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# Row over 'immoral' women's yoga retreat erupts in Kuwait

## Lawyer files complaint to parliament against MP Azmi

### Amir returns home after private visit



KUWAIT: HH the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah returned to Kuwait yesterday after a private visit abroad. Upon arrival, HH the Amir was received by HH the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, HH Sheikh Nasser Mohammad Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah and senior state officials. —KUNA

KUWAIT: A Kuwaiti women's yoga retreat that was denounced as "immoral" has been postponed after authorities said it needed a permit, its organizer said, prompting a backlash online and a complaint to parliament. Yoga instructor Eman Al-Husseinan said she had come under fierce media attack over the desert retreat, which was scheduled to take place on Friday.

"When I first organized the event, I did not know about the need for permits, and I was contacted by the interior ministry which clarified the importance of these permits," she said in an online video posted late Thursday. "We had already stressed the need for appropriate attire to take part in the sessions, which is modest clothing," she added.

The one-day retreat was focused on practicing yoga and highlighting its health benefits, as well creating a fun environment for women, Husseinan said. "I was to subject a fierce media attack... they projected an image of the event in a manner that was insulting, portraying it to be immoral. "Such projections are not a reflection of my morals or the morals of any Kuwaiti woman or Kuwaiti society."

Lawmaker Hamdan Al-Azmi had objected strongly to the event, urging its cancellation. "This is a serious matter, and we urge the interior minister to move swiftly in stopping these practices that are

alien to our conservative society," he tweeted on Wednesday. While some online agreed with the MP, many threw their support behind Husseinan.

"Kuwaiti women have become robbed of their will and rights... they are prevented from practicing yoga... and from exercising their basic rights," tweeted Kuwaiti writer Aljazi Alsenafi. Lawyer Areej Hamadeh told AFP that she had filed a complaint to parliament against Azmi. "The MP has infringed on the constitution and personal freedoms and decided to impose his own guardianship on society under the pretext of its customs and traditions," she said.

Kuwaiti women, who earned the right to vote in 2005, have long been pushing the boundaries of their society, considered one of the most open in the region. Last year, they defied conservative norms and a culture of "shame" to speak out against harassment for the first time. Azmi ruffled feathers last month when he questioned the defense minister about an October decision to allow women to join the army in combat roles.

The defense ministry later imposed new rules on women in the military, saying they have to wear a hijab, need permission from a male guardian to join and are not allowed to carry weapons. Unlike other Gulf countries, Kuwait's parliament enjoys legislative power and lawmakers have been known to challenge the government. — AFP

### News in brief

#### Erdogan tests COVID positive

ANKARA: Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said yesterday he had tested positive for COVID-19 but was not experiencing severe symptoms. "After experiencing light symptoms, my wife and I tested positive for COVID-19. We have a mild infection thankfully, which we learned to be the Omicron variant," the 67-year-old president said in a tweet. — AFP

#### Egypt media tycoon charged

CAIRO: An Egyptian businessman was charged yesterday with "human trafficking" and "sexual assault" a month after he was arrested over accusations that he abused seven girls in an orphanage he founded. Media and real estate tycoon Mohamed El-Amin was arrested on Jan 8 and held in custody pending investigations into accusations that he "sexually assaulted children using force". He now faces up to 25 years in prison if found guilty. — AFP

#### Release of Gitmo inmate recommended

WASHINGTON: American authorities have recommended releasing a mentally ill inmate from Guantanamo Bay and repatriating him to Saudi Arabia, according to a government document published Friday. Suspected of being Al Qaeda's intended 20th hijacker for the Sept 11, 2001 attacks against the United States, Mohammed Al-Qahtani was tortured by interrogators at the US military base in Cuba where he has been detained for nearly two decades. — AFP (See Page 6)

#### Meta adds 'personal boundary'

SAN FRANCISCO: Facebook parent Meta began rolling out Friday a minimum distance between users' avatars in its virtual reality Horizon network after reports of harassment, one of the thorny issues for its metaverse vision. — AFP (See Page 8)

## Rescuers reach Moroccan boy trapped in well

IGHRANE, Morocco: Morocco held its breath as rescue workers yesterday entered a tunnel and reached a pocket where a five-year-old boy has been trapped for days after falling into a well. For five days the complex and risky earth-moving operation has gripped residents of the North African kingdom and beyond, also sparking sympathy in neighboring Algeria, a regional rival.

A medical team was with the rescuers, who were trying to resuscitate young Rayan before bringing him out. It was not immediately clear how long it would take for them to exit the tunnel. A camera inserted into the well where Rayan is stuck had shown him, from behind, lying on his side, said Abdelhadi Tamrani, an official in charge of the operation.

But it is "impossible to say with certainty that he is alive," Tamrani told AFP. Onlookers applauded to encourage the rescuers, sang religious songs or prayed, chanting in unison "Allahu Akbar" (God is greatest). The more time that passes, the more fears arise over Rayan's condition.

Continued on Page 2



IGHRANE, Morocco: A member of the Moroccan emergency services gestures as teams work yesterday on the rescue of five-year-old boy Rayan from a well shaft he fell into in this remote village. — AFP

## US sanctions on Iran civil nuclear program waived

TEHRAN: US steps on lifting sanctions are "good but not enough", Iran's foreign minister said yesterday, hours after Washington announced it was waiving sanctions on Iran's civilian nuclear program.

The US action came as talks to restore a 2015 deal between Tehran and world powers over its nuclear program reached an advanced stage, with the issue of sanctions relief a major issue.

"The lifting of some sanctions can, in the true sense of the word, translate into their good will. Americans talk about it, but it should be known that what happens on paper is good but not enough," Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian was quoted as saying by ISNA news agency.

The secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council also reflected Tehran's view that

the US move falls short. "Real, effective and verifiable economic benefit for Iran is a necessary condition for the formation of an agreement," Ali Shamkhani said in a tweet. "The show of lifting sanctions is not considered a constructive effort," he added. The US State Department on Friday said it was waiving sanctions on Iran's civilian nuclear program in a technical step necessary to return to the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA.

Former president Donald Trump withdrew from the pact in 2018 and reimposed crippling sanctions. — AFP

Continued on Page 2

## COVID jab compulsory in Austria

VIENNA: It's official: Austrians over the age of 18 must be vaccinated against COVID-19 or face the possibility of a heavy fine, an unprecedented measure in the European Union. The new measure, adopted on Jan 20 by Parliament, came into force yesterday, the culmination of a process that

began in November in the face of the rapid spread of the Omicron variant. The government decided to pursue its new, tougher approach despite criticism within the country.

"No other country in Europe is following us on compulsory vaccines," said Manuel Krautgartner, who has campaigned against the new approach. In neighboring Germany, a similar proposal championed by the new Social Democrat Chancellor Olaf Scholz was debated last month in the lower house of parliament but many MPs still oppose the idea.

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VIENNA: A woman is vaccinated at a vaccination center in Amalienbad yesterday. — AFP



## Local

# Sheikh Abdullah Al-Salem Cultural Center, a civilized beacon in Kuwait



KUWAIT: An aerial view of the Sheikh Abdullah Al-Salem Cultural Center. — KUNA photos



A panoramic view of the Sheikh Abdullah Al-Salem Cultural Center.

**KUWAIT:** Sheikh Abdullah Al-Salem Cultural Center (ASCC) has attracted hundreds of thousands of visitors since its establishment, solidifying the cultural movement in Kuwait and becoming one of the country's scientific and cultural monuments. ASCC, which opened in February 2018, has attracted over 580,000 visitors as of March 2020, affirming its high status on the cultural arena as one of Kuwait's latest intellectual-educational beacon. The center has organized 88 activities, which ranged from exhibitions, lectures and workshops to festivals, camps and plays, touching on interests of different segments of the society.

Around 500 international organizations visited ASCC, which was also keen on establishing partnerships with embassies and similar international agencies. ASCC held cultural and scientific workshops about rocks, recycling, plants and energy sources among others, a camp for children during Ramadan, summer camps, space academy, Eid festivals and events in the Planetarium. ASCC participated in two events abroad, the first was in Venice, Italy, in 2019, and the second was last October in Berlin, Germany. The center won the prestigious ABB LEAF award as the Public Building of the year 2018, as well as four international awards. ASCC, named after late Amir Sheikh Abdullah Al-Salem Al-Sabah, is situated on the seaside Arabian Gulf Road and was built in the same place where Sheikh Abdullah Al-Salem High School, one of Kuwait first government schools.

ASCC, occupying 127,000 square meters with a parking lot for 1,231 cars, consists of eight buildings, six museums, one conference hall and documents' facility. The center, which has 25 water fountains, comprises 22 display halls with over 1,100 pieces of relics and unique items. The center, built in 20

months, consists of many facilities like theaters, green areas, gift shops, restaurants, coffee shops and outdoor sitting areas. Sheikh Abdullah Al-Salem Theater hosts local and international events, in addition to specialized conferences and exhibitions. It is designed to trigger inspiration for exhibitors, artists and students. The six family-friendly exhibitions depict historic, cultural, intellectual, scientific and technological worlds.

## Natural world

One exhibition enlightens visitors about the natural world for better comprehension of ecosystems and how they influence development of biodiversity of in the planet over millions of years. The exhibition enables visitors to explore Southeast Asia's rainforests and see how mangroves help the ecology. Visitors can dive into an underwater wonderland and witness the wildlife, particularly in Kuwait. The visitors can also test their skills in the exhibition's interactive displays and learn about how humans can keep the coastal community alive and help sustain the planet. In the "Our Earth" museum, the visitors are welcomed into the world of the dinosaurs.

They see the amazing reptiles and mammals that lived on earth up to 65 million years ago and also be bedazzled at the size of the huge creatures that inhabited Kuwait's prehistoric seas, how did they sound? What did they eat? The exhibition allows visitors to become paleontologists for the day in the Dino Lab and try to unearth their own dinosaur. Visitors will see the world of geology and geography come alive as they delve below the earth's crust to its fiery core. How does Kuwait's industry and climate affect the world and how can we affect changes in the environment, at home and

in the community to ensure a cleaner, greener planet. The Transportation and Robots museum display how through centuries transportation has taken people from elementary hot air balloons to jet engines, horse-drawn carriages to cars and small boats to oil tankers. Learn about Kuwait's maritime heritage and its long history of boat building. Also in the exhibition, visitors could meet the resident Giant Robot and discover the latest ways robotic technology is assisting humans. Visitors are welcomed to the demonstration area to learn about Artificial Intelligence (AI) and interact with robots, or learn about basic scientific processes in the Experiment Gallery.

Innovators will enjoy the Maker Space where creative ideas and scientific innovation is encouraged. Visitors can get acquainted at the Human Body and Mind Museum with how human body and mind work, their secrets and will realize how the brain act as super-computers with encapsulating exhibits explain how the brain and body work in tandem. The importance of health becomes clear when visitors learn how human bodies are tested when under attack. Through a 4D show, the interactive character Kashaf enlightens audiences to the marvels of the body's indefatigable defense mechanisms.

## Golden Age of Islam

The Arabic Islamic Science Museum focuses on the Golden Age of Islam and the innumerable scientific, cultural and artistic contributions of Muslims and Arabs to modern day science. The Arabic Islamic Science Museum highlights the scientists' groundbreaking work and accomplishments allowing visitors to proudly reconnect with the inspira-

tional message of Islam, which actively encouraged scientific discovery. It recognizes the work of Arab and Islamic scholars in the fields of Exploration, Medicine, Astronomy and Engineering; and sees how scientific discoveries contributed to the architectural wonders of the Islamic world. Moreover, it offers the spectacular opportunity to converse with ancient polymaths Al-Khwarizmi and Al-Bairuni who appear to have been brought to life in a uniquely entertaining exhibit.

Meanwhile, the study of space and the universe has always evoked mystery and inspiration. The Centre's Space exhibit gives audiences an unprecedented opportunity to explore the wonders of this unknown universe. The ASCC is also promoting culture of tolerance, respecting of human rights and peace among youth. It offers scientific programs like Coded, which teach boys and girls principles of coding, as well as a Bricks for Kids program in which participants learn scientific and mathematic skills through Lego Bricks. ASCC has six rooms for training and workshops, a Fine Arts Center comprising galleries, exhibition spaces, library, and artist studios. The Fine Arts Centre offers impressive programs of high-quality exhibitions, and collaborative shows for local artists, supporting them through communicating with international artists and professionals. Aimed at renovating the fine arts platform in Kuwait, it also hosts fairs, festivals, workshops, and conferences. Artist in Residence is one of the program offered by the Fine Arts Center. This program offers professional space for artists to develop their research and creative practices, and explore new ideas. The Library connects all museums with the Fine Arts Center, aimed at educating the young generation. — KUNA

## COVID jab compulsory...

Continued from Page 1

Despite the threat of such a drastic measure, the vaccination rate in Austria has still failed to take off, languishing below the levels seen in France or Spain. The humanitarian association Arbeiter Samariter Bund, which oversees some vaccination sites in the capital Vienna, said there had an uptick in turnout this week. "We recorded a small increase of around nine percent compared to last week," the organization's manager, Michael Hausmann, told AFP.

From the average of around 7,000 injections administered every day in the capital, only 10 percent are a first dose, he said. Erika Viskancove, a 33-year-old accountant, said she came to a vacci-

nation center situated next to an Art Deco swimming pool to receive her third booster dose, "I sincerely believe that the law is the best way" to defeat the pandemic, she said, calling on other countries to follow Austria's lead.

Melanie, a 23-year-old waitress who preferred not to give her second name, said she was mainly there to avoid ending up "locked up at home". Non-vaccinated people are currently excluded from restaurants, sports and cultural venues. But from now on they will also be subject to fines, which Melanie said was "unhealthy".

The law applies to all adult residents with the exception of pregnant women, those who have contracted the virus within the past 180 days and those with medical exemptions. Checks will begin from mid-March, with fines ranging from €600 to €3,600 (\$690-\$4,100). They will, however, be lifted if the person fined gets vaccinated within two weeks. More than 60 percent of Austrians support the measure, according to a recent survey, but large swathes of the popula-

tion remain strongly opposed.

For several weeks after the announcement of the new law, tens of thousands of people took to the streets to protest against what they regard as a draconian policy. Critics have also questioned the need for compulsion given the milder nature of the Omicron variant. Conservative Chancellor Karl Nehammer, who leads the Alpine country with the environmentalist Greens, also announced at the same time a relaxation of earlier COVID-19 restrictions.

But for Health Minister Wolfgang Mueckstein, compulsory vaccination is aimed at both protecting the country against new waves and fighting new variants. Vaccination passes are now a reality in an increasing number of countries for certain professions or activities. In Ecuador, it is compulsory, including for children over the age of five, a world first. Before that, two authoritarian states in Central Asia - Tajikistan and Turkmenistan - mandated vaccination, as did Indonesia, even if less than half its population is actually vaccinated. — AFP



VIENNA: A man is vaccinated at the vaccination center in Amalienbad yesterday. — AFP

## Rescuers reach Moroccan boy...

Continued from Page 1

Rescuers had tried to get oxygen and water down to the child but it was not clear whether he was able to use the vital supplies, AFP reporters said.

Rayan accidentally fell about 32 m down the narrow shaft near his home in the remote village of Ighrane in Chefchaouen province on Tuesday afternoon. Rescue crews, using bulldozers and front-end loaders, excavated the surrounding red earth down to the level where the boy is trapped and are now digging horizontally towards him, by hand.

They face a risk of landslides, and yesterday had to maneuver around a large rock which blocked their way. Earlier in the darkness, crews had moved a heavy pipe into position in the area. One rescuer lugged what appeared to be a jackhammer. A glacial cold has gripped this mountainous and impoverished region of the Rif, which is at an elevation of about 700 m.

Thousands of people have gathered and even camped in solidarity around the site in recent days, where AFP reporters have said the tension has been palpable. "We are showing solidarity with this child, who is dear to Morocco and the whole world," said onlooker Hafid El-Azzouz, who lives in the region. "We hope that, with God's will, he will get out," he said.

The shaft, just 45 cm across, was too narrow to

reach Rayan, and widening it was deemed too risky - so earthmovers dug a wide slope into the hill to reach him from the side. The operation has made the landscape resemble a construction site. It involves engineers and topographers, and was made more complex by the mix of rocky and sandy soils.

Red-helmeted civil defense personnel have at times been suspended by rope, as if on a cliff face. Overnight they worked non-stop under powerful floodlights that gave a gloomy air to the scene. "I keep up hope that my child will get out of the well alive," Rayan's father told public television 2M on Friday evening. "I thank everyone involved and those supporting us in Morocco and elsewhere."

He said earlier in the week that he had been repairing the well when the boy fell in. The drama has sparked an outpouring of sympathy online, with the trending Arabic hashtag #SaveRayan. "Millions of people across the world are holding their breath in the race against time to save Rayan," one Twitter user wrote.

Another paid tribute to rescue workers working around the clock for days, saying, "they are real-life heroes". Police reinforcements have been sent and metal barricades erected in an effort to prevent a swarm of onlookers from impeding rescuers. One volunteer said he was there to help. "We've been here for three days. Rayan is a child of our region. We won't leave until he's out of the well," he said.

The accident echoes a tragedy in Spain in early 2019 when a two-year-old child died after falling into an abandoned well 25 cm wide and more than 70 m deep. Julien Rosello's body was recovered after a search and rescue operation that lasted 13 days. — AFP

## US sanctions on Iran civil nuclear...

Continued from Page 1

on Iran, prompting the Islamic republic to begin pulling back from its commitments under the deal. The waiver allows other countries and companies to participate in Iran's civilian nuclear program without triggering US sanctions on them, in the name of promoting safety and non-proliferation. Iran's civilian program includes increasing stockpiles of enriched uranium.

Amir-Abdollahian reiterated that one of the "main issues" in the JCPOA talks is obtaining guarantees that the US will not withdraw from the 2015 deal again. "We seek and demand guarantees in the political, legal and economic sectors," he said, adding that "agreements have been reached in some areas". The Vienna negotiations, which include Iran, the United States, Britain, China, France, Germany and Russia, are at a stage where the sides have to make important "political decisions", different parties to the negotiations said last week.

"Our negotiating team in the Vienna talks is seriously pursuing obtaining tangible guarantees from the West to fulfil their commitments," Amir-Abdollahian said. Earlier yesterday, Iranian foreign ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh said: "Naturally, Tehran is carefully considering any action that is in the right direction of fulfilling the obligations of the JCPOA", local media reported.

Moscow's ambassador to the UN in Vienna, Mikhail Ulyanov, yesterday called the US waiver decision "a move in the right direction". "It will help expedite restoration of #JCPOA and mutual return of #US and #Iran to compliance with 2015 deal. It also can be seen as an indication that the #ViennaTalks have entered the final stage," he said on Twitter.

Talks on reviving the nuclear deal were halted last week and the negotiators returned to their capitals for consultations. Experts say the JCPOA talks could resume next week. US President Joe Biden moved quickly to seek a return to the agreement after he succeeded Trump a year ago, but Iran in the meantime has moved increasingly closer to producing enough fissile material for a nuclear weapon - which the JCPOA aimed to avoid. Iran has always denied seeking an atomic bomb.

"The technical discussions facilitated by the waiver are necessary in the final weeks of JCPOA talks," a State Department official said on Friday. The US official insisted that the move was not "part of a quid pro quo," as the partners in the JCPOA talks await Iran's response on key issues. State Department spokesman Ned Price insisted this US step is a sanctions waiver for the civilian nuclear program and not broader sanctions relief.

Barbara Slavin, an Iran expert at the Atlantic Council, said the resumption of the waiver was a positive step. "It's a necessary prerequisite to restoring the JCPOA and thus a good sign that this can be accomplished," she told AFP. "These sanctions were among the dumbest and most counterproductive imposed by the former administration," she added. — AFP



Local

# Kuwait lags behind most GCC states in gender equality: KTS

## Government sectors performed distinctively well during pandemic: Hayat

By Sajeev K Peter

**KUWAIT:** When it comes to gender equality and women empowerment, Kuwait appears to have lost the advantage it had years ago in the region, and the country needs to do more towards it, an official of Kuwait Transparency Society said.

In an exclusive interview with Kuwait Times, Asrar Hayat, Board Member, Undersecretary, KTS, spoke at length about the various activities of KTS, particularly on issues such as combating corruption, gender equality and woman empowerment. She also explained how KTS is collaborating with other civil society organizations on these critical matters.

Quoting an index presented by 'Women, Business and the Law 2021' on Kuwait covering 190 economies and structured around the lifecycle of a working woman, Kuwait scored only 28.8 out of 100, she said. The overall score for Kuwait is lower than the regional average observed across the Middle East and North Africa (51.5). Kuwait does not attain a perfect score on any of the WBL2021 indicators, Hayat said.

Even the number of women in leadership positions in Kuwait is only 15 percent, while women have around 12 percent representation in the country's corporate sector. Saudi Arabia has made significant progress in a short period although the kingdom began to address the issue of gender equality only fairly recently. Most of the other GCC countries have set a quota for women in corporate boardrooms and increased the number of women leaders in government as well. In Qatar, the percentage of women in leadership positions is 20 percent. In the Norwegian parliament 'Storting', women have 40 percent representation, while in Oman's parliament, women have a nine percent representation. Kuwait has no representation of women in parliament.

