Tuesday after filing a lawsuit in New York accusing the NFL and team owners of racist hiring practices that were "like a plantation". The lawsuit comes less than a month after the highly regarded 40-year-old was fired by Miami despite leading the team to consecutive winning seasons.

Flores had since been linked to several head coaching vacancies, but opted for legal action after being passed over by the New York Giants. In his lawsuit, Flores said he had received a message from New England Patriots coach Bill Belichick offering congratulations on his appointment by the Giants. That message turned out to be intended for Brian Daboll, who was eventually appointed as New York coach.

Flores, however, said the fact that his message from Belichick arrived three days before he was due to be interviewed by the Giants showed that NFL's vaunted "Rooney Rule" - which mandates that teams must interview at least one minority candidate for head coaching and senior football operations positions - was flawed. "The Rooney Rule is intended to give minorities an opportunity to sit down in front of ownership," Flores told CBS television on Wednesday.

"But I think what it has turned into is an instance where guys are just checking a box. And that has been the case - I've been on some interviews in the past where I've had that feeling, there's always no way to know for sure - and I know I'm not alone in that." Flores said he attended the interview with New York despite receiving the texts indicating the job had already been awarded to Daboll. "It was a range of emotions," Flores said of the situation. "Humiliation, disbelief, anger. I've worked so hard to get to where I am in football to become a head coach. Put 18 years in this league, and to go on what was a sham interview, I was hurt."

### 'Tanking' claim

One of Flores' attorneys, John Eleftherakis, said the lawsuit would seek to include criteria such as job performance and experience during the hiring process. "The Rooney rule is tied to the assumption that presidents, owners are going to do the right thing and hire the best, most qualified candidate," Eleftherakis told CBS. Flores' lawsuit also included explosive allegations against Dolphins owner Stephen Ross.

Flores said Ross attempted to persuade him to "tank" games during the 2019 season in order to boost Miami's NFL Draft status. Flores said Ross offered him \$100,000 for each defeat. Flores told ESPN on Wednesday that he believes that his refusal to bow to the pressure was behind his eventual dismissal.

"Take a flight, go on vacation, I'll give you \$100,000 per loss - those were his exact words," Flores told ESPN. "I deal in truth, I tell the players this, as well, I'm going to give you good news, bad news - but it's going to be honest. To disrespect the game like that, trust was lost, and there were certainly some strained relationships, and ultimately, I think that was my demise in Miami." Flores' lawsuit is the latest chapter in a long-running controversy about NFL teams' failure to hire minority coaches in a league whose playing population is roughly 70 percent African-American. — AFP



Duaij Khalaf Al-Otaibi

## Nadal says 21 Grand Slam titles 'not enough'

**MADRID:** Rafael Nadal said on Wednesday he is still not satisfied with his 21 Grand Slam titles following his historic triumph at the Australian Open. Nadal clinched his latest major win in Melbourne after pulling off an incredible comeback from two sets down to defeat Russia's Daniil Medvedev in the final. The 35-year-old's momentous victory took him to the top of the all-time men's list and one clear of the 20 Grand Slam titles won by Roger Federer, who is injured, and Novak Djokovic, who was controversially deported from Australia before the tournament began.

The Spaniard could now make it 22 at the French Open in June, where he has been crowned champion a record 13 times already. "I have no idea what number of Grand Slams I will have," Nadal said at a press conference at his academy in Mallorca. "Not long

## USA Swimming changes rules

**NEW YORK:** A transgender American swimmer's controversial career hung in the balance Wednesday after USA Swimming announced new rules, including testosterone limits, that could impact her ability to race competitively. Lia Thomas has dominated US collegiate women's swimming as a student athlete at the University of Pennsylvania where, just a few years ago, she competed on the men's team.

Now, amid an uproar fueled by those who say Thomas has an unfair advantage, USA Swimming unveiled guidelines that do not mention the 22-year-old by name but will impact her future in the sport - although exactly how remains unclear. The policy said that because swimming is "an important vehicle for positive physical and mental health," it remains committed to "greater inclusivity" at the non-elite levels of the sport.

But critics said the new policy from the governing body for competitive swimming in the United States might achieve just the opposite. USA Swimming said it had created a new set of guidelines for transgender athlete participation in elite competition that "relies on science and medical evidence-based methods to provide a level-playing field for elite cisgender women, and to mitigate the advantages associated with male puberty and physiology."

