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# No-confidence motion filed against FM after grilling

## Sheikh Ahmad denies all allegations made by Muwaizri



KUWAIT: Foreign Minister Sheikh Ahmad Nasser Al-Sabah is surrounded by fellow ministers during a National Assembly session yesterday. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

By B Izzak

**KUWAIT:** Ten lawmakers yesterday filed a no-confidence motion against Foreign Minister Sheikh Ahmad Nasser Al-Sabah following a grilling in which he denied allegations of squandering public funds and failing to perform his duties. National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem said he received the no-confidence motion signed by the MPs and that voting on the motion will take place on Feb 16.

At the start of the debate, the government stressed that the grilling violates the constitution because it does not talk about specific issues but rather common subjects, but still the minister accepted to face the grilling. MP Shuaib Al-Muwaizri, who filed the grilling, insisted that the grilling is in line with the constitution and charged that the ministry of foreign affairs has committed the largest number of violations among ministries. He claimed millions of dinars have been squandered by the ministry and Kuwaiti missions abroad.

Muwaizri also claimed that the ministry has ignored requests by the Audit Bureau and failed to provide it with documents related to expenses by some embassies, thus preventing the bureau from inspecting those expenditures. The lawmaker said a senior official at the ministry signed a \$10 million contract with a private company although he is not

authorized to sign such contracts, adding that several embassies have squandered millions of dollars.

Muwaizri showed a video of a party held at a house rented by a Kuwaiti diplomat, which featured "immoral behavior". He also claimed that some Kuwaiti embassies did not perform their duties in providing the required services to Kuwaiti citizens.

The minister however denied the allegations, saying that the lawmaker did not specify the acts of squandering of public funds, adding that if those allegations were true, the lawmaker should have reported the cases to the public prosecutor. He recalled the ministry's role in repatriating some 12,000 Kuwaitis who were stranded abroad after the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic.

Sheikh Ahmad also denied that the ministry has failed to protect Kuwait's political and security interests abroad, adding that this duty is not under the foreign ministry only. Commenting on the minister's reply, MP Muwaizri said the minister did not respond clearly to any of the accusations, adding that the issue of foreign transfers of public funds is still continuing and the ministry failed to deal with it.

To pass, the no-confidence motion needs the support of 24 MPs. Approving the motion will lead to dismissing the minister. But looking at the state of affairs of the opposition, it is unlikely to secure the support of the needed votes.

### News in brief

#### 17m requests for World Cup tickets

**DOHA:** FIFA said yesterday that requests for 17 million tickets for this year's World Cup finals in Qatar were received in the first phase of sales. Just over two million tickets will be available for the first tournament in an Arab country. — AFP

#### Saudi secures 2,450 wells

**RIYADH:** Saudi Arabia said it has filled and fortified thousands of abandoned wells across the country, after the tragic death of a boy in Morocco. Saudi Arabia's ministry of environment, water and agriculture said "the ministry was able to fill in and fortify 2,450 abandoned wells." — AFP

#### Dubai to charge for plastic bags

**DUBAI:** Dubai will charge a tariff of 25 fils (\$0.07) on single-use plastic bags in a drive towards more sustainable practices for the glitzy emirate known for its unbridled consumerism. The decision will come into force at the start of July in shops, restaurants, pharmacies and for home deliveries. — AFP

#### Bahrain announces long-term visa

**MANAMA:** Bahrain announced Monday the creation of long-term visas for foreigners in an effort to "boost the economy". Dubbed the "golden residence", the visa offers 10 years of residency in the kingdom, which can be renewed "indefinitely", provided certain criteria are met. — AFP

#### Gruesome video shakes Iranians

**TEHRAN:** A viral video of a man appearing to display his decapitated wife's head in the street after he discovered her alleged adultery has deeply shaken Iranians. Police suspect that Mona Heidari, 17, was killed by her husband and brother-in-law in Ahvaz. Officers arrested the two men in a raid. — AFP

## Zionist troops kill 3 young Palestinians

**NABLUS:** Zionist forces killed three Palestinians yesterday during a daytime raid, leaving a vehicle in the West Bank city of Nablus riddled with bullet holes. The Palestinian health ministry and the Zionist entity's security forces both confirmed the three deaths. The Palestinian Authority condemned the raid as a "summary execution".

Sources in the Palestinian Fatah movement identified two of the dead as Adham Mabrouk and Muhammad Al-Dakhil, who they said were affiliated with the Al-Aqsa Martyrs'

Brigades. According to a Palestinian security source, "(Zionist) soldiers who were in a civilian vehicle intercepted a Palestinian vehicle and directly fired at it, which led to the deaths of three young men."

AFP reporters in Nablus saw a bullet-riddled windshield of a silver car that eyewitnesses said Zionist forces targeted. The witnesses, who requested anonymity citing security concerns, said one of the vehicles carrying Zionist forces was a yellow taxi. Hundreds of Palestinians thronged the streets outside the Rafidia hospital in Nablus as the bodies of the men were carried out.

The PA foreign ministry statement said in a statement that it "holds the (Zionist) government headed by Naftali Bennett fully and directly responsible for this heinous crime".

Continued on Page 6



NABLUS: Mourners attend the funeral of three Palestinians killed by Zionist forces yesterday in this West Bank city. — AFP

## Eatery aims to free bad debt inmates

**TEHRAN:** Two Iranian ex-prisoners have opened a successful "jail restaurant" to help raise funds to free convicts languishing behind bars for unpaid debts. A storefront picture of their "Cell 16" diner in eastern Tehran shows a frustrated prisoner holding a chicken leg in one hand and trying with the other to bend the bars of his cell to escape. The idea of the restaurant was hatched in prison.

"I met my partner while we were in police custody," Benjamin Nakhat, 31, told AFP. "I was working at the iron market in Tehran but I went bankrupt. I found myself penniless." His business partner, Arman Alizadeh, a 30-year-old



TEHRAN: Iranians dine at the "Cell 16" restaurant on Feb 4, 2022. — AFP

exporter, was also drowning in debt. Iranian law is harsh on writing cheques that bounce, and on failure to pay agreed dowries or bank loans: It's jail time until the money is repaid. More than 11,000 Iranians are behind bars for failing to pay

their debts, according to prison officials. That is almost five percent of Iran's total prison population. Two years after their release, the jail time friends opened Cell 16, with its separate dining tables behind bars. — AFP (See Page 13)

## Highly accurate COVID test gives result in minutes

**BEIJING:** Chinese scientists say they have developed a new coronavirus test that is as accurate as a PCR lab test but gives results within four minutes. Polymerase chain reaction (PCR) tests are widely considered the most accurate and sensitive for the virus that causes COVID-19, but they usually take several hours. Some countries have experienced severe backlogs in the face of heavy testing demand, fueled by the explosive spread of the highly transmissible Omicron variant.

Researchers from Fudan University in Shanghai say they have a solution. In a peer-reviewed article published Monday in the journal Nature Biomedical Engineering, the team said their sensor - which uses microelectronics to analyze genetic material from swabs - can

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## Local

# Foreign Minister charges grilling themes, topics void of facts

## MP alleges 'serious irregularities' involving squandering of public funds

KUWAIT: Ten members of the Kuwaiti National Assembly yesterday filed a no-confidence vote against Foreign Minister Sheikh Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah at the end of a parliamentary session during which he was queried about alleged irregularities in his department. National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Ali Al-Ghanem indicated that the request to strip the minister of the confidence would be examined in seven days according to the parliament by-law, which also stipulates that a minister who may face such an eventuality must resign instantly. A no confidence vote requires approval of the majority of the MPs in order to pass. Earlier in the session, Minister Sheikh Ahmad meticulously reacted to charges raised by a member of the National Assembly denying irregularities in his department and assuring MPs about the ministry care about Kuwaiti citizens' welfare and interests abroad.

Sheikh Ahmad, who doubles as Deputy Prime Minister for Cabinet Affairs, answered in detail queries by MP Shuaib Al-Muwaizri, who had filed a motion to grill the minister over issues in his department. Sheikh Ahmad said the foreign ministry had pinpointed a shortcoming on part of a contractor responsible for building a complex for the Kuwaiti diplomatic mission in Brunei and liquidated his banking guarantee. Moreover, Sheikh Ahmad pointed out that the complex construction issue dated back to 2016 and that he had taken the office in 2019. As to irregularities at the ministry, he said that MP Muwaizri failed to specify any illegal act and asked him why he abstained from complaining instantly after learning about such alleged offenses.

Regarding the mysterious disappearance of Kuwaiti national Mohammad Al-Baghli in Romania, the minister disclosed



KUWAIT: Foreign Minister Sheikh Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah speaks during the debate of his grilling motion.— Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat



MP Shuaib Al-Muwaizri makes his argument during the debate.

that a security delegation would travel to the European country in March to follow up on the case, while affirming the ministry's keenness on following up closely



### No confidence vote next week

on the affairs of citizens abroad and securing their needs. Replying to the charges about breaching international treaties and conventions, totaling 2,616 since 1961, Sheikh Ahmad urged the concerned legislator to specify which accords had been violated particularly with respect of schedules and legal perspectives.

### Lacking evidence

Sheikh Ahmad had affirmed at the beginning of the session that he was ready to address the themes and topics of any interpellation directed towards himself despite yesterday's motion "lacking factual data and evidence." In his address to the ordinary session of the National Assembly, Sheikh Dr Ahmad Al-Nasser indicated that the interpellation did not provide clear evidence of the alleged "serious irregularities involving squandering of public funds" by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He warned that the allegations had used terms of grave consequences, stressed that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of State for Cabinet Affairs enabled the State Audit Bureau and other entities to supervise and inspect their expenditure.

MP Muwaizri had lashed out at the Foreign Ministry for having "serious irregularities involving squandering of public funds". Addressing the session,



National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Ali Al-Ghanem is seen during the session.

the MP blasted the ministry for having shrugged off the State Audit Bureau's (SAB) request for documents pertinent to its diplomatic missions' expenses.

Muwaizri also claimed that the ministry had failed to fine the contractor of a \$656 million diplomatic mission building in Brunei for not having finished the

facility in the allotted time. Furthermore, the deputy alleged that a senior ministry official had inked a contract worth \$10 million with a certain company, even though he had no power to do so, while astringently criticizing the ministry over KD 1.7 million (\$5.7 million) worth of furniture and appliances. — KUNA



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Local

# Lack of entertainment costs Kuwait its shine

## 'Pearl of the Gulf' struggling to keep up with its neighbors

By Sahar Moussa

KUWAIT: Khaled woke up early on Friday morning to the sound of his energetic son who wanted to go outside and play. But Khaled was confused because he didn't know where to take him to. He eventually decided to take him to the mall for the third time this month. Leisure options are very limited nowadays, especially after a lot of entertainment places closed in Kuwait.

On his way to the mall, Khaled recalled all the places he used to go to when he was a child, such as Entertainment City, Shaab Park, Showbiz, Aqua Park, the zoo, the ice skating rink, sea clubs of Touristic Enterprises Company, Marah Land and others.

"Whatever we had is closed now - all we have now are malls," said Youssef, a Kuwaiti father of two. This is the case of many parents in Kuwait, who are struggling to find proper and decent places for their children to play, other than going to malls.

### Nine-day holiday

A Kuwait Times survey on social media revealed 89 percent of respondents said there are not enough entertainment places in Kuwait. Since the government announced a nine-day holiday on the occasion of National Day, Liberation Day and Israa and Meraj, some commenters asked where they can go with the few options they have.

"Entertainment doesn't exist in Kuwait at all these days. They have closed down almost everything that is actually entertaining, and we don't know what to do in the holiday, except going to the same places which are malls," one commenter wrote. "There is not enough free entertainment for kids or clean and child-friendly parks. Everything is dilapidated, and we don't know where we should take our kids in the holiday," said another.

Meanwhile, many people raised concerns about the condition and safety of the few outdoor parks in Kuwait. "In some parks, the swings and slides are broken, outdated and filthy. The parks are not clean and not maintained," they said.

Meanwhile, many people demanded that there should be more interactive entertainment places and activities in a country like Kuwait. "We need skateparks, rollerblading, arcades, amusement parks, concerts, more recreational and interactive parks, proper museums, organizations for the youth to participate and organize events and more touristic

things - anything that doesn't only include food and movies," said one of the commenters.

### The comparison

The lack of entertainment options has led many people to start comparing Kuwait with other GCC countries, mainly Saudi Arabia, UAE and Qatar. Earlier this month, Saudi Arabia arranged the country's first yoga festival, which was attended by 1,000 people in just one day, while Kuwaiti authorities banned a yoga event in the desert.

"Kuwait needs something like Global Village and Expo 2020 in UAE, concerts in Saudi Arabia, and the ability to host big events like Qatar," said one commenter. "Where are we living; in Afghanistan ruled by the Taliban? Kuwait is going backwards while the rest of the Gulf is innovating and improving on their past. If this country doesn't improve what it is doing, I can guarantee that Kuwait will collapse on itself, leaving citizens to find somewhere new to live," said one commenter.

"The fact that people think about moving out of the country and want to travel all the time is because Kuwait literally has nothing. This is upsetting to think about. Kuwaiti citizens deserve more than just malls, cafes, chalets and parks and spending money in other countries instead of their own. They could be

“ Kuwait is going backwards while the rest of the Gulf is innovating ”

doing a lot to help make the country more entertaining and comfortable for the people living in it, but they are not. They should at least think of a way to fix the boredom that we feel from going to the same places repeatedly. There is so much potential for this country, but they are not doing anything about it," said another.

While some people praise UAE and Saudi Arabia, others question the current trend of drifting away from longstanding Gulf customs and traditions. In



KUWAIT: This file photo shows ruins of the Aqua Park in Kuwait City after it was demolished. — Photo by Fouad Al-Shaikh

Kuwait, the conservative voice remains strong, both on the political and social spectrums. In fact, Kuwaiti authorities banned the yoga event in response to comments raised by MP Hamdan Al-Azmi, who described the event as "dangerous", which would threaten the country's conservative society.

### The line between freedom and oppression

Azmi also sparked debate when he demanded during a parliament session that the government must not allow concerts in Kuwait, saying that they are "destructive" to society, "corrupt our children" and go against the Kuwaiti society's conservative nature. The Kuwaiti Artists Society criticized Azmi for his comments. They released a statement highlighting the message Kuwaiti arts has 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.

In response to Azmi's objections to the yoga event, the Kuwaiti Progressive Movement issued a statement rejecting "puritanical claims to restrict personal freedoms". They said: "We call on Kuwaiti citizens to confront this reality that is being imposed

on the state, society and individuals in Kuwait."

Another Kuwait Times survey on social media asking people about banning yoga in Kuwait revealed 78 percent are against the ban. All these developments lead to a protest at Irada Square on Monday against MPs' "guardianship of women and liberties". "Guardianship of the public is unacceptable. We are not against religion; we are against guardianship in the name of religion. We refuse to be under the guardianship of people who are equal to us," said Sarah Al-Mikaimi, one of the women at the protest.

Louloua Al-Mulla, head of Kuwait's Women's Cultural and Social Society, said "we are witnessing an attack from the forces of backwardness to limit the features of the civil state. Kuwait is a civil state ruled by the constitution and not fatwas, and we will defend it."

As Khaled sat down and watched his kid playing in the mall, he reminisced about the time when Kuwait hosted many cultural and entertainment activities, which attracted visitors from all over the region. At that time, Kuwait used to be known as the 'Pearl of the Gulf', and he like many others wonder if it will be called that again.



KUWAIT: People shop at a supermarket in Kuwait. —Photo by Ben Garcia

## Co-ops or supermarkets? Shoppers make their choice

By Ben Garcia

KUWAIT: In Kuwait, several choices are available for shoppers, from semi-government cooperative societies to supermarkets operated by private companies. Kuwait Times asked several shoppers whether they prefer to shop at co-ops or commercial supermarkets. Some shop at a particular place for convenience, while others choose their store depending on their taste, promotions, raffle draws or cheaper prices.

"I tried shopping in supermarkets, but I didn't like it as I am not comfortable in crowded places. I prefer cooperative societies, where I can find fresh-

er veggies and fruits," said Farah, an Arab shopper. But familiarity is the number one reason why people prefer to shop in co-ops. "I don't want to go to a place where I have to scan all the products before I can find what I want. I hate roaming around. I want to find my products quickly and I can trust only co-ops for that," she noted.

If you are looking for promos and cheaper prices, supermarkets and hypermarkets are the place to be. "I like shopping in hypermarkets. I go to almost all supermarkets that offer discounts. I don't frequent co-ops, as they have limited products. Hypermarkets have a variety of products at discounted prices," said Bai Intan Al-Qallaf, who used to shop at co-ops but change habits when she found things were cheaper in hypermarkets.

Marilyn shops at supermarkets for a chance to win in raffle draws. "When one of the oldest supermarkets opened in Shuwaikh in 2000, I was addicted to shopping there almost every day with my husband for a chance to win in the raffle. Thank God, at least I won a television, but that was it. I shopped there till it closed in 2017 and shifted to a new location," she said.

porated into "all aspects of life." On the environmental front, the seminar explained how the use of innovation, despite its "mixed track record" there, can lead to tangible change, including lowering pollution levels and promoting greater sustainability. "Innovation is a way of life," the UAE's Dr Matar Al-Neyadi told the seminar, adding that his country has "strived to invest" in innovation as a national priority, earning the Gulf Arab state the moniker of the "incubator of innovation." On international data concerning innovation, Kuwait ranks 72 out of 132 countries in the Global Innovation Index, which according to the UN Secretary General Representative and Resident Coordinator in Kuwait Dr Tarek El-Sheikh, is based on a country's "level of performance." The seminar focused on the use of innovation as a tool that can transform everyday life, leading to more productivity and efficiency in numerous fields. — KUNA

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Local spotlight

## Kuwaitization



By Nejouad Al-Yagout

There is a plan in place. It's no secret. The plan is to reduce the number of expats by a significant amount. In English, the plan is called Kuwaitization. In a country where the vast majority of inhabitants are expatriates, in a country where locals rely on the expertise of foreigners, in a country where humanitarianism is waning year after year, the fast-track to Kuwaitization is not to renew the contracts of foreign employees or to make their lives miserable so that they leave of their own accord (the latter was a ploy engaged in the past to encourage a local to resign, since it was virtually impossible to fire a Kuwaiti).

During the pandemic, the mass exodus of expatriates is hard to ignore. Many people who were born and raised here are asking themselves whether it is worth it to stay in a country that, frankly, does not want them here (or only wants them because locals cannot fill the required spaces). It was reported that nurses at Mubarak Hospital were in tears a couple of weeks ago when they were told it was their last day at work. Their contracts at the MoH had purportedly ended on the given day. How can you tell frontline workers whose lives are devoted to caring for our sick that it is their last day at work? Their salaries are already insufficient, and many of them get paid much less than other nurses who work the same amount of time as them. In a country where foreigners are already voiceless and the threat of deportation looms on many an expatriate's head, what justification do we have for such disregard? How can we treat anyone in this manner and sleep easy at night?