"In the GCC, a massive change is taking place with regards to gender equality and women's empowerment. In fact, Kuwait was way ahead of other GCC countries in terms of

gender equality, but it appears that the country has lost that advantage as it is currently trailing behind most of the other states in the GCC," Hayat said.

Salaries in the public sector are more or less equal in Kuwait. However, due to allowances, men still earn 41 percent more than women. In the private sector, the disparity is even more glaring, with men receiving 63 percent more salaries with increments, allowances, perks etc. "Men and women are equal in all aspects. We strongly advocate that this disparity is a critical issue and needed to be addressed," Hayat said, adding that KTS is partnering with other civil society bodies on realizing gender equality and empowerment of women.

### Transparency

Kuwait is moving, albeit at a slow pace, towards transparency and integrity, Hayat said, citing some positive changes the country is making in achieving good governance. "We are optimistic as we can see some positive changes now. Many entities in the country have begun to practice good governance," she said.

"How can we have transparency and integrity without a digital government and governance?" she asked. "We need to have a digital government and governance to achieve total transparency and integrity in our system. We also need a good cybersecurity system in place," Hayat said. "Combating corruption is one of our primary objectives. But it is a continuous effort. Even in developed countries, stamping out corruption from society is a herculean task," she pointed out.

"KTS conducts around 80 activities every year, all in line with fighting corruption under the leadership and guidance of Chairman Majid Al-Mutari. Our anti-corruption fight has three

pillars - transparency, democracy and social support," she elaborated.

Hayat, an ardent advocate of liberty, democracy and the environment, was the first woman in the region to run for the election to the board of Transparency International in November 2021. "Although I could not make it to the board, I garnered 35 percent of votes. I wanted to make a Kuwaiti voice heard in Transparency International. We need the world to see what Kuwaitis are doing," she said. TI has 100 chapters across the world. In the region, it has only two chapters - Kuwait and Bahrain.

### Crisis management

The KTS, in collaboration with the Public Authority for Anti-Corruption (Nazaha), has established a team to follow up on the government's performance in dealing with the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic in the society. "It was probably the first-ever civil society initiative at a local or regional level. I was part of an eight-member team. The team started its work in February 2020 and submitted the report in April 2021," she said.

"The overall performance of the government in facing the pandemic was very good. Different government sectors, especially the Ministry of Health, Kuwait National Guard and some other entities, performed distinctively well during the crisis," Hayat pointed out.

The report urged the government to apply governance in the public sector in order to ensure transparency and integrity and to empower community partnership, calling for the establishment of an independent risk management center. "It is crucial for us to have such a center in the event of a disaster or the outbreak of a pandemic such as COVID-19," Hayat said. The report also



**KUWAIT:** Asrar Hayat answers a question during the interview with Kuwait Times. —Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

called for reinforcing civil society's role and participation.

### Demography

"Some areas in the country do not have the right demographic proportion, resulting in several problems including health-related concerns as we have seen during the pandemic," she said. The report recommended rectification of such an imbalance in the country's demography.

The KTS has drafted executive regulations of the Right of Access to Information Law with a team of governmental experts. The law was passed in November 2021. "Although the government has accepted it, it has not yet been completely activated. We are putting pressure on concerned entities to apply the law," she said. KTS has conducted around 40 training courses for different government entities with a view to helping them in implementing the law.

"We have to be optimistic. At the end of the day, only transparency will guide the country towards becoming a developed country," she concluded.



### Hayat first woman from region to run for TI post

## Interior Minister mourns Lt Mohammad Al-Azmi



**KUWAIT:** Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Interior Sheikh Ahmad Mansour Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah alongside the Head of Kuwait Fire Force Lieutenant General Khaled Al-Mikrad mourned the death of First Lieutenant Mohammad Mezyad Al-Azmi on Friday. The Minister of Interior paid his respects to the par-

ents of the deceased and expressed sincere sentiments for their loss, said the ministry of Interior in a statement. Several high ranked officials, friends, colleagues and families attended the funeral. Kuwait Fire Force had announced on Friday finding of the body off Al-Zour's beach after long hours of search. —KUNA

## Multiple injuries in Ghous Street crash



**KUWAIT:** A three-vehicle accident on Al-Ghous Street on Friday left three persons critically wounded, Kuwait Fire Force said. Firemen rushed to the scene in response to an emergency call and were able to extract the motorists out of their vehicles. Emergency medical technicians onsite rushed the three to hospital where they were admitted in critical conditions, KFF said in a statement. A case was filed to reveal the cause of the accident, it added.



## On the occasion of the



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# Arabian horses on display at int'l festival in Kuwait



KUWAIT: Horses are paraded during the 9th International Arabian Horse Festival at the Bait Al-Arab Arabian Horse Center in Kuwait yesterday. A total of 430 horses from different Arab countries were participated in the event. —Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat

## News in brief

### Decree to establish citizenship committee

KUWAIT: His Highness the Deputy Amir and Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah issued a decree to establish a supreme committee for Kuwait citizenship, whose role is to receive and examine citizenship applications, grant citizenship to those who meet the required conditions and withdraw citizenship in case of forgery.

### Artists Society slams MP's comments

KUWAIT: The Kuwaiti Artists Society criticized MP Hamdan Al-Azmi for recent comments in which he argued that concerts leave a "destructive effect" on society. It highlighted the message Kuwaiti arts carried throughout history in line with the Kuwaiti society's customs and traditions, noting that the constitution stipulates that the state must protect sciences and arts.

### Kuwait Airways resumes Najaf flights

KUWAIT: Kuwait Airways announced yesterday the reopening of commercial flights to Najaf, Iraq with two flights a week. In a statement, Kuwait Airways CEO Maen Razouqi said that the flights will operate on Saturdays and Wednesdays of each week. "This comes as part of our efforts to offer as much options possible for our clients, and Najaf is considered a high demand destination for our clients for its touristic sites and rich cultural history," said Razouqi.

### Kuwait oil price up to \$92.25 pb

KUWAIT: Kuwait oil price rose \$2.73 to \$92.25 per barrel on Friday compared to \$89.52 pb Thursday, Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) said yesterday. Globally, the Brent crude went up by \$2.16 to \$93.27 pb and West Texas Intermediate rose by \$2.04 to settle at \$92.31 pb.

# CONDOLENCES

## Kuwait Times Management and staff

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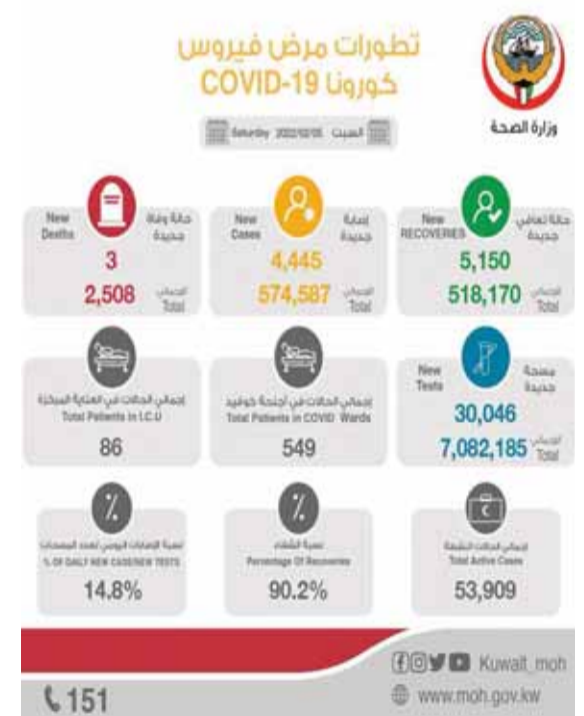
on the sad demise of his

## Father

*May Allah Almighty bestow His mercy on him*

## Kuwait reports 4,445 new COVID cases, three deaths

KUWAIT: Kuwait reported 4,445 new COVID-19 cases yesterday in addition to three deaths and 5,150 recoveries. The Ministry of Health had reported 5,407 cases a day before, in addition to two deaths and 5,846 recoveries. Meanwhile, the number of patients in ICUs stood at 86 yesterday, up from 84 on Friday. The number of patients hospitalized increased from 481 to 549, while total active cases dropped from 54,617 to 53,909. The percentage of daily new cases to new tests reached 14.8 percent while the percentage of recovery reached 90.2 percent, according to the health ministry's bulletin. Medical teams conducted 30,046 swab tests in the last 24 hours, bringing the country's overall tests so far to 7,082,185, Health Ministry Spokesman Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad said yesterday. The new figures took the country's total COVID cases to 574,587, while total deaths reached 2,508 and recoveries 518,170.



## NAFO holds 17th Annual General Body Meeting

KUWAIT: The 17th Annual General Body Meeting (AGM) of NAFO, a prominent socio-cultural organization in Kuwait, was held virtually recently. The event began with a soulful rendition of the prayer song by Srikanth Sudheer. This was followed by the national anthems of Kuwait and India. Unnikrishnan B Kurup, Convener, NAFO, donned the role of the anchor and took the crowd through the program. The General Secretary of NAFO, Vijayakumar Menon, marked the commencement of the program with the welcome address. The presidential address was then delivered by C P Rajiv Menon, NAFO President.

The annual report for 2021 and the plan of activities for 2022 were presented by NAFO General Secretary Vijayakumar Menon. He briefed the gathering on the events that were conducted during the past year. It is worth mentioning that the group was able to conduct relevant, interesting and noteworthy online events even during these trying times.

TKV Pradeep Kumar, NAFO Treasurer, sub-

mitted the Annual Accounts Statements and Budget for the year 2022. Next on agenda was the approval of amendment to NAFO's Byelaw and NAFO Kuwait's name change. This was officiated by the Chief of NAFO Advisory Board, Vijayan Nair V R.

M S Nair, the General Secretary of NAFO Global, enlightened the gathering on NAFO Global's updates and the way forward. Naveen C P, the acting Vice President and Family Assurance Scheme (FAS) Administrator, then conducted the FAS Promotion and membership campaign. This was followed by felicitation speeches by Advisory Board member Rajeev Pillai, Ladies Wing Chief Coordinator Shrimati Sheeba Shaiju, life member and Former Advisory Board Member Dr Prasad Nair and Mohandas Kizhakke.

As is characteristic of NAFO meetings, an open forum was the next segment where members were given the opportunity to air their views or discuss their opinions. The Concluding Speech was delivered by NAFO Secretary General Anish Nair. The Vote of Thanks by NAFO Convener Unnikrishnan B Kurup, marked the end of an event that usually sees all members getting together with their families and spending quality time sharing and creating memories. This time around it was again reduced to a Zoom meeting owing to the ever-challenging pandemic situation.





Sudan army supporters rally in Khartoum in new show of force

## UN seeks to define its role in Taliban-run Afghanistan

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ADDIS ABABA, Ethiopia: Heads of states pose for a group photo during the 35th Ordinary Session of the African Union (AU) Summit in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, yesterday. —AFP

# Dispute over Zionist entity at African Union summit

## Palestinian PM wants withdrawal of entity's AU accreditation

ADDIS ABABA, Ethiopia: Palestinian Prime Minister Mohammed Shtayyeh yesterday urged the African Union to withdraw Zionist entity's accreditation, bringing simmering tensions to a head as the 55-member bloc opened a two-day summit in Addis Ababa.

Even as the continent reels from a spate of military coups and the coronavirus pandemic, the relationship with Zionist entity is expected to figure prominently during the summit this weekend. The dispute was set in motion last July when Moussa Faki Mahamat, chair of the African Union Commission, accepted Zionist entity's accreditation to the bloc, triggering a rare dispute within a body that values consensus.

As heads of state gathered in Ethiopia's capital yesterday, Shtayyeh called on the body to reject Faki's move. "Zionist entity should never be rewarded for its violation and for the apartheid regime it does impose on the Palestinian people," he said. "Your excellency, I'm sorry to report to you that the situation of the Palestinian people has only grown more precarious." The summit may see a vote on whether to back or reject Faki's decision, which could yield an unprecedented split in the bloc.

Zionist entity's accreditation last year drew quick protest from powerful members, including South Africa and Algeria which argued that it flew in the face of AU statements supporting the Palestinian Territories.

Earlier yesterday, Faki said the AU's commitment to the Palestinian push for independence was "unchanging and can only continue to go stronger". He defended Zionist entity's accreditation, however, saying it could be "an instrument in the service of peace" while calling for "a serene debate" on the issue.

### War in Ethiopia

This year's summit comes as the AU faces mounting pressure to push for a ceasefire in host country Ethiopia, where a 15-month war has killed thousands of people and, the UN says, driven hundreds of thousands to the brink of starvation. The conflict pits Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's government against fighters from the northern Tigray region.

It has precipitated a rapid deterioration in ties between Abiy, the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize winner, and Western powers who once saw him as a reformer but have condemned alleged massacres

and mass rape committed during the conflict by Ethiopian and allied forces. The fact that Ethiopia hosts the AU has made any intervention by the bloc especially delicate, and Faki waited until last August—nine months after fighting began—to appoint Nigeria's former president Olusegun Obasanjo as a special envoy tasked with trying to broker a ceasefire. Yesterday, Abiy praised his fellow African leaders for what he described as their "support".

"Ethiopia's challenge was internal in nature and a matter of maintaining law and order. But the solution of our internal matters was made exceedingly difficult by the role played by external actors," Abiy said. "I wish to take this opportunity to thank you all for your support, solidarity and understanding as we underwent these trying times." Abiy also proposed the creation of "an African Union continental media house", renewing his criticism of international media coverage of Ethiopia and the continent at large.

"Negative media representation of Africa not only disinform the rest of the world about our continent, but also shapes the way we see ourselves as Africans," he said.

### Coup 'resurgence'

African leaders are also preoccupied with a recent string of military coups. Four member states have been suspended by the AU's Peace and Security Council since mid-2021 because of unconstitutional changes of government—most recently Burkina Faso, where soldiers ousted President Roch Marc Christian Kabore last month.

Addressing African foreign ministers this week, Faki denounced a "worrying resurgence" of such putsches. But the AU has been accused of an inconsistent response, notably by not suspending Chad after a military council took over following the death of longtime President Idriss Deby Itno on the battlefield last April. Attendees will also discuss the coronavirus pandemic, with South African President Cyril Ramaphosa, who is participating in the summit virtually, expected to provide an update on Africa's response to COVID-19, nearly two years after the continent's first case was detected in Egypt.

As of January 26, only 11 percent of Africa's more than one billion people had been fully vaccinated, according to the Africa Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. — AFP

## Sculpture of Algerian hero vandalized in France

AMBOISE: Vandals in central France attacked a sculpture of an Algerian military hero who resisted France's colonization of the North African country, just hours before it was inaugurated yesterday as a symbol of Franco-Algerian reconciliation.

The lower part of the steel sculpture in the town of Amboise, where Emir Abdelkader was imprisoned from 1848 to 1852, was badly damaged in the attack which comes in the midst of an election campaign dominated by harsh rhetoric on immigration and Islam.

Amboise mayor Thierry Boutard said he was "ashamed" of those responsible and decided to proceed with the inauguration ceremony regardless. "My second sentiment is of course one of indignation," he told AFP. "This is a day of harmony and unity and this kind of behavior is unspeakable," he said.

The sculpture was commissioned to coincide with the 60th anniversary of Algeria's independence from France, won after a brutal eight-year liberation war that continues to poison relations between the two countries. It was proposed by historian Benjamin Stora, who was tasked by President Emmanuel Macron with coming up with ways to heal the memories of the war and 132 years of French rule in Algeria.

The silhouette of the Islamic-scholar-turned-military-leader, who resisted French rule but was later feted as a hero in France for his defense of Christians in the Middle East, looks across the Loire river at the cas-



AMBOISE, France: A picture shows a sculpture in tribute to Algerian national hero Abdelkader, titled "Passage Abdelkader", created by artist Michel Audiard, after it was vandalized prior to its inauguration yesterday. — AFP

tle where he was imprisoned. Amboise police said they were investigating the incident, which comes two months ahead of a presidential election in which an upstart far-right candidate, Eric Zemmour, has repeatedly grabbed headlines with a campaign bashing Islam and immigration from Africa, including Algeria.

### 'Nauseating atmosphere'

Algeria's ambassador to France Mohamed Antar Daoud, who attended the inauguration, condemned the attack as an act of "unspeakable baseness".

"We have to get beyond that," he said, assuring that attempts to mend fences between France and Algeria would continue because "there is momentum and a desire on both sides to move forward." Ouassila Soum, a 37-year-old French woman of Algerian background who also attended the inauguration, said the vandalism left her "with a knot in my stomach."

"It's a shame and yet it's not surprising with the rhetoric of hate and the nauseating

current atmosphere," said Soum, hailing the sculpture as "a symbol of the reconciliation between peoples and civilizations." Seen as one of France's worst enemies in the late 19th century, Emir Abdelkader is considered one of the founders of modern-day Algeria for his role in mobilizing resistance to French rule. The rebellion he led failed however and he surrendered to French forces who shipped him to France, where he and his family spent four years under guard in Amboise castle.

He later moved to Syria where he won international acclaim for defending Christians during sectarian attacks. He was awarded the Legion of Honor, France's highest award for his role in trying to end the persecution. Stora, the historian behind the idea of the sculpture of Abdelkader, slammed the "ignorance" of those who vandalized it. "Emir Abdelkader had several lives. He fought France but he was also a friend of France. Those who committed this act know nothing about French history," he said. —AFP



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## International

# Sudan army supporters rally in Khartoum in new show of force

## Competing processions, a sign of deep divisions in Sudan

**KHARTOUM:** Thousands of supporters of Sudan's army rallied yesterday in front of UN headquarters in Khartoum, in a new show of force after months of protests against an October military coup.

Competing processions marched in Khartoum, according to AFP journalists — a sign of the deep divisions that have taken root in the country, which is among the poorest in the world. Army supporters, some of them riding camels, chanting slogans denouncing "foreign interference" and paying tribute to the military. Hundreds of army backers had boarded a train in Atbara, 250 kilometers (155 miles) north of the capital, to join the procession on Saturday morning. Dozens of anti-army protesters tried in vain to prevent them from boarding the train, demanding that the "military return to the barracks" and shouting "power to the people". Abu Obeida Ahmed, a resident of Atbara, told AFP.

Meanwhile, hundreds of women demonstrated in the capital's twin city of Omdurman, denouncing a crackdown by security forces on anti-coup demonstrators that has killed at least 76 people

and wounded hundreds, according to a pro-democracy group of medics.

The latest protest came as the UN has launched talks to help Sudan resolve the political crisis that was triggered by the coup. Last month the UN's Sudan envoy Volker Perthes said the consultations aimed "to support the Sudanese to reach an agreement on a way out of the current crisis". But he added that "the UN is not coming up with any project, draft or vision for a solution".

Sudan has been gripped by regular mass protests since the October 25 military takeover led by General Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan. The coup, one of several in Sudan's post-independence history, derailed a fragile power-sharing arrangement between the army and civilians that had been painstakingly negotiated after the 2019 ouster of longtime autocrat Omar al-Bashir. Army supporters are seeking to cement the post-coup status, while opponents have refused any initiatives for dialogue or partnership with the military. Last week, pro-military protesters also rallied outside the UN offices in Khartoum, chanting "Down, down UN". —AFP



**KHARTOUM:** Supporters of the Sudanese army rally outside the office of the United Nations mission, west of Sudan's capital Khartoum yesterday. —AFP



**MINNEAPOLIS, US:** Amir Locke's parents Andre Locke (right) and Karen Wells (center) look on during a press conference at City Hall in Minneapolis, Minnesota, on Friday. —AFP

## Parents of black man shot by US police demand justice

**MINNEAPOLIS:** The parents of a young Black man shot dead by police said Friday that Minneapolis officers "executed" their son and gave him no chance of survival. Authorities in the northern US city, still reeling from the police murder of George Floyd in 2020, said Amir Locke, 22, was shot Wednesday by officers carrying out a search warrant on the apartment he was in.

In the video, an officer uses a key to unlock the door and then a group of officers enter while shouting "Police, search warrant!" Locke, who was on a couch, starts to rise from beneath a blanket, with a gun in his hand, when police fire.

The total time between the officers' entrance and the shots fired was less than ten seconds. Locke was pronounced dead at hospital. "A mother should never have to see her child executed in that type of manner," said Locke's mother, Karen Wells, during a press conference, adding she would fight until her son "gets justice." Locke's father, Andre Locke, said he watched the video with "disbelief and anger."

He described his son, who he stressed had no criminal record and held a gun permit, as a "deep sleeper." "He did what any reasonable, law-abiding citizen would do, white or Black," Locke said.

He said police could have done "anything differently," including ordering his son to drop his weapon before opening fire. "It seemed that he didn't have a chance," Locke said.

### 'Locke's life mattered'

Locke's death has reopened the wounds caused by the killing of Floyd in May 2020, when white ex-Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin knelt on his neck for nearly nine minutes. To ease tensions now, Minnesota state attorney general Keith Ellison promised to conduct a "fair and thorough" investigation of the events.