It said that a three-member panel comprised of medical experts and a veteran athlete was being established to implement the new policy and to rule on specific cases. A key criterion that the panel will look for is that "from a medical perspective, the prior physical development of the athlete as a male, as mitigated by any medical intervention, does not give the athlete a competitive advantage over the athlete's cisgender female competitors."

In addition, a swimmer is ineligible "unless the

## KSSC to hold closing ceremony of shooting tourney on Saturday

By Abdellatif Shara'a

**KUWAIT:** Kuwait Shooting Sport Club will organize the closing ceremony of the Late Sheikh Sabah Al-Salem Al-Humoud Al-Sabah Annual Shooting Tournament on Saturday at 6:00 pm in the presence of tournament sponsor and honorary president of KSSC Sheikh Salman Sabah Al-Salem Al-

ago I would have signed for just being able to play tennis again. "I want to be the one with the most majors out of the three of us, I would love that, but I'm not obsessed, absolutely not. Whatever comes is welcome and I don't think 21 is enough to be honest. But you never know what will happen in the future."

Nadal's comeback against Medvedev had a wider context too, given he had doubts about even returning to professional tennis when struggling with a foot injury last year. The injury restricted Nadal to playing only one tournament in the last seven months of 2021. Nadal said he will decide if he is ready to play at Acapulco in Mexico later this month but he is keen to compete at Indian Wells in March.

"It still hurts when I play," Nadal said. "But I'm playing at a higher level now than I was more than four weeks ago and this has given me a huge boost of confidence to move forward. On a personal level it's been an unforgettable experience," Nadal added. "I have been able to enjoy the highest level of sport again, something that was very difficult to imagine a few weeks ago. As well as achieving something special, for me it has been special to be able to compete again to the maximum with the best players. This is vital for me and for the future." — AFP

athlete demonstrates that the concentration of testosterone in the athlete's serum has been less than 5 nmol/L (as measured by liquid chromatography coupled with mass spectrometry) continuously for a period of at least 36 months before the date of application." Doctors measure testosterone in nanomoles per liter (nmol/L). According to New York's Mount Sinai hospital, the healthy range of testosterone in a woman is 0.5 to 2.4 nmol/L.

Thomas followed National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) rules, undergoing a year-long testosterone suppression treatment. But some organizations, such as the Women's Sports Policy Working Group, have deemed these rules insufficient, especially in cases where an athlete has begun her transition after puberty. Athlete Ally, an activist organization that combats homophobia and transphobia in sport, swiftly responded that the new USA Swimming policy appears to be targeting Thomas.

"These sweeping new restrictions appear to be a direct retaliation against Lia Thomas, a talented, hard-working athlete who has followed all guidelines, is supported by her team, and trains diligently," said Anne Lieberman, the group's director of policy and programs.

### 'Full support'

The NCAA, which governs US college sports, said in January it would enforce rules set forth by USA Swimming, which has the authority to bar swimmers from competitions. A swim meet for the Ivy League - a grouping of top private northeastern US universities - is scheduled for February, and the NCAA National Championships are in March. "Penn Athletics has been informed of the new USA Swimming transgender participation policy," the university's sports department said in a statement. "We continue to work with the NCAA regarding Lia Thomas' participation in the 2022 NCAA Swimming and Diving Championship."

Thomas said she began her transition in May

Humoud Al-Sabah, Kazakh Ambassador to Kuwait Azamat Berdibay and President of Kuwait and Arab Shooting Federations Duaij Khalaf Al-Otaibi.

Otaibi spoke about the importance of the Late Sheikh Sabah Al-Salem Al-Humoud Al-Sabah tournament which KSSC is keen on organizing annually, and expressed his appreciation of all those who contribute to further the development of the sport of shooting.

Otaibi thanked Sheikh Salman Al-Sabah, who is also president of the Asian Shooting Confederation, for his continued interest in taking Kuwait shooting to new horizons. Otaibi also thanked the Director General of Public Authority for Sport Humoud Fulaiteh and its officials for their support.



**MANACOR, Spain:** Spain's Rafael Nadal poses with the Norman Brookes Challenge Cup trophy following his victory in the Australian Open during a press conference at Rafa Nadal Academy on Wednesday. — AFP



Lia Thomas

2019 with hormone replacement therapy - a combination of estrogen and testosterone suppressants. In early December at a meet in Ohio, she notched the best times of the year at the university level in the 200m and 500m freestyle. Her performances have renewed a long-running debate about the fairness of a transgender woman competing against those who were born biologically female.