Kuwait has been ranked as the worst country for expatriates seven times in eight years. Isn't that enough of an indicator that we are doing something seriously wrong? Where are the movers and shakers in our country? Why is it that the parliamentarians who are most popular are the ones who promise to raise the salaries of Kuwaitis and demand ministers to fulfill the rights of locals? What is the point of rights if they are not given to all inhabitants of a country? It's called human rights, not Kuwaiti rights. This nationalization, this sense of privilege is dangerous. Being a nationalist entails a degree of arrogance, a sense of us vs them-which not only causes divisiveness but delusion.

In his essay 'Notes on Nationalism', George Orwell writes: "The nationalist not only does not disapprove of atrocities committed by his own side, but he has a remarkable capacity for not even hearing about them." We see this denial everywhere. And the couple of human rights accounts on social media that are not in denial are either inactive or not able to pass legislation. What more can they say or do if all their appeals fall on deaf ears?

We have so many nationalists in power, that to even speak out against nationalism is considered a betrayal. But the more we love our country, the greater our duty to ensure that it moves in the direction of inclusivity and equality rather than on a path of polarization and exclusivity. When it comes to ethics, it is better to speak out than to permit injustices. As Desmond Tutu told us: "If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor."

As such, let us implore each other to remember we are not the color of our passports. History has even shown that borders are fluid. What then? Will we still cling on to our nationality? Or will it be too late?

## Photo of the Day



KUWAIT: Boats sail on the Arabian Gulf waters as the Jaber Causeway is seen in the background. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

# Kuwait reports 3,989 new COVID cases, two deaths

## WAO designates allergy establishment as center of excellence

**KUWAIT:** Kuwait reported 3,989 new COVID-19 cases yesterday in addition to two deaths and 5,022 recoveries. Meanwhile, the number of patients in ICUs remained at 91, while the number of patients hospitalized dropped from 532 to 514. Total active cases also dropped from 52,698 to 51,663. The percentage of daily new cases to new tests reached 13.8 percent while the percentage of recovery reached 90.7 percent, according to the health ministry's bulletin.

In other news, the World Allergy Organization (WAO) has accredited the Kuwaiti Abdulaziz Al-Rashed Allergy Center as a center of excellence, prompting the minister of health to hail the achievement as a credit for the whole national health sector. Minister Khaled Al-Saeed said in a

statement yesterday he is proud of the accomplishment, congratulating all the center staff and noting that the designation by the largest academy globally in this sector as a new success not only for the center but also for the whole Kuwaiti medical sector. He expressed gratitude to the personnel whose perseverance led to the international honoring of the center. Dr Mona Al-Ahmad, head of the center department of allergy and immunity, said the gesture by the world's largest academy at this level should prompt the concerned cadres to excel further. With this selection, the Kuwaiti establishment has become among six accredited centers in the Middle East and Africa as well as among 53 centers worldwide that had won such honors. — KUNA



## Foreign Minister meets US Acting Assistant Secretary of State

**KUWAIT:** Kuwait's Foreign Minister and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah met late Monday US Acting Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Yael Lambert and her accompanying delegation. During the gathering, the two sides discussed the bonds of friendship between the two friendly countries. They reviewed their distinguished bilateral relations and the strategic partnership as well as means of developing and enhancing them in a manner that achieves the common interests of the two peoples. In addition, they focused on the latest developments on regional and international arenas, and mutual coordination on these happenings. — KUNA



KUWAIT: Kuwait's Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah meets US Acting Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Yael Lambert. — KUNA

## HMC Hawally marks Hala February with special offers

**KUWAIT:** With the onset of Hala February and the festivities of National Day and Liberation Day, Hala Super Specialty Medical Center (HMC) is delighted to welcome all the residents of Kuwait to have a memorable healthcare experience with their friends and family. In the first quarter of 2022, Kuwait began to witness a devastating wave of COVID-19 cases affecting people of all ages, including children and infants. Post COVID ailment is very common at the 'new normal' as people after recovery often forget to diagnose these health conditions. HMC offers specialty medical care and consultation for all at a reasonable price, and if issues are found, people can get a specialist doctor's treatment at the earliest.

HMC offers diagnosis and treatment in multiple specialties such as gynecology and infertility, general medicine, endocrinology, emergency care, pediatrics, internal medicine, dentistry, radiology, lab service etc. Built on the foundation of the belief 'an art of care in quality healthcare', Hala Super Specialty Medical Center Hawally, an initiative of Hala Group Kuwait, is a super-specialty, patient centric specialty-care institution launched in the suburbs of Hawally. Located strategically in an easily accessible location, the medical center enjoys unmatched connectivity to various parts of Kuwait. Spread over 55,000 square feet, the 10-storey medical center has various specialty departments across the spectrum, offering medical care benchmarked to global best practices, underlined by an ethos of transparency, care and compassion. With

the belief that world-class health care should be accessible for all residents in Kuwait, Hala Super Specialty Medical Center offers a wide range of specialty departments under one roof, driven by technology, talent, care, and compassion. It is powered by a team of expert healthcare professionals with national and international credentials and with a mix of full-time doctors and with the upcoming introduction of distinguished visiting consultants for various subspecialties, whereas timely availability of expertise will be ensured at all times.

HMC has a Hala February special offer that includes post COVID screening, infertility profiles, gynecology checkups, dental packages, pediatric checkups, weigh loss plans and special dietician consultation. The offers include:

Full Body check-up only for KD 2 with free doctor consultation valid till end of February, 2022. FBS, SGPT (liver screening), creatinine (kidney screening), uric acid, total cholesterol, blood pressure monitoring, pulse temperature, spO2. Complete dental check-up for KD 1 with free doctor consultation valid till end of February, 2022. Complete internal medicine and cardiac checkup for KD 5 with doctor consultation includes total cholesterol, triglycerides, RBS for cardiac profile. Uric acid, urea, creatine, CUE (aspartate aminotransferase) for kidney profile. AST (Aspartate Aminotransferase), ALT (Alanine Aminotransferase), total bilirubin for liver profile. Gynecology check up with polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS) screening for KD 20 with renowned infertility Specialist Dr Saritha Hari. The screening includes pelvic scanning, thyroid test, prolactin and dietician consultation.

Apart from the comprehensive, doctor at home, lab at home, patient care at home is 24 hours home healthcare service with a difference and medical excellence. The core purpose is to deliver 'Healthcare outside hospitals' in the right way. The

main focus is on clinical excellence with specialist doctors and healthcare staff coupled with superior patient experience at an affordable cost.

Hala Super Specialty Medical Center is located right in the heart of one of the most prominent places in Kuwait: Beirut Street in Hawally, and is open 24 hours. Hala Group Kuwait also brought the 24-hour PCR swab testing available to the community at a low price and quick results. Hala Group Kuwait has the vision and strategic plan to expand its portfolio by adding more medical centers and specialty Hospitals in Kuwait. Hala group acquired Dar Al-Fouad Clinic located at Qutaibah Bin Muslim St, Hawally, worth KD 3 million with 60,000 square feet medical facilities.







Trump took Kim 'love letters,' gov't records from White House

## 49 convicted in India over deadly 2008 bomb attacks

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TRIPOLI: Lebanese men smoke waterpipes as they take a break outside their workshop in an alley of the northern city of Tripoli's impoverished neighborhood of Bab al-Tabbaneh. Dozens of young men from Tripoli, Lebanon's poorest city, are believed to have recently joined the Islamic State (IS) group, which never commanded territory in Lebanon but boasted some Lebanese among residents of its so-called 'caliphate' before it was defeated in Syria three years ago.



TRIPOLI: This picture shows a view of the northern Lebanese city of Tripoli's impoverished neighborhoods of Bab al-Tabbaneh and Jabal Mohsen. — AFP photos

# Mired in poverty, Lebanese join jihadists

## Young Lebanese man turned up dead in Iraq

TRIPOLI: Zakaria al-Adl was presumed to have attempted a sea escape to Europe after he had gone missing over the summer, but then the young Lebanese man turned up dead in Iraq. A native of the northern Lebanese city of Tripoli, the 22-year-old is one of at least eight men who have been reported killed in Iraq since December 2021, as a suspected jihadist militant. They all hail from impoverished Tripoli districts, and were allegedly lured into joining the Islamic State group by the promise of a decent salary, according to a security official.

Dozens more from the same Mediterranean port city are believed to have recently joined IS ranks with their recruitment handled by a Tripoli jihadist who lives outside Lebanon, the official said, speaking on condition of anonymity about the sensitive issue. "We didn't know he was in Iraq until we were notified of his death" in December, Zakaria's mother, Ghufran al-Adl, 56, told AFP from their one-bedroom apartment in the Bab al-Tabbaneh neighborhood, one of the country's poorest.

Zakaria had been missing since last summer, but it wasn't until the Iraqi army in December published images and videos of slain IS fighters in Iraq's western Anbar desert that his family came to know of his death. His brother Ali Al-Adl played one such video on his phone, which appeared to show the corpse of Zakaria beside another body on the hood of a car. In a statement at the time, the Iraqi army said it had killed 10 IS jihadists in strikes and clashes.

### Youth 'on the sidelines'

Zakaria's family said poverty and not ideological affiliation is what primarily drove the young man to join jihadist ranks, at a time when Lebanon is grappling with an unprecedented financial crisis. "When he disappeared, we thought that he was planning to go to Sweden illegally," Ali said. "He left because of

poverty," Ali said of his brother, who used to run a vegetable cart.

Ghufran, who is in urgent need of heart surgery that her family cannot afford, said that her son "lived and died on the sidelines". Since August, dozens of young men have disappeared from Tripoli, which has been especially hard hit by the country's financial crash. "The number of young men who joined IS is estimated at 48," said a security official, explaining that the latest wave of recruits left Lebanon on January 18.

"Their families informed authorities of their whereabouts after receiving calls from them while they were in Iraq," the same source added. Only five of the 48 have yet to be accounted for, the offi-

group is luring its recruits with the promise of "salaries reaching up to \$5,000 a month", the official said. Iraq's National Security Adviser Qassem Al-Araji said Sunday that Baghdad has started talks with Lebanese authorities over the IS threat. Lebanon's interior minister is expected to visit Baghdad soon to discuss concerns, he added.

### 'Your darling is dead'

In January this year, the Wadi Al-Nahleh village near Tripoli received news that Omar Seif was among five of its residents killed in Iraq. Omar left Tripoli on December 30 and died nearly a month later, according to his family. Omar's mother found out about it via WhatsApp, according to a relative who spoke to AFP on condition of anonymity. She had sent Omar a message asking: "How are you, my darling?" The response she received, from a number Omar had previously used to call her, read: "Your darling is dead." The Iraqi army issued a statement naming Omar and two of his cousins as Lebanese citizens killed in air strikes targeting IS fighters in the eastern province of Diyala. AFP had met Omar's mother two weeks before his death.

She claimed poverty took her son, an ex-convict detained on suspicion of involvement in attacks against the army—and who had virtually no job prospects after being released from jail. "He was desperate," she told AFP then, asking not to be identified for security reasons. "No one wanted to hire him... so he worked as a day laborer." Omar was planning to marry his fiancée within the coming two months which caused him to obsess over finances, his mother added, blaming the Lebanese state for her son's fate. When asked if she feared he might have joined IS, she said: "I am afraid he might have... but better die there than ever return to Lebanon, even if that means never seeing him again." — AFP



### Recruitment handled by a Tripoli jihadist

cial added. Even before the 2019 onset of Lebanon's financial crisis, Lebanon's second city was widely seen as a volatile militant bastion. Its poorest neighborhoods have been major supporters of Sunni militants responsible for attacks against the army and involved in jihadist activities in Tripoli and beyond.

Thousands have been detained on suspicion of terrorism links, many without trial. The security official believes that "financial motives" are the main reason Tripoli's youth are joining IS ranks. The

## Macron says no 'escalation' from Putin

KYIV: French President Emmanuel Macron said yesterday he had convinced Russia's Vladimir Putin not to escalate the crisis around Ukraine, ahead of talks in Kyiv aimed at defusing fears Moscow could invade. During a five-hour meeting over dinner in the Kremlin Monday, Macron said he offered Putin "concrete security guarantees" as the West scrambles to deal with Russia's massive troop build-up on Ukraine's border.

"I obtained that there will be no degradation nor escalation," the French leader told journalists as he arrived in Kyiv for talks with Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky. "My aim was to freeze the game, to prevent an escalation and open up new perspectives," Macron said. "This objective for me is fulfilled."

Putin—who has demanded sweeping security guarantees from NATO and the United States—told Macron that Moscow would "do everything to find compromises that suit everyone". He said several proposals put forward by Macron could "form a basis for further steps" on easing the crisis over Ukraine, but did not give any details.

At the same time as sending its military hardware to Ukraine's borders, Moscow issued demands the West says are unacceptable, including barring Ukraine from joining NATO and rolling back alliance forces in eastern Europe.

The French presidency said Macron's counter proposals include an engagement from both sides not to take any new military action, the launching of a strategic dialogue and efforts to revive the peace process in Kyiv's conflict with Moscow-backed separatists in eastern Ukraine.

It also said an agreement would ensure the withdrawal of some 30,000 Russian soldiers from Belarus at the end of joint military exercises later this month. "I didn't think for a second that he was going to make any gestures yesterday," Macron said of Putin. Macron—who was the first Western leader to meet Putin since the crisis began in December—faces a tough task trying to convince a wary Zelensky to accept any compromises. —AFP

## Philippines kicks off chaotic election campaign season

BOCAUE: The race to lead the Philippines kicked off yesterday, with the son and namesake of former dictator Ferdinand Marcos the favorite to succeed authoritarian firebrand Rodrigo Duterte and return his clan to the presidential palace they once fled. Candidates hit the hustings for the three-month campaign season in a chaotic and colorful charm offensive aimed at wooing millions of voters typically more interested in personality than policy. More than 35 years after the country emerged from his father's dictatorship, polls showed Ferdinand Marcos Jr heading towards a landslide victory in the May 9 elections.

Boosted by a massive social media campaign and a formidable alliance with first daughter and vice-presidential candidate Sara Duterte, Marcos Jr—one of the most polarising figures in the Philippines—has vowed to "unify the country". Thousands of supporters chanting "Bongbong, Sara" crowded into an indoor stadium owned by an influential church near Manila for a noisy, rock concert-like campaign launch of the running mates.

"When I first declared my intention to run as leader, as president of the Philippines, my only wish was to make our country united again," Marcos Jr told cheering fans. "Unity is my cause because of my firm belief that unity is the first step towards getting out of this crisis we are now in." Incumbent Vice President Leni Robredo—a former lawyer for the disadvantaged and a rival of Marcos Jr and Duterte—is a distant second in voter surveys.

Kicking off her pink-colored campaign in Lupi town in the central province of Camarines Sur, Robredo told supporters she was "filled with courage because you are with me". Robredo is



LIBMANAN: Philippine Vice President and opposition presidential candidate Leni Robredo (center-with microphone) speaks from a truck during a campaign rally in the town of Libmanan, Camarines Sur province, south of Manila yesterday, as candidates hit the road for the start of the three-month long campaign season. —AFP

ahead of celebrity mayor Francisco Domagoso, boxing superstar Manny Pacquiao and ex-police chief Panfilo Lacson. "The overwhelming presidential favorite remains Marcos," said Eurasia Group analyst Peter Mumford, giving the former senator "70 percent odds" of winning. "Many of Duterte's 'pro-authoritarian' supporters see Marcos as the continuity 'strongman' candidate," Mumford said.

### Ultimate comeback

Outgoing presidents usually identify their preferred successor, who they hope will keep them out of prison as much as protect their legacy. Duterte, who is constitutionally barred from seeking a second six-year term, had chosen loyal aide Senator

Christopher Go to replace him, but he pulled out of the contest.

On the eve of the campaign season, Duterte, who has previously accused an unidentified presidential contender of snorting cocaine and described Marcos Jr as "weak", said all candidates "are my friends" and he would not endorse anyone "at this time". Victory for Marcos Jr would be the ultimate comeback for the controversial family, which was chased into US exile after the patriarch's humiliating downfall in 1986. The dictator oversaw widespread human rights abuses to maintain his control of the country and enable his massive plundering, with thousands of people killed or tortured, according to previous Philippine governments. —AFP

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## International

# Ex-pope Benedict XVI asks for forgiveness over abuse scandal

**'I can only express to all victims of sexual abuse my profound shame, my deep sorrow'**

VATICAN CITY: Ex-pope Benedict XVI asked for forgiveness yesterday for clerical child sex abuse committed on his watch, but aides rejected allegations of a cover-up while he was archbishop of Munich. "I can only express to all the victims of sexual abuse my profound shame, my deep sorrow and my heartfelt request for forgiveness," the 94-year-old said in a letter released in response to a German inquiry last month that examined his handling of paedophile priests in the 1980s.

"I have had great responsibilities in the Catholic Church. All the greater is my pain for the abuses and the errors that occurred in those different places during the time of my mandate." The former pontiff, who stepped down in 2013, was accused in January of knowingly failing to stop four priests accused of child sex abuse in the 1980s when he was archbishop of Munich.

Benedict, who is in very frail health, asked a team of aides to help him respond to the findings by law firm Westpfahl Spilker Wastl (WSW), which had been commissioned by the archdiocese of Munich and Freising to examine abuse cases between 1945 and 2019. The aides insisted in a statement published by the Vatican alongside his letter yesterday that "as an archbishop, Cardinal Ratzinger was not involved in any cover-up of acts of abuse".

The former pope—whose birth name is Joseph Ratzinger—was the archbishop of Munich from 1977 to 1982. In one case, a now notorious paedophile priest named Peter Hüllermann was transferred to Munich from Essen in western Germany where he had been accused of abusing an 11-year-old boy. Benedict's team has already admitted to unintentionally giving incorrect information to the report

authors denying his attendance at a meeting about Hüllermann in 1980.

But they denied any decision was taken at that meeting about reassigning the priest to pastoral duties, and yesterday said the abuse was not discussed. "In none of the cases analysed by the expert report was Joseph Ratzinger aware of sexual abuse committed or suspicion of sexual abuse committed by priests. The expert report provides no evidence to the contrary," the statement said.

#### Fear and trembling

In his letter, Benedict said it had been "deeply hurtful" that the "oversight" over his attendance at the

“**Quite soon, I shall find myself before the final judge**”

1980 meeting "was used to cast doubt on my truthfulness, and even to label me a liar". Benedict, who lives in a former monastery within the Vatican walls, said he was "particularly grateful for the confidence, support and prayer that Pope Francis personally expressed to me". The Vatican moved last month to defend the former pope, saying he had "fought" sexual abuse—though Pope Francis has publicly stayed silent.