"Amir Locke's life mattered," he said, alluding to the Black Lives Matter movement. Without predicting the outcome of the investigation, Minnesota's Democratic governor Tim Walz said the circumstances of Locke's death "illustrate the need for further reform" on the police force beyond the changes made after Floyd's death, particularly the execution of search warrants.

The search warrant at the heart of the tragedy had not named Locke but said he was related to a suspect in a homicide investigation in the neighboring city of Saint Paul. The warrant allowed officers to enter unannounced, according to Minneapolis police chief Amelia Huffman, speaking to MPR radio.

These so-called "no-knock" warrants have been at the center of several cases of police violence, including the shooting in March 2020 of Breonna Taylor, whose death along with Floyd's sparked massive national anticracism protests the summer of that year. Minnesota has restricted the use of no-knock warrants since the protests. And on Friday Minneapolis Mayor Jacob Frey announced an immediate moratorium on such warrants while the city reviews the policy.

"No matter what information comes to light, it won't change the fact that Amir Locke's life was cut short," Frey said in a statement. "To ensure safety of both the public and officers until a new policy is crafted, I'm issuing a moratorium on both the request and execution of such warrants in Minneapolis," he added. —AFP

## US panel suggests release of mentally ill Gitmo detainee

**GUANTANAMO BAY NAVAL BASE, Cuba:** American authorities have recommended releasing a mentally ill inmate from Guantanamo Bay and repatriating him to Saudi Arabia, according to a government document published Friday.

Suspected of being Al Qaeda's intended 20th hijacker for the September 11, 2001 attacks against the United States, Mohammed Al-Qahtani was tortured by interrogators at the US military base in Cuba where he has been detained for nearly two decades. The government dropped its case against him in 2008 due to the abuse he experienced at the prison.

The detention of Al-Qahtani is "no longer necessary to protect against a continuing significant threat to the security of the United States," the Periodic Review Board, a panel composed of several US national security agencies, said in a summary of its decision.

In its final determination dated

February 4, the board said Al-Qahtani was "eligible for transfer" and recommended that he be repatriated to Saudi Arabia where he could receive comprehensive mental health care and be enrolled in a rehabilitation center for extremists. The body noted his "significantly compromised mental health condition and available family support." Security measures, including surveillance and travel restrictions, were also recommended.

Al-Qahtani was one of the first prisoners sent to Guantanamo in January 2002. He had flown to Orlando, Florida on August 4, 2001, but was denied entry to the country and sent back to Dubai.

He was eventually captured in Afghanistan in December 2001. His torture at the prison was widely documented and spurred on international human rights groups' calls for the site to be shut down. He was subjected to prolonged isolation, sleep deprivation, sexual humiliation and other abuses.

## Sri Lanka calls for diaspora investment on independence day

**COLOMBO:** Sri Lanka marked its independence day on Friday with an appeal to its diaspora to send money home to overcome the island's worsening economic crisis and a pledge to protect foreign investments. President Gotabaya Rajapaksa urged millions of Sri Lankans abroad to invest their savings in their home country, which is facing its worst debt crisis since independence from Britain 74 years ago.

"Expatriate Sri Lankans who provide foreign exchange to the country are a major resource to us," Rajapaksa said. "I invite all expatriate Sri Lankans to invest in their homeland."

Colombo's foreign reserves, which stood at \$7.5 billion when Rajapaksa took office in November 2019, have fallen by more than half, to \$3.1 billion. Worker remittances, Sri Lanka's number one foreign currency source, fell nearly 60 percent in December. For 2021 as a whole, the figure dropped a record 22.7 percent, to \$5.49 billion. Tourism, another key source of income, has been battered by the coronavirus pandemic.

The government imposed a broad import ban in March 2020 in a bid to save foreign currency, lead-

ing to shortages of food and fuel as well as raw materials needed for manufacturing and export-oriented industries. Rajapaksa, who came to power two years ago pledging to "retake" all state enterprises either leased or partly sold to foreign companies by the previous administration, called for greater foreign involvement in Sri Lanka's economy.

"Foreign investment is especially important for large-scale projects, industries requiring modern technological know-how and new ventures that open up global market opportunities for us," he said. He criticized "those who attempt to propagate incorrect public opinion against foreign investments, based on political motives". His coalition cabinet is divided on a move to sell a stake in a state electricity utility to a US company.

### 'Gallop corruption'

Faced with record inflation, falling reserves and warnings from international rating agencies about Sri Lanka's ability to service its \$35 billion external debt, Rajapaksa's finance minister brother Basil announced Wednesday that he had sought technical advice from the International Monetary Fund.

The IMF responded by saying it was ready to discuss "options" if the government asked for financial support. "While the IMF has not received a request for financial support from Sri Lanka, the staff stands ready to discuss options if requested," mission chief Masahiro Nozaki said in a written statement to AFP in Washington.

## Record heat, forest fires in Colombia's Amazon in January

**BOGOTA, Colombia:** January of this year was the hottest month in the Colombian Amazon in a decade, leading to an increase in forest fires in the southeastern region and very likely impacting air quality in the capital Bogota, according to an Environment Ministry report seen by AFP Friday.

It said the month of January recorded the "highest hot spot values in the last 10 years" in the Colombian Amazon. The phenomenon occurs, the ministry said, when the country goes through a season of low rainfall, and is due to human activity, of which "the most important is associated with deforestation fronts."

At least 80 percent of the "hot spots" were forest fires, a ministry spokesman told AFP. At the end of January, the ministry identified more than 3,300 "hot spots" in the six departments that make up the

Colombian Amazon, including 1,300 in the Guaviare region alone.

According to testimony collected by AFP in October in the region, peasants and landowners take advantage of the dry season, from January to April, to burn or cut down trees and plant coca plants in their place, or to let cattle graze there. The Serrania del Chiribiquete National Park, listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is particularly threatened, as is the Nukak National Nature Reserve, a vast territory of jungle inhabited by the last nomadic indigenous people of Colombia.

The Foundation for Conservation and Sustainable Development (FCDS), which keeps its own count and regularly flies over the areas concerned, recorded at least 938 forest fires, the highest monthly January figure since 2012. "Thousands of hectares of Amazon jungle, cut in recent months,



**GUANTANAMO BAY NAVAL BASE, Cuba:** In this file photo taken on January 27, 2017 the long-abandoned military detention center Camp X-Ray is seen at Guantanamo Bay. —AFP

"We tortured Qahtani," Susan Crawford, a top judicial official in the Bush administration said in 2009, according to a Washington Post article. In January, the United States approved the release of five of the remaining 39 men still at Guantanamo. Ten others, including the alleged mastermind of the

September 11 attacks, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, known as "KSM", are awaiting trial by a military commission. The detention center, run by the US Navy, was created after the 2001 attacks to house detainees in the US "war on terror" and has been called a site of "unparalleled notoriety" by UN rights experts. —AFP



**COLOMBO, Sri Lanka:** Sri Lanka's President Gotabaya Rajapaksa (center) addresses the nation along with Navy Chief Nishantha Ulugetenne and Airforce Chief Sudarshana Pathirana (right) during the Sri Lanka's 74th Independence Day celebrations in Colombo on Friday. —AFP

In an address to the nation ahead of a military parade, Rajapaksa made no reference to seeking IMF help, but said he was focused on finding both short- and long-term solutions and called for an "optimistic approach". The country's main opposition boycotted the military parade, which involved aircraft, gunboats and thousands of troops, saying Friday's elaborate celebrations were a waste of money when people did not have enough to eat and prices were soaring. —AFP



In this handout picture released by the Colombian Defense Ministry shows smoke rises from a forest fire in Chiribiquete National Natural Park, in the northwest of the Colombian Amazon on Friday. —AFP

are on fire today. These massive fires are now being felt as far away as Bogota," FCDS director Rodrigo Botero warned on Twitter.

"There are public health decisions to be made quickly. What are the air indicators saying in Bogota?"

Bogota mayor Claudia Lopez

decried "the inability" of the government "to control the territory and guarantee security." She described the fires as "arson attacks ... which, due to the direction of the wind, end up arriving and deteriorating the quality of the air" in the capital, almost 500 km away. —AFP



## International

# UN seeks to define its role in Taliban-run Afghanistan

## US probe finds single attacker in Kabul evacuation bombing

**UNITED NATIONS:** The UN Security Council will soon launch negotiations on the world body's future role in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, after a report from the organization's chief called for dialogue and advised against isolating the extremists. Led by Norway, which recently hosted landmark talks between Western diplomats and Taliban officials in Oslo, the negotiations are expected to be "very tricky and very difficult," said one UN ambassador under condition of anonymity.

The envoy, who represents a country currently on the Security Council, added that the West wants "to make sure (that) particularly women and girls are not sidelined in that discussion." But on the other side, China and Russia—both veto-wielding council members—could attempt to minimize the impact of human rights issues on the future of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), the envoy suggested.

Another diplomat who asked not to be named said that "consensus" could be found on the issues of humanitarian aid and combatting terror groups in the war-ravaged South Asian country. That same diplomat said "differences" could crop up between those who want to see "cooperation with the Taliban (Beijing and Moscow) and those in the West who support a "tough approach" to extract concessions from the hardline Islamist group. The mandate for UNAMA, which has been present in Afghanistan since 2002, expires on March 17.

### Recognition?

Beyond the talks within the Council, the definition of the UN's role in Afghanistan will depend in part on the goodwill of the Taliban, who took power in August and are seeking international recognition. So far, no country has obliged, but Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi, who attended the Oslo talks, told AFP in an interview this

week that the regime was inching closer to earning foreign recognition.

The new government in Kabul has so far failed in its efforts to assume the country's seat at the world body, with the nomination of its new ambassador, former Taliban spokesman Suhail Shaheen, still in limbo. The process of both recognizing the government and subsequently accepting its new UN envoy has been frozen at the world body in a deal reached by the United States, Russia and China.

Meanwhile, an attack that killed at least 173 people including 13 US service members during the chaotic Kabul airport evacuation last year was undertaken by a single suicide bomber, a Pentagon investigation concluded Friday.

The investigation ruled out more than one perpetrator or anyone using firearms in the August 26 attack, which was claimed by the Islamic State group. At least 160 Afghan civilians and the 13 US troops were killed by the bombing, which came during the final days of the US military's withdrawal after two decades of war, according to the investigation.

The bomb exploded in a dense crowd just outside the airport's Abbey Gate as thousands of people pushed to try to get inside and leave the country in the US-managed airlift.

Although some gunfire erupted after the bombing, US officers said they were warning shots and none of those who died in the event were killed by them. "There were no gunshot wounds" among the victims, said Brigadier General Lance Curtis, who presented the investigation findings Friday.

He said that the deaths were from shrapnel including ball bearings from the bomb, the wounds of which can look like gunshot wounds. Curtis admitted that on the day, the US military thought the attack was "complex," involving an Islamic State gunman as well as the bomber.

provide appropriate support," a department spokesman said in a statement to AFP.

The spokesman declined to comment further on the ongoing legal matter. Khemmarin Hassiri, commander of the foreign affairs division of the Royal Thai Police, said the Australian embassy filed a complaint against a man on January 6. Thai police said the investigation was ongoing. It is unclear how long the cameras had been in the bathrooms, with the matter only coming to light after a camera SD card was found on a bathroom floor last year, according to a report by ABC Australia.

The suspect has been released on bail. The incident represented a serious security breach, an Australian defense and foreign policy expert said. "If security was lax enough to allow devices like cameras to be installed anywhere within a secure area, it suggests it's not tight enough to keep the embassy secure," said Hugh White, emeritus pro-

Australia's High Court blocked an attempt by Rolfe to argue he acted in "good faith" when he shot Walker. Experts say the ruling took away a key legal defense available to police when carrying out their duties. In October, another police officer went on trial for murder in Western Australia over the death of a 29-year-old Aboriginal woman in the first such case in that state in a century. He was found not guilty.

Several other Australian officers have faced murder charges before being acquitted or having the charges dropped.

### Three shots fired

Rolfe will be tried in Darwin, about 1,500 kilometers (930 miles) north of the community of Yuendumu, where Walker died on November 9, 2019. According to court documents, Rolfe and another officer entered a house to arrest Walker for an alleged bail breach and told him to place his hands behind his back. Instead, Walker is said to have stabbed Rolfe in the shoulder with a pair of scissors, and a struggle ensued during which Rolfe fired three shots into Walker.

The teenager died that night at Yuendumu police station and four days later Rolfe was charged with murder. Walker's death sparked passionate protests in Yuendumu and around Australia, with large crowds marching and calling for justice.

### Police immunity

Rolfe's trial has long been delayed by pre-trial proceedings and the COVID-19 pandemic. When it begins tomorrow, the prosecution will

coming in," she said on Friday, adding that the sound had sent villagers fleeing. Troops then set fire to around 200 houses, including her own, she said, requesting anonymity. "We could not bring anything with us. We took some warm clothes only, and then we just ran away."

Troops also torched houses in nearby Inn Ma Hte village after a local pro-junta militia was attacked by anti-coup fighters who then fled, according to one of the rebels.

"When the PDF left the village, the army burnt it down," the fighter said, adding that 600 houses had been torched. Local media also reported that hundreds of homes had been razed in the two villages, and images obtained by AFP purporting to be of Bin village showed the remains of dozens of burnt-out buildings. AFP could not independently verify the reports from the remote region.

The fires consumed properties, motorbikes and carts, said another local who was helping to coordi-



HERAT, Afghanistan: Afghan passengers board a commercial aircraft bound to Kabul, at Herat Airport, some 10 km southeast of Herat yesterday. —AFP

"We now know that the explosive fired ball bearings causing wounds that looked like gunshots. When combined with a small number of warning shots, that led many to assume that a complex attack had occurred," Curtis told reporters. Also adding to the confusion was the fact that the shrapnel from the blast punctured tear gas canisters carried by the US troops for crowd control.

That created "instant chaos and sensory over-

load," said one of the officials who briefed reporters on the investigation. The bomb also left 45 US service members injured, some with brain injuries from the concussive force of the blast. The black-garbed perpetrator, shown in the investigator's sole video of the bombing, was later identified by Islamic State as Abdul Rahman Al-Logari, who was released from a government prison by the Taliban after they took control of Kabul on August 15. —AFP

## Man charged over bathroom spy cams at Australian embassy in Thailand

**BANGKOK:** A former staffer at Australia's embassy in Bangkok has been charged after spy cameras were found in women's bathrooms at the mission, a Canberra official said yesterday. Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade confirmed that Royal Thai Police had arrested a local former employee last month.

"The welfare and privacy of all staff remains a priority for the department and we continue to



BANGKOK: This general view shows the Australian Embassy in Bangkok yesterday. —AFP

fessor of strategic studies at the Australian National University. —AFP



SYDNEY: Zachary Rolfe (right) is accused of shooting dead 19-year-old Kumanjaya Walker

argue the officer acted unlawfully in shooting Walker three times. Even with the "good faith" defense struck out, Rolfe still has two other major legal points to rely on: that he acted reasonably or in self-defense. The case will likely draw scrutiny of clauses in Australian law that offer police officers immunity, according to law professor Anthony. "I think we'll really see an uptick in the campaigning against these special immunities," she said.

The trial will also inevitably stir debate about the high incarceration rate among Indigenous Australians—believed to be the most imprisoned people in the world—as well as over police accountability. "The conviction of Derek Chauvin in the US, who was found guilty of the murder of George Floyd, was a small step towards accountability," said Sophie Trevitt, executive officer of the Aboriginal-led justice coalition Change the Record. "Here in Australia, we have never seen that accountability." —AFP

nate aid for those displaced from Inn Ma Hte. "For them, it will be difficult to regain their livelihoods," he said, requesting anonymity. State-run TV ran a report on Thursday accusing PDF fighters of starting the fires, and published images it claimed showed burnt-out buildings destroyed by "terrorists". The Southeast Asian country has been in chaos since a coup last February, with more than 1,500 people killed in a crackdown on dissent, according to a local monitoring group.

In August the junta said it was considering raising village militias to combat opposition to its rule, as it struggles to assert control over swathes of the country.

Sagaing has seen regular clashes and bloody reprisals. In mid-December the United States and United Nations condemned the junta over what Washington described as "credible and sickening" reports of the killing of 11 villagers, including children, in the Sagaing region. —AFP

### News in brief

#### 'Citgo 6' sentence confirmed

**CARACAS:** Venezuela's supreme court confirmed sentences of up to 13 years and seven months in prison for six former executives of Citgo, the US-based subsidiary of the Latin American country's state oil company. The "Citgo 6"—five Venezuela-born American citizens and one with US permanent residency—have been held in Venezuela since 2017, accused of corruption. Their detention has further strained relations between Venezuela and the United States, which has repeatedly demanded their release. —AFP

#### Argentina cocaine toll 24

**BUENOS AIRES:** The death toll among dozens of people who consumed cocaine likely laced with opioids in Buenos Aires rose to 24 on Friday, with 23 still in hospital, health officials said. Eight of the hospitalized are in serious condition and on mechanical ventilation. Officials said 24 people, aged between 21 and 58, have died since Tuesday night from adulterated cocaine bought from dealers in the poor neighborhood of Loma Hermosa, some 40 kilometers (25 miles) from the Buenos Aires city center. —AFP

#### Peru president sacks PM

**LIMA:** Peruvian President Pedro Castillo dumped his prime minister Friday just three days after appointing him, amid outrage over revelations he was accused of domestic violence in 2016. "I have decided to reconstitute the cabinet," the president said, meaning Prime Minister Hector Valer Pinto is out. The leftist Castillo announced the change in a brief television address in which he did not mention Valer Pinto by name. —AFP

#### Pence rejects Trump claim

**WASHINGTON:** Former US vice president Mike Pence said Friday that he had no right to overturn the 2020 election and former president Donald Trump was wrong to claim he could have done so. Pence dismissed Trump's assertion he could have blocked Democrat Joe Biden's victory when he presided over the January 6, 2021 certification by Congress of the presidential election results. "President Trump said I had the right to overturn the election but President Trump is wrong," Pence said in a speech to the conservative Federalist Society in Florida. —AFP

#### DR Congo attack toll rises to 62

**BULE, DR Congo:** The toll of a machete attack at a camp for displaced people in eastern DR Congo this week has increased to 62 people killed, including 17 children, an official said Friday at a mass funeral. Grief-stricken relatives cried as men shovelled orange earth onto 53 coffins of different colours aligned in the ground at a mass burial following the killings on Tuesday. The bodies of a further nine people had been handed back to their families so they could be laid to rest in their villages following the attack overnight Tuesday. —AFP

#### Montenegro government toppled

**PODGORICA, Montenegro:** Montenegro's government was set to be dissolved following a no-confidence vote late Friday that sent the country's prime minister packing. The vote follows months of building tensions in the Balkan nation where a dysfunctional coalition government elected in 2020 has failed to make any tangible progress in passing reforms since taking power. "Things are not working. It is our responsibility to offer a solution and move to a new stage of development for the sake of the country's European future," said parliamentarian Milos Konatar, a member of the ruling coalition, ahead of the vote. —AFP

## Australian policeman faces trial over death of Aboriginal teen

**MELBOURNE:** An Australian constable goes on trial tomorrow with prosecutors trying to secure the country's first murder conviction against a police officer over the death of an Aboriginal person. Zachary Rolfe is accused of shooting dead 19-year-old Kumanjaya Walker in a remote outback town in 2019 in a high-profile case that prompted nationwide protests. Rolfe, 30, has pleaded not guilty. The trial kicks off amid growing outcry over the number of Indigenous deaths in police custody and follows large-scale racial justice rallies in Australia and around the world.

More than 500 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have died in custody since 1991, when detailed records began, including at least 11 in the last seven months. Despite several public inquiries and trials over similar cases, no Australian police officer has ever been convicted of murder over the death of an Indigenous person in custody. "Given the heightened attention to deaths in custody in Australia, and the Black Lives Matter movement, I think people are using this as a litmus test for whether the courts can provide justice for First Nations families," said Thalia Anthony, professor of law at the University of Technology Sydney.

In a surprise decision last November,

## Myanmar villagers accuse junta troops of burning homes

**YANGON:** Myanmar villagers and anti-coup fighters have accused troops of burning hundreds of homes in the country's restive northwest, as the junta seeks to crush resistance to its rule.

Mass protests against last year's coup have been met with a brutal military crackdown, and violence has flared across Myanmar as civilians form "people's defense forces" (PDF) to oppose the junta. A woman from Bin village in the Sagaing region, which has seen recent clashes, said troops had arrived in the early hours of Monday.

"They shelled artillery and fired guns before



SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 6, 2022

## Business

## US saw surprisingly robust hiring despite COVID surge

## Resilient economy added 467,000 jobs in January

WASHINGTON: The US economy brushed off a spike in COVID-19 infections to add 467,000 jobs in January, far better than expected and a potential sign that the pandemic's days of disrupting businesses are numbered. Labor Department data released Friday also showed major industries hiring, overall employment gains for 2021 revised higher, and more people entering the workforce, which pushed the unemployment rate up slightly to four percent.

The report was a welcome surprise for President Joe Biden, who has struggled to defend his economic policies as his approval ratings slid amid months of hiring data in which the surge in jobs he promised when taking office a year ago proved elusive. "America is back to work," the president said in a speech at the White House, cheering the "extraordinary resilience and grit" of US workers.