Members of the Penn swimming team and diving team issued a statement supporting their transgender teammate. "We want to express our full support for Lia in her transition," they said in the statement released late Tuesday, apparently after one teammate spoke out about Thomas. "We value her as a person, teammate, and friend. The sentiments put forward by an anonymous member of our team are not representative of the feelings, values, and opinions of the entire Penn team, composed of 39 women with diverse backgrounds." — AFP



Sports

# Mane and Senegal break Burkina Faso hearts to reach AFCON final

**YAOUNDE:** Senegal are through to a second consecutive Africa Cup of Nations final after breaking Burkina Faso hearts in their last-four tie in Yaounde on Wednesday. Abdou Diallo, Idrissa Gana Gueye and Sadio Mane scoring second-half goals to secure a 3-1 victory. Africa's top-ranked national team, Senegal were to find out their opponents in Sunday's final yesterday, when hosts Cameroon were to take on Egypt in the second semi.

"We dedicate this win to our people," said Senegal coach Aliou Cisse. "We are really satisfied this evening. Our objective is to win the trophy because that is what the boys deserve given everything they have put into this." Cisse's side had two penalties awarded in the first half only for the Ethiopian referee to change his mind both times following a VAR review.

However, they went ahead just after the midway point in the second period when Paris Saint-Germain defender Diallo popped up in the box to produce a striker's finish. The second arrived on 76 minutes as Mane provided a superb assist for Gueye, also of PSG, to score, and Mane completed the win late on after Bati Toure had pulled a goal back.

Senegal's two possible final opponents are the most successful sides in AFCON history with 12 titles between them, while the Lions of Teranga are still searching for their first continental crown, two and a half years after losing to Algeria in the final in Cairo. "We knew it was not going to be at all easy to get to two straight AFCON finals, but the most important for us now is to go all the way and win it, whoever we come up against," said Mane.

Senegal's opponents here could not be underestimated. Burkina Faso have shown themselves to be a talented young side and one driven on by the desire to

give joy to supporters in a country reeling after President Roch Marc Christian Kabore was overthrown in a military coup last week. That happened to a backdrop of a jihadist insurgency in the landlocked country, and their coach, Kamou Malo, talked of the events giving his team "added motivation".

### Keeper Koffi carried off

They showed plenty of fight and matched their opponents for long spells, but they did not trouble Chelsea's Edouard Mendy in the Senegal goal often enough. Mendy's opposite number, Herve Koffi, was stretchered off half an hour in after landing horribly as he went up to punch the ball clear in an aerial challenge with Cheikhou Kouyate. Referee Bamlak Tessema initially gave a spot-kick before changing his mind after a VAR review, as Kouyate was able to resume but Koffi could not.

"There is nothing to suggest he is seriously hurt, but he is undergoing further tests just so we can be reassured," said Malo, who said his side had enjoyed "a wonderful adventure". Referee Tessema also pointed to the spot in first-half injury time when a Gueye shot struck the arm of Burkina Faso's Edmond Tapsoba in the area, but again he changed his mind after a review of the images showed the defender's arm was in close to his body.

The breakthrough arrived with 20 minutes left, Kalidou Koulibaly trying an acrobatic attempt at a corner and inadvertently setting up Diallo to score, beating substitute 'keeper Soufiane Farid Ouedraogo. Senegal's pressing made the second goal as Mane got to the byline and set up Gueye, who just beat Bamba Dieng to the finish. It was always going to be a huge ask after that for the Stallions against a



**YAOUNDE:** Senegal's forward Sadio Mane (right) scores his team's third goal during the Africa Cup of Nations 2021 semifinal between Burkina Faso and Senegal at Stade Ahmadou-Ahidjo on Wednesday. —AFP

Senegal side who had conceded only once in the whole tournament.

They did reduce the deficit eight minutes from time as Issa Kabore's cross was diverted in by Toure's

knee. Mane had the final say, though, bursting clear in the 87th minute to make it 3-1. He was to find out on if he will come up against his Liverpool teammate Mohamed Salah and Egypt in the final. —AFP

## Canada on brink, US ice Honduras in big chill

**LOS ANGELES:** Canada moved to the brink of their first World Cup finals appearance in 36 years on Wednesday with a 2-0 win over El Salvador as the United States reignited their qualification campaign with victory against Honduras. Second-half goals from Atiba Hutchinson and Jonathan David gave Canada a deserved victory in San Salvador and left them leading the CONCACAF qualifying standings with 25 points from 11 games.