VATICAN CITY: File picture shows Pope Francis (L) welcoming Pope emeritus Benedict XVI, on December 8, 2015 in Vatican. —AFP

Before his election as pope, Benedict led the Vatican's doctrinal congregation—once known as the Holy Office of the Inquisition—giving him ultimate responsibility to investigate abuse cases. In the letter, dated February 6, he made a clear reference to

his failing health, saying that "quite soon, I shall find myself before the final judge of my life". "As I look back on my long life, I can have great reason for fear and trembling," he said, but was nonetheless "of good cheer" as the end nears. —AFP

## Door reopens to candidates after Iraq vote fails

BAGHDAD: Iraq's parliament announced yesterday the reopening of registration for presidential candidates, a day after it called off a session to vote in a new head of state. One of the two frontrunners, former longtime foreign minister Hoshiyar Zebari, was "temporarily" suspended by a court, citing years-old corruption accusations after a complaint was filed against him.

His eligibility for the post is being reviewed, with his party announcing it is sticking with his candidacy and that a verdict is expected within days. Iraq's political timeline for electing a head of state and forming a government, in the wake of last year's general election, has been derailed amid political infighting.

Monday's voting session was not held due to lack of a quorum after

several key political blocs and parties announced boycotts—against the backdrop of competing claims to a parliamentary majority. The office of parliament speaker Mohamed al-Halbussi announced on Tuesday the "reopening of registration for candidates for the post of president of the republic from Wednesday, February 9 and for a period of three days".

But a date has yet to be announced for a new voting session in parliament. Only 58 MPs attended Monday's session—well below the quorum of two thirds of the 329-seat chamber. The largest political bloc led by firebrand Shiite cleric Moqtada Sadr, as well as the allied Sovereignty Coalition led by Halbussi and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) — from which Zebari hails—all announced boycotts ahead of the session.

Legal expert Ali al-Tamimi denounced yesterday's announcement as "unconstitutional", noting that the legal deadline set to elect a president "cannot be broken, except by a decision from the Federal Court or an amendment of the law". —AFP

## Schools shut in India as hijab ban protests intensify

NEW DELHI: Authorities in southern India ordered schools to shut yesterday as protests intensified over a ban on Islamic headscarves that has outraged Muslim students. The stand-off in Karnataka state has galvanised fears among the minority community about what they say is increasing persecution under the Hindu nationalist government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Fresh demonstrations yesterday saw officers fire tear gas to disperse a crowd at one government-run campus, while a heavy police presence was seen at schools in nearby towns. Chief Minister Basavaraj Bommai appealed for calm after announcing all high schools in the state would be closed for three days.

"I appeal to all the students, teachers and management of schools and colleges... to maintain peace and harmony," he said.



BANGALORE, India: Muslim women hold placards during a demonstration after educational institutes in Karnataka denied entry to students for wearing hijabs, in Bangalore. —AFP

Students at a government-run high school were told not to wear hijabs last month, an edict that soon spread to other educational institutions in the state. Campuses have seen

escalating confrontations between Muslim students condemning the ban and Hindu pupils that say their classmates have disrupted their education. —AFP



NABLUS: Palestinians inspect a bullet-riddled car belonging to three Palestinians killed by Zionist forces yesterday. —AFP

## Zionist troops kill 3 young...

Continued from Page 1

Ties between the PA, led by Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, and the Zionist entity remain fraught, though there have been signs of a thaw in recent months following a series of high-level meetings, including Defense Minister Benny Gantz hosting

## Highly accurate COVID test gives...

Continued from Page 1

reduce the need for time-consuming COVID lab tests. "We implemented an electromechanical biosensor for the detection of SARS-CoV-2 into an integrated and portable prototype device, and show that it detected (virus RNA) in less than four minutes," the team said in the paper, referring to the official name of the COVID pathogen. The researchers said their method offers speed, ease of operation, high sensitivity and portability.

Their trial involved taking samples from 33 people in Shanghai who were infected with the coronavirus, with PCR tests conducted in parallel. The results from

Abbas at his home.

But Palestinian assailants have continued to attack Zionist forces in the West Bank, and the Zionist entity has responded with lethal force and frequent raids against groups it describes as militant cells. Some 475,000 Zionists live in settlements among around 2.9 million Palestinians in the West Bank, fueling tensions in the area that Palestinians claim as a part of their future state. Bennett, the former head of a settler lobbying council, opposes Palestinian statehood and has ruled out formal peace talks with the PA under his watch, saying he will focus instead on improving economic conditions in the West Bank. —AFP

their method were a "perfect" match with the PCR tests, according to the article. Their study involved testing the new method on 54 samples, which included people with fever who did not have the coronavirus, those with influenza, and healthy volunteers. Those cases did not yield any false positives, the team said.

The Fudan researchers said that once developed, their testing device can be used for quick testing in a variety of situations, including airports, health facilities and "even at home". PCR tests are not only slow, but they also require lab infrastructure that can be limited in many countries, reducing the number of cases that can be handled each day.

And while rapid diagnostic tests have now become available in many parts of the world, they are generally less accurate. China is one of the world's biggest makers of coronavirus test kits. According to customs data, it exported \$1.6 billion worth of test kits in December, a 144 percent increase from the previous month. —AFP

## Taleban in Geneva for diplomatic, humanitarian talks

GENEVA: A Taleban delegation is in Geneva for talks with Swiss officials and NGOs on humanitarian access and human rights, Switzerland's foreign ministry said yesterday. The delegation from Afghanistan's new rulers is due to hold talks with the Red Cross and other non-governmental organizations in the Swiss city, which is also home to several United Nations agencies.

"The members of the delegation will have discussions around humanitarian access to populations in need, the protection of humanitarian actors and respect for human rights," a foreign ministry spokeswoman told AFP. "The protection of children during conflicts and the management of land contaminated by mines are also on the agenda of the conferences, which take place in a confidential setting."

The spokeswoman said that Swiss ministry representatives would meet the delegation this

week. However, she stressed that their delegation's presence on Swiss territory "does not represent a legitimization or recognition of the Taleban".

Since the Taleban hardline Islamist movement seized control in mid-August as the United States ended its 20-year war in Afghanistan, the country has plunged into financial chaos, with inflation and unemployment surging. The halting of aid following the Taleban takeover has triggered a humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan, which has already been devastated by decades of war.

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

No country has formally recognized the government installed after the Taleban seized power. But Muttaqi told AFP that Afghanistan's new rulers were slowly gaining international acceptance. "On the process of getting recognition... we have come closer to that goal," he said. —AFP

## Seven Indian soldiers killed in avalanche

NEW DELHI: Indian army rescuers yesterday recovered the bodies of seven soldiers buried in an avalanche while on patrol along a remote Himalayan frontier contested by China. The troops were part of a larger deployment in Arunachal Pradesh state and were caught at an altitude of 4,400 m in an area that had seen heavy snowfall in the days before Sunday's avalanche.

Two days of searching in rough weather ended without the rescue team finding any survivors among the missing soldiers. "Unfortunately, despite the best efforts of everyone involved, all seven have been confirmed deceased," Lieutenant Colonel Harsh Wardhan Pande, an army spokesman, said in a statement. The bodies of the soldiers have been sent to a nearby military medical facility.

India and China have long disputed their vast frontier and fought a brief border war in Arunachal Pradesh

in 1962. Beijing claims much of the territory in the state, which it refers to as South Tibet. Tensions flared in 2020 after a lethal high-altitude skirmish in the far-northern region of Ladakh, which saw hand-to-hand combat between troops in the contested Galwan Valley. Since then, multiple rounds of talks have failed to de-escalate tensions and both sides have reinforced the region with additional military hardware and thousands of extra soldiers.

Meanwhile, pro-Kashmir social media posts by KFC, Hyundai and other global brands have sparked uproar in India, with diplomats saying yesterday that the controversy had prompted an apology from a foreign government. Control of Kashmir has been contested between India and Pakistan since their independence in 1947 and the nuclear-armed foes have fought two wars over the territory.

Both countries regularly trade heated diplomatic barbs over the issue and Pakistan marks every Feb 5 as a national holiday in a gesture of solidarity with people living on the Indian-administered side of the region. This year, several Pakistan-based social media properties connected to some of the world's biggest corporate names used to occasion to proclaim their own messages of support, including several American fast-food chains and South Korea's Hyundai. —AFP



## International

# C Africa PM fired amid tensions over Russia-France tug of war

## Dondra replaced by economy minister Felix Moloua

**BANGUI:** The Central African Republic's prime minister has been sacked, the presidency confirmed Monday, against the backdrop of tensions between pro-Russian and pro-French factions within the government of the poor, unstable country.

Henri-Marie Dondra had been named prime minister in June 2021, shortly after Paris froze budgetary aid, accusing it of "complicity" in what it called a Russian "disinformation" campaign against the country's former colonial master France.



**Russia's influence in CAR has increased steadily over 4 years**

Presidency spokesman Albert Yaloke Mokpeme told AFP that Dondra was "fired" and replaced by his economy minister, Felix Moloua, confirming a weekend report by online news website Africa Intelligence. President Faustin-Archange Touadera was attending an African Union summit in the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa at the time.

Russia's influence in the Central African Republic

(CAR) has increased steadily over the past four years. In late 2020, at Bangui's request, Russian military contractors, alongside troops deployed by Rwanda, helped quell a rebellion against Touadera.

With their help, CAR government forces recaptured much of the two-thirds of the country — and several major towns — that the rebels previously controlled. At the time of Dondra's appointment as prime minister he was perceived as more "pro-French" than his predecessor Firmin Ngrebada, seen as more sympathetic to the Russians.

"Touadera had named Dondra because he was close to international donors and he had good relations with France," said Roland Marchal, a researcher at Sciences Po university in Paris. But Dondra had "little control" over the defence and foreign ministers as well as the influential pro-Russian parliament speaker, Simplice Sarandji, Marchal told AFP.

### Technocrats

Moloua, the new prime minister, is considered a Touadera loyalist and a technocrat "with no political profile", according to a diplomat who requested anonymity. Trained as a demographer, the 64-year-old was the chief of staff at the economy ministry for eight years before being assigned the portfolio by Touadera in 2016.

Touadera is himself a technocrat, educated in France and Cameroon. Mineral-rich but rated the world's second-poorest country according to the UN's Human



**BANGUI, Central African Republic:** File photo shows Central African Republic's (CAR) new prime minister Henri Marie Dondra (C) makes a statement during the transfer of power in Bangui. — AFP

Development Index, the CAR has been chronically unstable since independence 60 years ago.

A civil war broke out in 2013, pitting myriad militias against a state on the verge of collapse, leaving thousands of people dead and forcing more than a quarter of the population of 4.9 million to flee their homes.

The fighting had lessened considerably in recent years, but it resumed abruptly when rebels launched

their failed offensive to overthrow Touadera. The UN accused both sides in the fighting of human rights abuses. The private military contractors are often described as belonging to the "Wagner group" — an entity with no known legal status. Last week the European Union said it would resume a suspended military training mission in the CAR if the country's soldiers stopped working for Wagner. — AFP



**WASHINGTON:** File photo shows former US President Donald Trump shows a letter he said was from North Korean leader Kim Jong-un during a Cabinet meeting at the White House in Washington, DC. — AFP

## Trump took Kim 'love letters,' govt records from White House

**WASHINGTON:** The US National Archives said Monday it had retrieved 15 boxes of records that had been improperly removed from the White House and taken to Donald Trump's southern Florida home including "love letters" from North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. The documents and mementos—which also included correspondence from ex-US president Barack Obama—should by law have been turned over at the end of Trump's presidency but instead ended up at his Mar-a-Lago resort in Palm Beach.

The National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) pursues any records it learns have been "improperly removed or have not been appropriately transferred to official accounts," Archivist of the United States David S. Ferriero told AFP. "Whether through the creation of adequate and proper documentation, sound records management practices, the preservation of records, or the timely transfer of them to the National Archives at the end of an administration, there should be no question as to need for both diligence and vigilance. Records matter," he added.

The agency told AFP it did not get hold of the

records until mid-January, however—almost a year late. The former president, waxing rhapsodic about his relationship with Kim, told a West Virginia rally in 2018: "We fell in love. No, really. He wrote me beautiful letters."

The comment prompted the media, as well as Trump supporters and opponents alike, to dub the unusual correspondence the Trump-Kim "love letters." The recovery of the boxes has raised questions about Trump's adherence to presidential records laws enacted after the 1970s Watergate scandal that require Oval Office occupants to preserve records related to administration activity.

Trump lost his bid last month to stop the Archives releasing diaries, visitor logs, speech drafts and other White House documents to the House committee investigating the 2021 US Capitol riot. Some of the papers handed over had been "torn up by former President Trump" and taped back together, the Archives revealed, adding that it had also received a number of records that were still in pieces.

"It's all a pristine example of Trump's approach to the Presidency, namely that the vast power exists for him and not for the American people, to whom these records in fact belong," former deputy assistant attorney general Harry Litman said on Twitter.

AFP reached out to Trump's office for comment but there was no immediate response. "Former President Trump's representatives have informed the NARA that they are continuing to search for additional presidential records that belong to the National Archives," the agency added. — AFP

Minister Jacinda Ardern said she had no intention of entering discussions with convoy participants, arguing that the majority of New Zealanders had shown their support for the government's vaccination programme.

"Ninety-six percent of New Zealanders have gone out and got a vaccination, which has enabled us to live now with fewer restrictions because of the extra protection that has provided," she told Radio New Zealand.

COVID vaccinations are mandatory for people working in certain sectors in New Zealand, such as health, law enforcement, education and defence. A pass system is also in force, with people required to show proof of vaccination to enter restaurants, sports events and religious services.

It is not required for public transport, supermarkets, schools and accessing health services. Several of the Wellington protesters carried Canadian flags, including an expatriate named Billy, who declined to give his surname. "I'm just supporting the brothers in Canada, fighting for freedom over there," he said.

A "Freedom Convoy" of truckers has gridlocked the Canadian capital Ottawa for more than a week, prompting city authorities to declare a state of emergency. Organisers of the Wellington convoy have not said how long they intend to remain parked in the city. — AFP

## Police step in as UK oppn leader mobbed outside parliament

**LONDON:** Anti-lockdown protesters mobbed British opposition leader Keir Starmer on Monday as he left the Houses of Parliament in London, with many shouting "traitor", prompting police to step in to shield him. A video posted online showed the Labour leader being jostled, before police intervened and escorted him to a car.

One protestor could be heard asking why he was "protecting paedophiles" during his previous role as the country's top prosecutor. Prime Minister Boris Johnson has been under fire over the last week after accusing Starmer of not taking action against notorious celebrity paedophile Jimmy Savile when he was head of the Crown Prosecution Service, despite not being personally in charge of the case.

Tory MP Julian Smith called on his party leader to retract the comment, tweeting: "What happened to Keir Starmer outside parliament is appalling. It is important for our democracy and his security that the false Savile slurs against him are withdrawn in full," he added.

Johnson later tweeted that "the behaviour directed at the Leader of the Opposition tonight is absolutely disgraceful. All forms of harassment of our elected representatives are completely unacceptable. I thank the police for responding swiftly."

Other protesters involved could be heard shouting "why aren't you opposing?", "traitor", "what about the working class?" and "why did you go after Julian Assange, why did you go after journalists?", another reference to his role as prosecutor.

A Metropolitan Police statement said: "Shortly after 5.10 pm on Monday, February 7, a man who had been surrounded by a group of protesters near to New Scotland Yard, was taken away from the scene by a police car." Some of the protesters held signs opposing mandatory vaccination and lockdown measures. A man and a woman were arrested at the scene for assault of an emergency worker after a traffic cone was thrown at a police officer, said police. — AFP



**LONDON:** A handout photograph released by the UK Parliament shows Britain's main opposition Labour Party leader Keir Starmer (C) attending Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs) in the House of Commons in London. — AFP

## NZ COVID protest convoy jams streets near parliament

**WELLINGTON:** A convoy of trucks and campervans blocked streets near New Zealand's parliament in Wellington yesterday to protest against COVID restrictions and vaccinations, inspired by a similar demonstration in Canada.

Plastered with messages such as "give us back our freedom" and "coercion is not consent", hundreds of vehicles parked in streets surrounding the parliament building known as The Beehive. Hundreds more drove around the city centre with their horns blaring as more than 1,000 protesters on foot listened to speeches.

Wellington man Stu Main said the protesters felt their concerns about rights being eroded were not being heard by the government. "I'm actually vaccinated but I'm against mandating people to be vaccinated," he told AFP. "I think it's disgraceful, forcing vaccination on people who don't want it."

The demonstration remained peaceful, with police reporting no arrests or major incidents. Prime

## Mali's premier says France sought country's partition

**BAMAKO:** Mali's prime minister on Monday accused France of having sought the partition of the west African country during its military mission there, the latest flare-up in relations between Paris and Bamako. In a 45-minute speech to diplomats gathered at his request, Choguel Kokalla Maiga denounced France, the former colonial power and a vocal critic of the military regime that appointed him.

But Maiga stopped short of calling for the departure of the anti-jihadist force that France leads in Mali. He acknowledged that France's military intervention in 2013 had halted a jihadist insurgency that had already captured the north of the country and threatened the south.

But, the French operation later turned into a de facto partition of the country, he argued. The

jihadists were allowed to take refuge in part of Mali's territory, regroup and return in force from 2014, said Maiga.

And drawing a parallel with the Allied liberation of France at the end of World War II, he added: "When the French judged that (the US presence) was no longer necessary, they told the Americans to go. 'Did the Americans start insulting the French?'"

France has already said it is considering the future of the anti-jihadist force-in consultation with its EU partners—after Mali expelled its ambassador last week. Tensions have been mounting after French President Emmanuel Macron lashed out at the junta's failure to stick to a timetable for a return to civilian rule.

Mali stepped up its denunciations of France after the West African bloc ECOWAS announced sanctions against Mali's military regime on January 9. Bamako has accused Paris of having manipulated ECOWAS into its hard line against Bamako, a theme Maiga returned to in Monday's speech.

The aim had been to present Mali as a pariah, he said. "We cannot be turned into vassals," he added. "You cannot enslave the country. That is over," he said, a reference to the country's past as a colony of France. — AFP



## International

# American lawyer jailed again for assaulting Hong Kong police

## Police officer 'outnumbered in front of a hostile crowd'

**HONG KONG:** An American lawyer working in Hong Kong lost his appeal yesterday and was jailed for assaulting a plainclothes policeman when he intervened in a confrontation between the officer and members of the public three years ago. The confrontation occurred towards the end of the huge and often violent democracy protests that rocked the financial hub.