"This has never happened here," he said, pointing at a chart showing employment growth alongside the records of six previous presidents. "History's been made here." Many economists expected the data to show either weak hiring or perhaps a contraction in employment because the United States was weathering a massive increase in COVID-19 infections

in January, during the time the survey was taken.

The unexpectedly positive report will likely bolster the Federal Reserve's belief that the economy is healthy enough to raise the interest rate off zero. With inflation also high, top officials have strongly signaled that at their upcoming March meeting, they will make their first rate increase since the coronavirus caused the economy to collapse nearly two years ago.

Analysts said the figures highlighted the economy's resilience. "Omicron, Schmomicon," Ian Shepherdson of Pantheon Macroeconomics said. "These data make it clear that the labor market ahead of Omicron was much stronger than previously believed."

**Better than it seems**

Overall, the economy has added 19.1 million jobs since the nadir of the COVID-19 crisis in April 2020, but it is still short 2.9 million positions, the data said. Beyond January's job growth, some economists say even better news was found in upward revisions the Labor Department announced to last year's payroll data.

These showed hiring in November and December-months when the initial reports were surprisingly weak—was a

massive 709,000 positions higher than first reported. "This underscores a strong economy, ready to take the gold and move on to the next stage," Beth Ann Bovino of S&P Global Ratings said. However, the report said hiring was a total of only 217,000 positions higher for all of 2021, since some months' totals were revised lower.

Major industries that took on workers in January included the bars and restaurants that comprise the leisure and hospitality sector, which gained the most of any industry with 151,000 positions. Professional and business services added 86,000 positions and retail trade 61,000.

**Virus impact**

The labor force participation rate, indicating the share of the US population working or looking for work, ticked up slightly to 62.2 percent, the data showed. That metric had seen scant improvement over much of 2021, though its increase may also account for the rise in the unemployment rate from 3.9 percent in December. There was, however, little movement in the elevated jobless rates of minority groups. Unemployment among Black Americans was 6.9 percent and for Hispanics 4.9 percent, compared to the 3.4 percent



WASHINGTON: US President Joe Biden speaks about the January jobs report from the State Dining Room of the White House in Washington, DC, on Friday. —AFP

jobless rate for white workers.

Average hourly earnings ticked up again to \$31.63, making them 5.7 percent higher for the past 12 months as the economy weathered a spike in consumer prices.

But there were still signs in the report of the impact from COVID-19. The government said 3.6 million people

were employed but not at work because of an illness at the time the survey was taken, an all-time high. The number of people who said they couldn't work because their employer's business was closed or otherwise affected by the pandemic also jumped to six million. In December, only 3.1 million workers were in such a position. —AFP

## Oil prices extend gains as markets weigh US jobs data

LONDON: Stocks were mixed Friday as markets weighed a surprisingly good US jobs report against concerns over tightening monetary policy, while oil prices pushed closer to \$100 a barrel.

The United States added an unexpectedly robust 467,000 jobs in January, according to Labor Department data that also significantly raised employment increases for November and December. While the report suggests health in the world's largest economy, another big rise in 10-year US Treasury note yields Friday focused concerns on expectations for multiple Federal Reserve interest rate hikes this year.

Worries about monetary tightening weighed on the Dow, while the S&P 500 and Nasdaq both finished higher. All three major US indices finished the week in positive territory, with the S&P 500 winning 1.5 percent. Earlier, European bourses had retreated a day after the European Central Bank opened the door to hiking interest rates in light of inflation. Next week's US consumer price index report could be another source of volatility, analysts warned.

"Persistent inflation, like a house fire, would force the Fed to barrel in and hose down inflation without regard for the upholstery, in this case equities," said Jack Ablin, chief investment officer at Cresset Capital Management. Oil prices kept climbing, with both the global and US benchmark contracts topping \$93 a barrel on a combination of factors that include cold weather in the United States and uncertainty over Ukraine.

"With demand standing resilient, it appears stronger supply will have to be the answer for calming market prices, but new production is notoriously slow in reacting to changing conditions," said Robbie Fraser of Schneider Electric. "While OPEC+ continues to slowly increase exports, US shale continues a slow pace of additions, even as prices are well beyond breakeven levels for all key regions."

Among individual companies, Amazon surged 13.5 percent as the company reported stronger-than-expected results despite higher labor, sourcing and delivery costs, with revenues jumping nine percent to \$137.4 billion in the fourth quarter. Snap was another big winner, soaring nearly 60 percent after the firm behind messaging app Snapchat reported its first-ever quarterly profit.

But Ford slumped nearly 10 percent as the automaker's fourth-quarter profits lagged analyst estimates, with the company citing supply chain problems as a factor. —AFP

## Meta adds 'personal boundary' tool after virtual harassment

MENLO PARK: Facebook parent Meta began rolling out Friday a minimum distance between users' avatars in its virtual reality Horizon network after reports of harassment, one of the thorny issues for its metaverse vision. The "personal boundary" function in the immersive platform, where people can socialize virtually, puts a ring of space around users' digital proxies.

"A personal boundary prevents anyone from invading your avatar's personal space," Horizon vice president Vivek Sharma wrote. "If someone tries to enter your personal boundary, the system will halt their forward movement as they reach the boundary," Sharma added.

The new function comes after complaints have emerged in press reports and in social media or blog posts of incidents of harassment. "Within 60 seconds of joining - I was verbally and sexually

## Amazon holiday quarter profit doubles

NEW YORK: Amazon reported its profit doubled to \$14 billion in the crucial holiday quarter, giving a boost to jittery markets that expected less due to higher labor, sourcing and delivery costs. The e-commerce colossus said its net sales climbed to \$137 billion, and its profit benefited greatly from a return on investment in electric vehicle maker Rivian, which went public in November.

Amazon shares were up some 14 percent in after-hours trading at 2300 GMT, drawing in investors eager for some good news after shares tanked in Facebook parent Meta. Amazon has been a big pandemic-era winner but it is particularly exposed to the supply chain headaches, labor churn and inflation that have come to weigh on people's lives and business' ability to make money.

"Despite these short-term challenges, we continue to feel optimistic and excited about the business as we emerge from the pandemic," CEO Andy Jassy said in an earnings statement. Amazon said it had its

## Over 7m visited Dubai in 2021 tourism turnaround

DUBAI: More than seven million foreign tourists visited Dubai last year, marking a "remarkable turnaround", the government of the Gulf city state hosting the Expo world fair announced.

The figure was up 32 percent on 2020, the first full year of the coronavirus pandemic, Dubai's economy and tourism department said in a statement. It

harassed," one user wrote in a blog of her experience. "A horrible experience that happened so fast and before I could even think about putting the safety barrier in place. I froze," she added. The boundary function is turned on by default, said Sharma, who added users will still be able to bump fists or give one another high-fives.

Horizon already has an anti-harassment feature that makes an avatar's hands vanish if it tries to inappropriately touch another virtual character, according to its creator.

Meta opened its Horizon Worlds virtual reality platform to the public in North America in December, in a step toward building its metaverse vision for the future. Facebook rebranded itself Meta last year to move past being a scandal-plagued social network and toward its plans to build a virtual universe blurring the lines between the physical world and the digital one.

But critics of the social networking giant fear that certain mass phenomena observed online, such as harassment or misinformation, will be reproduced in these ultra-immersive worlds.

Horizon Worlds is far from a fully realized metaverse, which even Meta concedes will require years of work and significant technological advances. But

"biggest-ever Black Friday to Cyber Monday holiday shopping weekend." The company also noted that its Amazon Web Services unit had inked big cloud computing deals with Nasdaq, Meta and others. AWS generated \$17.78 billion in revenue in the period, 40 percent more year-on-year.

This came as Google parent Alphabet and Apple have posted whopping profits this earnings season, although Facebook was battered by markets-losing some \$200 billion in value—after disappointing results that cast doubts about its future. Analysts remained subdued on the earnings, which included an \$11.8 billion boost from Amazon's Rivian investment. "Amazon managed to beat on the top and bottom lines despite softer growth trends for e-commerce this holiday quarter, which also weighed on growth in the high margin ads business," said Insider Intelligence analyst Andrew Lipsman.

**Uneven earnings**

"The one clear bright spot for the core business was the continued acceleration in AWS to help bolster a bottom line," he added. In the fourth quarter, Amazon's operating profit, a key indicator of profitability, came in at \$3.5 billion, half what it was a year ago. In the coming months, news is expected on the efforts of workers to organize unions at sites in New York and Alabama, either of which would

hailed the recovery as "a remarkable turnaround amid continuing global challenges".

This year, however, missile attacks since last month by Yemeni rebels on the United Arab Emirates of which Dubai is a member have prompted US and UK travel warnings. Dubai, home of the world's tallest tower, super-luxury hotels and swanky nightclubs, has since October 1 hosted Expo 2020 which runs until March 31.

The glitzy emirate, a trading and leisure hub for which tourism is a pillar of the economy, attracted a massive 16.7 million tourists from the East and West in 2019, before COVID-19 restrictions. It has recorded a total of more than 850,000 cases of coronavirus, including over 2,250 deaths. —AFP



MENLO PARK, US: In this file photo, a pedestrian walks in front of a new logo and the name 'Meta' on the sign in front of Facebook headquarters in Menlo Park. —AFP

headset-wearing users in the United States and Canada can now gather with friends or others, play games and build their own virtual worlds on Horizon as long as they are 18 years old and have the proper equipment.

"It's an important step, and there's still much more work to be done," Sharma wrote of the new safety feature. Options being explored include letting people adjust the distance for their personal boundaries, he added. —AFP



NEW YORK: Amazon reported its profit doubled to \$14 billion in the crucial holiday quarter

be the first at an Amazon US warehouse. Also, consumers will see the price go up for Amazon's Prime membership in the United States from \$12.99 to \$14.99 per month with the annual rate going from \$119 to \$139 — the first increase since 2018. It has been an uneven earnings season, with great hits and misses. Google's parent firm Alphabet announced quarterly profits Tuesday that beat expectations and nearly doubled in 2021 — after a booming holiday season for the online ads giant facing anti-trust regulation scrutiny. —AFP



DUBAI: The Burj Khalifa is the tallest structure in the world, standing at 829.8 m (2,722 ft) which is three times as tall as the Eiffel Tower and almost twice as tall as the Empire State Building.



## Business

# Lisa Cook, expert on racism's economic scars, Biden Fed pick

## Cook expected to bring a new perspective to US central bank

WASHINGTON: A researcher focused on how discrimination has harmed the American economy and the damage downturns do to the poor, Lisa Cook would bring a new perspective to the US central bank. If confirmed by the Senate, Cook would be the first Black woman to serve on the powerful Federal Reserve Board of Governors, a seven-member body which guides the country's monetary policy and throughout its 108-year history has largely been a domain of white men.

The daughter of a Baptist chaplain and a professor of nursing, Cook bears physical scars from racism after she was attacked as a young child while involved in an effort to integrate racially segregated schools in the state of Georgia. She has dedicated much of her research as an adult to previously unmeasured economic scars of discrimination on the productive capacity of the world's largest economy.

Cook is one of President Joe Biden's picks to fill open seats on the Fed board, along with Philip Jefferson of Davidson College, who would be the fourth Black man to serve on the body.

For the powerful post of Fed vice chair for supervision, which oversees the nation's banks, Biden tapped former Fed governor Sarah Bloom Raskin, who is white. If all three new nominees are confirmed, women would comprise a majority on the board for the first time in the central bank's history.

### Focus on discrimination

Cook is a professor of economics and international relations at Michigan State University, and earned an economics degree from Oxford University and a doctorate from the University of California, Berkeley. She speaks five languages, including Russian, and also specializes in international development economics, having worked on topics such as Rwanda's recovery following the 1994 genocide. "That experience convinced me of the enormous responsibility economists have,"



WASHINGTON: Lisa DeNell Cook, nominated to be a Member of the Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, testifies before a Senate Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs Committee confirmation hearing. — AFP

she said in a video on her university's website, where she highlights her focus on non-traditional data sources.

"It is absolutely vital to ask the right questions and to seek the right data." Cook grew up in an area of the United States where public swimming pools were destroyed rather than allowed to be integrated, and was one of the first Black children to attend her previously segregated school. She has studied lynchings and patents issued to Black entrepreneurs, arguing that discrimination has held back the entire society, not just the direct victims of the injustice. "My own research demonstrates, for example, how hate-related violence can reduce the level and long-term growth of the US economy," she wrote in a November 2020 column in The New York Times.

### Fed focus on inequality

Critics say Biden's choices would politicize the Fed's stewardship of the economy at a critical

time, with inflation at a 40-year high and millions of jobs lost during the COVID-19 pandemic still missing. Others, including conservative political commentator George Will, have questioned Cook's credentials.

But central bank watchers dismiss those concerns as racially motivated. Fed Chair Jerome Powell, who is also awaiting confirmation after Biden nominated him to a second term, has repeatedly stressed the importance of ensuring economic opportunities extend to disadvantaged groups—a notable change of focus in an economy where Black workers face far higher unemployment rates than other racial groups.

"The politics around this are really kind of shameful," Grant Thornton chief economist Diane Swonk told AFP, calling Cook a "phenomenal" candidate for the post. Her experience will fill "huge holes" in the ranks at the Fed which was "late on the uptake" in recognizing the costs of inequality, Swonk added. "You want to improve the quality of decision making by diversifying the pool of decision makers."

The struggle is not new to Cook, who in interviews has said male economists often discouraged her from pursuing a career in the profession. David Wessel, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution think tank and a longtime Fed watcher, dismissed the criticisms about qualifications. "The people who are against her are describing a caricature," he said in an interview. "The double standard that's going on here is ridiculous." He predicted Cook, who also worked at the White House Council of Economic Advisers under former president Barack Obama and on Biden's transition team, would be confirmed despite the opposition. When it comes to monetary policy, she and her fellow nominees will bring a new perspective but likely follow Powell's lead on policy as the Fed prepares to raise interest rates multiple times this year, Wessel said. —AFP

when the UK left the European Union. It and all other unionist parties argue the checks on goods coming from England, Scotland and Wales are damaging the Northern Ireland economy. Irish Foreign Minister Simon Coveney said the threat by Poots amounted to a "breach of international law" and was "a very serious matter indeed".

### 'Halt all checks'

"It's essentially playing politics with legal obligations. And I certainly hope that it doesn't happen, as has been threatened," he said.

London and Brussels have spent months trying to thrash out compromises to reform the protocol but Poots indicated he wanted to short-circuit the process.

He said his own legal advice stated he had the power to suspend the sanitary checks on plant and animal goods entering Northern Ireland from the UK mainland. "I have now issued a formal instruction to my permanent secretary to halt all checks that were not in place on December 31, 2020 from midnight tonight," he said on Wednesday.

The DUP is trailing Sinn Fein in opinion polls as Northern Ireland gears up for elections in May, and other parties accuse it of growing increasingly desperate on the question of the protocol.

But the DUP insists that the EU agreement is a threat to Northern Ireland's pro-UK unionist population, and wants London to scrap it unilaterally. On Thursday, the DUP's Paul Givan resigned as first minister of the power-sharing executive in Belfast, prompting calls from nationalists for early elections.

British Foreign Secretary Liz Truss and EU commission vice president Maros Sefcovic are locked in talks to try to agree changes. —AFP

## N Ireland court orders post-Brexit port checks to resume

LONDON: Northern Ireland's High Court on Friday issued an interim order suspending a decision by Agriculture Minister Edwin Poots to stop post-Brexit checks on agri-food moving to and from mainland Britain. The ruling, made by judge Adrian Colton, will stand until a judicial review against the unionist minister's decision can be heard in full.

The checks on trade between the province and mainland Britain are mandated by a post-Brexit EU protocol, but are deeply unpopular among the pro-British community. Unionist parties say that checks on the Irish Sea border, to prevent unchecked goods entering the European single market via EU-member Ireland to the south, Northern Ireland risks being cast adrift from the rest of the UK. The Irish government in Dublin and nationalist, pro-Irish parties in Northern Ireland said the order by Poots, of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), broke the law. In his ruling, Colton said: "There shouldn't be any confusion hanging over those in the Civil Service, so I am persuaded this is a case where there should be interim relief."

"I therefore make the order to suspend the instruction given by the minister for agriculture until further order of this court." The DUP is bitterly opposed to the Northern Ireland Protocol, an agreement reached between London and Brussels to regulate its trade



LARNE, UK: A lorry leaves Larne port, north of Belfast in Northern Ireland, after arriving on a ferry from Stranraer in Scotland. — AFP

bars and restaurants most vulnerable to COVID-19, and added 151,000 workers.

Professional and business services gained 86,000 jobs, retail trade 61,000 and transportation and warehousing 54,000. Overall, the economy has grown by 19.1 million jobs since the nadir of the COVID-19 crisis in April 2020, but it is still short 2.9 million positions, according to the data.

### Four percent unemployment

Despite the healthy hiring, the unemployment rate rose slightly from its 3.9 percent level in December. That may be a function of an increase to 62.2 percent in the labor force participation rate, which measures the percentage of the population working or looking for jobs, and has struggled to return to its 63.4 percent level before the pandemic.

### Tweaks to 2021

The Labor Department also revised its hiring totals for last year, which was characterized by surprising whipsaws in monthly job gains as vaccine

rollouts helped the economy recover even as the Delta and Omicron variants menaced it anew. Weaker-than-expected hiring in November and December was revised to show it was a total of 709,000 jobs higher than first reported. However, the massive hiring totals in June and July were lowered by a combined 807,000 positions. All told, last year's employment gains were revised upwards by 217,000.

### Massive pandemic disruptions

Even if the overall report was a positive surprise, there were still signs workers struggled amid the surge in COVID-19 infections. The government said 3.6 million people were employed but not at work because of an illness at the time the survey was taken, an all-time high.

The number of people who said they couldn't work because their employer's business was closed or otherwise affected by the pandemic also jumped to six million. In December, only 3.1 million workers were in such a position. —AFP



## Italy's biggest bank promises share-holders \$25.2 billion

ROME: Intesa Sanpaolo, Italy's biggest bank, said Friday it would pay its shareholders 22 billion euros (\$25.2 billion) between now and 2025 as part of its new strategic plan. The bank announced a 27.7 percent increase in net profit to 4.18 billion euros in 2021, slightly above expectations although less than predicted several years ago due to the coronavirus pandemic. For 2022, Intesa Sanpaolo expects a net profit of more than five billion euros, chief executive Carlo Messina said. The shareholder payout, in dividends and share buybacks, is equivalent to more than 40 percent of Intesa Sanpaolo's market capitalization and includes 6.6 billion euros in 2022.

Messina told analysts' call that the payout ratio—the proportion of earnings paid to shareholders—of 70 percent was "one of the highest in the banking sector in Europe and we consider it to be the right level". Main rival UniCredit set its own ambitious target in December of paying out at least 16 billion euros to shareholders by 2024.

That same month, the European Banking Authority (EBA) urged banks not to be "overly generous", even those with "comfortable" liquidity positions, in case the economic outlook worsened. At the start of the pandemic in early 2020, the European Central Bank asked banks in the eurozone to suspend dividends and share buybacks, but this recommendation was lifted last summer. As a result, European companies are expected to pay out a total of 410 billion euros to shareholders this year, a new record after the 378 billion in 2021, according to a report last month from AllianzGI.

Messina insisted the strategic plan took a long-term approach and was "prudent and conservative". After a takeover of Ubi Banca in 2020, the chief executive said Intesa Sanpaolo would be cautious on mergers and acquisitions in the years to come. —AFP

## The numbers behind surprisingly good Jan for US workers

WASHINGTON: The US economy surprised forecasters by adding hundreds of thousands of jobs in the first month of 2022, even as COVID-19 infections hit levels never seen before. Here are the surprising findings of the Labor Department's January employment report:

### 467,000 jobs created

The headline increase in employment was far better than the 180,000-position jump analysts expected, and defied worst-case predictions that employment last month actually decreased as the pandemic flared anew. Among the industries taking on the most workers was leisure and hospitality, which comprises the

### News in brief

#### Namibia offshore oil discovery

WINDHOEK, Namibia: Namibia's state-owned oil company on Friday said Shell and Qatar Energy had discovered light oil deposits offshore, but had yet to determine how large or viable they were. "We are pleased to announce that the Graff-1 deep-water exploration well, 270 kilometers (165 miles) from the town of Oranjemund, has made a discovery of light oil in both primary and secondary targets," the National Petroleum Corporation of Namibia (NAMCOR) said in a statement. Further work is needed to determine the quality, size and viability of the reservoir, it added. —AFP

#### German industrial orders rise

FRANKFURT: Incoming orders to German industry rose for the second month in a row in December, official figures published Friday showed, after the economy was buffeted by supply bottlenecks in 2021. The indicator, which gives a foretaste of industrial production, climbed by 2.8 percent in December over the previous month, having risen by 3.6 percent in November, according to revised figures from the federal statistics agency Destatis. Over the whole of 2021, orders were 17.8 percent higher than in 2020, when the economy was laid low by the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic. —AFP

#### IMF disburses \$1bn for Pakistan

WASHINGTON: The IMF has approved a \$1 billion loan disbursement for Pakistan after signaling approval with recent government reforms. The money comes from an agreement that was approved in July 2019 for a \$6 billion loan over a period of more than three years under the Washington-based crisis lender's Extended Fund Facility. However, only a third of the money has been sent out thus far, with the IMF holding back until Islamabad implements reforms it had committed to. To secure the release of the latest tranche, announced Wednesday, the government submitted a new budget to the IMF last month, which includes ending tax exemptions on basic commodities and foodstuffs. —AFP

#### Canada shed jobs in January

OTTAWA: Canada shed 200,000 jobs in January as reintroduced public health restrictions to slow the spread of the COVID-19 Omicron variant forced many businesses to close temporarily, a government agency showed Friday. That pushed up the unemployment rate 0.5 percentage points to 6.5 percent, Statistics Canada said in a statement. It was the first increase since last spring when the economy began to rebound and recover jobs lost in the pandemic upheaval. The jobs data, commented Desjardins analyst Royce Mendes, "was worse than the consensus had predicted." But he noted a bright spot: outside of high-touched sectors such as accommodation and food services, "employment actually held up well in January," with the goods sector adding jobs, for example. —AFP

## Fitch lowers Ukraine from positive to stable, keeps B rating

KIEV: Credit rating agency Fitch downgraded Ukraine's long-term debt outlook from positive to stable on Friday due to tensions with Russia, while maintaining its rating at B. "Expectations of a more protracted period of heightened tensions with Russia, an increased downside risk of conflict, constrained financing conditions, moderate capital outflows and weakening international reserves, have increased external financing risks since our previous review in August," the rating agency said.