Although their qualification for Qatar is not mathematically certain, it would require a freak sequence of results for Canada to fail to qualify for their first World Cup since the 1986 finals in Mexico. The Canadians lead the standings by four points with three games remaining, all to be played next month. A win over Costa Rica in their next game on March 24 would seal Canada's place in Qatar.

Elsewhere on Wednesday, the USA cruised to a 3-0 win over Honduras in a game played in sub-zero temperatures in St. Paul Minnesota. Two Honduras players were substituted at half-time due to the extreme

weather conditions at the Allianz Field. Players from both teams took to the field with multiple layers of clothing, with some opting for balaclavas in addition to gloves and thermal jerseys.

Jamaican referee Oshane Nation also wore a balaclava and gloves throughout. USA coach Gregg Berhalter defended the decision to play in St. Paul, where temperatures for the evening kick off plunged to around 3 degrees Fahrenheit (-16 Celsius). "We provided Honduras and their staff and the referees with warm weather gear, we provided them with headgear, and trying to make it a safe environment for them to play," Berhalter said.

"When we go down to those countries and it's 90 degrees and it's unbearable humidity and guys are getting dehydrated and cramping up and getting heat exhaustion. That's the nature of our competition. "When we scheduled this game and this location, you know, you have to go by average temperatures." Berhalter's side, beaten 2-0 by Canada on Sunday, bounced back to win with goals from Weston McKennie, Walker Zimmerman and Christian Pulisic.

The victory leaves the USA with 21 points from 11 games, four adrift of Canada. With three games remaining, the US look well-positioned to grab one of the three automatic World Cup qualifying berths available for teams from Central America, North America and the Caribbean. Mexico are in third, level with the USA on 21 points, after battling to a scrappy 1-0 win



**SAN SALVADOR:** El Salvador's defender Roberto Dominguez (left) vies for the ball with Canada's forward Jonathan Osorio (center) during the FIFA World Cup CONCACAF qualifier at Cuscatlan Stadium on Wednesday. —AFP

over Panama in Mexico City on Wednesday.

Mexico's winner in an unconvincing performance at the Azteca Stadium came via Wolves striker Raul Jimenez from the penalty spot. The team finishing in fourth place faces a play-off against the winner of the Oceania qualifying tournament. Elsewhere Wednesday, Costa Rica kept their qualifying hopes alive with a 1-0 away win over Jamaica in Kingston. The victory leaves Costa Rica in fifth with 16 points, just behind Panama (17 points) following their defeat to Mexico. —AFP

## Celtic blow Rangers away to go top

**GLASGOW:** Ange Postecoglou hailed a 3-0 win over Rangers to go top of the Scottish Premiership for the first time since August as a sign of the progress the Hoops have made in his first season in charge. Postecoglou lost three of his first six league matches, but Celtic are unbeaten in 18 since Reo Hatate was the star of the show on his Old Firm debut as the Japanese midfielder scored twice and made the other goal for Liel Abada.

Victory takes Celtic one point clear of their Glasgow rivals at the top of the table. Postecoglou's men have overturned a six-point deficit at the winter break in the last four games and will now be confident of taking back the title with a number of key players to return from injury and international duty. "Going top is a sign of the progression. We lost three of our first six games and everyone knows how the Scottish

Premiership works, we have had to be nearly perfect since," said Postecoglou. "It was a big game, we knew the consequences. There was big pressure on us and they handled it."

Rangers had been unbeaten in the previous seven meetings between the teams but were blown away in Giovanni van Bronckhorst's first Old Firm game in charge. "It seemed like it was the first Old Firm we've played," said Van Bronckhorst, who has plenty of experience of the Glasgow derby from his time as a Rangers player. "We know what it will bring. The environment, the ambience, the pressure, but it seemed like we weren't ready for it."

"When the whistle blew we were just waiting for the goal to be scored. We were too naive and deserved to be 3-0 down." Rangers stopped Celtic's bid for a record 10th consecutive title last year by romping clear to win the league by 25 points.