“**Most violent chapter in the history of HK**”

At the time, the city's 30,000 police officers were allowed to carry retractable batons during off-duty hours to protect themselves during a period when the popularity of law enforcement had plummeted. Samuel Phillip Bickett, 37, thought he was breaking up a fight inside a Hong Kong Subway station in December 2019 as the police officer did not declare his identity, defence lawyers had argued earlier.

The former compliance director at Bank of America was sentenced to four and a half months in prison last July, and spent 45 days behind bars before he was

granted bail pending his appeal. Yesterday, High Court Judge Esther Toh dismissed his appeal, saying the event took place during "a most violent chapter in the history of Hong Kong" where off-duty police were beaten up.

"Police officers or any public officers who are carrying out their public responsibilities must be protected when in the execution of their duties," Toh said, returning Bickett to jail to serve out the remainder of his sentence. The American maintained his innocence and said he would further appeal his case.

"Today's ruling is just the latest indication that the judiciary's reputation for applying the law rationally, fairly and equally is in danger," he said in a statement. "In a society with rule of law, police officers do not have free rein to do whatever they want." The December 7, 2019, confrontation occurred after Senior Constable Yu Shu-sang in plainclothes forcibly stopped a young man who had allegedly jumped a turnstile.

Bickett said he believed the officer's use of force to be unlawful, noting that Yu and another man had been "beating and choking" the man with a baton before he intervened. In the ensuing scuffle, which was caught on camera, Bickett grabbed the officer's baton, stepped on his chest and hit him in the face several times - a move his lawyers deemed as "reasonable force" to halt Yu's actions.

But Toh rejected the argument, saying that Yu striking the American was "entirely natural and appropriate" as the police officer was "outnumbered in front of



**HONG KONG:** File photo shows US lawyer Samuel Bickett arriving at the High Court in Hong Kong to appeal his conviction for assaulting a police officer during the 2019 pro-democracy protests in the city. — AFP

a hostile crowd". Public trust in the Hong Kong Police Force was severely hammered during the 2019 democracy protests, where violent clashes resulted in over 10,200 arrests and hundreds of officers wounded. More than 2,700 of the arrestees have been prosecuted for a wide range of offences including rioting and unlawful assembly, while no officer was brought to court for misconduct. — AFP

deterrent to regional threats and to strengthen homeland defense," said the US agency.

### Beijing condemns sale

The first major arms sale to Taipei under Biden was last August, which saw the approval of 40 M109A6 medium self-propelled howitzer artillery systems. Beijing on Tuesday opposed and condemned the latest sale, saying it "seriously undermines" US-China relations, as well as peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait.

"China will take legitimate and strong measures to uphold its own sovereignty and security interests," said foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian, without specifying what the measures would be. Beijing has become increasingly bellicose under Chinese President Xi Jinping, ramping up military, diplomatic and economic pressure on Taiwan. Last year, Taiwan recorded 969 incursions by Chinese warplanes, according to a database compiled by AFP - more than double the roughly 380 carried out in 2020.

The new year appears to be following the same trend: The defence ministry recorded 52 warplanes entering the zone over two days in January, a large uptick over a short period. The Patriot is a highly mobile surface-to-air missile system that would be a crucial defence against Chinese warplanes. Washington diplomatically recognises Beijing over Taipei but it is also bound by Congress to sell Taiwan weapons to defend itself. Former US president Donald Trump ramped up big-ticket arms sales to Taiwan during his time in office as he feuded with Beijing on a host of issues from trade to national security. Sales included drones, missile systems and new-generation fighter jets. — AFP

## Taiwan welcomes arms sale worth \$100mm from US

**TAIPEI:** Taiwan thanked the United States yesterday for selling up to \$100 million worth of equipment and services to support its air and missile defence systems, as China ramps up incursions of warplanes into the island's air defence zone. Self-ruled democratic Taiwan lives under constant threat of invasion by authoritarian China, which views the island as part of its territory to be seized one day-by force if necessary.

Beijing has significantly increased incursions into Taiwan's air defence identification zone in recent months, with the final quarter of 2021 seeing a massive spike. On Tuesday, Taipei expressed "gratitude" to the United States for approving a \$100 million arms sale, which will maintain its Patriot missile air defence system.

"This is the second arms sale to Taiwan since President Joe Biden took office and the first time this year," Taiwan's presidential spokesman Xavier Chang said in a statement. "It... reflects the rock-solid partnership between Taiwan and the US."

Taiwan's defence ministry said the deal is expected to take effect sometime in March. According to a statement from US Defence Security Cooperation Agency, the deal covers engineering support and maintenance of air defence systems and will "ensure readiness for air operations". "The recipient will use this capability as a



**AHMEDABAD, Gujarat:** Police stand outside a sessions court in Ahmedabad yesterday during a court hearing for 2008 bomb attacks in India's Gujarat state. — AFP

## 49 convicted in India over deadly 2008 bomb attacks

**AHMEDABAD:** India convicted 49 people yesterday over a 2008 attack in the western city of Ahmedabad that left dozens dead, in what perpetrators said was retaliation for earlier deadly communal violence. The string of bombings killed 56 people and wounded more than 200 others as shrapnel ripped through markets, buses and other public places in Gujarat state's commercial hub.

A group calling itself the Indian Mujahideen claimed responsibility, and said the act was revenge for 2002 religious riots in the area that left thousands dead. Nearly 80 people were charged but 28 were acquitted, prosecutor Amit Patel told reporters outside an Ahmedabad court.

The remaining 49 defendants were all found guilty of murder and criminal conspiracy with sentencing to be issued on Wednesday, he added. The marathon trial

has lasted nearly a decade, with more than 1,100 witnesses called to testify. Proceedings were dragged out by procedural delays, including a legal battle by four of the accused to retract their confessions. Police also foiled a 2013 attempt by more than a dozen of the defendants to tunnel their way out of jail using their food plates as digging tools.

All 77 accused have been held in custody for years, with the exception of one who was bailed after a schizophrenia diagnosis. Ahmedabad was the centre of deadly 2002 religious riots that saw at least 1,000 people - mostly Muslims - hacked, shot and burnt to death. The violence was prompted by the death of 59 Hindus in a train fire first blamed on Muslims but later ruled to be accidental. Prime Minister Narendra Modi was then head of the state government and has subsequently been dogged by accusations of turning a blind eye to the violence.

India was rocked by several lethal bomb attacks in 2008 claimed by the Indian Mujahideen group - with dozens killed in the capital New Delhi and northern tourist city of Jaipur. In November of that year, 166 people were killed by gunmen armed with explosive devices, in a coordinated assault on hotels and other high-profile targets in Mumbai that was blamed on Pakistan-based militants. — AFP

### OP-ED

## The global problem solving paradox

By Antonio Guterres

As Secretary-General of the United Nations, I spend much of my time speaking with world leaders and taking the pulse of global trends. It's clear to me that we are at a defining moment in international relations. Global decision making is plagued by gridlock - and a fundamental paradox lies at the heart of it.

On the one hand, many of today's global leaders recognize our common threats - COVID, climate, the unregulated development of new technologies. They agree that something needs to be done about them. Yet that common understanding is not matched by common action.

### Indeed, divides keep deepening

We see them everywhere: in the unfair and unequal distribution of vaccines; in a global economic system rigged against the poor; in the utterly inadequate response to the climate crisis; in digital technology and a media landscape that profit from division; and in growing unrest and conflict around the world.

So if the world agrees on the diagnosis of these common problems, why is it unable to effectively treat them? I see two fundamental reasons. First, because foreign policy often becomes a projection of internal politics. As a former Prime Minister, I know that despite good intentions, international affairs can be hijacked by domestic politics. Perceived national interests can easily trump the larger global good. This impulse is understandable, even if it is wrong-headed in instances where solidarity is in a country's self-interest.

### Vaccines are a prime example

Everyone understands that a virus like COVID-19 does not respect national borders. We need universal vaccination to reduce the risk of new and more dangerous variants emerging and affecting everyone, in every country.

Instead of prioritizing vaccines for all through a global vaccination plan, governments have acted to safeguard their people. But that is only half a strategy. Of course, governments must ensure the protection of their own people. But unless they work simultaneously to vaccinate the world, national vaccination plans could be rendered useless as new variants emerge and spread.

Second, many of today's global institutions or frameworks are outdated or simply weak and the necessary reforms are impeded by geo-political divides. For example, the authority of the World Health Organization is nowhere near what is required to coordinate the response to global pandemics.

At the same time, international institutions with more power are either paralyzed by division - like the Security Council - or undemocratic - like many of our international financial institutions. In short - global governance is failing at precisely the moment when the world should be coming together to solve global problems.

We need to act together in the national and global self-interest, to protect critical global public goods, like public health and a livable climate, that support humanity's wellbeing. Such reforms are essential if we are to deliver on common aspirations for our collective global goals of peace, sustainable development, human rights and dignity for all.

This is a difficult and complex exercise that must take into account questions of national sovereignty. But doing nothing is not an acceptable option. The world desperately needs more effective and democratic international mechanisms that can solve people's problems. As the pandemic has taught us, our fates are tied. When we leave anyone behind, we risk leaving everyone behind. The most vulnerable regions, countries and people are the first victims of this paradox in global policy. But everyone, everywhere is directly threatened.

The good news is that we can do something about our global challenges. Problems created by humanity can be solved by humanity. Last September, I issued a report on these issues. Our Common Agenda is a starting point: a roadmap to gather the world together to tackle these governance challenges and reinvigorate multilateralism for the 21st century.

Change won't be easy, nor will it happen overnight. But we can begin by finding areas of consensus and moving in the direction of progress. This is our greatest test because so much is at stake. We are already seeing the consequences. As people start to lose trust in the ability of institutions to deliver, they also risk losing faith in the values that underlie those institutions.

In every corner of the world, we see an erosion of trust and what I fear is the emergence of a twilight of shared values. Injustice, inequality, mistrust, racism and discrimination are casting dark shadows across every society. We must restore human dignity and human decency and respond to people's anxieties with answers. In the face of growing inter-connected threats, enormous human suffering, and shared risks, we have an obligation to speak up and act to put out the fire.

Note: Antonio Guterres is Secretary-General of the United Nations

### News in brief

#### Texas church shooting

**WASHINGTON:** A US federal judge on Monday ordered the Air Force to pay more than \$230 million in damages to survivors and relatives of victims of a 2017 Texas shooting for failing to report the perpetrator's criminal record. Twenty-six people were killed and 22 more wounded when Devin Patrick Kelley opened fire at the First Baptist Church in Sutherland Springs, Texas, in November 2017. Kelley, a convicted felon, had a history of domestic abuse and mental health problems. The attack, after which Kelley was found dead having shot himself, was the worst mass shooting in Texas history. "The Court concluded that the Government failed to exercise reasonable care in its undertaking to submit Kelley's criminal history to the FBI and that the Government was 60 percent responsible for the Plaintiffs' injuries," the ruling read. — AFP

#### New charges against Navalny

**MOSCOW:** A Moscow court said yesterday it will start hearing two new cases against jailed Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny next week that could see his prison sentence extended by more than 10 years. Navalny — President Vladimir Putin's most vocal domestic critic — was jailed last year after surviving a poisoning attack that he blames on the Kremlin. The Moscow Lefortovsky district court said it will hold preliminary hearings on charges of fraud and contempt of court against Navalny on February 15. The fraud case was launched in December 2020, while Navalny, 45, was recovering in Germany after narrowly surviving a nerve agent poisoning. Investigators accuse Navalny of stealing for personal use more than \$4.7 million (4.1 million euros) of donations that were given to his organisations. The charges carry a maximum penalty of 10 years in prison. — AFP

#### Tigray victims file case

**NAIROBI:** A legal non-profit yesterday filed a complaint against Ethiopia at the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, alleging "massive human rights violations" against civilians in the war-torn northern region of Tigray, its lawyers said. The 15-month conflict has seen reports of massacres, mass rapes and other atrocities by all sides, prompting the UN Human Rights Council in December to order a probe into a wide range of alleged abuses, a move condemned by Addis Ababa. The non-profit Legal Action Worldwide (LAW) said it "represents victims from Tigray, who have provided testimony for the case but could not be listed as complainants due to fear of reprisals from the government". — AFP

#### Newspaper HQ handed to govt

**CARACAS:** A Venezuelan court has officially handed over the headquarters of the newspaper El Nacional to Diosdado Cabello, widely seen as the government's number-two man. The move came as Cabello won a defamation lawsuit against this opposition daily. "Ownership of the headquarters of El Nacional and the land on which it is built were directly awarded to Diosdado Cabello (...) in an irregular and clandestine judicial auction," a statement from the newspaper said. The newspaper said the auction was carried out without fair information exchanges or open bidding. The headquarters of EL Nacional was seized in May. In April, a Venezuelan court had sentenced the daily to pay \$13.4 million for causing "serious moral damage" to Cabello, deputy and number two of the ruling United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV). The conviction is the legal follow-up to a complaint filed in 2015 by Cabello against El Nacional after it re-ran an article from the Spanish newspaper ABC which linked him to drug trafficking. — AFP



Business

# Al-Marzouq: KD 243.4m net profit for KFH shareholders for year 2021

Net profit increased by 64.0% compared to last year • EPS reached 28.59 fils

KUWAIT: Chairman of Kuwait Finance House (KFH) Hamad Abdulmohsen Al-Marzouq said that KFH has, by the grace of Allah, reported net profit attributable to the shareholders of the bank of KD 243.4 million for the year ended 2021; an increase of 64.0 percent compared to 2020.

Earnings per share for the year ended 2021 reached 28.59 fils compared to 17.74 fils for last year; an increase of 61.2 percent. Total operating income for the year ended 2021 reached KD 811.0 million; an increase of 1.9 percent compared to last year. Net operating income for the year ended 2021 reached KD 503.1 million; an increase of 0.7 percent compared to last year. Financing portfolio increased to reach KD 11.4 billion, i.e., an increase of KD 608 million or 5.7 percent compared to 2020.

Investment in Sukuk reached KD 2.7 billion, i.e., a decline of 0.3 percent compared to last year. Total assets increased to reach KD 21.8 billion, i.e., an increase of KD 286 million or 1.3 percent compared to last year. Depositors' accounts reached KD 15.9 billion, i.e., an increase of KD 550 million or 3.6 percent compared to 2020. Shareholders' equity reached KD 1.9 billion, at the same level of last year.

In addition, the capital adequacy ratio reached 18.69 percent which is above the minimum requirement. This percentage confirms the solid financial position of KFH. The Board of Directors has proposed 12 percent cash dividends to shareholders and 10 percent bonus shares subject to general assembly and concerned authorities' approval.

**Positive financial indicators**

Al-Marzouq added that KFH achieved positive results in all key financial indicators, including ROAA and ROAE, and maintained good ratios in terms of the cost to income, NPFs, debt coverage ratio as well as other financial indicators. Also, KFH successfully maintained the Group's capital support and improvement of assets quality, which confirms the flexible busi-

ness model of KFH and the disciplined implementation of plans and strategy.

"KFH maintained strong liquidity and operational performance and achieved a growth in the financing portfolio for the retail and corporate sectors. In addition to the increase in customers deposits. Al-Marzouq said that by providing a wide range of banking and financing solutions for retail and corporates as well as SMEs sector, KFH is moving forward in its developmental role and in supporting government plans.

**160 million digital banking transactions**

"Enjoying great experience in handling challenges and managing risks, KFH has proven its competence in managing the pandemic repercussions while it continued providing integrated financial services to its customers without interruption. This confirms KFH's resilience, while reflects its efficient digital services and IT infrastructure as well as the capability and expertise of KFH staff. During 2021, KFH customers executed about 160 million digital banking transactions through KFHOnline, with 25 percent growth compared to 2020. This reflects customer confidence, ease and efficiency of the innovative digital banking services KFH provides to enhance the banking experience of its customers," Al Marzouq added.

**ESG standards**

Al-Marzouq stressed the importance of moving forward in leading the Islamic finance industry and contributing to attracting new players and developing products and services to become an active element in implementing economic visions, providing greater support for growth and sustainability, and taking into account environmental, social and governance (ESG) standards.

He highlighted KFH's role in sustainability through issuing Green Sukuk and the successful arrangement of \$350 million of sustainability Sukuk issuance transaction for KFH-Turkey. The issuance is



Hamad Al-Marzouq



Abdulwahab Al-Rushood

considered as the first of its kind to be issued by an Islamic financial institution and the first tier 2 sustainability Sukuk issuance transaction globally. Also, he indicated that KFH launched a comprehensive report on sustainability highlighting the leading role of the bank.

**Social contributions**

Al-Marzouq noted that KFH's social contributions and initiatives are a milestone in the corporate social work and consolidate KFH's position in this field. The Bank has contributed to many strategic community initiatives such as: paying, in collaboration with the Ministry of Justice, over KD20 million in debts to release approximately 10,000 defaulting debtors; KFH signed an agreement with the KRCS to implement relief and medical projects in collaboration with the Jordan Red Crescent. Moreover, KFH signed two agreements with the King Hussein Cancer Foundation and the KRCS to treat cancer patients among refugees in Jordan. KFH also signed a partnership agreement, the first of its kind in the Kuwaiti banking sector, with KSH to support people with special needs, not to mention many environmental and sustainable initiatives, supporting youth and entrepreneurs as well as other initiatives that covered various social aspects.

**Profitability maximization**

Acting Group CEO at KFH, Abdulwahab

Essa Al-Rushood said that the positive financial results for the year 2021 confirmed KFH's success in achieving its strategic goals relating to the sustainability of profits and its ability to deal with various circumstances and challenges with high professionalism. He added that KFH has taken proactive and professional steps to deal with the conditions imposed by the pandemic, whether in terms of services and products or human resources.

He pointed out that KFH maintains its efforts to maximize profitability and ROE, improve asset quality, manage costs, and develop policies for granting credit across all KFH's subsidiaries in Turkey, Bahrain, Malaysia, Germany and Saudi Arabia. He highlighted the increasing investment in green Sukuk, diversifying the financing portfolio and continuing the strategy of focusing on the core banking business.

**\$16 billion sukuk transactions**

Al-Rushood added that KFH has expanded investment and trading activities in the primary and secondary capital markets, indicating that the Treasury at KFH Group level executed Sukuk deals worth over \$16 billion during 2021. He added that KFH maintained its position at the top of the main dealers in the issuances of the International Islamic Liquidity Management (IILM) of the Primary Sukuk Market. The bank also topped the Secondary Market Dealers list.

It is worth noting that this is the first achievement whereby a financial institution tops the two lists in the Sukuk primary and secondary markets.

**100% Kuwaitization in 2021**

Al-Rushood indicated that the successful implementation of recruitment and development of national talents strategy has resulted in KFH having the highest number of Kuwaiti employees at the Kuwaiti banks and private sector institutions level. The Kuwaiti recruits' ratio reached 100 percent in 2021 while the nationalization ratio reached about 76 percent. He stressed the continuity of attracting Kuwaiti talents and competencies, especially from the youth, to achieve KFH's vision and raise the performance level and productivity rates.

