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National Assembly cuts fines for health violations to KD 50

Kuwait reports 3,463 cases, one death • Mishref stampede blamed on 'inaccurate info'



KUWAIT: Kuwaiti servicemen prostrate during a graduation ceremony for army officers at Ali Al-Sabah Military Academy yesterday. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat (See Page 2)

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: The National Assembly yesterday approved amendments to the 1969 health precautions law, cutting fines for violations in public places - like in case of flouting coronavirus measures - to just KD 50 instead of KD 5,000. MP Mohammad Al-Sayer said the amendment will resolve some 8,000 cases referred to courts for coronavirus violations. The amendment becomes effective after publication in the official gazette.

During the session, adjourned prematurely due to a lack of quorum, MPs approved recommendations to the government over coronavirus pandemic measures. The recommendations could not be approved last week due to a lack of quorum. The recommendations call on the government to ease restrictions on unvaccinated people by allowing them to enter malls by presenting a negative PCR test result and allow them to travel to countries that admit them.

They also call to consider people immune against the disease after taking two vaccine doses and allow them to travel. The non-binding recommendations urge the government to exempt returning citizens from doing a PCR test abroad and replace it with one upon arrival.

Meanwhile, the health ministry yesterday reported 3,463 new coronavirus cases, as numbers continue to decline for over a week now. It also announced 5,203 recoveries and one death in the

same period. The ministry's official spokesman Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad said 94 patients are in ICUs and 474 in COVID-19 wards, while there are 49,922 active cases, adding 27,947 new tests were carried out in the last 24 hours.

The health ministry also said in a statement that inaccurate information saying that residents are allowed to get booster shots without prior appointment led to an unusually large number of people arriving at the Kuwait Vaccination Center in Mishref. Thanks to coordination with the security authorities and volunteers, the situation was brought under control, and the stampede caused no damage or harm to anyone, according to the statement.

The ministry called on all citizens and residents to obtain information from official sources and commit themselves to the specified time and date of appointment in order to preserve the health and safety of all. Earlier, the interior ministry noted security teams immediately dealt with the overcrowding at the vaccination center, and the situation was immediately brought under control.

In other Assembly news, Foreign Minister Sheikh Ahmad Al-Nasser Al-Sabah yesterday called on the National Assembly to investigate what he termed as indecent videos shown by MP Shuaib Al-Muwaizri during his grilling on Tuesday. The minister said in a letter to Assembly Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem that such images undermine the integrity of the staff at the ministry.

News in brief

Iran Guards unveil missile

TEHRAN: Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps yesterday announced the development of a surface-to-surface missile whose stated range would put its Zionist entity arch foe within reach. The missile has a range of 1,450 km, runs on solid fuel and is capable of penetrating anti-missile systems. — AFP

Copt heads Egypt top court

CAIRO: Egypt's first ever Coptic Christian judge to head the country's highest court was sworn in yesterday, an appointment called "historic" by rights activists. Judge Boulos Fahmy, 65, took the oath to head the Supreme Constitutional Court in a ceremony attended by the president. — AFP

Nail hammered into head

PESHAWAR: A pregnant Pakistani woman had a nail hammered into her head by a faith healer who said it would guarantee she gave birth to a boy. The woman arrived at a hospital in Peshawar after trying to extract the nail herself with pliers. The mother of three daughters said she was pregnant with another girl. An X-ray showed the 5-cm nail had pierced the top of the woman's forehead but missed her brain. — AFP

Abu Dhabi gas blast raises jitters

DUBAI: A gas explosion in downtown Abu Dhabi prompted a warning of a possible attack early yesterday. The US embassy issued a security alert after the blast in a building on Hamdan Street just after midnight sent a fireball into the sky and set off a blaze. But the official WAM news agency said emergency teams "put out a fire caused by a gas cylinder explosion". — AFP

Panel wraps up after \$52bn paid to Kuwait

GENEVA: A UN commission set up to obtain reparations from Iraq over the country's 1990 invasion of Kuwait submitted its final report in Geneva yesterday after paying out \$52.4 billion to Kuwait. Set up in 1991 by UN Security Council Resolution 692 to manage financial compensation owed

by Iraq to Kuwait, the commission raised the funds through a five percent tax on sales of oil and other petroleum products.

Iraq's Saddam Hussein ordered his army to invade Kuwait and seize what he described as "Iraq's 19th province" on Aug 2, 1990, before being pushed back seven months later by a US-led coalition. The recipients of the war reparations included private individuals, companies, government organizations and other groups that suffered losses as a direct result of the Iraqi invasion and occupation of Kuwait.

Continued on Page 2

Tech hub bans protests over hijab row

BANGALORE: India's tech hub Bangalore banned protests around schools and other educational institutions for two weeks yesterday, a day after all high schools in Karnataka state were shut as a row over an Islamic headscarf ban intensified. Muslim students and community members have mounted protests across the southern state since a gov-

ernment-run high school last month told girls to not wear hijabs in class - an edict that soon spread to other institutions - triggering counter-demonstrations in turn.

Footage has gone viral of one hijab-wearing student being pursued by Hindu men yelling "Jai Shri Ram" (Hail Lord Ram) as she arrives at PES College in Mandya, and shouting "Allah-u Akbar" (Allah is Greatest) in response. Many from India's 200 million strong minority Muslim community see the latest stand-off as part of a larger trend of persecution under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalist government.

Continued on Page 2

Climate hope as scientists in UK set fusion record

ABINGDON, United Kingdom: Scientists in Britain announced yesterday they had smashed a previous record for generating fusion energy, hailing it as a

"milestone" on the path towards cheap, clean power and a cooler planet. Nuclear fusion is the same process that the sun uses to generate heat. Proponents believe it could one day help address climate change by providing an abundant, safe and green source of energy.