But Celtic have been transformed by Postecoglou's arrival from coaching in the J-League and a number of Japanese players who followed him to Glasgow. Hatate already looks a bargain having cost just over £1 million



**GLASGOW:** Celtic's Japanese midfielder Reo Hatate (left) runs with the ball during the Scottish Premiership match between Celtic and Rangers at Celtic Park stadium on Wednesday. —AFP

(\$1.3 million), and got Celtic off to the perfect start by firing through a crowd of players into the far corner after just five minutes. —AFP

## Rayo, Valencia scrape into Copa del Rey semis

**MADRID:** Rayo Vallecano reached the semifinals of the Copa del Rey for the first time in 40 years on Wednesday after they beat Mallorca 1-0 at a jubilant Vallecas. Oscar Trejo's penalty just before half-time was enough to seal victory for Rayo, who will now attempt to make their first ever final in the competition. They will be joined in the last four by Valencia, who defeated Cadiz 2-1, Hugo Duro heading in a late winner at Mestalla.

On Thursday, La Liga leaders Real Madrid play Athletic Bilbao at San Mames and Real Sociedad host Real Betis in the other two quarter-finals. Rayo's winner came in the 44th minute after Alvaro Garcia fooled Franco Russo with a sharp turn in the box and toppled over the sliding Mallorca defender. Trejo guided the penalty confidently into the corner.

Rayo returned to La Liga this season and have enjoyed a superb campaign so far. They beat Barcelona in October and now sit eighth in the table, with survival all but already secured. They are only the fifth promoted team in the top flight to make the Copa del Rey semifinals this century.



**VALENCIA:** Valencia's Guinean midfielder Ilaix Moriba (left) vies with Cadiz's Danish midfielder Jens Jonsson during the Spanish Copa del Rey quarterfinal at Mestalla stadium on Wednesday. —AFP

Valencia have won the cup eight times, most recently in 2019 when they overcame Barca in the final, and they scraped past Cadiz thanks to Duro's header 11 minutes from time. Cadiz had levelled when new signing Lucas Perez scored a penalty to cancel out Goncalo Guedes' opener but Duro ensured Valencia avoided an upset. Cadiz's Juan Cala was sent off late on. —AFP

## France favourites for exciting Six Nations

**LONDON:** France may be "red-hot favourites" to win the Six Nations according to England coach Eddie Jones, but several sides will fancy their title chances when spectators return for a 2022 edition that starts this weekend.

Several European teams enjoyed a successful November campaign, none more so than the French who thrashed New Zealand 40-25 to round off an unbeaten month.

Les Bleus have blended the traditional virtues of forward strength and inventive back play with a defence bolstered by the coaching of former Wales guru Shaun Edwards.

France last won the Six Nations in 2010 but next year's World Cup hosts have enjoyed two second-placed finishes in the Six Nations since former scrum-half Fabien Galthie took over as coach.

A first win over the All Blacks in 15 attempts in November was masterminded by the outstanding half-back duo of world player of the year Antoine Dupont, fit following knee and Covid-19 problems, and Romain Ntamack. "Some people want to put that (favourites) label on us," France team manager Raphael Ibanez told AFP. "When I saw that, I thought, 'Another hit from the Brits!'"

### 'Northern hemisphere in great shape'

But with England and Ireland also enjoying November wins over South Africa and the All Blacks respectively Ibanez added: "The November interna-

tional revealed that teams from the northern hemisphere are in great shape.

"Scotland put 30 points on Australia, England beat the world champions, Ireland beat New Zealand a week before we did... All these teams are lined up and in a position to win." England, having finished a lowly fifth in last season's Six Nations, are set to have their squad depth tested after suffering a series of injuries.

Captain Owen Farrell has been ruled out of the whole tournament, with wings Jonny May and Anthony Watson sidelined as well.

Meanwhile Courtney Lawes, widely tipped to replace Farrell as skipper, is one of several pack members who will miss Saturday's opener away to Scotland as he recovers from a concussion. Farrell's absence will intensify the spotlight on fly-half Marcus Smith, one of England's rising stars.

Jones, typically, tried to deflect the pressure by saying: "As you know, France are red-hot favourites. They are expected to win."

Ireland, with veteran fly-half Jonathan Sexton still at the helm, also have grounds for optimism. "We want to deliver a trophy every single time we enter a competition and this year is certainly no different," said Ireland coach Andy Farrell. "Amid all the speculation it is easy to forget that Wales, away to Ireland this weekend, are the reigning champions."