**20 prestigious awards**

Al-Rushood expressed his pride that KFH won 20 prestigious awards on the Group level from international business and finance providers and institutions during 2021, in recognition of Group's excellence, contributions, financial results and digital innovation. Among these awards were: "World's Best Islamic Financial Institution 2021" from Global Finance, and "Best Islamic Bank in Middle East" and "Best Bank in Kuwait" 2021 Awards from the prestigious magazine "The Banker", in addition to various awards from well-known international providers.

**Strategic goals**

He stated that KFH's standard indicators confirm its success in achieving its strategic goals during 2021, which provide the motive towards increasing the ambition for more achievements and strengthening KFH's position locally and globally.

Al-Rushood expressed his appreciation for the trust of shareholders and customers and the support of the Board of Directors and also thanked the regulatory authorities, praising the efforts of employees and all partners and stakeholders.



بيت التمويل الكويتي  
Kuwait Finance House

Praise be to Allah

## 2021 Financial Results

	2021	2020	%																	
<b>Net Profit for Shareholders</b> "KD Million"	243.4	148.4	64.0	<p><b>To Investors</b></p> <p>KFH Board of Directors is pleased to inform the investors that it has been resolved to distribute profits corresponding for the financial year ended 31st Dec. 2021 as follows:</p> <table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <thead> <tr> <th></th> <th>2021 %</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Investment Deposits "Al-Khumasiya"</td> <td style="text-align: center;">1.700</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Investment Deposits "Al-Mustamera"</td> <td style="text-align: center;">1.450</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Investment Deposits "Al-Sedra"</td> <td style="text-align: center;">1.100</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Investment Deposits "Al-Dimah" 12 Months</td> <td style="text-align: center;">1.275</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Investment Deposits "Al-Dimah" 6 Months</td> <td style="text-align: center;">1.150</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Long Term Investments Plans</td> <td style="text-align: center;">1.225</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Investment Saving Accounts</td> <td style="text-align: center;">0.200</td> </tr> </tbody> </table> <p style="text-align: center; font-size: small;">Profits will be credited to their bank accounts</p>		2021 %	Investment Deposits "Al-Khumasiya"	1.700	Investment Deposits "Al-Mustamera"	1.450	Investment Deposits "Al-Sedra"	1.100	Investment Deposits "Al-Dimah" 12 Months	1.275	Investment Deposits "Al-Dimah" 6 Months	1.150	Long Term Investments Plans	1.225	Investment Saving Accounts	0.200
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<b>Earnings per Share</b> "Fils"	28.59	17.74	61.2																	
<b>Total Operating Income</b> "KD Million"	811.0	795.6	1.9																	
<b>Net Operating Income</b> "KD Million"	503.1	499.6	0.7																	
<b>Financing Receivables</b> "KD Million"	11,355	10,748	5.7																	
<b>Total Assets</b> "KD Million"	21,788	21,502	1.3																	
<b>Depositors' Accounts</b> "KD Million"	15,867	15,317	3.6																	
<b>Shareholders' Equity</b> "KD Million"	1,932	1,936	(0.2)																	

**To Shareholders**

KFH Board of Directors is pleased to inform the shareholders that it has been recommended to distribute Cash Dividends and Bonus Shares corresponding for the financial year ended 31st Dec. 2021 as follows:

	2021 %	2020 %
Cash Dividends	12	10
Bonus Shares	10	10

This recommendation is subject to the approval of General Assembly and other regulatory entities.

kfh.com 180 3333



## Business

# Al-Fulaij urges youth to prepare for a future dominated by AI, data analytics

## NBK CEO in a panel discussion at 'Tamakan' program

KUWAIT: 'Tamakan' training program, held with strategic sponsorship from National Bank of Kuwait (NBK), hosted a panel discussion in which Salah Al-Fulaij, CEO of NBK - Kuwait lectured the participants giving them tips on the best ways to develop their career and shared with them, in an open discussion, his extensive experience in the banking business.

Al-Fulaij reviewed his journey since in the banking sector, which started about 40 years ago. In the early 80's, he joined NBK for a six-month training. However, during this short period, he found a great passion that prompted him to decide to make a career shift to banking.

### Passion for math

Al-Fulaij said: "I was particularly fond of mathematics since I was young, and I was looking forward to being a university professor in this field, but I turned to studying engineering, which is very similar to business and finance, as I joined The University of Miami College of Engineering, USA."

Al-Fulaij narrated: "When I first joined NBK, I had much determination and challenge as I pursued my MBA in Business Management while moving between different departments, then I worked at the Credit Department at New York Branch, after I returned to Treasury Department, which I quickly became attached to due to the dynamic nature of work in this department, which serves as the link between the bank and the local and international financial markets. After that, I moved to investment and asset management at NBK Capital and eventually returned to NBK."

Al-Fulaij accentuated that the eagerness to develop was always the driver and the positive energy for achieving further progress in his career, noting that in a rapidly changing world, development is an ongoing process, especially in the era of huge amount of data, which we are now learning how to benefit from, as data has become a wealth



Salah Al-Fulaij during the panel discussion

generating huge returns. The audience's interaction with Al-Fulaij's speech was noticeable, as he affirmed for the trainees that if they do not go to work every day feeling that you enjoy what they are doing, then they are surely in the wrong place and job, calling them to challenge themselves to realize their ambitions and dreams in the future.

### Finding creative people

In a question about the challenges he faces as CEO, Al-Fulaij said that finding creative and competent people and high-performance work teams who have great passion and ambition is the biggest concern and challenge for any leader. "We are always looking for people having creative thinking and searching for innovative solutions. A clear example of this is the Kuwaiti team who worked day and night, and recently achieved a great accomplishment in our digital transformation journey by launching 'Weyay' as the first digital bank that embodies the requirements of Kuwaiti youth," he added.

Al-Fulaij pointed out that the challenges also include the strategic vision and the future steps that we must take for the next five years. People need



banks for three things, which are deposits, money transfer and borrowing, when needed. Therefore, it is our responsibility to develop these services and provide them to customers in the fastest and best way possible.

"The banking industry is changing rapidly, as we are now living in an era where 'your branch is in your pocket' and you can make all your banking transactions with one click or tap. This requires hard work to keep pace with this advancement in a way that enriches the customer experience."

### Perseverance in learning

Al-Fulaij called on the trainees to enhance their skills with training programs that are designed according to the requirements of the labor market, which has become rapidly changing. He mentioned that he always advises his children to be perseverant in learning and knowledge acquisition, pointing out that being satisfied with a university degree only means staying behind the world is moving and developing and delay in catching up with this development and wasting opportunities for a better future.

"Raise the ceiling of your ambitions to the highest positions. The youth are part of the success of

our institution, as they serve our customers and our community, build technology, take strategic decisions with us, manage risks, lead innovation, and their presence ensures our prosperity at the present time and in the future."

Giving his advice to the youth navigating their early career, Al-Fulaij said: "You should be well-prepared for a future in which technology and digital trends dominate all aspects of life, which requires a change in educational priorities to include artificial intelligence (AI) software, robotics and data analytics."

He called on the trainees to make their ambitions sky high and to benefit from the valuable training programs like "Tamakan" to enhance their skills through knowledge and exposure to the labor market and its requirements, which will help them make the right decisions in their future career.

Al-Fulaij advised the trainees to plan early for the future, noting that success requires a passion for development, a mind that is eager to learn and striving to make achievements, explaining that the present generation of the youth is fortunate with this huge advancement offering easy access to the sources of knowledge.

## EU states must be allowed to fix fiscal targets: Spain

MADRID: EU budget rules must be reformed to let member states define their own fiscal targets tailored to "the specific circumstances of each country", Spain's economy minister said Monday.

Under terms of the EU's Stability and Growth Pact, member states must keep their budget deficits under 3.0 percent and overall debt under 60 percent of GDP, although occasional adjustments are possible. "The current ratios of public debt to GDP are much higher than before the pandemic in all countries of the EU," said Nadia Calvino during a round table in Madrid with Paschal Donohoe who currently heads the Eurogroup of eurozone finance ministers.

"Therefore, the path for public debt reduction must be adapted to this new reality and take into account the specific circumstances of each country," she said, calling for swift action to change the budgetary rules. The pandemic has caused soaring levels of debt, which in France had risen to an estimated 115 percent of GDP by the end of 2021, and almost 122 percent in Spain, rendering the targets almost impossible without tough austerity measures.

In order for the European Union to avoid making the same mistakes of the 2008 financial crisis, "member states must play a leading role in setting their own fiscal targets," Calvino said.

Brussels had urged member states to quickly get back on track to avoid a ballooning of public debt. But experts say the rush to impose austerity hampered the bloc's recovery and caused long-term damage to its economy. "We're all aware of the lessons from the past crisis," admitted Donohoe, who is also Ireland's finance minister. — AFP

## stc participates in LEAP conference in Riyadh

KUWAIT: Kuwait Telecommunications Company - stc, a world-class digital leader providing innovative services and platforms to customers, enabling the digital transformation in Kuwait, announced its participation in the 'LEAP' conference hosted in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia from the 1st to the 3rd of February 2022 in Riyadh. LEAP held under the theme "One Eye on the Stars", and considered the largest tech conference of its kind, brought together the global technology community to tackle the biggest socio-cultural challenges of the world.

CEO of stc, Eng Maziad Al-Harbi attended the conference in line with stc's strategy to enable digital transformation and expand the wide range of its innovative digital portfolio of solutions in Kuwait. His attendance stems from stc's role as a key player in the regional and international telecom scene whereby such conference provides a unique opportunity and platform in exploring and attracting leading technology corporations and inspiring pioneers from global start-ups. stc's strategy and objective has always been to provide a rich portfolio of cloud, digital, and telecom solutions along with pioneering IT solutions to enrich the customer experience for individuals and enhance the business models of corporate customers.

The conference, recognized as the global platform and unique event for future technologies and



Maziad Al-Harbi



the most disruptive technology professionals from around the world, featured more than 350 experts who spoke in six conferences on health technology to AI, delivering cutting-edge content. This comes in addition to over 700 technological innovators and start-ups who participated to showcase their technological innovations to the world through the event.

Key topics discussed during the conference included the digital economy, the Internet of Things (IoT), biological and health technologies, quantitative sciences, smart exploration, unmanned systems, as well as others. This came in addition to discussing the role of technology in solving some of the most important challenges faced in today's world. In this regard, the experts participating in the conference unanimously agreed that despite the range of challenges the world is facing today, such as poverty, diseases, environmental disasters, pollution, or scarcity, technology can be the key to

resolving some of these issues.

The conference also touched on developing future cities that can promote the health and well-being of citizens, purify the air from pollution, as well as addressing other environmental concerns. Additionally, the thoughts of reimagining travel through faster transportation methods, managing food supplies, protecting bodily health from harmful chemicals and preservatives were also addressed. Experts also discussed how the human way of life can be developed to support innovations that can revolutionize the medical field, while transforming the way people live, work, play or even how they spend their leisure time.

On the sideline of LEAP International Conference, stc Group announced the launch of its initiative to establish a major digital hub "MENA Hub" for the Middle East and North Africa that comes in cooperation with regional and international partners linking three continents.

## LuLu Exchange plans big celebrations on 10th anniversary

KUWAIT: LuLu Exchange, one of Kuwait's leading payment service providers, has completed 10 successful years of operations in the country. Popular for its reliable and customer-friendly service, the company has since inception been at the forefront of technological innovations to make cross-border payments seamless, reliable and affordable for the country's people. To celebrate its milestone year, the company has planned a gala line-up of events over the next 10 months, as part of its 'Turning Ten-Fest' campaign.

The campaign will start with an exciting contest for customers, set to run from February 6th to May 7th. The contest will include KD 1,000 worth of shopping vouchers to be gifted to a winner every 10 days, and a grand prize of \$10,000. The contest is open to transactions made either through the LuLu Money app or any of the company's 27 branches, in the above-mentioned period.

In the second phase of the 'Turning Ten-Fest' campaign, the company will conduct a series of virtual monthly events from May till August. These events will be clubbed with the International Nurses Day and will comprise an impressive lineup of fun

and entertaining activities geared towards the country's nursing community and their families. And to wrap up the celebrations, LuLu Exchange will conduct special employee engagement programs from September till end of the year. The events are a recognition of the hard work and dedication of its various team members who have helped the company grow over the last decade.

Speaking on the company's decade long achievement, Adeb Ahmed, MD, Lulu Financial Group, said, "We are proud to have built a solid foundation for our business, in line with the positive economic sentiment of the great nation of Kuwait. Through our various services and technological advancements, we have been able to contribute greatly to ease the cross-border payment needs of the people of Kuwait, and on this momentous occasion, I hope that the faith placed in us by our valued customers, partners and other industry stakeholders, inspires us to continue our good work."

Conveying his wishes to the entire team, Shaiju Mohandas, General Manager, LuLu Exchange Kuwait, said, "It is a proud moment for all of us at LuLu Exchange to have come so far, and to achieve so much in this short span of time. The first 10 years of any organization is a challenge unto itself, and we owe our success to the government and people of Kuwait for believing in our vision and contributing to our growth in a positive way. We reaffirm our commitment to be an impactful player in Kuwait's payments ecosystem."

## Gulf Bank to announce annual draw winner of 100 times their salary next Thursday

KUWAIT: Days after announcing the winner of the KD 1.5 million Al-Danah grand prize, and in keeping with its commitment to rewarding its customers and fulfilling customers' dreams, Gulf Bank will conduct its annual Salary Account grand draw on February the 10th. The winner of the 2021 Salary Account grand draw will be taking home a prize equivalent to 100 times their monthly salary.

The draw will be broadcast live next Thursday at 1.30 PM on 360 FM at 360 Mall in the presence and supervision of representatives from the Ministry of Commerce and Industry and Ernst & Young.

In light of the occasion, the General Manager of Consumer Banking, Mohammed Al-Qattan, said: "Gulf Bank continues to reward its customers and help them fulfill their dreams with unique prizes. For our Salary Account clients, on Thursday we will be announcing the winner of the

grand prize of up to 100 times their salary, a prize that will be announced for one lucky winner of 2021."

Gulf Bank's vision is to be the leading Kuwaiti Bank of the Future. The bank is constantly engaging and empowering its employees as part of an inclusive and diversified workplace in recognition of every employee's role in delivering customer excellence and serving the community at large. With its extensive network of branches and innovative digital services, Gulf Bank is able to give its customers the choice of how and where to conduct their banking transactions, all while ensuring a simple and seamless banking experience. Gulf Bank is committed to maintaining a robust sustainability program at the community, economic, and environmental levels through sustainability initiatives that are strategically selected to benefit both the country and the Bank. Gulf Bank supports Kuwait Vision 2035 "New Kuwait" and works with the different relevant parties to achieve it.



Mohammad Al-Qattan



## Business



MURANO, Italy: In this file photo, "Murrine" glass canes, small cylindrical elements with a characteristic floral motif, at the 1911 established company Ercole Moretti, on the island of Murano in the Venetian lagoon. — AFP



MURANO, Italia: Venetian glass "murrine", small cylindrical elements with a characteristic floral motif, during a fusion process at the 1911 established company Ercole Moretti, on the island of Murano in the Venetian lagoon. — AFP

# Glassblowers on Venice's Murano scorched by blazing energy bills

## Gas prices soared 600%, threatening the centuries-old craft

VENICE: The blown glass creations forged in the furnaces on Venice's Murano islands are prized around the world—but soaring gas prices are threatening the centuries-old craft. "It's a huge problem... A hurricane has hit the economy," Luciano Gambaro, head of the Promovetro glass association, told AFP, describing bills that have risen a whopping 600 percent. Murano's artisans fashion everything from tiny, colored animals to majestic chandeliers, seven days a week.

To do so, they need one key thing: heat. Energy is their second biggest expense, after labor costs, and they are suffering from record gas prices worldwide. They were paying 20 cents (\$0.23) per cubic meter until September. "On the December bill, the price was 1.27 euros, a rise of over 600 percent," said Gambaro, who

employs six people and is feeling the strain.

There have been glassmakers on Murano—a series of islands linked by bridges—since the 13th century, when they were moved from Venice proper after devastating fires which began in their furnaces. Some have kept their creations in vogue by partnering with renowned designers. Others have seen their glass included in art displayed in major museums. In a bid to stave off a crisis, the Veneto region forked out three million euros in November to help compensate for the glassmakers' spiraling energy costs. "Unfortunately, that will all be used up by the end of February," said Gambaro, who admitted to being "very worried" about the prospect of "paying the full price from March".

It is "a bigger problem than COVID", he said, in ref-

erence to the coronavirus pandemic which hit Italy in 2020, forcing a series of financially-punishing lockdowns, and emptying Venice of its big-spending tourists.

### "Tip of the iceberg"

Cristiano Ferro, whose company Effetre Murano employs 32 people and makes semi-finished products—brightly colored blocks, rods and sheets to be shaped and crafted by glassmakers—in 16 kilns, says gas prices are "just the tip of the iceberg". "All the raw materials have increased by 20, 30, 40, 50 percent: sand, soda and all the mineral oxides used to color the glass," he said.

Companies like his have few solutions, apart from upping their own prices. "We have increased the costs by 15 to 30 percent, now we'll see how the market

reacts," Gambaro said.

There is no quick fix: it is very costly to shut down and restart the furnaces. Instead, he said European countries need to put pressure on supply countries—in this case Russia—with jointly-agreed countermeasures.

### "We will overcome it"

It is not just the workshops along Murano's picturesque canals that are feeling the pain. Manufacturers and consumers across Italy are being hit by soaring gas and electricity bills, and the government has so far pledged 5.5 billion euros in support. Despite the threat to Murano and its glassmakers, Gambaro refuses to despair. "We have a problem, but we will overcome it," he said. "We have been here for a thousand years." — AFP

## IBS holds virtual program on innovation and creativity

KUWAIT: Prof Yaqoub S Y Al-Refaei, Director General of the Institute of Banking Studies, stated that the Institute conducted "How to Improve Innovation, Creativity, and Performance in a Digital Age," a virtual program by Professor Michael Wade, Professor of Innovation and Strategy, IMD, Director of the Global Center for Digital Business Transformation, tomorrow.

This program was sponsored by the National Bank of Kuwait, Burgan Bank and Al-Ahli Bank of Kuwait. Participants from different sectors, such as banking and investment, attended this program.

The world is witnessing a digital transformation at all levels and in all important sectors, and in the financial and business sectors in particular. In this context, the Institute invited Professor Michael Wade and he presented one of the most important training programs related to this topic. The Director General of the Institute, Prof Al-Refaei, has indicated that the speed of change and new developments in the world require from all organizations the readiness for digital transformation and the knowledge to deal with all circumstances related to it.