A team at the Joint European Torus (JET) facility near Oxford in central England generated 59 megajoules of energy for five seconds during an experiment in December, more than doubling a 1997 record, the UK Atomic Energy Authority said. That is about the power needed to power 35,000 homes for the same

period of time, five seconds, said JET's head of operations Joe Milnes.

The results "are the clearest demonstration worldwide of the potential for fusion energy to deliver safe and sustainable low-carbon energy", the UKAEA said. The donut-shaped machine used for the experiments is called a tokamak, and the JET site is the largest operational one in the world.

Inside, just 0.1 mg each of deuterium and tritium - both are isotopes of hydrogen, with deuterium also

Continued on Page 2



KUWAIT: This file photo taken on March 14, 1991 shows an aerial view of burning oil wells in Ahmadi, set ablaze by retreating Iraqi troops. — AFP



BANGALORE: Activists from the National Students Unions of India hold placards and Indian flags during a demonstration yesterday. — AFP

Local

Minister recalls 'heroic sacrifices' at army officers' graduation ceremony

Sheikh Hamad stresses duty of defending the homeland

KUWAIT: The Ali Al-Sabah Military Academy hosted a graduation ceremony yesterday for the 48th batch of Kuwait Army officers, under the patronage of Commander-in-Chief of the Kuwait Armed Forces His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah attended the ceremony along with Kuwait Army Chief of Staff Lt Gen Khaled Saleh Al-Sabah and top military brass.

Sheikh Hamad addressed the graduates by stressing their duties towards the nation "that are fulfilled through dedication, sacrifice and continued work to achieve development and prosperity." He congratulated the graduates and conveyed to them greetings from His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah.

Furthermore, Sheikh Hamad reminded graduates of the sacrifices Kuwait Army members made during the Iraqi invasion. "Kuwait marks in the next few days the 61st National Day and 31st Liberation Day anniversaries, in which we remember with great pride the heroic sacrifices of members of the Kuwaiti Army in defending Kuwait from the Iraqi invasion in 1990, and their active participation in the Liberation War of 1991," he said. The minister also expressed gratitude to the academy's staff for their efforts in preparing the graduates. — KUNA



KUWAIT: Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah attends the graduation ceremony along with Kuwait Army officials. — Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat



Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah and senior Kuwait Army staff attend the ceremony.



Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah honors a graduate.



Kuwait Army graduates march during the ceremony.

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Climate hope as scientists in UK...

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called heavy hydrogen - is heated to temperatures 10 times hotter than the center of the sun to create plasma. This is held in place using magnets as it spins around, fuses and releases tremendous energy as heat.

Fusion is inherently safe in that it cannot start a runaway process. Deuterium is freely available in seawater, while tritium can be harvested as a byproduct of nuclear fission. Pound for pound (gram for gram) it releases nearly four million times more energy than burning coal, oil or gas, and the only waste product is helium. The results announced yesterday demonstrated the ability to create fusion for five seconds, as longer than that would cause JET's copper wire magnets to overheat. A larger and more advanced version of JET is currently being built in southern France, called ITER, where the Oxford data will prove vital when the site comes online, possibly as soon as 2025.

ITER will be equipped with superconductor electromagnets which will allow the process to continue for longer, hopefully longer than 300 seconds. About 350 scientists from EU countries

plus Britain, Switzerland and Ukraine - and more from around the globe - participate in JET experiments each year. JET will soon pass the fusion baton to ITER, which is around 80 percent completed, said Milnes.

"If that's successful, as we now think it will be given the results we've had on JET, we can develop power plant designs in parallel... we're probably halfway there" to viable fusion, he said. If all goes well at ITER, a prototype fusion power plant could be ready by 2050. International cooperation on fusion energy has historically been close because, unlike the nuclear fission used in atomic power plants, the technology cannot be weaponized.

The France-based megaproject also involves China, the EU, India, Japan, South Korea, Russia and the US. Tim Luce, head of science and operation at ITER, said the project emerged in the 1980s from talks on nuclear disarmament between US president Ronald Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev.

"And the one thing they did agree on was using fusion as a cooperation," he told AFP. "Somehow fusion has had the scientific panache to bring together disparate governmental entities and actually choose to work together on it." Despite dozens of tokamaks being built since they were first invented in Soviet Russia in the 1950s, none has yet managed to produce more energy than is put in. — AFP

Panel wraps up after \$52bn

Continued from Page 1

Nearly 2.7 million compensation demands were submitted over the 30-year life of the commission, which paid out \$52.4 billion of some \$352 billion sought. The last payment was

made on Jan 13 totaling nearly \$630 million, according to the report formally adopted in Geneva yesterday.

"While this period of time may seem excessive, it is important to note that the resolution of almost 2.7 million claims with an asserted value of \$352 billion over this period of time has no precedent in the history of international claims resolution," the report said. "This accomplishment is noteworthy and has contributed to post-conflict reconciliation, demonstrating the value and importance of international law," it added. — AFP

Tech hub bans protests over...

Continued from Page 1

"Restricting these girls to exercise their right to freedom of religion is against the fundamental rights that are guaranteed under the constitution and forcing the students to remove hijab is denying them the dignity that is also a constitutional right," said Sumayya Roushan, President of the Girls Islamic Organization in Karnataka. "Moreover, here the right to education of the students is at stake."

Bangalore police commissioner Kamal Pant issued an order restricting protests around educational institutions in the state capital for two weeks as protests elsewhere "have led to violence, disturbing public peace and order". A judge at Karnataka's

top court began hearing a petition challenging the legality of the headscarf ban Tuesday, but yesterday passed it to a larger panel to consider.