But they have been hard hit by injuries, with captain Alun Wyn Jones one of several high-profile absentees, together with fellow British and Irish Lions players George North, Leigh Halfpenny, Taulupe Faletau, Justin Tipuric, Josh Navidi and Ken Owens all sidelined.

Fly-half Dan Biggar has taken over the captaincy, with Wales coach Wayne Pivac saying: "We've lost 680 caps (to injury) and that's a lot of experience gone. Dan brings a wealth of experience." —AFP



## Beijing Olympics to 'change winter sports'



ZHANGJIAKOU, China: An athlete takes part in a snowboard slopestyle practice session at Genting Snow Park yesterday ahead of the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympic Games. — AFP

**BEIJING:** The Beijing Olympics will "change the scale of winter sports forever", IOC president Thomas Bach said yesterday, on the eve of a Games beset by concerns about human rights and COVID. China's ruling Communist Party hopes the Olympics will be a soft-power triumph but they have been overshadowed by diplomatic boycotts, fears for tennis player Peng Shuai, warnings about surveillance and the environmental impact.

The Games, which launch with an opening ceremony on Friday at Beijing's "Bird's Nest" stadium and last until Feb 20, are taking place in one of the driest regions of China and rely almost entirely on man-made snow. American snowboarder Jamie Anderson, a reigning two-time Olympic champion, said she had been scared trying out the slopestyle course and its artificially made surface, calling it "bulletproof ice".

China has little tradition of winter sports but has consistently said that staging the Olympics are part of a drive to get 300 million people in the world's most populous nation to "engage" in ski and ice pursuits. Bach said that goal had already been exceeded. "Today we can say: China is a winter sport country," he told an International Olympic Committee meeting. "Everything is in place for a safe and successful

Winter Olympics," Bach added.

### COVID in bubble

China and the IOC hope that the rancor that has clouded the build-up will be relegated to the sidelines once the action gets under way. The sport started on Wednesday with curling and there was a smattering of masked fans at the so-called "Ice Cube", the striking venue known as the "Water Cube" when Beijing hosted the 2008 Summer Games, which was seen then as China's coming-out party on the world stage.

Women's hockey and freestyle skiing is also underway. These Games are taking place in a vast "closed loop" bubble to thwart the coronavirus, with the nearly 3,000 athletes and tens of thousands of support staff, volunteers and media cut off from Beijing's general population. China, where the virus emerged in late 2019, has pursued a no-nonsense zero-COVID policy nationwide and adopted the same approach to the Games, with everyone cocooned inside the bubble having daily tests and required to wear a mask at all times.

There were 55 positive COVID results among Games-related personnel on Wednesday, the highest

daily total so far, bringing the number since January 23 to 287. Eleven people have been hospitalized with the virus but Brian McCloskey, chairman of the medical expert panel for Beijing 2022, said none were seriously ill.

COVID is not the only challenge. The United States, Britain, Canada and Australia are among countries staging a diplomatic boycott over rights, with the fate of China's Muslim Uyghur minority of particular concern. Washington accuses China of perpetrating genocide in the region of Xinjiang. China warned that the US would "pay the price" for its diplomatic boycott. Athletes of the boycotting nations will still compete.

Russian President Vladimir Putin, who will attend the opening ceremony as a guest of Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping, hit out at the doping sanctions against his country. In an interview with Chinese media, Putin said: "We oppose the politicization of sports and attempts to use this as an instrument of pressure, unfair competition or discrimination." Russia, he said, "remains committed to traditional Olympic values".

Moscow was found to have orchestrated a state-backed doping program at the 2014 Winter

Olympics in Sochi and banned from international competition. Russian competitors will take part in Beijing, but only under the banner of the "Russian Olympic Committee".

### Hanyu v Chen

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 artificially-made snow to cover what would otherwise be brown mountainsides. Eileen Gu has captivated China and looks set to be 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.

There will also be intense interest in Chloe Kim, the American snowboarder who melted hearts when she won gold aged 17 at the Pyeongchang Olympics in 2018. Japan's Yuzuru Hanyu is looking to make it a hat-trick of figure-skating Olympic titles but faces a stern challenge from his American rival Nathan Chen. Norway are tipped to top the medals table for a second consecutive Winter Olympics. — AFP

## Racers revel in debut on untested Olympic downhill

**YANQING, China:** Intimidating, stressful, nerve-racking, but great fun: Just some of the reactions of the ski racers after yesterday's first men's downhill training run on the untested man-made Olympic speed slope. Competitors should have had come into the Beijing Games on the back of two World Cup races on the slope, but both events were cancelled due to COVID-19 restrictions in China.