Employers need to develop a working mechanism,



Michael Wade

and give the employees more training to qualify them and to enhance their skills. In this Program, Michael Wade discussed a new way to support innovation and creativity that participants can all use, based on his 2021 book, *Alien Thinking: The Unconventional Path to Breakthrough Ideas*. He introduced the ALIEN approach and then he discussed how it can be amplified using digital tools and technologies. He also presented ways in which participants can turbocharge their own innovation and creativity.

The Institute of Banking Studies frequently invites renowned world speakers to present programs/seminars/workshops for executives across the private and public sectors in the State of Kuwait. Over the last 8 years, IBS has invited the following international experts and speakers to present professional programs, seminars and workshops: Robin Sharma, Dr John C Maxwell, Tom Peters, John Baldoni, Mark Sanborn, Adrian Gostick, Michael Neill, Joel Garfinkle, Steve Farber, Dave Ulrich and Erik Qualman. IBS also invited James Dowd, Senior Fellow, Managing Director, Executive Education; Linda A. Hill, Professor of Business Administration, Faculty Chair, Leadership Initiative; and Francesca Gino from Harvard Business School, and Mohd Al-Qahtani, holder of the world championship in diction and rhetoric, 2015, and Latifa Al-Loughni from Kuwait.



SANTIAGO: An elderly man receives a BioNTech Pfizer COVID-19 jab as a booster, in Santiago in Monday. — AFP

## Pfizer's 2021 profits doubled to \$22bn on vaccine sales

WASHINGTON: Pfizer said yesterday it expects \$32 billion in revenue from COVID-19 vaccines in 2022 as it reported annual profits had more than doubled to \$22 billion. The pharmaceutical giant, which with German company BioNTech won approval for the first vaccine to counter the deadly virus, saw annual revenues nearly double to \$81.3 billion, with \$36.8 billion from the COVID-19 vaccine. Pfizer also expects \$22 billion in sales of Paxlovid, the company's pill for COVID-19, in 2022.

The results are the latest to show how the coron-

avirus has transformed Pfizer, which a year ago had projected just \$15 billion in COVID-19 vaccines sales in 2021 and ended up selling more than twice that amount after repeatedly lifting the forecast. Pfizer's scientists "continue to monitor the COVID-19 virus and believe it is unlikely that it will be fully eradicated in the foreseeable future," Chief Executive Albert Bourla said in a statement.

"That said, we now have the tools—in the forms of vaccines and treatments—that we believe will help enable us to not only better manage the pandemic but also help countries move into the endemic phase," Bourla said. "In other words, we believe these tools will help allow us to go back to normality and spend time with family and friends, travel, attend indoor dining and concerts, and enjoy many other activities while lowering the risk of overburdening hospitals and healthcare systems around the world." Although Pfizer's profit per share topped analyst expectations, revenues fell short. Shares fell 4.1 percent to \$51.02 in pre-market trading. — AFP



## Italy's Monte dei Paschi bank axes CEO

ROME: Italy's troubled Monte dei Paschi, the world's oldest bank, on Monday ousted its chief executive and named an immediate replacement to lead negotiations on a recovery plan with Brussels.

Guido Bastianini, who led the ailing state-controlled Siena bank since 2020, would be leaving "with immediate effect", it said in a statement. He was replaced by mergers specialist Luigi Lovaglio, 66, picked for his "significant experience, including at an international level".

The economy ministry wants a fresh face as it negotiates a new recovery plan for the ailing bank with the European Commission. The state has been the main shareholder of Monte dei Paschi di Siena (BMP) since its bailout in 2017, and the government is keen to resolve the banking sector's thorniest dossier as quickly as possible. Negotiations with Brussels resumed in early December over recapitalization, cost reductions, and an extension of the 2021 deadline for the state to divest from BMP. The bank has fallen behind on a plan agreed with the European Commission in 2017, particularly in terms of job cuts and capital strengthening.

An unimpressed European Central Bank asked it in early February to further strengthen its capital base.

### Buyer wanted

BMP has also yet to attract a buyer. Rome wants to sell its 64.2 percent share, but a possible deal with Milan-based UniCredit in October fell through. Negotiations were hampered by the amount of public money requested by Italy's second biggest bank to take over BMP.

With no sale in sight, the bank was forced to submit a new plan to Brussels in December, which includes a 2.5 billion euro capital increase, to be carried out in 2022. Bastianini, 63, had been banking on a voluntary redundancy plan saving around 275 million euros a year. He had mooted the idea of some 4,000 voluntary departures—almost a fifth of the workforce, which stood at 21,297 employees at the end of September.

But Brussels thought that too small a saving, sparking the search for a new CEO, according to media reports. Founded in 1472 in Tuscany, BMP made a disastrous acquisition in 2007 of Banca Antonveneta at twice its estimated value.

It then plunged further into the red when its executives were accused of fraud and embezzlement. Hit by the eurozone debt crisis in 2008 and burdened by a mountain of bad loans—loans that may never be repaid—the bank has accumulated heavy losses. After BMP failed to raise the five billion euros needed by the end of 2016 to recapitalize, the state was forced to step in with a bailout that cost Italian taxpayers 5.4 billion euros. — AFP

## Taiwan eases nuclear-accident food import ban from Japan

TAIPEI: Taiwan said yesterday it would relax a food imports ban from areas in Japan around the site of the 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster, as it pushes for support from Tokyo in its bid to join a major trans-Pacific trade pact. Taiwan imposed a blanket ban on food imports from five regions in and around Fukushima in 2011, after radioactive particles were detected on some products following the devastating meltdown of the nuclear power plant.

The relaxation comes as Taipei lobbies for inclusion in the region's largest free trade pact, the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) — which accounts for more than 13 percent of the global economy—despite Chinese opposition. President Tsai Ing-wen, writing in a Facebook post Tuesday, said the move would boost Taipei's chances of joining the trade pact and help the island "go global and stand in the world, creating more opportunities and prosperity". While Japan does not formally recognize Taiwan, relations between the two have warmed in recent years with Tokyo donating sev-

eral batches of COVID vaccines to the island and becoming more outspoken about China's growing influence in the region.

Taiwan's cabinet spokesman Lo Ping-cheng said the government will "reasonably adjust the restrictions" to their blanket ban on Fukushima-related food imports, since most countries have lifted or relaxed controls. "Taiwan is a trade-reliant country and if we want to join international trade organizations and the high-standard CPTPP, we can't turn a blind eye to international standards," he told a press conference yesterday. Currently only Taiwan and China ban all food imports from the Fukushima region, Lo said, adding Taipei's decision will take effect by the end of February.

A few items—including mushrooms, wild game, and a Japanese vegetable known as koshiabura—will still be banned, while some products would require radiation safety certificates. Taiwan applied last September to become a member of the CPTPP—which was signed by 11 Asia Pacific countries, including Japan. But island's bid was opposed by China, which submitted its own application.

Beijing claims self-ruled democratic Taiwan as its own territory to be reclaimed one day, by force if necessary. It has increasingly stepped up diplomatic efforts to isolate the island on the world stage.

On the military front, it has also ramped up pressure, flying an unprecedented number of war planes into Taiwan's air defense zone — with more than double the number of incursions recorded in 2021 compared to the year before. — AFP



## Business

# In post-recession cash injection, oil prices boost GCC economies

## Report cites downside risks to growth outlook caused by pandemic

**DUBAI, UAE:** Rising oil prices are boosting economic growth throughout the oil producing economies of the MENA region, with predictions that GDP will largely return to pre-pandemic levels during the course of 2022. Oil prices are expected to level out at about \$70 per barrel, with global demand for oil picking up. In the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), oil activity is expected to grow by up to 8 percent in 2022, a huge increase on the 0.5 percent recorded last year.

Many of the energy-exporting nations have also enacted strong vaccine strategies, which in turn has enabled them to lift lockdown measures and reopen domestic sectors such as retail and tourism. However, despite a brief role when they led the economic recovery during the oil price shock, several non-energy exporting nations have now slipped behind their GCC neighbors when it comes to short-term growth predictions. For Jordan and Lebanon, in particular, ongoing high COVID-19 infection rates are negatively impacting their economic rebounds and contributing to weak economic growth.

The development of the region's private sector is also likely to have an impact on the size and speed of the region's economic recovery. As the report outlines, without private sector reform, economic growth will slow. This is true of most GCC countries where the

share of the state-owned hydrocarbon sector dwarfs their various private sectors, but also in Algeria and Egypt where restrictions on imports and foreign investment, and a preferential treatment of state-owned companies over private companies in public tenders are additional factors that are stifling business.

Although vaccine programs and the development of the private sectors are important for the region's economy, growth is still heavily dependent on oil. Niels de Hoog, Senior Economist, Atradius, acknowledged that the world economy will still require energy from fossil fuels on a large scale for several decades. However, he noted that despite plans to expand the capacity of hydrocarbon production, many GCC nations are also investing in renewable energy. He said: "Investments in renewable projects are being stepped up simultaneously to increase the share of domestic energy consumption that comes from renewable sources. The additional fossil fuel production will mainly be destined for exports." At the same time, the rise in home-grown renewables is also changing the economic prospects of the region's non-hydrocarbon producers for the better as they become less dependent on imported energy.

Schuyler D'Souza, Managing Director Middle East, Atradius said: "The Atradius Regional Economic



Outlook for the Middle East and North Africa paints a varied picture. On the one hand we are seeing a rebound from the economic crises of the pandemic downturn and the oil price shock. However, on the other hand, additional factors are impacting projected growth in the region. Primary among these are the

slow rate of vaccine roll-out in some of the economies and heavy dependence on state-owned hydrocarbon businesses. This picture may change over the next few years as some of the region's countries expand investment in renewable energy and enable growth among the private sector." —AFP



## Air pollution costs Mideast, N Africa annual \$141bn: WB

**BEIRUT:** Air pollution costs the Middle East and North Africa \$141 billion per year, or around 2 percent of GDP on average, the World Bank said Monday, urging a green post-COVID-19 recovery for the region. Environmental pollution will cost some nations in the region including Egypt, Lebanon and Yemen more than 3 percent of their GDP, it said a report.

"Productivity falls if residents cannot work after they or their family members fall ill from air pollution, and health care costs can be a substantial burden on both individuals and governments," said the report. The average resident will be ill for 60 days in his lifetime due to air pollution, with town dwellers breathing in 10 times the level of pollutants considered safe by the World Health Organization, it said.

## US eases Trump-era tariffs on Japan steel

**WASHINGTON:** The United States will ease tariffs on steel imported from Japan, officials announced Monday, in the latest move by President Joe Biden's administration to resolve trade disputes started under his predecessor Donald Trump. Beginning in April, Japan will be allowed to pay lower duties on exports of up to 1.25 million tons of steel per year to the United States.



**HIROSHIMA, Japan:** In this file photo taken on May 27, 2016, a Japanese and a US flag are seen next to the Hiroshima Peace Memorial in Hiroshima. — AFP

The decision ends the 25 percent levies Trump imposed in June 2018 on metal imports from the country and others, citing national security concerns. The dispute with Japan was one of a number Trump initiated during his time in office that Biden has worked to resolve, and follows an agreement Washington reached last year to end the metal tariffs on the European Union. "The deal we reached will strengthen America's steel industry and ensure its workforce stays competitive, while also providing more access to cheaper steel and addressing a major irritant between the United States and Japan, one of our most important allies," Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo said in a statement. US Trade Representative Katherine Tai said the deal would "protect a vital American industry, our workers and their families," as well as level the playing field against China.

The report singled out "low environmental standards" in the transportation and industry sectors, the use of low quality fuel, and burning waste as the main drivers of air pollution in the region.

The Mediterranean is one of the most plastic-polluted seas in the world, it said, adding that the average resident dumps more than six kilograms (13 pounds) of waste into its waters each year.

The Mediterranean has "as much plastic flowing into it each year as the volume of fish taken out from the two most commonly caught species", the report said. Sea pollution drives coastal erosion, a major threat to livelihoods, especially among the poor, it said.

In countries that rely on tourism for revenue such as Tunisia, coastal erosion could cost the country up to 2.8 percent of its GDP. "Polluted skies and seas are costly to the health, social and economic wellbeing of millions of people in the Middle East and North Africa region," said Ferid Belhaj, World Bank vice president for the region. "As countries recover from COVID-19, there is an opportunity to change course and choose a greener, bluer and more sustainable growth path," he said. — AFP

"This agreement, combined with last year's resolution with the European Union, will help us combat China's anti-competitive, non-market trade actions in the steel sector, while helping us reach President Biden's ambitious global climate agenda," she said. However, the deal does not resolve all the outstanding trade issues between the two countries. Levies of 10 percent on Japan's aluminum exports will remain for now, while the new tariff system covers less than the 1.8 million tons of steel the United States imported from Japan in 2017, the last year before the levies were imposed, according to Commerce Department data.

Japan "regrets" that the US "has taken no steps to address" tariffs on aluminum, Japan's foreign minister Yoshimasa Hayashi told reporters yesterday. He said Japan sees the announcement about eased levies on steel as a "step forward," however, adding the country will "continue to push the US for complete resolution" of the matter.

### 'Melted and poured'

The Alliance for American Manufacturing welcomed the agreement, particularly a provision ensuring imported steel must be "melted and poured" in Japan so that other nations don't transship their metals through the country. The trade group's president Scott Paul said Biden's move widened "the focus on global overcapacity, while maintaining appropriate tools to mitigate threats to our economic and national security."

Trump's Republican administration engaged in a number of trade spats with allies and adversaries alike, many of which were unresolved when Biden took office in January 2021. Among those were the tariffs of 25 percent on steel and 10 percent on aluminum imported from several countries, including the European Union and Japan. Japan and the United States are among the world's top steel producers, ranked behind China, the European Union and India, according to data from the World Steel Association. At the time, critics rejected Trump's citing of national security grounds in his decision, while the levies poisoned relations with Brussels and other allies. The Biden administration worked out an agreement to lift the EU metals tariffs last October, and this month announced a deal to resume trade in mussels, clams, oysters and scallops after a decade-long halt.—AFP

## WWF: World must work together to tackle plastic ocean threat

**PARIS:** Plastic has infiltrated all parts of the ocean and is now found "in the smallest plankton up to the largest whale" wildlife group WWF said yesterday, calling for urgent efforts to create an international treaty on plastics.

Tiny fragments of plastic have reached even the most remote and seemingly-pristine regions of the planet: it peppers Arctic sea ice and has been found inside fish in the deepest recesses of the ocean, the Mariana Trench. There is no international agreement in place to address the problem, although delegates meeting in Nairobi for a United Nations environment meeting this month are expected to launch talks on a worldwide plastics treaty.

WWF sought to bolster the case for action in its latest report, which synthesizes more than 2,000 separate scientific studies on the impacts of plastic pollution on the oceans, biodiversity and marine ecosystems. The report acknowledged that there is currently insufficient evidence to estimate the potential repercussions on humans. But it found that the fossil-fuel derived substance "has reached every part of the ocean, from the sea surface to the deep ocean floor, from the poles to coastlines of the most remote islands and is detectable in the smallest plankton up to the largest whale".

### 'Saturation point'

According to some estimates, between 19 and 23 million tons of plastic waste is washed into the world's waterways every year, the WWF report said. This is largely from single-use plastics, which still constitute more than 60 percent of marine pollution, although more and more countries are acting to ban their use. "In many places (we are) reaching some kind of saturation point for marine ecosystems, where we're approaching levels that pose a significant threat," said

Eirik Lindebjerg, Global Plastics Policy Manager at WWF. In some places there is a risk of "ecosystem collapse", he said. Many people have seen images of seabirds choking on plastic straws or turtles wrapped in discarded fishing nets, but he said the danger is across the entire marine food web.

It "will affect not only the whale and the seal and the turtle, but huge fish stocks and the animals that depend on those", he added. In one 2021 study, 386 fish species were found to have ingested plastic, out of 555 tested. Separate research, looking at the major commercially fished species, found up to 30 percent of cod in a sample caught in the North Sea had microplastics in their stomach.

Once in the water, the plastic begins to degrade, becoming smaller and smaller until it is a "nanoplastic", invisible to the naked eye. So even if all plastic pollution stopped completely, the volume of microplastics in the oceans could still double by 2050. But plastic production continues to rise, potentially doubling by 2040, according to projections cited by WWF, with ocean plastic pollution expected to triple during the same period.

### Enduring risk

Lindebjerg compares the situation to the climate crisis—and the concept of a "carbon budget", that caps the maximum amount of CO2 that can be released into the atmosphere before a global warming cap is exceeded. "There is actually a limit to how much plastic pollution our marine ecosystems can absorb," he said. Those limits have already been reached for microplastics in several parts of the world, according to WWF, particularly in the Mediterranean, the Yellow and East China Seas (between China, Taiwan and the Korean Peninsula) and in the Arctic sea ice.

"We need to treat it as a fixed system that doesn't absorb plastic, and that's why we need to go towards zero emissions, zero pollution as fast as possible," said Lindebjerg.

WWF is calling for talks aimed at drawing up an international agreement on plastics at the UN environment meeting, from February 28 to March 2 in Nairobi.

It wants any treaty to lead to global standards of production and real "recyclability". Trying to clean up the oceans is "extremely difficult and extremely expensive", Lindebjerg said, adding that it was better on all metrics not to pollute in the first place. — AFP



**PANAMA CITY:** In this file photo, a man collects garbage, including plastic waste, at the beach of Costa del Este, in Panama City.— AFP

## US trade deficit ends 2021 with slight increase

**WASHINGTON:** The United States ended a year that saw a big increase in the trade deficit with a slight but unexpected monthly uptick as imports again outpaced exports, government data said yesterday.

The deficit increased 1.8 percent to \$80.7 billion in December from its upwardly revised level the month before, the Commerce Department said, just under its record high of \$80.8 billion posted in September 2021 and against analysts' expectations for a small monthly decline. The deficit increased nearly \$15 billion from 2020, the data said, and is far from the \$41.6 billion reported

before the pandemic. "It's unlikely that the trade deficit will significantly unwind its Covid-related expansion until the pandemic is sustainably contained domestically and abroad," Mahir Rasheed of Oxford Economics said. "However, we expect gradually warming growth and stronger services activity to boost export growth this year while import demand moderates."

Exports rose last month by \$3.4 billion, while imports increased by \$4.8 billion. Consumer goods exports rose \$1.2 billion, most of which were pharmaceutical preparations, while food, feed and beverages declined \$1.1 billion. Transportations and travel exports made up the bulk of the services exports, the data said. Among imports, consumer goods rose \$5.2 billion, cars and parts climbed \$2.4 billion, capital goods climbed \$2.3 billion and industrial supplies decreased \$3.2 billion.