Though downgraded from positive to stable, the outlook is not negative, as the agency believes "full-scale military conflict with Russia will be avoided." The agency is counting on a "somewhat greater availability of IFI [International Financial Institutions] and bilateral finance, Ukraine's credible macro-policy framework and strengthened fiscal and FX reserves position coming into 2022," which it said "will help mitigate impacts."

The IMF on Wednesday urged a peaceful resolution to the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, stressing that it was already having an impact on energy prices and posed a threat to global growth.

Since the end of 2021, Russia has massed up to 100,000 soldiers on the border with Ukraine. Western states accuse Moscow of preparing to attack. Moscow denies any plans to invade, while demanding written guarantees for its own security, including assurances that Ukraine will not join NATO, and the end of the Atlantic Alliance's expansion eastwards, in particular in the former Soviet republics. —AFP



## Business

# 'Together under one tent': IKEA way of honoring togetherness culture of Kuwait

## IKEA Pop-Up to host family and group activities as part of national celebrations



**KUWAIT:** In the month of the Kuwait national celebrations, IKEA joins in by honoring the togetherness culture and heritage of Kuwait with the latest Pop-Up in 360. The IKEA Pop-Up will host family and group activities as part of its festive calendar, bringing the Kuwaiti culture closer through food, music, and creativity.

Inspired by its vision "to create a better everyday life for the many people", IKEA Kuwait opens a new Pop-Up to provide both outdoor solutions and entertaining experiences that are rooted in Kuwaiti traditional and cultural labels. The IKEA Pop-Up reflects Kuwait's stunning sand dunes, cityscape, and desert lands through tents that feature IKEA's flexible outdoor solutions, the Hembjuden Ramadan collection, and many inspiring accessories.

"The series of lockdowns in the past two years made people more appreciative of Kuwait's miraculous desert lands and outdoor spaces. The country enjoys heavenly landscapes of nature and sand

dunes that people in Kuwait can explore and treat themselves after long periods of lockdowns. With our home furnishing knowledge, our beautiful, flexible, and affordable home furnishing solutions, we aim to inspire the people of Kuwait to create the tent of their dreams," stated Asma El Achhab, IKEA Kuwait Marketing Activity Leader.

The IKEA Pop-Up welcomes visitors who are open to new adventures and experiences in nature, families who want to set-up outdoor tents for special gatherings and occasions such as Ramadan iftars, and anyone who wants to make use of their outdoor spaces and have a makeover at their rooftops, backyards, or even their walk-in basements.

There will also be a two weeks' family and group activity on February 10, 2022, for those who like to create and display an artwork for Kuwait National and Liberation days. The 'Art for Kuwait' activity will provide small groups a chance to come together and translate



their own feelings for Kuwait through their personalized artwork.

"We are pleased to welcome all our visitors to come and enjoy the Pop-Up at

360 and safely re-experience the spirit of connection, unity, and coziness under IKEA's togetherness tents. The tents strictly follow all the COVID-19 safety

requirements and recommendations from the authorities to ensure an enjoyable and safe experience to all the visitors of the IKEA Pop-Up," pointed out Mohammad Jalloul, IKEA Kuwait Marketing Manager.

"We highlight the fact that IKEA is setting up tents for families to bond and get together, a type of diwaniya culture which is famous in Kuwait. What we have here are solutions to petty problems we face when we want to achieve something for diwaniya type settings," said Jalloul. "With IKEA touch, the more external solution we offer, the more we encourage people to go out, have fun and have a good time with love ones, it's more important," he added.

Visitors can visit the IKEA Pop-Up in 360 ground floor, main atrium until March 4, 2022. IKEA is inviting all the people of Kuwait to further enjoy an exciting shopping experience: IKEA The Avenues, IKEA 360 Planning Studio and IKEA The Assima Mall.

## Argentina pays IMF \$370m in debt interest

**WASHINGTON:** Argentina on Friday paid \$370 million to the IMF as interest on a \$44 billion debt that was rescheduled late last month, officials said. The Central Bank's bulletin showed international reserves of \$37.18 billion at the end of the day, a difference from the day before corresponding to the amount paid out Friday.

It was the second payment of the year by Argentina, after a transfer of approximately \$700 million last Friday, the day that the rescheduling announcement was announced. Argentina and the IMF announced a week ago an agreement in principle on a renegotiation of the country's \$44 billion debt in return for economic reforms.

Under the new deal, Argentina has committed to progressively reducing its fiscal deficit from three percent of GDP in 2021 to 0.9 percent in 2024. The gradual reduction-to 2.5 percent in 2022 and 1.9 percent in 2023 — would "not prevent the recovery" of the economy, Economy Minister Martin Guzman said last week. IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva said there was no alternative to a pending agreement with the Washington-based crisis lender to get Argentina out of its spiral of inflation and poverty.

"Our main focus is to get Argentina out of this very dangerous path of high inflation," she told reporters. Last week, Argentina and the IMF announced they had reached a deal to renegotiate a staggering \$44 billion in debt in exchange for economic reforms, though further negotiations are expected. Georgieva said these talks offered a path forward for Argentina, and without a deal, poverty would rise, particularly among children. "What is the alternative? The alternative is nothing," she said. —AFP

## Costa Rica: Central America's green pin-up

**ALAJUELA, Costa Rica:** Costa Rica, which elects a new president today, is a small country thriving on ecotourism. Its neutrality, strong democracy and political stability have earned it the nickname of Central America's Switzerland. Here are four facts about the country of more than five million people:

### Beacon of peace

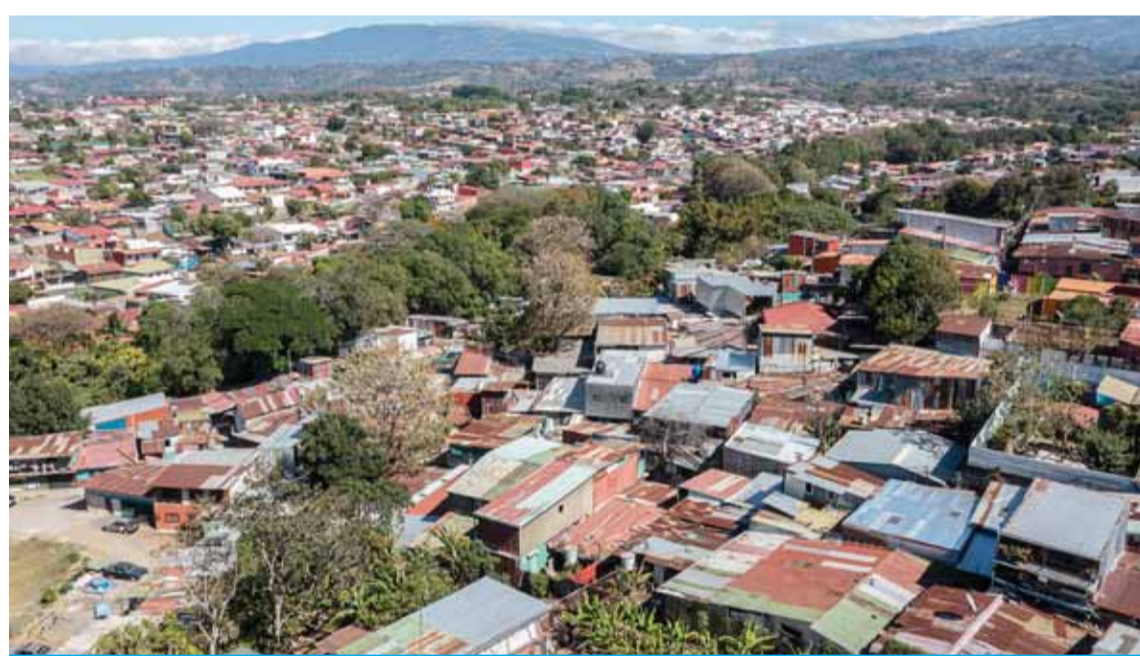
Independent since 1821, Costa Rica is considered a model of democracy in Central America. A short civil war in 1948 led to the abolition of the army and helped put in place the country's political stability.

In the 1980s, when several other Central American countries were mired in civil wars, neutral Costa Rica acted as peace broker, earning then-president Oscar Arias Sanchez the Nobel Peace Prize in 1987. It saw a political shift in 2014, when the two rightwing parties that had shared power since the 1960s—the PLN and PUSC—suffered an historic defeat as centrist Luis Guillermo Solis was elected president.

Outgoing president Carlos Alvarado is from the same party. On the international stage Costa Rica has fought for disarmament and for a total end to nuclear weapons and the strengthening of the non-proliferation regime. Over recent years it has seen an increase in organized crime, largely due to the drug trafficking that has ravaged its neighbors.

### Green paradise

With its stunning beaches on the Pacific and Caribbean coasts, its lush rainforests and imposing volcanoes, Costa Rica has become known as a green democracy and global leader for its environmental policies. Nature reserves cover a quarter of Costa Rica's 51,000 square kilometers (19,700 square miles), territory that hosts five percent of the world's biodiversity. It is one of the few countries to have banned blood sports and to have shunned exploitation by the mining and oil giants, which are the main source of income for many Latin American countries.



ALAJUELA, Costa Rica: Aerial view of El Erizo (left) low-income neighborhood and the modern neighborhood of Ciruelas, in the province of Alajuela, Costa Rica. —AFP

Over the last decade the environment has nevertheless come under strain from economic development, with a poor administration of protected areas, increasing air, ground and water pollution, and damage caused by the cultivation of pineapples. Costa Rica is nevertheless the only tropical country which has managed to reverse deforestation, according to the World Bank.

It has invested heavily in clean energy, passing the threshold of generating electricity exclusively from renewable energy 300 days in one year, in 2017. The nation has vowed to eliminate the use of fossil fuels by 2050.

### Decades of growth

Costa Rica has seen 25 years of regular economic growth, thanks to the opening up to foreign investment and a gradual liberalization of foreign trade. Its main exports are bananas, pineapples and coffee. It is also the world's biggest exporter of butterflies. GDP per capita has tripled since 1960, but in 2020 it contracted by 4.1 percent due to the

COVID pandemic.

In 2021 growth was expected to reach 3.8 percent, according to the World Bank. The poverty rate that year rose to 23 percent, according to official statistics. Costa Rica has a top-notch social security system and has invested heavily in education. It is ranked 62nd out of 189 countries on the UN's Human Development Index. The tourism sector represents eight percent of GDP, but was hammered by the pandemic. A member of the OECD since 2021, the country has been trying to attract digital nomads to boost its economy.

### Land of asylum

More than 100,000 Nicaraguans, fleeing the violent crackdown on anti-government protests, have taken refuge in Costa Rica. A conservative, religious country, but with a long tradition of opening its arms to asylum seekers, Costa Rica has taken in hundreds of lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgender people who were persecuted in their home countries in Central America. — AFP

## Spain govt salvages key labor reform demanded by Brussels

**MADRID:** Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez managed to secure last-minute backing for a key labour reform demanded by Brussels that is aimed at ending rampant job insecurity.

Despite lacking support from several traditional parliamentary allies, Sanchez managed to push through the reform with support from the liberal Ciudadanos and some centre-right lawmakers, allowing the text to be voted through with a majority of just one vote—with 175 in favor and 174 against in the 350-seat chamber. The reform is aimed at reducing insecurity in Spain's labor market, which has the highest number of temporary contracts in Europe.

Although the reform took effect on January 1 following a hard-fought deal negotiated between the government, employers' groups and unions, it still needed par-

liamentary approval to avoid being rendered null and void. But getting backing for the reform proved more difficult than expected, with Sanchez's Socialists and hard-left coalition partner Podemos—which hold a minority in parliament—failing to win over several key allies, notably Basque and Catalan independence parties, which voted against. The right-wing opposition Popular Party and the far-right Vox also voted against.

With the reform poised to hit the rocks, Sanchez sought backing from Ciudadanos and several small factions that are normally in opposition. However after the vote, the Popular Party said it was one of its lawmakers who had tipped the balance due to a "computer error" and had in fact meant to vote against. It was an "anomaly" and should be "rectified", party spokesperson Cuca Gamarra insisted.

Reforming the country's labor laws was a condition laid down by Brussels in exchange for Spain receiving the promised 140 billion euros (\$158 billion) under the EU's massive coronavirus recovery plan. The new text amends legislation originally passed in 2012 by the right-wing government of Mariano Rajoy in a bid to revive the economy following the 2008 global financial crisis. —AFP

## UK regulator hands Meta new fine over Giphy takeover

**LONDON:** Britain on Friday ordered Facebook parent Meta to pay another £1.5 million for breaching regulatory rules over its acquisition of animated graphics startup Giphy. The Competition and Markets Authority said in a statement that Meta had failed to alert the regulator in advance of three key staff leaving Giphy as it probed the transaction.

The penalty, equivalent to \$2.0 million or 1.8 million euros, comes after the CMA had already fined the group £50.5 million last October for failing to supply information linked to the deal. "This is not the first time Meta failed to inform the CMA of staff changes at the appropriate time, having failed to do so multiple times in 2021," the watchdog said on Friday.

The penalty took into account the "nature and gravity of the breach in question". In reaction, Meta said it would pay up — but described the fine as "problematic".

"We are disappointed by the CMA's decision to fine us because of the voluntary departure of US-based employees," said a company spokesperson.

"We intend to pay the fine, but it is problematic that the CMA can take decisions that could directly impact the rights of our US employees protected under US law." Meta had announced the purchase of Giphy — a platform and search engine for "stickers" and other products using the graphics interchange format or GIFs — for a reported \$400 million in May 2020.

The CMA then launched an investigation into the proposed acquisition one month later. The British watchdog then ordered Meta to sell Giphy in November 2021, ruling the deal would harm competition and advertising. However, Meta is appealing this verdict in a hearing due at the end of April. —AFP





Visitors exit the Seattle NFT Museum during its opening weekend in Seattle, Washington. Using the blockchain technology behind cryptocurrencies, Non-fungible tokens (NFTs) transform anything from illustrations to memes into virtual collectors' items that cannot be duplicated. — AFP photos



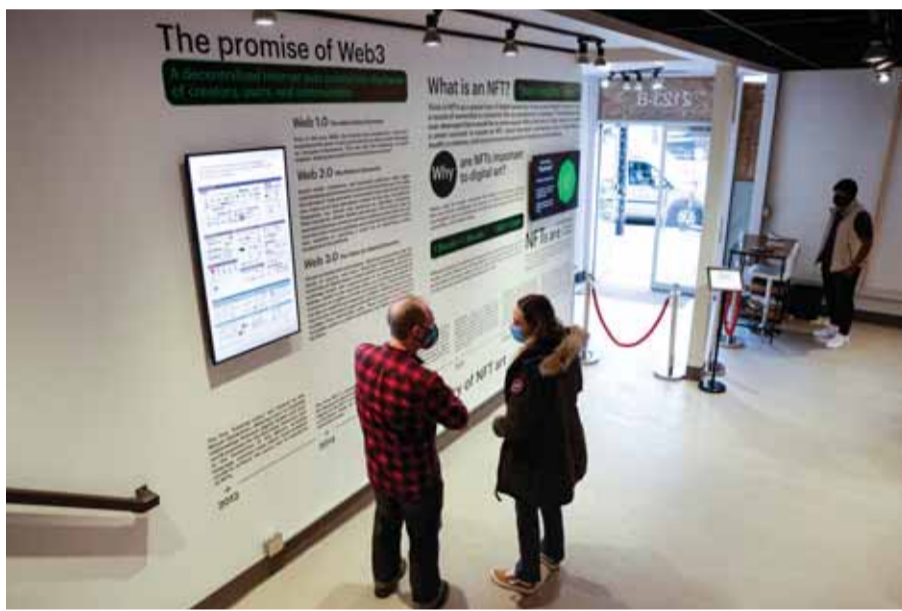
Visitors read about Non-Fungible Tokens, or NFTs, during the opening weekend of the Seattle NFT Museum in Seattle.

# Can Hermes, Nike stop 'unauthorized' NFTs?

As digital objects in the form of NFTs have exploded in popularity and value over the past year, so too have the legal headaches and complications. Nike became the latest company to file a lawsuit over the issue on Thursday - suing shopping platform StockX for creating and marketing NFTs with its logo and branding. It follows a lawsuit last month by French luxury brand Hermes against artist Mason Rothschild, who has auctioned 100 "MetaBirkins" - a digital "homage" to the label's famous Birkin bag - some fetching tens of thousands of dollars.

## Can these cases succeed?

The Hermes case could go either way, said lawyer Annabelle Gauberti, whose firm Crefovi specialises in creative industries. Rothschild has argued that he is protected by the First Amendment as an artist, which often has validity in US courts. In Europe, too: Gauberti recalled the example of a case from a decade ago in which Louis Vuitton lost in its attempts to prevent a Dutch artist placing one of its bags in a picture of a Darfur refugee. "The 'fair use' defence works well, particularly in UK and US law, in which an artist can use a trademarked word or product to



Visitors stand in front of a display about Non-Fungible Tokens, or NFTs, during the opening weekend of the Seattle NFT Museum in Seattle.

make a point or as a parody," Gauberti said. But she said Rothschild may struggle to convince a judge that his work had artistic merit.

"It's hard to see on the face of it what

message he is trying to convey other than that he wants to make a lot of money, so it's going to be a lot of work for his legal team," she said. The Nike case is a more directly commercial affair, since StockX

has never claimed its NFTs are a form of art. But it remains to be seen how trademark law holds up in the digital realm. "The extent of these protections in the digital world as well as what remedies can be granted are yet to be explored," wrote lawyer Danielle Garno in a briefing note for Lexology.

## Should NFTs be treated differently?

In his response to Hermes, published on Twitter, Rothschild compared his MetaBirkins to Andy Warhol's famous Campbell soup paintings. "The fact that I sell the art using NFTs doesn't change the fact that it's art," he wrote in a response published on Twitter. However, Edward Lee of Chicago-Kent College of Law told Bloomberg Law that the Warhol comparison was not perfect since the Campbell Soup Co. was never likely to get into the business of selling paintings, whereas Hermes could well choose to create its own NFTs. The technology can also confuse matters, since an NFT is actually just a receipt of ownership, rather than the thing itself. "Many people assume that, when you talk about an NFT, the content of the NFT is inside the token, which it is not, and because it is not, there is no

unauthorized reproduction," Primavera De Filippi, co-author of "Blockchain and the Law," told Business of Fashion magazine.

## What can companies do?

Hermes has demanded that Rothschild remove and destroy his MetaBirkins, and at least one NFT platform, OpenSea, has already agreed to remove them from sale. But Gauberti said enforcing the law online is very tricky. "Even if lawsuits are successful, how do you go after the guy who has already bought the item or stop them being sold on secondary auctions? It's the wild west in terms of enforcement online," she said.

The best option, she said, is for brands to get ahead of the copycats and dominate the space with "official" NFTs. Nike has done exactly that, acquiring RTFKT, a company that specializes in designing digital sneakers, in December. "A strong offence is the best defense," said Gauberti. "At the moment, a lot of these brands are on the fence (about creating their own NFTs) because their core products are physical, and they're still watching the space to see if the metaverse will really take off." — AFP

## Search begins for Shackleton's lost shipwreck

A South African icebreaker departed yesterday morning in search of Ernest Shackleton's ship Endurance, which sank off the coast of Antarctica in 1915 after being slowly crushed by pack ice. "The Falklands Maritime Heritage Trust is pleased to confirm that the Endurance22 Expedition, which is aiming to locate, survey and film the wreck of Endurance... has departed on schedule from Cape Town, headed for

the Weddell Sea in Antarctica," the expedition's organizers announced.