Instead they had to make do with video sessions to glean every nugget of invaluable information from watching Chinese racers on the course last year, a quick course pre-inspection and throwing some caution to the wind in the first of three training runs ahead of Sunday's downhill medal race. "It's different to what we're used to on the World Cup," said in-form Norwegian Aleksander Aamodt Kilde. "It's narrower, snaky. With the jumps, terrain and snow, there's a really nice flow."

Austria's Vincent Kriechmayr, who won both downhill and super-G gold at the 2021 world championships in Cortina, said the course was "amazing". "The snow conditions are some of the best I've ever seen," he said of the artificial snow used to create the piste in Yanqing. "First impressions are very good. It's not bumpy but it's not easy, nearly every section is difficult.



YANQING, China: Norway's Aleksander Aamodt Kilde takes part in the men's downhill first training session during the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympic Games at the Yanqing National Alpine Skiing Centre yesterday. — AFP

It's the first time for everybody here, so nobody knows about the track and the course setting."

### 'Fun to ski'

Switzerland's World Cup overall leader Marco Odermatt agreed, saying it was a "really great slope, but one that doesn't really compare to the classics" on the World Cup circuit such as Kitzbuehel or Wengen. "For everybody it is new, us athletes as well as the coaches. It's a big challenge for the whole team to find a perfect set-up. "There are many blind gates, so now it's a question of finding the good line."

Kriechmayr's Austrian teammate Matthias

Mayer, who won super-G gold in Pyeongchang after downhill gold in Sochi, admitted he had felt "a little nervous" in the startgate. "I missed two gates at the top so there's a lot to learn for tomorrow! "There are many guys who can be good here, the guys who've been really fast on the last World Cup runs." The snow, he said, was like that found in North America, "very hard".

American Bryce Bennett agreed, saying it was "pretty similar to the set-up we've got back home". "It was a little intimidating, we had no idea about the course," he said. "Today was more getting a feeling, getting more comfortable getting speed in places." — AFP

## Weather at Beijing should be better than Pyeongchang

**BEIJING:** Those competing in this month's Beijing Winter Olympics will face frosty temperatures but should be spared the Siberian winds and chill factor that sparked postponements and athlete anger during the last Games in South Korea.

Pyeongchang 2018 was bedeviled by sweeping high winds of up to 80 km an hour which forced delays to alpine skiing and snowboarding events. Multiple snowboarders were injured after accidents caused by sudden gusts in both practice and competition, triggering anger that the events were allowed to go ahead in such conditions.

While Northern China's winters are harsh and unforgiving, as a region it has something Pyeongchang did not - fairly predictable and fixed weather patterns. "Thus far, the weather forecast looks cold, but stable," Jenny Wiedeke, a spokesperson for the International Ski Federation, told AFP.

The blustery conditions that made Pyeongchang so risky for snowboarders should be less of an issue - wind speeds so far this month have been recorded at a maximum of around 35 km an hour. "The wind is expected to be weak or potentially moderate," said Yann Amice, a meteorologist and former consultant for the French Winter Olympic teams.

Wiedeke said Olympic organizers will also have plans in place to mitigate against a sudden flurry of high winds. "If it is a windy day for an Alpine downhill, the start might be lowered to a less windy altitude. In ski jumping, some hills have wind nets installed if they are in a wind location to act as a barrier," she said.

Daytime temperatures in the mountains outside Beijing where the main skiing and snowboarding events will take place regularly dip below -16 Celsius. The cold could become a problem if the mercury plunges below -20C - the point where an event like cross country can be postponed.

Recent night temperatures in Zhangjiakou have been recorded as low as -25C. Previous Games in Russia's low-lying Sochi and Canada's Vancouver saw an opposite meteorological problem - warm temperatures creating slushy conditions or shortages of snow. Amice says that should not be an issue at Yanqing, where the alpine sports are taking place, or at Zhangjiakou which will host cross-country skiing, the biathlon, snowboarding, freestyle skiing and ski jumping. "As the site is geographically landlocked, we don't expect any major upheavals... The cold temperatures will remain a constant," he told AFP. — AFP