For 2021 in total, the report said exports were up \$394.1 billion and imports up by \$576.5 billion, with the US goods deficit expanding and the services surplus shrinking.— AFP





In this Gaurav Sharma, superfan of late Bollywood playback singer Lata Mangeshkar, poses for pictures during an interview with AFP at his home museum where he has meticulously catalogued thousands of compact discs, films and books featuring the singer, in Meerut. — AFP



Gaurav Sharma, superfan of late Bollywood playback singer Lata Mangeshkar, reads one of his collection at his home museum.

## 'Nightingale of India' legacy lives on at superfan's museum

Beloved Bollywood superstar Lata Mangeshkar's legacy has been kept alive at a home museum in India curated by one of the much-mourned singer's biggest admirers. Mangeshkar was known as the "Nightingale of India" and her high-pitched melodies were an instantly recognizable feature of the country's cinema, with her work appearing in more than 1,000 films. The 92-year-old died Sunday and her body was cremated later that day in a Mumbai park, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi among the mourners laying flowers on her funeral pyre.

News of her death devastated Gaurav Sharma, a lifelong superfan who recalled meeting the songstress at her home nearly

a decade ago. "When I saw her for the first time, I felt she had some kind of incandescent glow around her," the 38-year-old told AFP. "She was so simple and down to earth. We talked for a long time. I got a lot of love from her."

Sharma maintains what could be the world's largest collection of Mangeshkar memorabilia at his house in the city of Meerut, where he has meticulously catalogued thousands of compact discs, films and books featuring the singer. A teacher by profession, Sharma also has samples of the singer's perfume, movie posters and almost every article on Mangeshkar that has ever appeared in print.

"I even have the recording from 1974

when she sang at London's Royal Albert Hall," Sharma said in an interview. "She appeared in only one advertisement, which was for a cough syrup in the early days of her career, and I have that." The singer's death cast a pall of gloom over the Sharma home, and he told AFP he could barely contain his tears at the news.

But Sharma said he was taking heart from the fact that she would "continue to live amongst us" through the thousands of songs she sang over her storied career. "Obviously I am devastated... But the show must go on," he said. "The body has its limits. But she will remain with us until this universe exists." — AFP



Gaurav Sharma, superfan of late Bollywood playback singer Lata Mangeshkar, shows one of his collection at his home museum.

## 'The Power of the Dog' leads Oscar nominations with 12

Jane Campion's gothic Western "The Power of the Dog" led the Oscars nominations yesterday, fending off a crowded field of movies from a year in which Covid-weary audiences slowly headed back into movie theaters.

The movie about a repressed 1920s cattle rancher in Montana released by Netflix earned 12 nods ahead of next month's Oscars gala, including best director-making Campion the first female auteur nominated twice in Academy Award history. "The Power of the Dog" was also nominated for best picture, and landed acting nods for Benedict Cumberbatch, Kirsten Dunst, Jesse Plemons and Kodi Smit-McPhee. Campion was last nominated 28 years ago for "The Piano."



Sprawling sci-fi epic "Dune" landed in second place overall, landing 10 nods including best picture, although its director Denis Villeneuve was overlooked by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. As expected, the adaptation of Frank Herbert's sprawling novel set on a desert planet plagued by monstrous sandworms scored well across technical categories including cinematography, visual effects and sound.

Other coveted directing slots went to Kenneth Branagh for black-and-white childhood drama "Belfast" and Steven Spielberg for musical "West Side Story," with each film securing seven nominations. Spielberg's decision to remake the most honored musical in Oscars history had been criticized as unnecessary by some, but it won over voters to earn

a best picture nomination, and another for supporting actress for Ariana DeBose as Anita.

The directing category was rounded out by Paul Thomas Anderson for "Licorice Pizza," and Japanese filmmaker Ryusuke Hamaguchi-whose subtitled, three-hour drama "Drive My Car" also earned a rare best picture nomination. Hopes that larger-than-life, unapologetically commercial box office hits like "Spider-Man: No Way Home" and "007 outing "No Time To Die" could break into the best picture race were thwarted. The \$1.8 billion-grossing "Spider-Man" film landed only a visual effects nomination, while Daniel Craig's final James Bond film earned three nods.

### 'Wide open'

As widely predicted, frontrunner Will Smith earned recognition for his portrayal of the father of tennis greats Serena and Venus Williams in "King Richard," which took six nods overall. He is up against Cumberbatch, Denzel Washington ("The Tragedy of Macbeth"), Andrew Garfield ("tick, tick...BOOM!") and Javier Bardem ("Being the Ricardos.") Lady Gaga was the surprise omission in the best actress category, with "House of Gucci" earning just one nomination-for best hair and make-up.

Instead best actress will be contested by Jessica Chastain ("The Eyes of Tammy Faye"), Olivia Colman ("The Lost Daughter"), Penelope Cruz ("Parallel Mothers"), Nicole Kidman ("Being the Ricardos") and Kristen Stewart ("Spencer"). The plethora of A-listers will be welcomed by the Academy, after last year's sparsely-watched Oscars gala, which featured smaller movies barely known to the wider public.

Giant cinematic spectacles-many of which were pushed back into 2021 during the first year of the coronavirus pandemic-are competing with auteur films that gained tractions on streaming sites in this year's diverse race for Hollywood's biggest awards. "Last year we had a much more indie Oscars... This year was the return of big cinema, big movies and studio films," said one Academy voter, who asked not to be named. "The race is wide open this year," said Deadline award columnist Pete Hammond. The 94th Academy Awards gala is scheduled for March 27. — AFP

## Iran 'jail restaurant' aims to free bad debt inmates

Two Iranian ex-prisoners have opened a successful "jail restaurant" to help raise funds to free convicts languishing behind bars for unpaid debts. A storefront picture of their "Cell 16" diner in eastern Tehran shows a frustrated prisoner holding a chicken leg in one hand and trying with the other to bend the bars of his cell to escape. The idea of the restaurant was hatched in prison. "I met my partner while we were in police custody," Benjamin Nakhat, 31, told AFP. "I was working at the iron market in Tehran but I went bankrupt. I found myself penniless."

His business partner, Arman Alizadeh, a 30-year-old exporter, was also drowning in debt. Iranian law is harsh on writing cheques that bounce, and on failure to pay agreed dowries or bank loans: it's jail time until the money is repaid. More than 11,000 Iranians are behind bars for failing to pay their debts, according to prison officials. That is almost five percent of Iran's total prison population. Two years after their release, the jail time friends opened Cell 16, with its separate dining tables behind bars.

"Decorating the place was easy, we just reproduced the place where we'd been held," Nakhat said, smiling. "We wanted to show that prison isn't necessarily a place filled with bad guys. "Inmates are sometimes

people who haven't committed crimes but have had misfortune. It can happen to anyone."

### Help the prisoners

With the help of social media, the business has been a success, having first opened in 2016 with just seven "cell" tables. It has expanded to two more eateries, in Tehran and the central city of Isfahan. But the owners have not forgotten their comrades in trouble. "We want to help inmates

married person with children, or sick persons unable to work to repay a loan." Several associations and celebrities are involved in such charities. According to state news agency IRNA, last year \$130 million were donated to repay the debts of thousands of prisoners. Cell 16 also employs newly-released ex-cons. Accompanied by her two friends, diner Hasti Berjissian, 24, a purchasing manager in a factory, likes the concept. "We've been coming here since it opened," she said, taking a bite of pizza. "The food is



Iranians dine at restaurant-prison 'Cell 16' in eastern Tehran. — AFP photos

by raising funds," Alizadeh said. "We help indebted prisoners by sometimes launching campaigns for help from donors or clients. "We post the requests on our Instagram page and everyone contributes in their own way. Parts of the restaurant's proceeds will also be used to help free prisoners."

He added that "it's often the wives of prisoners who seek help. We choose those who seem to us to have priority: for example, a

good but above all, we want to help the prisoners." In another cell, Shiva Shemshaki, 33, celebrated her husband's birthday. "I come because a friend of ours has been in prison for nine months for unpaid debts," she said. "He had bought some goods but, because of inflation, he was ruined." — AFP



Iranian women wear prisoner outfits as they dine at restaurant-prison 'Cell 16'.



## Sports

# Booker scores 38 as Suns stay hot; Jazz beat Knicks

## Toronto Raptors down Charlotte Hornets 116-101

LOS ANGELES: Devin Booker scored a team-high 38 points as the Phoenix Suns won for the 13th time in the last 14 games with a 127-124 victory over the Chicago Bulls on Monday. Booker shot 14-of-23 from the floor and Chris Paul finished with 19 points and 11 assists, while Jae Crowder had 10 points, grabbed 10 rebounds and dished out six assists for the NBA-best Suns. "We play together as a team and get it done every night," said Booker. "We have been through it. We had a deep playoff run last year and we keep getting better."

Booker has now scored 30 plus points in five of the last eight games for Phoenix, who led by as many as 27 points in front of a crowd of 20,600 at the United Center arena. "Just playing within the offense," Booker said. "I understand that's how our team is built, there are gonna be opportunities to score at all times. I've been in this system for a minute now. There's no reason to force anything. We have too many talented players out there."

Phoenix shot 54.4 percent compared with 47.8 shooting by Chicago, who lost for the second time in as many days while permitting 115-plus points for the seventh straight game. JaVale McGee (16 points), Mikal Bridges (15) and Deandre Ayton (13) also scored in double figures for the Suns. DeMar DeRozan paced the Bulls attack with 38 points, while Zach LaVine returned from a back injury to tally 32 points for the Eastern Conference's third-ranked team, who have lost three of their last four.

DeRozan converted a three-point play to cut the Suns' advantage to nine points with just under six minutes remaining. But the Bulls answered with five points in the next 40 seconds to regain control as the Bulls' made a late run but fell short. "The most important thing down the stretch was getting stops on defense," said Booker. Phoenix has now won four straight games over the Bulls, including two wins last season. Elsewhere, Klay Thompson scored 21 points for the Golden State Warriors, who won their ninth consecu-



CHICAGO: JaVale McGee #00 of the Phoenix Suns dunks against the Chicago Bulls during the second half of a game at United Center on February 07, 2022. — AFP

tive game by beating the Oklahoma City Thunder 110-98.

### Warriors on a roll

Stephen Curry added 18 points, 10 assists and nine rebounds for the Warriors, who shot 50 percent from the field. Lu Dort scored 26 points and Darius Bazley equaled a season high with 20 for Oklahoma City. Josh Giddey added 16 points, 11 rebounds and seven assists. Thompson nailed two three-pointers late in the fourth quarter to thwart a Thunder rally and give Golden State a commanding nine-point lead.

Also, Pascal Siakam and Gary Trent each scored 24 points as the Toronto Raptors defeated the Charlotte Hornets 116-101. "I am just trying to calm everybody down when it gets crazy out there. Kudos to the team for staying with it," Siakam said. In Salt Lake City, Donovan Mitchell scored 32 points and the Utah Jazz erased a large second-half deficit to defeat the New York Knicks 113-104. Bojan Bogdanovic scored 20 points, Mike Conley added 18 points and seven assists and Jordan Clarkson returned from missing two games due to a knee injury to score 16 points for the Jazz.— AFP

ous KHL squads. "It is easier to build chemistry that way. The tournament is pretty short and it's good to have great team chemistry," said Filppula.

### 'Group of Death'

The 12 teams are split into three groups for the preliminary rounds. The Russians and Finns are expected to emerge from Groups B and C respectively, but a question mark hangs over Group A—the "Group of Death" of Canada, the United States, Germany and hosts China. Canada, birthplace of the game and winner of three of the last five golds, will rely on its natural depth in a squad that combines grizzled veterans with fresh faces from its seemingly inexhaustible pool of young talent. The United States, meanwhile, comprises mainly top players from its national collegiate ranks, hoping to counter European experience with American youth and speed.

"When we looked at the player pool available to us, we thought speed, skill, pace and tempo was going to be the strength of our team," USA coach David Quinn said. Germany, surprise silver medalists in 2018, will be primed to take advantage as they look to further an unexpected resurgence in the sport. "We have built something in our mind. We started to believe in ourselves. That is something we have not done in a long time. That is how we have to keep going," said Germany forward Moritz Muller.

Group A gets under way on Thursday with one of the tournament's most anticipated matches: geopolitical rivals the USA against China, who make their first Olympic appearance in men's ice hockey. China has no hockey tradition and were nearly barred from the tournament by the sport's governing body on concerns that they might get thrashed. But they have been bolstered by several Canadian and American players with professional experience who switched to China, and the absence of NHL stars has added further fuel to Chinese hopes for at least a respectable showing.— AFP

## 'Anyone has a chance': Hockey up for grabs after NHL no-show

BEIJING: The Beijing Winter Olympics men's ice hockey starts today with no clear-cut favorites and the tournament missing star power after National Hockey League (NHL) players stayed home because of COVID. The decision by the world's top league has crippled perennial medal threats Canada and the United States, forcing them to throw together untested squads at the last minute. "It's a level-playing field," said forward Valtteri Filppula, whose Finland are ranked second in the world, behind Canada. "If a team gets hot, a goalie gets hot, any team has a chance."

European teams benefit the most from the NHL players not being in the Chinese capital, with particular eyes on the Russians, who are the defending champions, and Finland. Both are stocked with top talent from the Kontinental Hockey League (KHL), widely consider the world's second-best, as well as players with past experience in NHL rinks. The Russians still have several players from the crew that beat Germany to take gold in Pyeongchang four years ago, including current KHL points leader Vadim Shipachyov.

The battle-tested Russians are big too, none more so than two-metre (6-foot-6) goalkeeper Ivan Fedotov. The Finns are among the most experienced teams, featuring several players who won the 2019 World Championship and managed a silver in that competition last year. They are also cohesive, with most of the roster comprising teammates from vari-



BEIJING: Japan's Chiho Osawa (left) and Czech Republic's Daniela Pejsova fall during their women's preliminary round group B match of the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympic Games ice hockey competition, at the Wukesong Sports Centre in Beijing yesterday. — AFP



KIDDERMINSTER: Kidderminster Harriers' English midfielder Sam Austin (left) vies with West Ham United's French defender Kurt Zouma during the English FA Cup. West Ham and France defender Kurt Zouma has apologized after a disturbing video surfaced of him kicking and slapping a cat. — AFP

## West Ham's Zouma apologizes for abusing cat in shocking video

LONDON: West Ham and France defender Kurt Zouma has apologized after a disturbing video surfaced of him kicking and slapping a cat, with the Premier League club publicly condemning the footage. Zouma is seen in the clip dropping, kicking and slapping the animal, while laughter can be heard in the background.

The 27-year-old then chases the cat, before throwing a pair of shoes at it and slapping its head. West Ham condemned Zouma's actions in a strongly worded statement following publication of the clip online. "West Ham United unreservedly condemns the actions of our player, Kurt Zouma, in the video that has circulated," the club said in a statement.

"We have spoken to Kurt and will be dealing with the matter internally, but we would like to make it clear that we in no way condone cruelty towards animals." The France international, who joined West Ham from Chelsea in August 2021, has also released a statement expressing his regret. "I want to apologize for my actions," he said. "There are no excuses for my behavior, which I sincerely regret. I also want to say how deeply sorry I am to anyone who was upset by the video. I would like to assure everyone that our two cats are perfectly fine and healthy."

"They are loved and cherished by our entire family, and this behaviour was an isolated incident that will not happen again." The RSPCA animal welfare charity described the video as "very upsetting". "It's never acceptable to kick, hit or slap an animal, for punishment or otherwise," said a spokesman. "We are so grateful to people who report suspected animal suffering to us and we would like to reassure people we will always look into and, if necessary, investigate any complaints made to us about animal welfare." — AFP

## Bengals ace Burrow has eye of the tiger for Super Bowl test

LOS ANGELES: Cincinnati Bengals quarterback Joe Burrow has brushed off the hype surrounding his fairytale first Super Bowl, insisting he remains firmly focused on beating the Los Angeles Rams and little else. The 25-year-old could craft a Hollywood ending worthy of this year's Super Bowl host city on Sunday when the Bengals face the star-studded Rams in their \$5.5 billion SoFi Stadium home. Burrow has led the Bengals to the Ohio franchise's first Super Bowl since 1989 in only his second season in the NFL.

More impressively, the former Heisman Trophy winner has done it after bouncing back from a rookie campaign cut short by a devastating knee injury. In the playoffs, Burrow showed his pedigree by leading the Bengals to road wins over the top-seeded Tennessee Titans and the mighty Kansas City Chiefs. Another victory on Sunday would complete a remarkable turnaround for the Bengals, who only two seasons ago finished with a dismal 2-14 record.

But while the narrative surrounding the Bengals has all the makings of a blockbuster, Burrow says his attention is fixed solely on Sunday's game. "I haven't really thought about any of that," Burrow said Monday when asked about his route to the Super Bowl. "I've been focused on game prep and trying to eliminate as many distractions as I can. "With a Super Bowl in L.A., everyone has distractions, and you're going to get pulled in different directions. "The team that handles those distractions the best is going to end up winning the game."

### 'Bungles' no more

It's the sort of steely mindset that has characterized Burrow's play throughout the postseason. With a Super Bowl less than a week away, Burrow said he is determined to seize the chance before him. "You've got to take advantage of your opportunities when you get there," Burrow said Monday. "You see guys who go their whole career without ever getting to the Super Bowl. So when you do get there you have to hunker down and take advantage of those opportunities."

The Bengals lost their previous two Super Bowl appearances in 1989 and 1982, and until this season had not won a playoff game in more than 30 years, the longest drought in the NFL. Burrow however says his team-mates on a franchise once dubbed the "Bungles" have little time for the weight of history. "We have a really young team who doesn't really understand the historical significance of what we're doing," Burrow said. "We're just out there playing football and getting better while we're doing it."

Burrow, who is also from Ohio, does admit though to taking pride about being able to give long-suffering Bengals fans something to cheer about. "Being from Ohio, and being the quarterback of the Bengals is something I'm really proud of," Burrow said. "Growing up there really weren't a lot of Bengals fans in high school and middle school." —AFP

## NFL's Texans promote Smith to head coach

LOS ANGELES: Lovie Smith has been promoted to head coach of the Houston Texans, replacing David Culley to become the fifth head coach in franchise history. The 63-year-old Smith was the Texans' defensive coordinator this past season under Culley, who was fired after leading the Texans to a dismal 4-13 record in his only season as head coach.

"I am excited to introduce Lovie Smith as our next head coach," said Texans general manager Nick Caserio. "He is one of the most respected coaches in the NFL and an established leader. "A proven winner, Lovie has shown the ability to develop players both on and off the field for years. We had numerous discussions with countless coaches, executives, and players, and what revealed itself is that Lovie has both the leadership and people skills it takes to lead us forward." The Texans are Smith's third NFL head coaching job. He took the Chicago Bears to Super Bowl XLI.