As part of the renowned polar explorer's Imperial Trans-Antarctic expedition between 1914 and 1917, Endurance was meant to make the first land crossing of Antarctica, but it fell prey to the Weddell Sea. Just east of the Larsen ice shelves on the Antarctic peninsula, it became ensnared in sea-ice for over 10 months before being crushed and sinking some 3,000 meters below the surface. The voyage is something of a legend, due to the miraculous escape Shackleton and his crew made on foot and in boats.

The crew managed to escape by camping on the sea ice until it ruptured. They then launched life boats to Elephant Island and then South Georgia Island, a British overseas territory that lies around

1,400 kilometres (870 miles) east of the Falkland Islands. The South African icebreaker S.A. Agulhas II set off from Cape Town yesterday morning with a crew of 46 and a 64-member expedition team aboard. The expedition will last for between 35 days and 45 days, with the vessel navigating its way through heavy ice and harsh temperatures.

It hopes to find the iconic shipwreck with state-of-the-art technology and explore it with two underwater drones. But the journey will be a difficult one. The Anglo-Irish explorer himself even described the site of the sink as "the worst portion of the worst sea in the world." The 144-foot-long ship sunk in the Weddell Sea, which has a swirling current that sustains a mass of thick sea ice that can cause problems even for modern ice

breakers. It is one of the hardest parts of the ocean to navigate.

Endurance22's director of exploration, Mensun Bound, said in a statement that his team "very much hope we can do justice to this magnificent chapter in polar exploration". If they do find it, it will be left untouched but they will do a 3D scan of it and broadcast it in real time. Despite the optimism, there is no guarantee the 110-year-old ship will be located. "In terms of shipwreck challenges, it is the most difficult," David Mearns, one of the world's leading shipwreck hunters, told AFP. "You won't get any more difficult than this because of the ice conditions". — AFP

## Mosque-goers pray for rain in drought-scorched Morocco

Mosques held prayers for rain on Friday across the parched North African kingdom of Morocco where farmers are battling an acute drought. King Mohammed VI ordered all the country's mosques to hold prayers "calling on God for rain", the religious affairs ministry said in a statement carried by the official MAP news agency. Such prayers, which also take place in other Muslim countries when rain is needed, are based on a verse from the Koran and on a saying of the Prophet Mohammed, who recommended an extra prayer "every time the rain is scarce".

Morocco's economy depends heavily on agriculture, but the country is in the midst of a severe drought. Reservoirs are at just 34 percent capacity, compared to 46 percent this time last year, according to official figures. Despite improved harvests in 2021, the lack of water has battered the agricultural sector, which is responsible for about 14 percent of the country's Gross Domestic Product. The situation has sparked fears of spiralling prices for basic goods. In January, tourist hotspot Marrakesh imposed tight restrictions on water usage, news website Medias24 reported.

That recalled 2020, when the Atlantic coastal city of Agadir cut off mains water supplies at night to rein in usage. Agadir this month fired up the country's first seawater desalination plant to meet the needs of desperately dry farmland nearby. The agriculture ministry forecasts that average precipitation will drop by 11 percent by 2050, with the amount of water available for irrigation falling by a quarter. Along with Morocco, the North African nations of Algeria, Libya and Tunisia are among the 30 most water-stressed countries in the world, according to the World Resources Institute. — AFP



A Minke whale swims near a whale-watching boat off Reykjavik. — AFP Photos



Photo shows what they report to be a Blue whale awaiting slaughter at the Hvalur hf whaling station in Hvalfjörður Iceland.

# Iceland to end whaling as demand dwindles

Iceland, one of the only countries that still hunts whales commercially, said Friday it plans to end the practice from 2024 as demand for whale meat dwindles. For the past three years, Icelandic whalers have barely taken their boats out into the North Atlantic despite the country's large quotas. Demand for Icelandic whale meat has decreased dramatically since Japan-Iceland's main market, especially for fin whale meat-returned to commercial whaling in 2019 after a three-decade hiatus.

The extension of a no-fishing coastal zone, requiring whalers to go even further offshore, also made Iceland's hunt more costly. "There are few justifications to authorize the whale hunt beyond 2024", Fisheries Minister Svandis Svavarsdottir,

a member of the Left Green party, wrote in Morgunbladid newspaper.

"There is little proof that there is any economic advantage to this activity," she said. Iceland, Norway and Japan are the only countries that authorize the commercial whale hunt, despite criticism from animal rights activists and environmentalists, concerns about toxins in the meat and a shrinking market. Iceland's annual quotas for 2019 to 2023 allow for the hunting of 209 fin whales-the planet's second-largest species after the blue whale and considered endangered-and 217 minke whales, one of the smallest species.

## Pandemic slowdown

But for the past three years, Iceland's two main licence holders have suspended

their whale hunts, and one of them, IP-Utgerd, hung up its harpoons for good in 2020. Only one whale has been killed in the past three years-a Minke whale in 2021. Other issues have also made whaling more challenging. Safety requirements for imported meat are more stringent than for local products, rendering Icelandic exports more difficult.

Social distancing restrictions imposed to combat the coronavirus pandemic also meant Icelandic whale meat processing plants were unable to carry out their tasks. In Iceland's last full season in 2018, 146 fin whales and six Minke whales were killed. Iceland resumed commercial whaling in 2003 despite a 1986 IWC moratorium, which both it and Norway opposed.

In neighboring Norway, whalers have had similar experiences to Iceland in recent years, struggling to fill their quotas. The number of boats taking part in the hunt continues to shrink as well. In 2021, 575 whales were harpooned in Norway, less than half the authorized quota, by the 14 boats still operating. In Iceland, rather than ending up as steaks on a plate, whales have in recent years become the stars of a flourishing ecotourism scene. More than 360,000 whale watchers flocked to the waters of the North Atlantic off Iceland to admire the majestic creatures in 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic paralyzed the tourism sector. — AFP



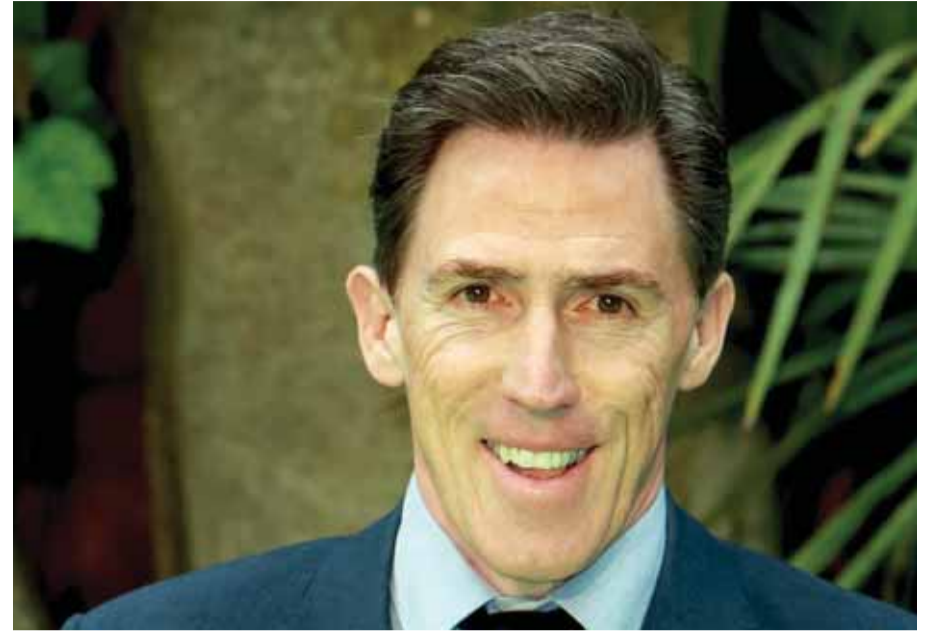
## Lifestyle | Gossip

# Rob Brydon says Prince William has lost his looks

The 'Gavin and Stacey' actor poked fun at the British royal's appearance, joking that he was "gorgeous" for 12 months "before the gene pool kicked in". According to the Daily Mail newspaper's Eden Confidential column, Rob, 56, said: "We all have an age at which we peak. The example I always give is Prince William. Do you remember as a teenager, he had about a year when he was gorgeous. For just 12 months, he looked like a model... then the gene pool kicked in. "For a while, he could have

been on the cover of a magazine. After, he could still have been on the cover of a magazine, but it would have been Horse & Hound and somebody would have been riding him." Brydon is not the only famous actor to mock 39-year-old William's appearance. During a 2019 interview, Rob Lowe poked fun at William's hair loss when he was asked if he thinks he's more or less vain than the average British man. He responded: "That's a low bar. Can we talk about William? The future king of your country let himself lose his own hair, so

(that's why) I say British men set a very low bar. "Honestly, one of the great traumatic experiences of my life was watching Prince William lose his hair. He's going to be the King of England!" However, Prince William isn't taking his receding hairline too seriously, joking after his son Prince George was born in 2013 that "he has way more hair than me, thank God!"



## Ken Jeong felt 'disrespected' after Giuliani was revealed

The 52-year-old actor - who is a qualified medical doctor - strongly disagrees with Giuliani's political views and those of former US President Donald Trump, who Giuliani works for as his personal attorney. Ken stormed off the set of the show - where he is a judge - and his close pal and fellow judge Robin Thicke followed him to check if he was ok after the reveal. A source told PEOPLE:

"Ken felt disrespected and was livid to see Rudy was under the mask which is why he walked off. There's no way he could hide his feelings. "Ken has been incredibly vocal about how the previous administration handled many things but especially COVID-19 and has found a lot of what they've said not only wrong but dangerous. To get someone who helped to spread misinformation and call into question the accuracy of our election and democracy to appear on his show was going to set him off." Deadline first reported the incident, adding that fellow judges Jenny McCarthy and Nicole Scherzinger stayed and chatted with the ousted contestant. Robin and Ken eventually returned to resume filming, though it is unclear how long they were off stage. Giuliani has been involved in a number of controversies in recent years, and in 2021, federal agents raided his home and office during an investigation into his work in Ukraine.



## Sir Elton John will miss his own Oscars bash this year

The 74-year-old singer has hosted an annual Hollywood party on Academy Awards night for the past 30 years, in order to raise money for his Aids Foundation, but he will be absent this year due to a scheduling clash. The Oscars have been postponed from February to March 27 when Elton is back on his 'Farewell Yellow Brick Road' tour and he didn't want to disappoint fans after the tour was previously postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. A source told The Sun newspaper's Bizarre column: "Elton is absolutely gutted he can't make the party but it was completely out of his hands. "When his 'Farewell Yellow Brick Road' tour was rescheduled, he kept the first Oscars date free. "But when the ceremony was then moved, everything was already set in stone. Elton's annual Oscars

Party has raised tens of millions for his Aids Foundation to date and he always plans his touring schedule so he can attend. "It was completely unavoidable. "Elton didn't want to let down those thousands of fans who'd held on to their tickets for his gig in Nebraska and waited so patiently for the tour to be rescheduled after COVID." However, the party will go ahead in Los Angeles, with Elton's husband David Furnish hosting the star-studded bash in his absence. The insider added: "His husband David Furnish and a huge list of very special guests will be in attendance at the Oscars Party in Los Angeles and they will more than make up for his absence. "There is no doubt it will be another brilliant night that will raise a lot of money for his charity."

## Liam Gallagher has given up cigarettes and alcohol

The 49-year-old singer admitted he leads a clean-living lifestyle when he is touring because he needs to watch his health as he approaches his 50th birthday in September. Speaking to Chris Moyles on Radio X, Liam said: "When I'm singing, there's no smoking and I don't drink dairy on the day. "I just have jasmine tea. It's good for the throat. When that's done, then I go back to how I am. "I know it doesn't sound very rock 'n' roll and all that but as you get older...? I'm nearly 50. "On my 50th, without a doubt, I'll be definitely having a do." And while he had taken up running, he has had to quit because of injuries to his hips. Liam said: "I'm not running any more. I can't run, my hips are mashed up. I'm just walking, lots of walking." However, Liam hasn't completely turned his back on partying and recently enjoyed a raucous trip to



Mustique in the Caribbean with his fiancée Debbie Gwyther for her 40th birthday. He said: "There was seven days out there on a bender and it was like something out of

the Nineties. I'm still recovering from that."

## Dame Judi Dench has 'never, ever' discussed marriage with partner

The 'Belfast' actress has been in a relationship with David Mills for the last 11 years but they have maintained separate homes and she and the 78-year-old conservationist are very happy with the way things are. She quipped: "It brings a lot of driving [to the relationship]." She then added to Saga magazine: "No, we're just two very independent people who don't want to move. "Sometimes we see each other quite a lot during the week, sometimes we don't." And asked about the possibility of marriage, she said: "We have never, ever discussed it." The 87-year-old star has one daughter, Finty Williams, from her marriage to Michael Williams - who died of cancer in 2001 - but she admitted she dreamed of having six children. She said: "I wanted a house full of them. I would have loved to have had that. But it didn't happen, alas. "I didn't get married until I was 36, so I left it a bit late. I wouldn't have minded not working, not at all." Instead, Judi and Michael created a "family community" in 1995 by moving to Stratford with her widowed mother and her spouse's parents. She said: "My first dream had always been a family community. All our parents jumped at it, so we bought a house and all lived together with Fint as a little girl. We had all our high days and holidays there, both our Mas died there. It was lovely."



## Rosie Huntington-Whiteley has given birth to baby girl

The 34-year-old model and her 54-year-old partner Jason Statham - who also have son Jack, four, together - reportedly welcomed the latest addition to their family in London earlier this week, a source told MailOnline. Rosie announced her latest pregnancy in August. The model has been with Jason for over 10 years and the couple got engaged in 2016, one year before she gave birth to Jack. Speaking about their decision to have a long engagement, she said at the time: "We're looking forward to that time. It's also not a huge priority for us; we're so happy. "I think it will be fun to do it when the baby's grown up a bit and he can be involved in the wedding." And Rosie recently gushed about what an amazing father Jason is. She told her fans: "He's an amazing hands on Daddy. A supportive and protective partner and he's pretty funny too." Meanwhile, Rosie also revealed motherhood has made her reconsider her beauty priorities. She told Britain's Vogue magazine: "When you become a parent, you become time-poor. You don't have that time for yourself, or that ability to just go off and lock yourself in your bathroom in the middle of the day and play around with products. I certainly remember having a lot of that prior to my son being born. "Oftentimes, I'll have to decide: it's 9am and I can do hair or make-up, which one is it going to be today? Usually it's make-up because I can just throw my hair up."

## Noomi Rapace forces herself to party

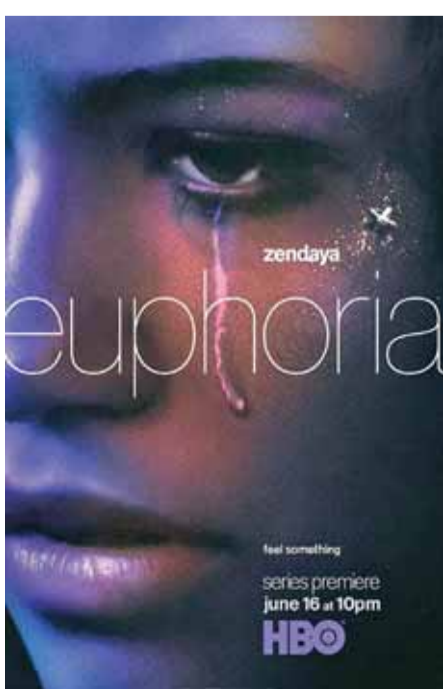
The 'Lamb' actress admitted one of the best pieces of advice she's been given is that she'd remember the night she "stayed up" far more than those when she just had an early night, so she will commit to going to events even when she's exhausted. She said: "You only remember the nights you stayed up, you don't remember the nights you slept. This advice is from my American publicist. We were in Toronto at a film festival and were out for three nights in a row at different parties and events and I was so tired. "She reminded me that there was a birthday party I had to go to, when I just wanted to go back to the hotel and sleep. "But then she told me this bit of advice and it stuck with me. That saying has been echoing inside me for years. "Oh, and I did go to the birthday party." However, the 'Girl With the Dragon Tattoo' actress admitted there have been times when she's regretted living by the maxim because she's felt so bad the next day. Asked the worst advice, she admitted to Grazia's 'Life Advice' podcast: "It is the same as one of my best pieces of advice, you only remember the nights you stayed up, you don't remember the nights you slept. "I live by this advice a little too much. "I like telling other people this advice - and I'm quite good at convincing them to stay up too. "There are many nights where I have stayed up when I should have just slept. "The next morning, you're just crawling out of bed and it's painful."



## 'Euphoria' has been renewed for a third season

The drama series has been a huge hit with viewers since its launch in 2019, and HBO has now officially renewed the program for a third season. Francesca Orsi, the executive vice president of HBO Programming, said: "Sam [Levinson], Zendaya, and the entire cast and crew of 'Euphoria' have taken season two to extraordinary heights, challenging narrative convention and form, while maintaining its heart." The hit TV show stars the likes of Zendaya, Eric Dane, Alexa Demie, Jacob Elordi, Sydney Sweeney and Colman Domingo. And Francesca is already looking forward to season three of 'Euphoria'. She said: "We couldn't be more honored to work with this gifted, wildly tal-

ented team or more excited to continue our journey with them into season three." Zendaya plays the part of Rue Bennett, a teenage drug addict, in the show, and the actress previously admitted that she jumped at the chance to join the Sam Levinson-created series. She explained: "I think the choice to do this show wasn't really a choice. I just felt like I had to do it. "I felt very connected and emotionally invested in Rue, and the characters. When I met Sam, I immediately was drawn to the story that he was telling and how honest it was because I think Rue is a version of himself, and his experience with addiction. "I thought it was a beautiful story. It wasn't a decision of like, 'oh, is this the right thing to do?' Or, 'is somebody going to think this way of me?' All those preconceived notions about what I was supposed to do just kind of went out the window because I was really just focused on what emotionally felt like the right decision and the right move."





Lifestyle | Gossip

# JESSICA CHASTAIN BELIEVES TAMMY SENT HER MESSAGES FROM BEYOND THE GRAVE

**T**he 44-year-old actress portrays the late evangelist - who died in 2007 - in 'The Eyes of Tammy Faye', and she claimed some "really beautiful" things happened on set which convinced her the TV personality was there with her. Asked if she felt any signs from Tammy, she said: "Sometimes. I don't want to share too much because it's private, but we've been going through some personal things. "Sometimes we'll be talking and a light will go on. "There are some really beautiful things that have happened on set." Jessica felt "lucky" to meet some of the people from Tammy's life as part of her research into the role. She said: "I've been lucky enough to talk to her children. "Plus, we run into people with very close

connections to her, like bodyguards. "There are so many people in Charlotte [where she lived] who knew her and every single person says Tammy was the real deal. "She was always hugging people, she was touching them. "You get to see the journey of this woman and the idea of her discovering if she is worthy of love." Whatever the actress' questions, Tammy's children were always ready to answer them. Jessica told Britain's OK! magazine: "They shared so much with me. "If I'm doing a scene, I can text them and get an answer immediately. "Even down to the little things, like Tammy always had Vicky VapoRub on her bedside table."



## Kanye West claims Kim Kardashian accused him of being 'on drugs'

**T**he 44-year-old rap star has hit back at his estranged wife on social media, after she criticised Kanye for his "constant attacks" against her. The 'Stronger' hitmaker - who has North, eight, Saint, six, Chicago, four, and Psalm, two, with the brunette beauty - said on Instagram in response to Kim: "What do you mean by main provider? America saw you try to kidnap my daughter on her birthday by not providing the address. (sic)" Kanye recently called out Kim's joint TikTok account with Chicago, and he's now accused the 41-year-old star of forcing him to undergo a drug test after he attended his daughter's birthday party. He said: "You put security on me inside of the house to play with my son then accused me of stealing I had to take a drug test after Chicago's party cause you accused me of being on drugs. Tracy Romulus stop manipulating Kim to be this way. (sic)" Tracy Romulus is a close friend of Kim and the chief financial officer of Kim Kardashian West Brands. Kanye made the comments in response to Kim, who previously claimed that she's the "main provider and caregiver" for their children.



Kim - who filed for a divorce in early 2021 - said on Instagram: "As the parent who is the main provider and caregiver for our children, I am doing my best to protect our daughter while also allowing her to express her creativity in the medium that she wishes with adult supervision - because it brings her happiness. "Divorce

is difficult enough on our children and Kanye's obsession with trying to control and manipulate our situation so negatively and publicly is only causing further pain for all.

## Jennifer Lopez, Affleck have 'happy, healthy relationship'

**T**he 52-year-old actress and Ben previously dated between 2002 and 2004, and they rekindled their romance last year, with Jennifer feeling they're both now at "different places" in their lives. She shared: "We're older now, we're smarter, we have more experience, we're at different places in our lives, we have kids now, and we have to be very conscious of those things." Jennifer has already been married three times, to Ojani Noa, Cris Judd and Marc Anthony. But she's convinced that Ben, 49, is the perfect man for her. She told People magazine: "It's a beautiful outcome that this has happened in this way at this time in our lives where we can really appreciate and celebrate each other and respect each other. "We always did, but we have even more of an appreciation because we know



that life can take you in different directions." Jennifer and Ben's romance attracted huge attention and scrutiny in the early 2000s. But the 'Jenny from the Block' hitmaker is convinced they're both now older and wiser, and will be able to cope with the pressure this time around. She said: "I think we are strong enough now to know what's real and what's not, whereas when we were younger maybe some of those outside voices were a little bit tougher for

us to reconcile and survive." Jennifer also feels they're both on the same page at this point in their lives. She explained: "I feel like he's at a place in his life where - just like I feel about myself - it's been a journey of learning yourself and figuring yourself out, getting to a place where you feel really good on your own and who you are so you can be in a happy, healthy relationship."