Many leaders from Modi's rightwing Bharatiya Janata Party, which rules Karnataka, have backed the ban, which has also triggered communal confrontations on campuses as many Hindu classmates blame protests for disrupting their education, and insist they too should be allowed to wear religious symbols. At Mahatma Gandhi Memorial College in Udipi one student said: "Those students who wore the hijab started this row first. If they end it, we will also end it. If they wear a hijab then we are also forced to wear saffron to compete with them."

Chief Minister Basavaraj Bommai on Tuesday appealed for calm after state police fired tear gas to disperse a crowd at one government-run campus before announcing a three-day shutdown of all state high schools. "I appeal to all the students, teachers and management of schools and colleges... to maintain peace and harmony," he said. — AFP

Local

Crown Prince urges officials to develop Kuwait's sports

Leadership supports athletes to compete at int'l levels



KUWAIT: His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah meets Minister of Public Works and State Minister for Youth Affairs Ali Al-Mousa. —Amiri Diwan photos



His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah meets Foreign Minister and State Minister for Cabinet Affairs Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah.

KUWAIT: His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah urged yesterday state officials in charge of sporting activities and youth to put forth visions contributing to the development of the sporting scene and to translate such visions into a tangible reality. This came in a speech given by His Highness the Crown Prince at Bayan Palace when receiving Minister of



His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah meets Minister of Public Works and State Minister for Youth Affairs Ali Al-Mousa, along with representatives of Amir Cup winners.



Sheikh Mishal meets Foreign Minister

Public Works and State Minister for Youth Affairs Ali Al-Mousa, Deputy Director of Public Authority of Sports Sheikh Humoud Mubarak Al-Sabah, and Head of Kuwait Football Association Sheikh Ahmad Al-Yousef Al-Sabah. His Highness the Crown Prince was presented with the three winning teams of His Highness's the Amir Sheikh

Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah's Cup. Kuwait Sporting Club had won the tournament, while Al-Qadsia Sporting Club and Al-Arabi Sporting Club came second and third respectively. His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah conveyed in his speech His Highness Amir's greetings and congratulations for the three teams, affirming that Kuwait's leadership is keen on improving sports

and aspiring to compete at regional and international levels. He further illustrated that good planning and monitoring, in all ministries and government bodies are key to attaining more achievements. His Highness the Crown Prince also willed athletes to have honorable morals and principles, as an athlete is first a role model of ethics. Attending the meeting were Minister of Amiri Diwan Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah Al-Mubarak

Al-Sabah, Amiri Diwan Secretary and Head of His Highness the Amir office Ambassador Ahmad Fahad Al-Fahad, and head of the Crown Prince's office Jamal Al-Theyab. Also yesterday, His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received Foreign Minister and State Minister for Cabinet Affairs Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah at Bayan Palace. —KUNA

Arab Group demands permanent representation at UNSC: Kuwait



Mansour Al-Otaibi

NEW YORK: The Arab League member-states demand a permanent representation in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), should the permanent seats membership be expanded in the future, Kuwait's Representative to the UN Ambassador Mansour Al-Otaibi said. His remarks came during the first informal meeting of the plenary on the intergovernmental negotiations on the question of equitable representation and increase in the membership of the Security Council late Tuesday.

Otaibi also called for increasing Arab representation in the non-permanent seats category, as Arab states represent 12 percent of general membership, noting that the majority of topics and issues discussed at the Council are related to Arab countries. "The Arab Group is committed to achieving a real and comprehensive reform of the Security Council, especially as it is the main body entrusted with maintaining international peace and security under the Charter of the United Nations, in order to make it more capable and effective in confronting and addressing the challenges facing our world, within a more representative, transparent, impartial and credible framework," he said. He added that "the objective of our meeting today is to discuss the intergovernmental negotiations and how to develop it in light of the adoption of the Political Declaration to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the establishment of the United Nations, and the issuance of the report of the Secretary-General entitled Our Common Agenda."

"The Arab Group appreciates the Co-Chairs' efforts in the last session pertaining to the Co-Chairs' Element's Paper on Convergences and Divergences. While this paper shows a convergence of positions towards many elements regarding the reform of the Council, it also at the same time confirms that there is more work that we must do in order to bring the views closer and reduce the gap with regard to many other elements," Otaibi said. "The Arab Group sees that five meetings of intergovernmental negotiations should be held during the current session, so that each meeting deals with one of the five clusters, to enable the Co-Chairs to collect the positions, and note the development in them, in order to form a summary of the current

round of intergovernmental negotiations. The Group affirms its respect for the time frames set during the previous rounds of negotiations so that negotiations do not extend beyond June of each year."

"The Arab Group emphasizes the interdependence of the five cluster topics, and our vision stems from the main and most comprehensive objective of the reform process, that is to ensure that all geographical and regional groups are fairly and appropriately represented in the membership of the Security Council. In addition, we would like to emphasize the importance of focusing the reform process on redressing the injustices inflicted on developing countries, especially Arab and African countries, that are not represented at all in the category of permanent seats in the Security Council," the ambassador noted. "In connection with the issue of cross regional representation, which is of great importance to the Arab Group, we believe that and to ensure fair regional representation at the global level, the specificity of the Arab Group as a regional group in itself should be recognized by the expanded Security Council without being affiliated with the African Group or the Asia-Pacific Group. This stems from the premise that each region has its own particularity that deserves to be highlighted in the expanded Security Council."

"We consider it important to give more clarification regarding what is meant by regional representation, and whether this means allocating a regional seat to which the Member States of the region rotate, or whether the purpose of regional representation is to allocate one or more seats to that region so that the latter chooses its occupants. In this context, it is important to determine the criteria that will be applied to fill the seat or seats in either case, and we emphasize in this context that what applies to any region should apply to the rest of the other regions in a fair and equal manner," he added. The Kuwaiti diplomat concluded that "the Arab Group affirms its determination to continue to participate actively and positively during the intergovernmental negotiations and expresses its openness to consulting with all other groups in a transparent and constructive manner with the aim of reaching a real and comprehensive reform of the Security Council." —KUNA

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Push to decriminalize laws against transgenders in Kuwait

Court examines law penalizing 'imitation of the opposite sex' Feb 16

By Nawara Fattahova

KUWAIT: The constitutional court will review article 198 of the penal code, which penalizes imitation of the opposite sex, to check its constitutionality during its session on Feb 16, 2022 and issue a verdict. The Kuwait Bar Association held a symposium to speak about this issue.