Smith becomes the fifth minority head coach in the league. The other four are Pittsburgh Steelers Mike Tomlin, New York Jets Robert Saleh, Washington Commanders Ron Rivera and Miami Dolphins Mike McDaniel. He was hired less than a week after Brian Flores filed a racial discrimination lawsuit against the NFL and three teams over potential job interviews and Flores' firing by the Miami Dolphins. Smith beat out former quarterback Josh McCown and Flores for the head coaching job. The only head coaching vacancy remaining is the New Orleans Saints.

Flores, who is Black, has accused the NFL of running the league like a "plantation". In his lawsuit, Flores also alleges that Dolphins owner Stephen Ross offered him \$100,000 for every loss during the latter part of the 2019 season in a bid to improve the team's draft position. Elsewhere, the New Orleans Saints are poised to hire their defensive coordinator Dennis Allen as their next head coach, US sports broadcaster ESPN reported. The 49-year-old Allen will replace Sean Payton, who stepped down last month. This will be Allen's second stint as a head coach.— AFP



## Sports

# Chinese women's Asian Cup win sparks calls for gender equality

## A record ninth Asian title for China

BEIJING: The dramatic triumph of China's women footballers at the Asian Cup has sparked calls on social media for equal pay, with commenters contrasting their performance with the dismal men's side. Xiao Yuyi's stoppage-time goal clinched a remarkable 3-2 comeback win over South Korea in the final, sealing a record ninth Asian title for China.

Fans on social media were quick to contrast their stirring victory with the less successful men's team, who were heaped with scorn last week after a limp defeat to Vietnam ended their slim hopes of qualifying for the 2022 World Cup. "Please hand out prize money to the women's team according to what the men get—equal pay for equal work!" read one widely shared post on the Twitter-like Weibo.

Another popular post said China's football association "leads the way in favoring men over women". Women "keep working hard, and the money they bring home goes towards the football association's hapless sons," it added. In China, women earn 12 percent less than men overall, according to a report last year by online recruitment firm Zhaopin. Equal pay campaigns for national women's teams have gained ground in recent years, with countries including England, Brazil and Australia taking action to pay them the same as men.

But other nations have been slow to follow suit, with the US women's team—the most successful in international competition—locked in a long-running dispute with the country's soccer federation over what it calls discriminatory pay practices. Chinese President Xi Jinping has said he wants his country to host and even win a World Cup one day, but the



NAVI MUMBAI: China's Xiao Yuyi (left) hits the third goal against South Korea as South Korea's Jang Selgi (R) tries to fight for the ball during the AFC Women's Asian Cup India 2022 football final match between China and South Korea on February 6, 2022. — AFP

men's team has only ever qualified once—in 2002, when they failed to score a goal or win a point. China hosted the women's edition in 1991, and finished runners-up in the 1999 tournament. — AFP

## Newcastle face moment of truth; Premier League winter break ends

LONDON: New-look Newcastle take on Frank Lampard's Everton on Tuesday after splashing the cash in the January transfer window as the Premier League gears up for a first full program of matches after the winter break. Bottom-club Burnley host Manchester United while Manchester City will seek to return to winning ways against Brentford after a rare off-day against Southampton last month. AFP Sport takes a look at some of the talking points ahead of the midweek action.

### No excuses for Howe

Newcastle became one of the richest clubs in the world when they were bought in October by a group led by Saudi Arabia's sovereign wealth fund but initially they could do little with their money. The January transfer window was always likely to be made or break for the Magpies, who have just two Premier League wins all season and remain stuck in the relegation zone. Newcastle were the biggest spenders last month, spending about £85 million (\$115 million) to bring in Lyon midfielder Bruno Guimaraes, Burnley forward Chris Wood and three defenders—Kieran Trippier, Dan Burn and Matt Targett—to boost a leaky defense.

For all their problems, Eddie Howe's side are just one point from safety, with Burnley and Watford, either side of Newcastle in the drop zone, struggling to find the wins they desperately need. But Tuesday's game will be a tough one. Ex-Chelsea boss Lampard started his Everton reign with an impressive 4-1 win at home to Brentford in the FA Cup and is equally desperate for the points.

### Can Rangnick make Utd purr?

Manchester United looked like they had at last found some rhythm under interim manager Ralf Rangnick in the early stages of Friday's FA Cup tie against Middlesbrough before they lost their way and exited on penalties. United wasted a glut of golden chances in the fourth-round match and paid the price when the Championship side equalized. Rangnick's side still look less than the sum of their parts two months after he took charge at Old Trafford, even though he was surprisingly upbeat about their performance against Boro.

The German has thinned out his bloated squad, allowing forward Anthony Martial and Donny van de Beek to leave on loan but the club are also now without the suspended Mason Greenwood, who was arrested last week on suspicion of the rape and assault of a woman before being bailed. For all their attacking riches, United have scored 19 goals fewer than Premier League leaders Manchester City this season and have struggled to kill off teams. Winning the Champions League appears unlikely, making it vital that United finish in the top four. Rangnick believes they are going in the right direction but they must find their mojo soon.

Arsenal are in the mix to qualify for the Champions League after an absence of five seasons but do they have the firepower to get them over the line? Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang has now left the club to join Barcelona after a troubled last few months at the Emirates, leaving Alexandre Lacazette and Eddie Nketiah as the only senior forward options. Lacazette has scored just three times in the league while Nketiah, yet to start a league game, has yet to get off the mark. — AFP

## Kuwait to organize Open Women's Boxing tournament



By Abdellatif Sharaa

KUWAIT: Kuwait Boxing Federation continues its efforts to hold Kuwait Open Boxing (Women) tournament from 26th February to March 3rd. Eight boxers from Kuwait, 11 from Saudi Arabia and five from Jordan have already



registered. Registration will remain open for all female boxers over 17 years - from clubs and academies in Arab countries. "We were waiting for this opportunity for a long time and what made us more happy is the large turnout of participants which will make it more exciting and competitive," Kuwait's boxer Suad Al-Mutairi said.



## Senegal's coach wins over critics

DAKAR: Thousands of Senegalese supporters are celebrating their country's maiden Africa Cup of Nations win on Monday, feting coach Aliou Cisse, who only a month ago was battered by criticism over his tactical choices. Fans hailing global stars such as Liverpool's Sadio Mane and Chelsea's Edouard Mendy were also chanting the name of Cisse after he orchestrated their win over Mohamed Salah's Egypt 4-2 in a penalty shoot-out in Sunday's final in Cameroon.

The game had finished goalless after extra time. The victory marked Senegal's first in the tournament and sparked jubilant celebrations across the West African country's capital on Sunday evening. President Macky Sall declared Monday a public holiday to mark the victory after which a grey baseball cap-clad Cisse was ubiquitous across national media-draped in the national flag, in tears before fans at the stadium after the final or being thrown in the air by his joyous players.

"He allowed us to get the cup we had been waiting for years. I was among those giving him stick-but we've none better than him," said Alla Diop, a 30-year-old trader among ecstatic fans celebrating in Dakar. Cisse had come in for some bitter criticism from millions of fans since first taking over the Lions of Teranga in 2015 but also from game insiders in a football-obsessed country. Many held his philosophy to be too defensive and too slow to make the most of top-drawer talents such as Mane.

## Chelsea pay damages in 'racial abuse' case

LONDON: Chelsea on Monday settled a High Court case brought by four former youth-team players over alleged historical racial abuse at the Premier League club. The ex-players had sought damages for personal injury and loss over claims they were "subjected to a barrage of disgracefully offensive racist abuse" from two members of the Premier League club's youth coaching staff in the 1990s. Lawyers for the men said Chelsea were

**Missed spotkick memory**  
"If we don't win the AFCON it would be more respectful for Aliou Cisse to pack it in," suggested his former international teammate Khalilou Fadiga before the event. Fadiga was among the previous generation of players alongside Cisse which lost a CAN final in Mali in 2002 - Cisse missed in the shootout against Cameroon—then followed up with a quarter-final exit to Turkey at that year's World Cup.

Fans had begun to fear a jinx after Cisse coached the side to a final loss in 2019 when Algeria triumphed thanks to a freakish deflected goal. Cisse has taken the national side to three African showpiece tournaments - 2017, 2019 and 2021 - as well as the 2018 World Cup. "We were 14th in the African rankings and 64th in the FIFA standings when I arrived," he recalled recently. "Today, we are first on the continent and in the world top 20."

### Debt 'repaid'

Finally this year saw Senegal live up their status as a top tip to land the trophy—and Cisse found feelings towards him begin to turn in his favour with the last 16 win over Equatorial Guinea. It was thereafter that journalist Cheick Tidiane Gomis, a journalist with newspaper Wal Fadjri, publicly congratulated him for his substitutions to manage that victory.

"In six years you only lambasted me, Gomis. This compliment really goes straight to the heart," said Cisse. After the final Fadiga showered him with warm and effusive praise—as did his squad. "This trophy, I dedicate it to Aliou. You cannot know just

"vicariously liable" for abuse they faced when aged between 14 and 18. Their cases were due to go to trial but a settlement has now been reached, a High Court judge was told at a pre-trial review hearing on Monday.

David McClenaghan, representing the men, told the court: "I'm pleased to let you know that a successful settlement agreement has been achieved between the parties." One of the men previously alleged in court documents that he faced "repeated and persistent bullying and harassment" involving "deliberately offensive racist insults". A Chelsea spokesman said: "The club is pleased that we have been able to conclude a settlement of these claims without any further litigation.

"We will continue to offer support to the former players concerned through our dedicated



YAOUNDE: Senegal's head coach Aliou Cisse waves a Senegalese flag as he celebrates after winning the Africa Cup of Nations (CAN) 2021 final football match between Senegal and Egypt at Stade d'Olembe in Yaounde on February 6, 2022. — AFP

how much he has brought to the Senegal team," Liverpool star Mane said Monday.

"Champions of Africa! It was a long time coming and it was difficult but we never gave up. We dedicate this victory to the Senegalese people," said Cisse. "Since independence we have been running to catch up. Now we too have a star on our shirt," said Cisse before his players swamped him at his press conference. For Dakar trader Mammy Diallo, harking back to the heartbreak of the defeat on penalties 20 years ago, "he had been carrying a debt since 2002 which he completely paid back yesterday". — AFP

player support service." McClenaghan and Rebecca Sheriff, partners at law firm Bolt Burdon Kemp, said in a statement: "This is a historic moment for our incredibly brave clients, who have spoken out about their horrendous experiences that they suffered over many years at Chelsea Football Club as young boys at the hands of their football coaches.

"This settlement will hopefully go some way in repairing the harm and ongoing trauma caused to our clients, who were just children when the abuse was inflicted on them by those in positions of trust. "Through our clients' courage, we believe that this will prompt other victims of racial abuse to come forward and our clients hope that this case will prevent others from enduring what they had to." — AFP

## Verdi free-kick brace not enough for Salernitana

MILAN: A stunning pair of free-kicks from Simone Verdi were not enough for a new-look Salernitana to get their unlikely bid for Serie A survival going after Monday's 2-2 draw with Spezia. Verdi, one of 11 players brought in by Salernitana's new sporting director Walter Sabatini during the January transfer window, put his new side ahead just two minutes into his debut when he whipped home his first set-piece from an unlikely angle.

And he struck again in the 16th minute, shortly after Rey Manaj had levelled from the penalty spot for Spezia, with an effort which again left Ivan Provedel grasping at thin air. However Daniele Verde earned a draw for the away side with another penalty on the half hour following Lys Mousset's handball, leaving rock-bottom Salernitana nine points from 17th-placed Cagliari. Stefano Colantuono's side, who risked being booted out of the league until they were saved at the last minute by new owner Danilo Iervolino, have won just three times since being promoted from Serie B. — AFP



## Palmeiras overwhelm Al Ahly 2-0

### Dudu inspires Palmeiras to Club World Cup final



ABU DHABI: Palmeiras' midfielder Raphael Veiga scores the opening goal during the 2021 FIFA Club World Cup semi-final football match between Egypt's Al-Ahly and Brazil's Palmeiras at Al-Nahyan Stadium in Abu Dhabi yesterday. — AFP

**ABU DHABI:** Dudu scored one goal and created another as Palmeiras defeated Al Ahly 2-0 yesterday to reach the Club World Cup final and set up a potential showdown with Chelsea. The playmaker released Raphael Veiga for the opening goal just before half-time and then fired in a second for Copa Libertadores winners Palmeiras early in the second half.

The Brazilian side await the winner of Wednesday's second semi-final between Chelsea and

Saudi Arabia's Al Hilal, the record four-time Asian champions. Roughly two-thirds of the 15,000-seat Al Nahyan Stadium was occupied by green-clad Palmeiras fans, many of whom made the 12,000-kilometre trip from Sao Paulo, for a repeat of last year's third-place play-off won on penalties by Al Ahly.

Midfielder Amr El Solia was rushed back into the Al Ahly team less than 48 hours after he started Egypt's loss to Senegal in the Africa Cup of Nations final. An

attritional first half required a touch of brilliance from Dudu to break it open, his deft flick from Danilo's pass sending Veiga clear to slot beyond Ahly Lotfy. Dudu doubled the lead four minutes after half-time as he drifted forward unchallenged from the halfway line before slamming a fierce shot past Lotfy from a tight angle.

African champions Al Ahly appeared to have pulled a goal back when Mohamed Sherif tapped in the rebound after Palmeiras goalkeeper Weverton spilled

Ahmed Abdelkader's tame strike, but it was ruled out for offside. Al Ahly's slim hopes were all but extinguished when captain Ayman Ashraf was sent off for a terrible tackle on Rony, his initial yellow card changed to red following a VAR review. Walid Soliman headed against the bar deep into stoppage time, moments after Weverton clawed away an effort from Mohamed Hany, the hero of Al Ahly's win over Monterrey in the previous round. — AFP

## Hanyu makes shaky start at Olympics as Gu grabs gold

**BEIJING:** Japanese figure skating icon Yuzuru Hanyu was "shocked" after making a shaky start to the defence of his Olympic crown yesterday while Californian-born teenage freestyle skier Eileen Gu won a thrilling gold for China on her Games debut. Reigning champion Hanyu has won the last two Olympic titles and his showdown with American triple world champion Nathan Chen is one of the most eagerly anticipated events in Beijing.

But Hanyu has a fight on his hands to win a third gold medal after Chen smashed his Japanese rival's world record in the opening program, scoring 113.97 to comfortably beat Hanyu's previous short program best of 111.82. The all-important free skate is tomorrow. Chen, 22, performed a fist pump after his skate and said afterwards of his reaction: "I have no idea what came over me."

"I don't generally do stuff like that but it just felt right... I was just really happy and I guess that just came out," Hanyu, 27, made a mistake on his first jump and told reporters he thought the error might have been caused by a hole in the ice made by another skater. "Actually, I feel really shocked today," he said. "But I have one more chance in the free program." Ten gold medals were up for grabs on the fourth full day of competition in the Chinese capital, in sports including curling, luge, snowboarding and speed skating. But the day belonged to 18-year-old Gu, who justified all the pre-Games hype by nailing her third and final run in the Big Air to snatch gold from Tess Ledeux and force the French competitor into silver.

Gu-known in China as Gu Ailing-collapsed to her knees on the snow and screamed in delight at the Big Air Shougang, where enormous industrial cooling towers provide a stunning backdrop. "That was the best moment of my life. The happiest moment, day, whatever... of my life. I just cannot believe what just happened," she said. The grade-A student and part-time model, who switched allegiance from the US to China in 2019, had been touted as one of the faces of the Beijing Olympics and she did not disappoint despite the huge pressure on her young shoulders. — AFP

## FIFA 'inundated' with 17 million requests for WCup tickets

**DOHA:** Fans have sought 17 million tickets for this year's World Cup finals in Qatar, FIFA said yesterday, making it more than five times over-subscribed. Higher prices being demanded for the best tickets—which cost up to \$1,600 for the final—and controversy over Qatar's bid did not deter followers of the world's most popular sport. "Fans across the globe have proven their enthusiasm," FIFA said.

Demand was highest from the host country of the November-December event. But FIFA said it had been "inundated" with requests from Argentina, Brazil, England, France, India, Mexico, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and the United States. Some 1.8 million tickets were sought just for the final which will be held in the 80,000 seat Lusail stadium on December 18, the world body said. Tickets for the game will cost between 605 riyals (\$165) - for some Qatari residents—and 5,850 riyals (\$1,600). The top price is more than 45 percent higher than best places for the 2018 final in Russia, which was won by France.

The cheapest final tickets for international fans are 2,200 riyals (\$600), about a third more expensive than last time and some fan groups have complained about the prices. Organizers said about 3.3 million tickets for all games will be available. Qatari residents, including its army of migrant workers, will pay as little as \$11 for a ticket to less popular games. FIFA, which hopes to make more than \$500 million from tickets, broadcasting rights and other World Cup commercial revenues, said fans who were successful in a computer lottery would be told by March 8.

### Qatar braces for visitor deluge

After the 20 days of applications closed yesterday, FIFA said it will check applications before tickets are allocated in a computer draw. Qatar has been preparing for 11 years for the first World Cup in the Arab world and the first held in the traditional winter months of the top football nations. The date was moved because of the scorching summer temperatures in the Gulf. It has spent billions of dollars



DOHA: This picture shows the countdown clock along the Doha Corniche, as Qatar prepares to host the FIFA World Cup 2022. — AFP

on a building blitz including seven new stadiums and refurbishing one, all in a 50 kilometer radius of central Doha. The Lusail stadium is to be inaugurated next month but many surrounding skyscrapers are still engulfed in cranes.

Qatar has also faced questions over its rights record—especially conditions for migrant workers who built the stadiums—and what fans can expect. Rights groups say hundreds of workers have died in accidents and the heat. A number of national teams staged protests over rights concerns during qualifying matches. Qatar authorities say conditions and labor laws have changed drastically over the past decade and they have been "unfairly" criticized. The tiny state is expecting up to 1.2 million visitors but as it does not have enough hotel rooms, thousands of fans will be housed on cruise ships during the event.

"The first FIFA World Cup in the Middle East

and Arab world will be an extraordinary event," according to Nasser Al Khater, Qatar's chief organizer who has promised that everything will be ready. FIFA released the figures as Qatar marked a National Sports Day holiday. Former England star David Beckham, now an ambassador for the Qatar organizers, appeared at a women's football tournament in the Gulf state. No spectators were allowed however.

Hasan al-Haj, who was jogging with his daughter at the Education City complex in Doha, said he had applied for tickets for five matches. "There is not a fever yet, we can see there is still a lot to do, but I know a lot of people here who applied. This is going to be an important event. We will discover the world and the world will see what Qatar can do," he said proudly. FIFA and the organizers have not said what they will do if the coronavirus pandemic surges again but insist they have plans. — AFP