## Sharna Burgess and Brian Austin Green expecting their first child

**T**he 36-year-old star and Brian, 48, are set to welcome their first child later this year, with photos obtained by People showing the ballroom dancer's growing baby bump. The loved-up couple started dating in 2020, after being set up by mutual friends, and in one of the photos, Brian is seen cradling his girlfriend's bump. The 'Beverly Hills, 90210' actor already has Noah, nine, Bodhi, seven, and Journey, five, with his ex-wife Megan Fox, as well as Kassius, 19, with Vanessa Marcil. Brian and Sharna's pregnancy news has emerged

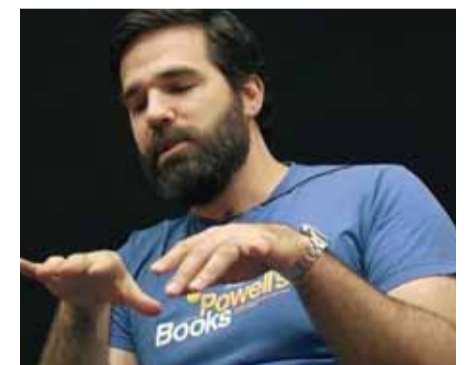
one month after Megan, 35, announced her engagement to Machine Gun Kelly. The Hollywood actress was married to Brian between 2010 and 2021, but they split in 2020 and she's been dating the music star for the last two years. A source recently revealed that Megan and the 'Bloody Valentine' hitmaker had discussed getting engaged "for a while". Their high-profile romance was also described as a "love at first sight situation", and he popped the question during a trip to Puerto Rico in January. The insider shared: "They had been talking about it for a while. "For those two, it was very much a love at first sight situation." Megan and Kelly are keen to spend "every waking second together", and they're also eager to support each other in their professional lives. The source added: "They spend every waking second together. They are always together for each other's professional and personal events. "She always likes to be by his side. All of his friends and colleagues know that if they're going somewhere, nine out of 10 times, Megan will be there."



## Rob Delaney celebrates 20 years of sobriety

**T**he 45-year-old actor quit drinking in 2002, after he blacked out while driving and crashed into a building in Los Angeles, and he's now taken to Instagram to celebrate his sobriety landmark. He shared: "Hi there, as of today I have been sober for 20 years, which is a long time. It's almost two decades. And I'm shocked and overwhelmed and grateful." The 'Deadpool 2' star also reflected on the journey he's been on over the last 20 years. He said: "Twenty years ago I was in jail in a wheelchair and now I'm on a couch, with a lovely quilt, and my life is unrecognisable." Rob subsequently thanked his wife Leah and the rest of his support network for helping him to overcome his struggles. He explained: "I got a lot of help from a lot of wonderful people. I

started doing volunteer work after I'd been sober for a while, and through that I met my wife 18 years ago, and we've had so many children together. And I had the courage to pursue the career that I really wanted to. "Things are better now. I'm not hungover, I'm not wondering if I'm in the beginning throes of schizophrenia because my desire to drink was so palpable. It was like personified; it felt like a thing in me being like, "Drink!", and I don't have that anymore." Rob has also urged anyone going through similar issues to seek help. He said: "I just wanted to say thank you to everybody who's helped me, and let people who might be struggling with drugs or alcohol know that there is a way out, and if it happened for me, it can happen for you. Love to everyone."



## Kellan Lutz, wife Brittany expecting their 2nd child

**T**he 36-year-old actor - who already has Ashtyn, 11 months, with Brittany - has taken to Instagram to announce the news to his followers. As part of a compilation video - which features a positive pregnancy test - there's text that says: "I invited him to a calendar event 'Baby #2 due date!!!!' (sic)" And as the calendar invite appeared on his phone, Kellan says: "You're pregnant? Oh my gosh! What?" A visibly emotional Brittany then replies: "I couldn't wait to tell you." The video also features footage from a sonogram and a clip of Ashtyn wearing a "Big Sister" T-shirt. Kellan captioned the

post: "2 under 2 in 2022 God is Good! Babies are the Best! Love you forever and always @brittanylynnlutz. (sic)" Kellan and Brittany suffered a miscarriage in 2020. But seven months later, the loved-up couple - who tied the knot in 2017 - announced they were expecting a child. In February 2021, Brittany wrote online: "The day she came into the world it was snowing, raining, and freezing, but that night she was born and we woke up to sun, clear skies, and winter melting away. "It was so symbolic considering this time last year was literally winter for our souls only to be met one year later with the brightest sun-

shine. She ushered in a new season for us and we love her beyond comprehension." Meanwhile, Kellan - who played Emmett Cullen in the 'Twilight' franchise - previously spoke about his ambition to become a dad. He said: "I've always had a father's heart and I come from a separated family. My parents were divorced and so never felt complete really. I'm really looking forward to teaching my children the stuff that I learned not to do and what to do and I want a big family."



## Sports

# Jazz down Nets; Raptors win again; Cavs hold off Hornets

## Doncic powers Dallas Mavericks to victory

### News in brief

#### Marseille thrash Angers 5-2

PARIS: Arkadiusz Milik scored a hat-trick as Marseille overcame a nightmare start to thrash Angers 5-2 at the Stade Velodrome on Friday and move second in the Ligue 1 table. Jorge Sampaoli's men, looking to bounce back from a midweek 2-1 loss to rivals Lyon, found themselves two goals behind inside 11 minutes. But the hosts dragged themselves level and then scored three times in 15 second-half minutes to wrap up an ultimately comfortable victory. "They took us by surprise in the first ten minutes, but my team rewrote the story," Sampaoli said. "When Arek (Milik) is on form we really tick. And he showed he's on form regardless of the system." Marseille are now one point clear of third-placed Nice, who host Clermont on Sunday, as the race for a top-three finish and Champions League qualification intensifies. OM are now eight points ahead of fourth-placed Strasbourg. Angelo Fulgini gave Angers the lead on eight minutes after robbing Gerson of the ball inside his own area, before he turned provider shortly afterwards for former Tottenham midfielder Nabil Bentaleb to put the visitors in seemingly total control. —AFP

#### China accused of 'appropriation'

SEOUL: A leading South Korean presidential candidate has accused China of "cultural appropriation" after a performer wearing a traditional Korean dress appeared at the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics. Friday's grand opening of the Games featured a young woman carrying a Chinese flag in a pink and white Korean traditional dress-known as hanbok-as part of a group of other performers representing the country's ethnic groups. China is home to one of the world's largest populations of overseas Koreans and the countries share deep cultural links. But the appearance of the hanbok sparked anger online in South Korea, with many accusing Beijing of "stealing" the country's culture. Lee Jae-myung, the ruling Democratic Party's candidate in upcoming presidential elections, condemned China's "cultural appropriation". The office of his main opponent, conservative Yoon Suk-yeol, also accused Beijing of being "disrespectful" in its decision to feature the dress, urging Seoul to seek an apology from China. —AFP

#### Kuwait's Burbayea shines

KUWAIT: International Jet Sports Boating Association (IJSBA) yesterday announced the Kuwaiti jet ski racer Muhammad Burbayea as the champion of 2021/2022 in the Pro Runabout Gb Category. Kuwaiti Burbayea topped first place in the European Championship in its category, which was held in Poland, and took the first place in the American Championship held in Arizona, USA. He also grabbed the second place in the King of Thailand Championship. The Kuwaiti winner expressed his great pride in this great achievement and raising the Kuwaiti flag high in international marine sports in conjunction with Kuwait's celebrations of its national days. —KUNA

#### Injury blow for AC Milan

ROME: AC Milan striker Zlatan Ibrahimovic has been ruled out of a crucial derby clash against Inter with an Achilles tendon problem, coach Stefano Pioli said. The 40-year-old Swede has not yet recovered from the right leg injury suffered in a goalless draw against Juventus on January 23, with Croatian forward Ante Rebic also sidelined with an ankle injury. "For Zlatan to be missing is disappointing," said Pioli. "We've come a long way with him but we have to show that we're also strong without him." Milan are third, level on points with second-placed Napoli, four points behind reigning champions and league leaders Inter. France forward Olivier Giroud, who has scored five goals in 14 Serie A games this season, is expected to step in and play his first derby. "Olivier is a player of international calibre. He's hungry to perform and is ready to play because he's an intelligent, complete player, who can link up the play and get into space in the box," said Pioli. —AFP

#### Bettman defends NHL decision

LAS VEGAS: Commissioner Gary Bettman defended the NHL's decision to pull out of the Beijing Olympics on Friday but said the league expects to make a return in 2026 in Italy. Bettman said withdrawing from the Winter Games because of how COVID-19 outbreaks affected the NHL schedule will allow the league to finish the 2021-22 regular season on time. "We were prepared to go to the Olympic Games but for COVID," Bettman told reporters at the NHL All-Star Game festivities in Las Vegas. "I don't know how we would have finished the season if we had gone. Hopefully the world will be in a better place for Italy four years from now because we know the players want to go." Bettman said 105 NHL regular season games have been rescheduled for what would have been the February break to allow players to compete in Beijing. Asked what the reaction was from the Beijing organizers when the league told them they weren't going, Bettman said, "They weren't very happy, obviously." —AFP

#### Varner, Arnaus share lead

KING ABDULLAH ECONOMIC CITY: American Harold Varner III and Spain's Adri Arnaus surged into the halfway lead at the Saudi International on Friday, both carding four-under-par 66s in the second round of the opening event in the Asian Tour schedule. Sitting on 10-under 130, the pair pulled two clear of Australian Cameron Smith and Matthew Wolff from the United States, with overnight leader Matteo Manassero of Italy falling back to five-under after hitting a 73. England's Tommy Fleetwood sits a shot further back on seven-under after carding a 67 on another windy day at Royal Greens Golf & Country Club. American Bryson DeChambeau, the 2020 US Open champion, withdrew before the round with left hand and left hip injuries after opening with a three-over 73 on Thursday. DeChambeau, the world number nine, this week denied a report that he was offered \$135 million to join a Saudi-backed breakaway tour. —AFP

LOS ANGELES: Donovan Mitchell returned from an eight-game injury absence to score 27 points for the Utah Jazz, who handed the Brooklyn Nets a seventh straight NBA defeat, 125-102 on Friday. Mitchell hadn't played since suffering a concussion when he took an elbow to the head in a game against the Los Angeles Lakers on January 17. He stepped right up, however, connecting on eight of 10 shots from the floor with six three-pointers and six assists. It was a confidence-boosting performance for a player who admitted he'd been "kind of nervous" as his symptoms persisted.

"It was bad," Mitchell said. "The headache, the nausea were pretty messed up. "It was tough because we've been going through a tough stretch," he said of his enforced absence. "Guys have been out, so it's been eating at me." With Rudy Gobert still sidelined, Eric Paschall scored 16 points and Hassan Whiteside added 15 for the Jazz, who never trailed against the depleted Nets. Brooklyn were without two of their "Big Three" with Kevin Durant still recovering from a knee sprain and James Harden nursing a tight hamstring. LaMarcus Aldridge and Joe Harris were also absent.

Kyrie Irving scored 15 points and rookie Cam Thomas had a career-high 30, but the Nets trailed by 21 entering the fourth quarter and never got any closer. In Dallas, Luka Doncic scored 33 points in a triple-double to power the Dallas Mavericks to a 107-98 come-from-behind NBA victory over the Philadelphia 76ers on Friday. Slovenian star Doncic added 13

rebounds and 15 assists, his eighth career game of at least 30 points, 10 rebounds and 15 assists. Only Oscar Robertson-with 22 - has more.

"I try to play games and win," Doncic said of the impressive stat. "I have fun out there. As long as we win I'm good. We came back from two not-so-great losses. We stepped it up, we bounced back and that's how we have to play." Philadelphia's Most Valuable Player candidate Joel Embiid scored 27 points and the Sixers led by 10 at half-time. But Dallas roared back on the strength of determined defense, holding Embiid to nine points after the break. That came later than expected, after a 43-minute delay in the first quarter because one basket rim was crooked and had to be replaced.

#### Cavs hold off Hornets

In Charlotte, the Cleveland Cavaliers fended off a furious Hornets rally to snatch a 102-101 victory in wild style. Jarrett Allen scored 29 points and pulled down 22 rebounds for Cleveland, and Kevin Love made two free throws to seal the win with 1.2 seconds remaining. The Cavaliers led 76-65 going into the fourth quarter, but their fortunes changed when Ed Davis, who was on the Cleveland bench but didn't play in the game, interfered with a three-point attempt by Charlotte's Terry Rozier, thinking the play had been whistled dead.

He was assessed a technical foul and Rozier was credited with a three-pointer-and made the technical free throw to cut the deficit to six points.

## Langer delivers shock resignation as Australia cricket coach

SYDNEY: Australian men's cricket coach Justin Langer announced his abrupt departure yesterday, just weeks after his side trounced arch-rivals England in a lopsided Ashes series and months after they won the T20 World Cup. The 51-year-old resigned from the top management job in Australian sports after failing to secure the public support of key players, and as governing body Cricket Australia made clear his days were numbered.

Board members held lengthy "robust" discussions about Langer's future into Friday night, but failed to reach an agreement with the former Test batsman. The coach is said to have bristled at being offered a one-time extension until the end of the T20 World Cup in November — this despite a stellar record that culminated in a 4-0 Ashes victory and Australia being ranked the world's number one Test team.

Sports management company

DSEG announced Langer's departure in a terse statement saying "our client Justin Langer has this morning tendered his resignation as coach of the Australian men's cricket team". "The resignation follows a meeting with Cricket Australia last evening. The resignation is effective immediately."

Cricket Australia said it had accepted Langer's resignation, while praising his "outstanding leadership". "Justin is not only a legend of the game but an outstanding individual," it said, adding Andrew McDonald has been appointed as interim head coach.

#### 'Grumpy'

As a player, Langer's searing intensity drove him to greatness with the bat. But it also appeared to play a role in his downfall. In the months leading to his departure disgruntled players complained anonymously to local media about his "headmaster-like" leadership



SALT LAKE CITY: Kyrie Irving #11 of the Brooklyn Nets tries to drive through Jared Butler #13 and Hassan Whiteside #21 during the second half of their game on February 4, 2022. —AFP

Allen's tip-in of a Love miss pulled Cleveland within 101-100 with 35.3 seconds left. That was the score with 2.1 seconds remaining when Cavs guard Brandon Goodwin missed a jumper. Love grabbed the rebound and missed the follow-up-sparking celebrations on the Hornets bench. But officials deemed on review that Love had been fouled, and he was awarded the game-winning free throws.

In Toronto, the Raptors pushed their winning streak to five games, following up their overtime triumph over the Chicago Bulls on Thursday with a 125-114 victory over the Atlanta Hawks. Pascal Siakam equaled his sea-

son high with 33 points. Fred VanVleet scored 26 points and handed out 11 assists as the Raptors beat the Hawks for the second time in a week.

De'Andre Hunter and John Collins scored 23 points apiece for Atlanta. Trae Young had 22 points and 13 assists for the Hawks a day after his 43-point performance in the Hawks' victory over the league-leading Phoenix Suns. Chicago center Nikola Vucevic scored a season-high 36 points and grabbed 17 rebounds and DeMar DeRozan added 31 points to power the Bulls to a 122-115 victory over the Indiana Pacers, who had 42 points from Caris LeVert. —AFP

style. "I am intense, yeah, I am serious, I am - do I get grumpy sometimes? Yeah, I get grumpy sometimes," Langer acknowledged early last year. "I'm not perfect that's for sure."

But his position seemed untenable when the new captain and world number one bowler Pat Cummins pointedly refused to publicly endorse Langer when asked recently. "It lies in Cricket Australia's hands," he said. "They're just going through an evaluation process at the moment which I think is fair and the right thing to do." Cricket Australia CEO Nick Hockley did not give details of the dressing room divisions, but said it was time for the team to "transition" to a new coach for the sake of "unity and future success".

#### Toxic culture

Langer's departure has infuriated allies, who accused Cricket Australia of treachery and ungratefulness given his success reviving the scandal-tainted side's fortunes. Langer took the job in 2018, with Australian cricket at its lowest ebb for decades in the wake of the sandpaper-gate cheating affair that shocked the country. Langer's long-time partner at the crease Matthew Hayden

said that after that low, the new coach had restored pride in their beloved baggy green cap. "He came into one of the most toxic environments in Australian sport," Hayden told ABC. "It had been disgraced and dishonored." Langer not only ended the rot but oversaw a string of wins that took Australia back to the top of the Test rankings and culminated in recent victories in the T20 World Cup and the Ashes.

#### 'Man manager' needed

Former captain Mark Taylor said he suspected Langer had completed the job he was brought in to do and Cricket Australia now wanted "more of a man manager and less of an absolute cricket coach and disciplinarian". That view was echoed by Hockley, who said Cricket Australia would be looking for someone "strategic" to manage batting, bowling and other coaches who were ready to step up into more autonomous roles. Regardless of how his tenure as coach ended, Langer's feats with the bat have already sealed a spot in Australian cricket's Hall of Fame. He played 105 Tests from 1993 to 2007, averaging 45.27 and amassing 7,696 runs, including 23 centuries. —AFP

## Winter Olympic downhill: Ultimate test of raw speed

BEIJING: The Beijing Olympic alpine skiing program launches today with the eagerly anticipated men's downhill. Known as the ultimate test of raw speed, this downhill takes place on a previously untested course in Yanqing, making it a real challenge for some of skiing's daredevils. Upwards of 12 racers are in the frame for a gold-medal finish but the slightest mistake can cost anyone dear. AFP looks at five things to know ahead of the race.

#### Kilde v Odermatt

Aleksander Aamodt Kilde is shouldering the weight of an expectant Norway in his bid to carry on where the now-retired Aksel Lund Svindal left off at Pyeongchang 2018. He is guaranteed a battle royale with Swiss racer Marco Odermatt, the current leader of the World Cup overall standings. "Marco's an amazing skier. It's going to be a battle the whole of the Olympics and the rest of the season," said Kilde. Odermatt dubbed his friend and rival

## Beijing exults in Games' return

BEIJING: Despite freezing temperatures and tight COVID restrictions, Beijing tried its best to celebrate the start of a Winter Olympics chilled even before its start by the pandemic, frosty relations with the West, and a dose of been-there-done-that indifference. Thousands of invited spectators braved a several-hour ordeal just to get to the opening ceremony in Beijing, where the Chinese capital became the only city to open both a Summer and Winter Games.

But while many things brought a sense of 2008 deja vu-an opening kickoff directed by celebrated Chinese filmmaker Zhang Yimou at the iconic "Bird's Nest" stadium in the heavily policed capital-many noted a reduced sense of excitement. Due to the pandemic, "it's

definitely the bigger favourite for the downhill than me".

#### Triple threat

With the spotlight on the two World Cup high-flyers, there could be a way through the backdoor for a raft of pretenders, not least the Austrian pair Vincent Kriechmayr and Matthias Mayer, and Odermatt's teammate Beat Feuz. Kriechmayr is reigning double world speed champion while Mayer won downhill gold in 2014 and topped the super-G podium four years ago. Feuz's form on the demanding Kitzbuehel course is a sure indicator that the Swiss racer would thrive on what promises to be tough, icy conditions.

#### Jansrud the outsider

While Norwegian teammate Kilde has been hogging the spotlight, experienced Kjetil Jansrud goes into the speed events as an outsider as he returns from a knee injury sustained in December. "My physical shape is fine, skiing shape is as good as it can get with the months of training and races I've had," said Jansrud, a four-time Olympic medalist including super-G gold in 2014. "I'm eager to try to prove myself as much as I can and we'll just have to see at the end of the downhill and super-G how it turned out, but the chances are there. We have a proud history in alpine skiing for Olympic

surely not going to be as lively as back then", said Beijing resident Yin Rui, 31. "But the enthusiasm is still there in everyone's hearts," she added.

Although the Beijing Games won't be as bereft of atmosphere as last year's Tokyo Summer Olympics-which were held largely behind closed doors-the pandemic will severely limit attendance in Beijing. The Games also coincide with the start of the Lunar New Year, when the attention of millions is focused on holiday gatherings that are often the only time families can come together each year. China's government-itself preoccupied with containing the pandemic-has refrained from the ubiquitous slogans, banners and other imagery that bedecked the country 14 years ago.

For some, it's because China has changed. It had something to prove in the 2008 Olympiad, widely seen as the country's coming-out as a great power-but today is a far richer and more powerful nation, with national confidence gaining a boost recently from its relative success keeping the pandemic under control. —AFP

Games and that's what we have to deliver."