Lawyer Ali Al-Aryan submitted the constitutional appeal at the constitutional court. "I found that article 198 of the penal code is unconstitutional. This article was amended in 2007 to penalize any form of imitation of the opposite sex. Since that amendment, the ministry of interior started applying this law and arrested transgenders, who can be imprisoned for up to one year," he noted.

Aryan presented his defense in front of the misdemeanor court, highlighting that the law is in conflict with the constitution. "We demanded that the accused in this case should be checked by psychiatrists to confirm they have gender identity disorder (gender dysphoria). One of the accused had medical reports proving he suffers from this disorder since he was born, and that he underwent psychiatric treatments which were useless and he can't be cured. He is now in his thirties," he said.

"The judge accepted our demand and transferred the accused to a group of psychiatrists, who confirmed that the patient suffers from gender dysphoria. Their report also described the symptoms of this disorder in detail but added it does not impair the patient's ability to differentiate between the sexes. So the judge sentenced him to pay a KD 1,000 fine," Aryan pointed out.

"The constitutional court accepted our appeal over this verdict and set a session during which we presented our evidence, and the verdict should come on February 16, 2022. Our defense highlighted conflict with numerous articles of the constitution. His disorder should be diagnosed by a psychiatrist, who will prove this is a disorder and not a crime," stressed Aryan.

Other conditions

Apart from gender dysphoria, there are other conditions such as transgender disorder that are also included in the MSD Manual, in addition to a



KUWAIT: Lawyer Ali Al-Aryan speaks during the symposium. — Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat



Dr Nayef Al-Mutawa makes his statement.

long list of genetic, hormonal and psychical disorders, which all lead to behaviors imitating the opposite sex.

According to Aryan, amendment of article 198 was not based on medical and scientific viewpoints. "In 2003, a case of gender change was presented in

"There are many reports from forensic medicine admitting the existence of this disorder. Also, various verdicts have confirmed it. So it shouldn't be penalized by law, as it is against the health policies of the government. Furthermore, there are religious fatwas by both Sunni and Shiite scholars that this disorder can be treated by surgery. A few months ago, a verdict was issued against the ministry of interior to compensate a woman who was accused of being a transgender, which was not true. This proves the defect of article 198 of the penal code, which has caused great problems," concluded Aryan.

Dr Nayef Al-Mutawa, professor of clinical psychology at the Faculty of Medicine at Kuwait University, assured that 70 percent of sexual disorders are since birth and not as a result of sexual abuse. "To avoid nasty comments, a person suffering from a sexual disorder gets married, but this marriage doesn't last and he gets divorced soon," he pointed out.

Dr Mohammed Al-Faili, constitutional expert and professor of law at the Faculty of Law at Kuwait University, believes transgenders should not be penalized unless sexual provocation is involved. Dr Mohammed Al-Tamimi, professor of penal code at Kuwait University, also believes transgenders should only be penalized if there is incitement to immorality and prostitution.



70% of sexual disorders are since birth

the court. The court of first instance, based on forensic medicine, decided on medical rules, although it was later appealed. The first instance court decided that in such cases of gender dysphoria, surgery is necessary and allowed by the sharia. It's not an imitation of the opposite sex, but rather getting back to the prevalent gender. Gender is not only about organs, but also about feelings," he explained.

Ryan's tragedy

Legalese



By Labeed Abdal

local@kuwaittimes.com

The death of the child Ryan in Morocco reminds us of the child Mohammed Kurdi who was found dead on a Turkish beach, among displaced Syrian families who were travelling in rubber boats that lacked safety elements. Both incidents call upon us to be careful with our children, especially that many families leave their kids in the care of helpers for hours while parents are at work.

The two incidents proved that the world is a small village and connected with each other. Families around the world were affected by the loss that touched the hearts of all fathers and mothers across the globe. World countries come together as one family during such difficult times, and leaders and kings of the world communicated to ask about the victims.

The human conscious is affected with sadness because of such incidents. It is for sure that the lessons learned from the incidents will compel education and care institutions to always take preventive precautions to avoid such results in the future.

Kuwait crude oil loses 53 cents, settles at \$92.43 pb

KUWAIT: Kuwait crude oil dropped 53 cents during Tuesday's trading sessions to reach \$92.43 per barrel (pb) compared with \$92.96 pb the day before, Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) said yesterday. Brent also lost \$1.91 to \$90.78 pb and West Texas Intermediate declined \$1.96 to \$89.36 pb. OPEC's basket of crudes went down by \$1.25 to reach \$92.17 per barrel on Tuesday compared to \$93.42 pb on Monday, the cartel bulletin reported yesterday. The bulletin said that the yearly rate of the basket of oils averaged \$69.89 a barrel, last year.

The coalition of oil producers, OPEC+, decided at its 25th ministerial meeting yesterday to maintain the production plan designed to increase the output gradually, where the stakeholders agreed on pursuing the output increase by some 400,000 barrels per day next March. The global usage of oil is continuing recovery from the decline in 2020 as factories' production and traffic have increased as well as the reserve of the US crude has decreased, thus the oil prices went up by more than \$90 pb. The OPEC+ coalition managed to resume about two thirds of the output suspended during the first phases of the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, OPEC and its partners still expect an oversupply, but it seems less than previously thought. —KUNA

ICSG hold luncheon meeting with Indian ambassador

KUWAIT: A luncheon meeting was held by Indian Community Support Group (ICSG) at the St Regis recently to discuss various topics related to the Indian diaspora in Kuwait. Indian Ambassador to Kuwait Sibi George was the guest of honor.

Wide ranging issues related to the Indian diaspora were discussed and various innovative ideas were put across as part of ICSG's commitment to assist the Indian community. The ambassador briefed ICSG on the Indian embassy's activities as part of its outreach program to assist the Indian diaspora and initiatives taken to help the less privileged members of the community.

KISR appreciates decision to set up company to market innovations

KUWAIT: The Acting Director General of the Kuwait Institute for Scientific Research (KISR), Dr Mane Al-Sudairawi, commended the decision of the Cabinet in its session held on Monday which stipulates "assigning the Kuwait Institute for Scientific Research to update the economic feasibility study for the establishment of a company to market scientific innovations". The decision also stipulates "coordinating with the Fatwa and Legislation Department to determine the appropriate legal tool for the establishment of the company and submit to the Council of Ministers the outcome of the matter."

Sudairawi expressed his appreciation for the approval of the Council of Ministers, in line with Decree-Law No 28 of 1981, which has stated in its second article that "KISR, in order to achieve its objectives, may request the government to establish specialized companies for the production and marketing of its scientific innovations." This

achievement will support the government's work program, especially regarding the first aspect of "sustainability and enhancing the diversification of income sources by supporting the country's knowledge economy."

Sudairawi said that KISR obtains diversified scientific innovations that, through their marketing, will reflect its scientific status and developmental contribution. The marketing of KISR's various innovations and accompanying results, production, and applications, will be utilized according to the appropriate legal and marketing tools.

Sudairawi has pointed out that the idea of marketing innovations has been initially presented to the Government Performance Follow-up Agency, which supported the idea and adopted its presentation to the Economic Committee of the Council of Ministers. The latter discussed the matter in the presence of KISR's representatives, and then a recommendation was submitted to the Council of

Ministers, where it issued its decision.

Sudairawi valued the efforts of all those who contributed to this important result; and hoped that the study would be carried out through KISR's ad-hoc committee, in coordination with the Fatwa and Legislation Department. Thus, the results of the study would receive the final approval of the Council of Ministers, and KISR would establish a company to market the outcome of its innovations in order to achieve developmental returns and revenues. It can be employed and utilized to contribute to enhancing KISR's own revenues.

In conclusion, Sudairawi said that KISR continues its scientific innovations and research patents, and provides technical and advisory services to the country's public and private sectors. It accomplishes numerous applied achievements that will reach everyone through marketing by available means.



Mane Al-Sudairawi

Firemen battle vehicle blaze in Failaka Island

KUWAIT: Firemen in Failaka Island put out a blaze which gutted a vehicle parked in an open area yesterday. No injuries were reported in the incident as an investigation was opened to reveal the cause of the fire, Kuwait Fire Force said in a statement. Meanwhile, a house in Abdullah Al-Mubarak caught fire, prompting Jleeb and Istiqlal fire stations to respond. Firemen evacuated a woman and three children from an apartment in the building and handed them to paramedics before extinguishing the blaze, Kuwait Fire Force said.



ICSG on its part assured the ambassador that they were keen to extend support and undertake further programs aimed at helping the community and country. ICSG was set up by the Indian embassy in 2020 during the beginning of the pandemic to assist the Indian community with food during the lockdown. More than 20,000 ration kits that included nearly 600,000 raw uncooked meals were distributed to those who were stranded or affected by the lockdown.

ICSG also contributed significantly to the largest ever oxygen consignment to India received from abroad during the sudden and brief period of medical oxygen shortages in India due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, ICSG helped 121 low-income families in India who lost their bread earner in Kuwait because of coronavirus. The ICSG committee, comprising prominent members of the Indian community, continues to work with several Indian associations and members to alleviate and help affected Indian nationals due to job loss or death.





Godsend or 'ghetto': Syrian migrants flock to small Cyprus town

Hindu pride, Muslim fears overshadow key India poll

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KANDAHAR: Newly recruited Taliban fighters display their skills during a graduation ceremony at the Abu Dujana National Police Training centre in Kandahar yesterday. — AFP

Taliban sniper becomes mayor

Taliban undergoing broader transformation

MAYMANA: Strolling through the town of Maymana, the new mayor appears to inspire goodwill from war-weary constituents in the Afghan provincial capital. But Damullah Mohibullah Mowaffaq has a reputation as one of the top snipers in the ranks of the Taliban, until last summer waging war to take control of the country. Mowaffaq was made mayor of Maymana, capital of Faryab province in the far reaches of northwest Afghanistan, in November, three months after the Taliban ousted the Western-backed government and seized power.

He rose to prominence as a fighter, but now his schedule is packed with the daily tasks of local government—unblocking sewers, planning roads, and smoothing over neighborhood quarrels. His switch reflects the broader transformation that the Taliban are undergoing, as the insurgents grapple with administering territory. “When I was fighting my objectives were very specific: To end the foreign occupation, discrimination and injustice,” the 25-year-old said. “Now my goals are also clear: To fight corruption and make the country prosper.”

‘Ups and downs’

On walkabout through the streets of Maymana, the new mayor talks with municipal workers clearing roadside gutters. Residents of the city of 100,000 approach with complaints and suggestions, which are dutifully added to an ever-growing to-do list. “The new mayor is young, well-educated and, very importantly, from the city,” says his non-Taliban deputy, Sayed Ahmad Shah Gheyasi. “He knows how to deal with people.”