#### Wind worries on unknown piste

The man-made Yanqing pistes rely on artificial snow and stand out on a bare mountain range in one of China's most arid regions. Sceptics questioned the logic behind it, but skiers have been overwhelmingly enthusiastic about the course - untested after World Cup events were twice cancelled because of COVID-19 restrictions. "It's a really great slope, they have built up an incredible slope," said Odermatt. "It was fun to ski." But Saturday's third training session was cancelled because of high winds, an uncontrollable factor that could well come back to play havoc with the alpine schedule.

#### Cowboy grooms the snow

The unlikely figure of American Tommy Johnston, who farms in Wyoming for half the year, helps ensure snow of the highest standard. The self-professed cowboy happens to be one of the world's leading snow-surface experts. "My hayfields are the same way - I want them to be perfect," he said. The surface at the National Alpine Skiing Centre in Yanqing comprises hard-packed, artificial snow — much to the delight of Johnston and racers. "Snow conditions are some of the best I've ever seen," purred Kriechmayr. —AFP



ZHANGJIAKOU: Australia's Cooper Woods-Topalovic competes in the freestyle skiing men's moguls final during the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympic Games at the Genting Snow Park A & M Stadium yesterday. —AFP



Sports

# Wily Egypt block Senegal's path to the first Cup of Nations title

## Mane, Salah face off for the trophy

YAOUNDE: Senegal once again stand on the brink of a first Africa Cup of Nations title but they must get the better of record seven-time champions Egypt in today's final in Yaounde which sees Liverpool stars Sadio Mane and Mohamed Salah face off for the trophy. It has been a difficult tournament for Cameroon, scarred by the deadly Olembe Stadium crush of January 24 and troubled by organizational chaos and poor attendances, yet it has thrown up a heavyweight final showdown between two African giants.

Cameroon hoped to be there themselves, but the five-time AFCON winners who dreamed of lifting the trophy on home soil were beaten on penalties by the Egyptians in Thursday's semi-final. As a country, Egypt have the experience of seven past Cup of Nations victories, although the most recent was in 2010 when they claimed their third in a row.

Salah made his international debut the following year and is now desperate to win silverware with the Pharaohs having already been in the team that lost

the 2017 final to Cameroon and then went out prematurely as hosts in 2019. Senegal, meanwhile, have the status of Africa's top-ranked national team but also the pressure of a nation to finally claim their first Cup of Nations crown after losing to Algeria in the deciding game two and a half years ago.

"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," Mane said after scoring one goal and making another in the 3-1 semi-final defeat of Burkina Faso. The Lions of Teranga are hoping it will be third time lucky in the final after they also lost the title decider in 2002, going down on penalties to Cameroon. Aliou Cisse was the captain of that team and then the coach in 2019. Nobody knows better than him what it would mean to Senegal to get the monkey off their back.

### Egyptian fatigue a factor?

His side must take advantage of the extra day's

rest afforded them given their semi-final was played 24 hours earlier than that of their opponents, and Senegal have also come through all three knockout ties in 90 minutes. In stark contrast, Carlos Queiroz's Egypt required penalties to beat the Ivory Coast in the last 16 and extra time to overcome Morocco in the quarter-finals before another shoot-out against Cameroon - the equivalent of a whole extra match in often energy-sapping conditions. That explains why Egypt assistant coach Diao Al-Sayed suggested moving the final back a day to allow his team more time to recover. "Senegal have one extra day to train and therefore maybe we should play the final on Monday," he said after the semi-final.

This Cup of Nations has already seen the Confederation of African Football announce last-minute venue changes without offering an official explanation, while the third-place play-off was belatedly brought forward to yesterday. Egypt, though, will not get their wish and must try to

avoid the fate of Croatia, who similarly needed two penalty shoot-out wins and another in extra time to reach the 2018 World Cup final, where they were well beaten by France. "We are the only team that has played three times 120 minutes but we are very well prepared physically and we have the commitment needed to keep going to the end," insisted Al-Sayed.

Egypt will be without veteran Portuguese coach Queiroz after he was shown a red card against Cameroon, while right-back Omar Kamal is suspended too. They must also hope Salah can have more of an impact on the game than he did in the semi-final when he often appeared isolated on the right flank. Without doubt Senegal have the greater depth, from Chelsea's Edouard Mendy in goal to skipper Kalidou Koulibaly in central defense, Paris Saint-Germain's Idrissa Gana Gueye in midfield and Mane on the wing. Mane, like Salah, gets the attention but Senegal will hope their collective strength can make the difference. — AFP



## GAZOO Racing celebrates podium finish at Rallye Monte-Carlo

KUWAIT: The GAZOO Racing (GR) World Rally Team (WRT) completed a strong debut event for the new GR YARIS Rally1 recently, with Sebastien Ogier claiming second place overall at the famous Rallye Monte-Carlo. Ogier, who was chasing a record-extending ninth win together with new co-driver Benjamin Veillas, gave his all in the final stage to finish just 10.5 seconds from victory in the No 1 GR YARIS Rally1.

GAZOO Racing World Rally Team began a bold new hybrid electric era in the FIA World Rally Championship as the 2022 season commenced in Monaco. Toyota's new vehicle, the GR YARIS Rally1, is the successor to the all-conquering Yaris WRC, which achieved a clean sweep of the manufacturers', drivers', and co-drivers' championship titles during the 2021 season.

The hybrid electric vehicle consists of a 3.9kWh battery and motor-generator unit delivering an additional 134 hp combined with the proven 1.6-litre turbocharged engine from the Yaris WRC to provide the drivers with over 500 hp. It runs on 100% sustainable fuel and is the first of its kind to be used in an FIA world championship.

All three of the team's drivers claimed stage wins in their new vehicles, which made the GR YARIS Rally1

the fastest vehicle on nine of the 17 stages. It demonstrated both impressive performance and reliability despite the challenges of the new Rally1 regulations, which introduce hybrid electric power to rallying's top level for the first time. In Monaco to join the team and witness the GR YARIS Rally1's debut was Kazuki Nakajima, the recently-appointed Vice Chairman of GAZOO Racing Europe.

Akio Toyoda, President and CEO of Toyota Motor Corporation, commented: "It was so close for Sebto achieve his ninth victory in Rallye Monte-Carlo. His driving feeling with our new vehicle, the GR YARIS Rally1, seemed to be good. I would like to express my respect to the leadership of the FIA, WRC Promoter, and all others involved in the preparations to help this historic and traditional World Rally Championship move toward the realization of carbon neutrality with electrified cars and new fuel."

Toyoda continued: "The GR Yaris is a production sports car that we, Toyota, made by ourselves to win in motorsports. The car has finally started the real competition stage now. I'm so glad, and I would like to thank everyone who has worked together with me to build GR Yaris. The season has just begun and I believe we can continue the good

work together. To the fans, I appreciate your continued support for the GAZOO Racing World Rally Team this season. Thank you so much!"

Sebastien Ogier, Driver of the No 1 Toyota GR YARIS Rally1, said: "It has been a huge joy to compete in this special rally again and be in this incredible fight. We have done a great performance over the weekend and there were no issues with the car, which is a fantastic achievement. Fate decided differently today, but I'm still smiling, and I still enjoyed this fight very much. It's been a good weekend for the sport."

Over the years, Toyota has been participating in many different forms of motorsports, including Formula One, the World Endurance Championship (WEC), and the Nurburgring 24 Hours endurance race. Toyota's participation in these events was overseen by separate entities within the company until April 2015, when Toyota established GR, to con-

solidate all of its motorsport's activities under one in-house brand.

Representing Toyota's belief that 'the roads build the people, and the people build the cars,' GR highlights the role of motorsports as a fundamental pillar of Toyota's commitment to making 'ever-better' cars. Harnessing years of experience gained under the extreme conditions of various motorsports events, GR aims to forge new technologies and solutions that bring the freedom, adventure, and joy of driving to everyone.

The second race of the 2022 FIA WRC championship, Rally Sweden, will be held from 24 - 28 February and is the only full winter event of the season taking place on snow and ice. The rally moves further north to a new base in Umea this year, meaning all of the stages will be new to the drivers. Metal studs inserted into the tires bite into the ice to provide grip and allow for some of the highest speeds of the year.

## Recoveries on the line; Barca, Atletico battle for top four

MADRID: Rejuvenation will be the reward for the winner of Barcelona and Atletico Madrid today as La Liga's two fallen giants seek a statement victory to hasten their return to the elite. Both clubs have endured the kind of turbulence this season that neither have faced for more than a decade but each of them head to Camp Nou with fresh hope and a sense of optimism that a corner is being turned.

Today will mark exactly two months since Xavi Hernandez was appointed Barcelona coach, with the team lying ninth in La Liga, five points adrift of the top four. The trajectory since has not always been upward, with failure to qualify for the Champions League knock-out stages preceding defeat by Athletic Bilbao in the last 16 of the Copa del Rey.

Under Xavi, Barca have lost at home to Real Betis and drawn away at Osasuna, Sevilla and Granada. Even in their last game against Alaves, which brought a 1-0 win, the lack of punch and creativity was arguably as clear as it ever was under Ronald Koeman. But there is evidence now of a system and a plan, even if these players are not always capable of executing it. Results have improved - Barca have lost only once in the league in Xavi's 10 games.

And youngsters have taken another step forward, with Nico Gonzalez, Gavi and Ronald Araujo forming the beginnings of a spine around which this team might be able to build. Most importantly, Barca have closed the gap, with just a point now separating them from Atletico Madrid in fourth, meaning a win this weekend would lift them into the Champions League qualification spots for the first time since September. For all the excitement about Xavi coming home and a new generation coming through, Barcelona cannot afford to wait.

Erasing the club's enormous debts, keeping their sharpest talents and even being a contender to sign the likes of Erling Haaland in the summer will all rely on Xavi's side finishing in the top four. It is why any romantic ideas about style and youth have been tempered by a more pragmatic edge, the kind that persuaded Xavi and Joan Laporta to re-sign a 38-year-old Dani Alves, add the physicality of Adama Traore and bring Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang in from the cold.

Aubameyang could make his debut today, although given the 32-year-old's last game for Arsenal came on December 6, he might be more likely to start on the bench. Atletico's problem has been conceding goals rather than scoring them, the collapse of their usually dependable defence the central reason for the crumbling defence of their title. Already, they have conceded 26 goals, one more than they let in all last season. — AFP

# Classifieds

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Mubarak Al-Kabir Hospital	25312700	Khalidiya	24848075
Chest Hospital	24849400	Kaifan	24849807
Farwaniya Hospital	24892010	Shamiya	24848913
Adan Hospital	23940620	Shuwaikh	24814507
Ibn Sina Hospital	24840300	Abdullah Salem	22549134
Al-Razi Hospital	24846000	Nuzha	22526804
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## Norway's Johaug wins first gold

China thrill crowd with first gold; Bogataj gives Slovenia historic ski gold



ZHANGJIAKOU: Norway's Therese Johaug (center) celebrates her victory after crossing the finish line of the women's skiathlon 2x7.5km event during the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympic Games yesterday. — AFP

**BEIJING:** Norwegian cross-country skier Therese Johaug won the first gold medal of the Beijing Olympics yesterday and hosts China claimed a thrilling victory as sport moved centre stage after a troubled build-up. Johaug was a comfortable winner of the women's 7.5-plus-7.5-kilometre skiathlon.

The 33-year-old, who was ruled out of the 2018 Winter Games after failing a doping test for a substance in a lip balm, had to dodge coronavirus after two of her Norwegian teammates tested positive before travelling to these Games. "At first I was really happy just to come here because we have the COVID in our team," Johaug said after finally winning an individual Olympic title at her third Games.

"I've trained thousands of hours for this and been away from home a lot over the years so it's beautiful to reach this goal," Dinigeer Yilamujiang, a 20-year-old Uyghur who was chosen by China as one of two athletes to light the cauldron in Friday's opening ceremony, finished 43rd in the skiathlon race. Yilamujiang's inclusion in a ceremony watched by a worldwide television audience placed her at the centre of long-time controversy over rights abuses in China's Xinjiang region.

Campaigners say China has incarcerated at least

one million people from mostly Muslim minorities, notably Uyghurs, in "re-education camps" in Xinjiang. The United States, Britain, Canada and Australia are among countries staging a diplomatic boycott of the Games over China's rights record, and particularly the fate of the Uyghurs. Asked whether the inclusion of a Uyghur competitor in the ceremony met the International Olympic Committee's standard of political neutrality, IOC spokesman Mark Adams said she had "every right" to participate.

"As you'll know from the Olympic Charter, we don't discriminate against people on where they're from, what their background is," he said. China won their first gold of the Games when their quartet claimed victory in the short track speed skating mixed relay on the event's dramatic Olympic debut. The Chinese almost failed to reach the final but were reprieved when the United States were penalised for blocking by an infield skater. Cheered on by a small but enthusiastic crowd of several hundred at the Capital Indoor Stadium, China crossed the line ahead of Italy.

### White bowing out

Shaun White, the American snowboarder who has

defined his sport, announced he would retire after he competes in Beijing at his fifth Olympics. White, three times a gold medalist in the halfpipe, said there were "little signs" that his 35-year-old body was telling him time was up. "It's this now, it's that now - it's all these little things adding up that's taking away from days of practice that I would normally have," he said. Canada's Mikael Kingsbury, considered the best moguls skier in history, was stunned by 21-year-old Swede Walter Wallberg under the floodlights in Zhangjiakou, just outside Beijing.

Kingsbury was a strong favorite to retain the title he won four years ago, but Wallberg put down a stunning run to beat the Canadian and become Sweden's youngest Winter Olympic champion for 58 years. "Wallberg, with the pressure on, put down the best run of the day and props on him," said a gracious Kingsbury. Ursa Bogataj came from behind to win the women's individual ski jump title — Slovenia's first ever gold medal in the sport. Norway earned their second gold of the day in biathlon, triumphing in the 4x6-kilometre mixed relay.

### High-speed rush

Today Aleksander Aamodt Kilde is the favorite in

the high-speed men's downhill - traditionally one of the highlights of a Winter Olympics. Kilde's girlfriend Mikaela Shiffrin meanwhile admitted she would be disappointed to leave Beijing without a medal, but the American skier warned it was impossible to have a flawless Games.

Shiffrin is one of the headline acts at Beijing 2022 as she pursues a third gold after winning in slalom at the 2014 Sochi Olympics and giant slalom four years later in Pyeongchang. Her first race is the giant slalom on Monday. "I've never in my life had three weeks where I had no regrets and no disappointment," Shiffrin said. "At the Olympics it's impossible to have the perfect two weeks."

The Games are taking place inside a vast "closed loop" bubble designed to thwart COVID-19. The nearly 3,000 athletes and tens of thousands of support staff, volunteers and media are cut off from Beijing's general population and tested daily. Masks are compulsory. The number of COVID cases in the bubble rose above 350 yesterday, among them an unknown number of athletes. Germany's three-time Olympic nordic combined champion Eric Frenzel will miss his first event on Wednesday because he tested positive on arrival in Beijing, his team said. — AFP

## Beijing Olympics puts Uyghur athlete at the centre of controversy

**BEIJING:** China's move to thrust a young Uyghur athlete into the spotlight at the climax of the Beijing Winter Olympics opening ceremony placed her at the centre of long-time controversy over rights abuses in Xinjiang. Dinigeer Yilamujiang, a 20-year-old cross-country skier, trained for years to fulfill every child's dream to star at the Olympics.

But her prominent, smiling appearance as the final Olympic torch-bearer on Friday at the "Bird's Nest" national stadium in front of thousands of spectators and across global television screens had clear political overtones. She is from the mostly Muslim Uyghur minority from the far-northwestern region of Xinjiang, where China's ruling Communist Party is accused of widespread human rights abuses.

Following Yilamujiang's appearance on national and international television, Chinese diplomats shared videos on Twitter of her family clapping as they watched the ceremony on screen, some dabbling tears from their eyes. China has repeatedly exhorted its critics to stop "politicizing" these Olympics, which have been overshadowed by issues including rights, COVID and fears of what will happen to athletes if they speak out at the Games. Asked by journalists if Yilamujiang's inclusion met the standard of political neutrality, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) said she had "every right" to participate.

"As you'll know from the Olympic Charter, we don't discriminate against people on where they're from, what their background is," IOC spokesman Mark Adams said. "I think the concept of having all the generations there was a really excellent one." The final stretch of the torch relay that took place inside the stadium involved Chinese winter sports athletes born in every decade starting from the 1950s and finishing in the 2000s. Yilamujiang finished 43rd in the skiathlon race yesterday. The fate of China's Uyghurs has been at the centre of international alarm.

At least one million mostly Muslim minorities have been incarcerated in "re-education camps" in Xinjiang, campaigners say, and Chinese authorities have been accused of forcibly sterilizing women and imposing forced labour in the area. The United States



BEIJING: Olympic torch bearers Dinigeer Yilamujiang (left) and Zhao Jiawen hold the torch in the middle of a giant snowflake during the opening ceremony of the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympic Games. — AFP

has accused China of genocide, a charge denied by Beijing. Although world leaders including Russian President Vladimir Putin were present at the ceremony Friday, the US, Australia, Britain and Canada were among countries who did not send diplomatic representatives because of rights fears, especially over the Uyghurs.

### 'Breakthrough athlete'

Yilamujiang started ski training aged 12, according to China Sports Daily, under the guidance of her father - also a cross-country skier, who competed nationally. She joined China's cross-country skiing team in 2017 and was among a group of athletes who headed to Norway for three years to hone their craft, state media reported. Altay, the part of Xinjiang she is from, has been touted by Chinese state media as the "birthplace of skiing" and a growing winter sports destination.

In 2019, she became the first Chinese cross-country skiing medalist in an international ski federation-level event, with media reports lauding her as having achieved a "breakthrough" for the country in the sport. Her father, who became a cross-country skier in the 1980s and is now a skiing instructor, was a strong motivating force behind her during her overseas training. Yilamujiang took part in last year's World Championships, ranking 13th in team sprint and 41st in the 10km competition. — AFP

## Chelsea survive scare; Man Utd suffer shock

**KIDDERMINSTER:** Non-league Kidderminster Harriers were seconds away from one of the biggest shocks in FA Cup history until Declan Rice rescued West Ham as the Premier League side progressed to the fifth round 2-1 after extra time. Chelsea also needed extra time and late drama to see off lower league opposition 2-1 to reach the last 16 after Plymouth missed a late penalty at Stamford Bridge.

Sixth-tier Kidderminster sit 113 places below David Moyes' men, who are pushing for a place in next season's Champions League. But the fragility in the Hammers' squad without Rice and Michael Antonio was exposed as Harriers were good value for the lead given to them by Alex Penny's early goal for much of the 90 minutes. The defender smashed into an unguarded after the Hammers failed to deal with Omari Sterling's free-kick.

Moyes sent on Rice at half-time among five changes during the second half, but the home side looked set to hold on until the England midfielder took matters into his own hands. Rice charged forward from midfield in the first minute of stoppage time, cut inside and blasted the ball high into the roof of the net. Even then the visitors labored for 30 minutes of extra time until striking in stoppage time once more to avoid the risk of a penalty shootout. Jarrod Bowen was left with the simple task of tapping home from close range after Kidderminster 'keeper Luke Simpson denied Aaron Cresswell from point-blank range.

Chelsea were without manager Thomas Tuchel, who has tested positive for coronavirus. And a star-studded Blues line-up made life difficult for themselves before jetting off to the Club World Cup in Abu Dhabi. Macaulay Gillesphey nodded the League One side into the lead after just eight minutes. The Plymouth goal led a charmed life as Mateo Kovacic and Callum Hudson-Odoi hit the bar before Cesar Azpilicueta's inventive finish leveled just before half-time.

An expected Chelsea onslaught in the second half failed to materialize and they had to wait until stoppage time at the end of the first half of extra time to



MANCHESTER: Manchester United's Portuguese striker Cristiano Ronaldo (right) and Manchester United's Portuguese midfielder Bruno Fernandes (center) go for the same ball during the English FA Cup match on February 4, 2022. — AFP

go in front when Marcos Alonso slotted home Kai Havertz's cross. However, the drama did not end there as Plymouth were awarded a penalty with seconds to go in extra time. Kepa Arrizabalaga has been brought on in the past by Tuchel for shootouts as a penalty specialist and the Spaniard ensured there was not a shootout when he saved Ryan Hardie's spot-kick.

### Man Utd suffer shock

Meanwhile, Ralf Rangnick claimed Manchester United were robbed by VAR after his side suffered a shock FA Cup exit at the hands of Championship club Middlesbrough who won 8-7 on penalties after a 1-1 draw on Friday. Rangnick's team crashed out in the fourth round after Anthony Elanga blazed his spot-kick over the bar in a nerve-jangling shoot-out at Old Trafford. Swedish teenager Elanga was the only player from either team to miss in the shoot-out, leaving the forward holding his head in disbelief as Middlesbrough celebrated their stunning victory.

Jadon Sancho had put United ahead in the first half, but Matt Crooks grabbed a controversial equalizer after the interval to set the stage for Middlesbrough's memorable upset. Crooks' goal was allowed to stand despite Duncan Watmore controlling the ball with his hand before providing the assist. "We conceded a goal which I don't understand why it stood. He controlled it with his hand," Rangnick said. — AFP