Unlike the poor, madrassa-educated rural men who make up the Taliban rank and file, Mowaffaq comes from a family of wealthy traders and grew up in Maymana, where he excelled at school and in sport. Memorabilia from his youth decorates his

office including a certificate from a martial arts competition as well as his high school diploma. After joining the insurgency at 19, he was promoted to command a small unit deployed in Faryab province. Others describe him as one of the Taliban’s most talented snipers, although he appears reluctant to be drawn into telling war stories.

But on walkabout with AFP he pauses in front of a house blemished with munition marks near the village of Doraye Khoija Qoshre, where his unit once held sway. Here he used to hide himself away, scouting American troops with his rifle and honing a reputation as a crack shot. “He killed an American with his rifle from this house, then a plane came and

“**Now my goals are to fight corruption**”

bombed him,” said Saifaddin, a local farmer, who like many in Afghanistan goes by one name.

Although it cannot be confirmed Mowaffaq was responsible, in mid-2019 the United States announced a member of their special forces had been killed in fighting in Faryab. A year earlier, the Afghan Analysts Network said Maymana was “practically under siege” owing to “an astonishingly widespread Taliban presence”. Mowaffaq witnessed several comrades killed in fighting but remains evasive about the horrors he both inflicted and suffered. “I have had many ups and downs,” he says.



MAYMANA: Photo shows Maymana mayor Damullah Mohibullah Mowaffaq posing for a picture at his office in Maymana, capital of Afghanistan's northwestern Faryab province. —AFP

Unconventional totem

The United Nations and rights groups have accused the Taliban of gross human rights abuses since they seized power in August. The deaths of more than 100 members of the former government or security forces have been blamed on the country’s new rulers, while women activists have been detained and journalists beaten for covering their protests. The Taliban ideal of a thick beard and black turban may frame Mowaffaq’s face, but in many ways he is an unconventional totem of their austere ideology. Nationwide the Islamists have effectively evicted women from the public sphere, shutting older girls out of education and largely barring the opposite sex from the workplace. But in Mowaffaq’s office, female employees have been allowed to keep working, and a public garden in the city is reserved for them. Under the first Taliban regime from 1996 to 2001 the all-covering burqa was mandatory for women. — AFP

How Taliban’s return changed women lives

KABUL: After seizing control of Afghanistan in August 2021 the Taliban promised a softer version of the harsh rule that characterized their first stint in power, when women were stripped of most of their rights. This time around the movement has largely refrained from issuing rigid national edicts, but authorities at a provincial level have introduced rules and guidelines dictating how women should live. Here are some areas of women’s lives impacted by the Taliban’s return:

Employment

The Taliban say they allow women to work as long as they are segregated from men. In practice, however, women are effectively barred from employment—particularly for the government—apart from in specialized sectors such as health care and education. Even women working in the private sector complain of being harassed going to and from their offices, while Taliban intelligence operatives frequently visit commercial enterprises to make sure strict segregation is enforced.

In some places, however, small women-only cooperatives have been able to continue—such as a jasmine processing facility in the ancient western city of Herat, long considered liberal by Afghan standards. Still, tens of thousands of Afghan women have been made jobless by the Taliban’s return, overturning two decades of progress in diversifying all aspects of their employment—from the police to courts.

Education

The Taliban say all girls are entitled to an education, but the majority of secondary schools at least—for those aged from 13 to 18 — have not reopened since August. Officials now say education for all will resume by the end of March, but an exodus of teachers and a ban on men leading classes for girls means it will be difficult for them to meet that target. Most private universities have resumed, also while suffering a teacher shortage. But classes must be segregated by sex and there can be no mingling of men and women between lessons. Some government universities resumed under similar constraints last week, but there was only a trickle of attendance by women at most facilities.

Personal freedoms

During their first stint in power, the Taliban made it compulsory for women to wear an all-covering burqa in public, and agents of the feared Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice would lash anyone caught without. The ministry put up posters across Kabul last month “suggesting” women should at least wear the less restrictive hijab or headscarf—but the message was accompanied by pictures of the burqa.

An order was also issued saying women could not travel between cities and towns unless accompanied by a male relative, and taxi drivers were told not to pick up female passengers unless they wore head coverings. Beauty parlors and fashion boutiques were booming before the Taliban’s return, but they have largely disappeared. —AFP

End of war brings relief and despair to Afghan women

CHARIKAR: The Taliban’s takeover of Afghanistan in August brought an end to 20 years of fighting—and relief for many women—but harsh restrictions imposed by the new government are also causing despair. Here is a look at how the lives of three ordinary women have changed with the return to power of the Taliban.

The mother

In a hilltop village outside Kabul, children rush between the low-slung entrances of mud-brick houses as Friba settles into what she calls a more peaceful life now foreign forces have left. “Before this, the planes were in the sky and bombing,” said the mother of three, who like many Afghans goes by only one name. The Taliban’s victory over US-backed former government forces has dramatically reduced the violence that killed tens of thousands of Afghans over the past two decades—the majority in rural areas—and left many too afraid or unable to leave their villages. Foreign forces were often accused of disrespecting local customs while successive governments were plagued by corruption. Having lost several relatives in the conflict, Friba was also in a near-permanent state of worry about family members criss-crossing the country looking for work.

“We are happy that the Taliban came to power and peace came,” she tells AFP at her two-room dwelling in Charikar, Parwan province. “Now I’m



MAYMANA: Female municipality employees leave their office in Maymana, capital of Afghanistan's northwestern Faryab province. Nationwide, the Taliban have effectively evicted women from the public sphere, shutting older girls out of education and largely barring women from the workplace. — AFP

sitting at home, more relaxed.” But while security has vastly improved, the struggle to maintain a household remains the same. “Nothing has changed, nothing at all. We have no money,” she explains. She and her husband rely on casual farm work and aid handouts to get by, including from the new Taliban rulers. “I am worried about my daily expenses... I worry day and night,” she says. “But it is better now.”

The student

Zakia was in her third year of an economics degree at Kateb University in August when her teacher announced the Taliban were at the gates of the city. “My hands started trembling. I pulled my phone from my bag to call my husband... and it

slipped onto the ground a couple of times,” she told AFP. That was the last time she was in class. Although private universities reopened last year—and some government institutions restarted classes last week—many aspiring women graduates have dropped out. For Zakia, the issue is twofold.

Paying for tuition would be a major challenge given her husband’s government salary has been drastically reduced by the impoverished new leadership. But her family’s dread over the Taliban foot soldiers that patrol the neighborhood is the main barrier that keeps her from returning to class. Zakia has left home only a handful of times since August to limit her interaction with the hardliners. “(They) say that I might get stopped by a Taliban, maybe they’ll beat me,” she said. — AFP

International

Ukrainians on Russian border 'on alert' for last eight years

Tensions soar over fears of full-scale invasion

GOPTIVKA: Wrapped up against the cold in a padded camouflage jacket, a Ukrainian border guard cradles his automatic rifle as he looks out over a barbed wire-topped fence into the expanse of Russia beyond. While international tensions have soared in recent months over fears Moscow could stage a full-scale invasion, the looming threat of the Russians has been with the Ukrainian forces protecting the frontier a lot longer.

Eight years ago, before the Kremlin seized Crimea and sparked a brutal separatist conflict in the industrial east of Ukraine, the border barely existed. Relatives in the two ex-Soviet countries crossed back and forth without thinking about it to visit one another, and business ties were close. But then, as the Kremlin began fuelling violence and bloodshed in Ukraine in 2014, reinforcing the border in the country's northeast became a priority for Kyiv.

Now, even though nothing can be seen across the border except for snow-covered fields, the West is warning that over 100,000 Russian troops poised along Ukraine's frontier could be preparing to strike. "We are constantly on alert," says border guard officer Mykola Feryn. "We conduct training, especially with reserve forces trained in combat operations. In the case of Russian aggression, we will be the first to be involved."

Observation tower

Feryn points to an observation tower equipped with a video surveillance system that can scan the horizon up to 10 kilometers away. The fence was erected and a trench dug as part of the push to reinforce the border that started in 2015. Border guards huddle for warmth around a stove in a bunker. The nearby crossing of Goptivka, once the region's main route to Russia, is quiet with few vehicles looking to enter Ukraine.

Just 40 kilometers away, the 1.5 million residents of Ukraine's second city Kharkiv have learnt to live with the idea that war may be coming—even before the recent spike in tensions. In 2014, pro-Moscow crowds took over Kharkiv's regional administration, and fears swirled that the largely Russian-speaking industrial hub some 400 kilometers from Kyiv might be taken over by separatists.

But local politicians and reinforcements from Kyiv helped claw Kharkiv back, stopping it from following two neighboring regions as they plunged into a bloody conflict fuelled by the Kremlin. A flow



Kharkiv's residents live in fear

of traumatized people displaced by the fighting only served to highlight the grim fate Kharkiv had avoided. Faced by renewed fears that their region could be plunged into violence, some in the city insist they are willing to fight. At the weekend some 20 civilians learnt how to handle Kalashnikov rifles and pump-action shot guns at training for a territorial defense organization set up by a former combatant.

'Prepare for the worst'

"Weapon-handling is a skill that can be needed at any moment, especially if you live in Kharkiv. So it's good that they give an opportunity to shoot," said computer programmer Dmytro Bolshutkin.



KHARKIV: A Ukrainian frontier check documents of a driver at the Ukrainian-Russian border at the Goptivka check point, some 40 kms from the second largest Ukrainian city of Kharkiv. —AFP

"Somehow we were lucky in 2014, but we cannot be lucky every single time. We must be ready. We must hope for the best, but prepare for the worst."

While Ukraine's authorities have sought to play down the threat of an imminent invasion, President Volodymyr Zelensky did suggest Moscow could look to "occupy" Kharkiv. After eight years of conflict, "life has certainly changed, but the first wave of fear and panic has disappeared", says local lawmaker Galyna Kuts at a Ukrainian "Unity March" Saturday, that saw several thousand people demon-

strate against Russian aggression.

"We understand that we are at the front line and people like me will not leave Kharkiv, we will organize its defense." The lawmaker says many residents have readied themselves to cope in case basic services—water, electricity, phone networks—are cut. She says she has stopped buying high-heeled shoes in case she needs to flee at any moment and has taken first-aid training. "Kharkiv is located on the border, Kharkiv today is the shield of Ukraine and all civilised Europe," says Kuts. —AFP



MANILA: This file photo shows Philippine Senator Leila de Lima, a former human rights commissioner who is one of President Rodrigo Duterte's most vocal opponents, waving to her supporters after appearing at a court in Muntinlupa City, suburban Manila. —AFP

'My work is not done': jailed Duterte's critic Lima runs for Senate

MANILA: From behind bars, Philippine senator and human rights campaigner Leila de Lima is running for re-election in an against-the-odds campaign that gives her the chance to once again "go after" President Rodrigo Duterte. De Lima was one of the most vocal and powerful local critics of Duterte after he took power in 2016 and launched a deadly drug war—until he and his allies tried to stifle her.

But despite being forced from the Senate and into a jail cell for the past five years on drug trafficking charges she and human rights groups call a mockery of justice, de Lima has not been "destroyed" as Duterte vowed. Instead, the 62-year-old is running again for the Senate in May's national elections, determined to continue her campaign against him. "I am running because, to put it plainly, my work is not done," she told AFP in handwritten notes on Senate stationery sent from Manila's national police headquarters, where she is being held.

"I was jailed because I fought for truth and justice against tyranny and impunity. I was not wrong to do so and I will keep fighting to prove that what I have been fighting for is worth the sacrifice." Before her arrest on February 24, 2017, de Lima had spent a decade investigating "death squad" killings allegedly orchestrated by Duterte during his time as Davao City mayor and then in the early days of his presidency.

She conducted the probes while serving as the nation's human rights commissioner, then from 2010 to 2015 as justice secretary in the Benigno Aquino administration that preceded Duterte's rule. De Lima won a Senate seat in 2016, becoming one of the few opposition voices as the populist enjoyed a landslide win. But Duterte then accused her of running a drug trafficking ring with criminals inside the nation's biggest prison while she was justice secretary.

The charges were "an act of vengeance" by Duterte to silence her and warn others not to oppose him, said de Lima, who is not allowed bail. But de Lima hopes she will soon get justice. Duterte, constitutionally barred from seeking re-election and facing an international probe into his drug war, will lose protection from criminal charges when he leaves office. "Justice for me is the dismissal of my cases and the prosecution of Duterte and all those who knowingly fabricated and filed fake charges against me," she said. —AFP

Godsend or 'ghetto': Syrian migrants flock to small Cyprus town

CHLORAKAS: On the Mediterranean island of Cyprus, grappling with an influx of asylum seekers, the small town of Chlorakas has become the centre of tensions. One-quarter of its residents are refugees. While local authorities talk of "ghettoization" and seek to move some of them, many of the newcomers renting flats there refuse to leave, saying they have nowhere else to go. The Cypriot government says the divided country has the highest number of first-time asylum applications in the European Union per capita, accusing Turkey of sending many across the UN-controlled buffer zone.

"We have a demographic problem," said Chlorakas Mayor Nicholas Liasides. Five kilometers (three miles) from the west coast city of Paphos, Chlorakas is home to 7,000 people, 1,700 of whom are asylum seekers. Most of them are from Syria, and their number has more than doubled from 800 over the past three years. At the heart of the issue, according to the mayor, is the St Nicolas residential complex on the outskirts of town where around 700 of the refugees live.

DR Congo alleges 'actions against national security'

KINSHASA: Investigators in the Democratic Republic of Congo have uncovered "serious indications of actions against state security", the government said Tuesday following the surprise weekend arrest of the president's special security adviser. "The investigations are ongoing and they are taking place at various levels," a spokesman of President Felix Tshisekedi said in a statement read over state television, urging the Congolese people to "stay calm". Francois Beya, who had been considered a powerful figure in the conflict-riven Central African country, was arrested on Saturday while Tshisekedi was attending an African Union summit in the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa.

The arrest sparked protests, fears of instability within the Congolese government and even rumours

In Chernobyl ghost town, Ukraine forces train for combat

PRIPYAT: Machine gun fire echoed through the abandoned buildings of Pripjat in the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone, as Ukrainian National Guard troops on Friday staged urban combat exercises. The live-fire training—carried out in one of the most radioactive places on earth—came as warnings swirl over a potential Russian invasion. Moscow has massed over 100,000 troops along Ukraine's border—including deploying personnel to Belarus, which lies just 10 kilometers to the north for joint drills.

Located on a hill overlooking the Mediterranean Sea, the complex formally known as "St Nicolas Elegant Residence" consists of about 20 peach-colored residential blocks with terracotta tiles. But its lustre began to fade following a 2018 financial dispute between the owner and the municipality over unpaid water bills. When the COVID pandemic from 2020 led to a plunge in foreign visitor arrivals, refugees took their place.

'Shameful'

Liasides told AFP he believes the solution is to resettle the refugees throughout Cyprus. "This is a ghetto and actually we want to break (up) this ghetto," he said. One month ago the local authorities declared the site unfit for habitation, and cut off the water supply to 250 apartments. "It's shameful," said Neofyto Paranetis, who is in his 70s and manages the complex. He is under criminal investigation for alleged violation of an interior ministry decree, issued in December, which forbids any new refugees from staying in Chlorakas. "These are just excuses



CHLORAKA: This picture shows a general view of the Saint Nicolas residential complex, where around 700 refugees live, in the Cypriot village of Chloraka in the Paphos district. —AFP

because I am housing refugees," Paranetis said.

Tensions in Chlorakas worsened in early January after two fights between refugees, some of whom lived at St Nicolas, said Paphos police spokesman Michalis Nicolaou. "For one month we've been patrolling in the village every evening, and we have investigated more than 80 people illegally living there," he said, noting the ministerial ban on new residents. Since early January townspeople have organised two protests, which drew dozens carrying signs hostile to asylum seekers.

A cafe owner, who asked to remain anonymous because he doesn't "want any trouble" with the refugees, said: "People here are hospitable towards the refugees, but now there are many who are illegal and creating problems here. "Most of the people in the village are scared to go near the place because there are too many refugees." Local business owner Geoffrey Velloza, 50, said that "to be honest, I haven't been affected by their presence. They have been perfectly decent with me, but I feel for others who were made uncomfortable." —AFP

of an attempted coup. A security source told AFP on condition of anonymity that Beya was "suspected of wanting to try something in the absence of the head of state" on the weekend. In Tuesday's statement, presidential spokesman Tharcisse Kasongo Mwema said: "No attempt at destabilisation of our democratic institutions will be tolerated."

The authorities have provided no information on Beya's arrest. Mwema said that the National Intelligence Agency (ANR), where Beya is being questioned, does not generally "communicate on its activities". "However... we can confirm that the investigators have indications of serious actions against national security." "Investigations are being carried out at different levels," he said, adding that the government would communicate further "if it is necessary".

'Situation is under control'

Mwema also called on the population to "be vigilant and avoid giving credence to false speculation disseminated by ill-intentioned people in the media and on social networks". "The indications are sufficiently serious and do not point to other considera-

tions of a tribal, clan or regional nature," he said. DR Congo has a long history of political and ethnic violence.

The east has been plagued by fighting between armed groups for a quarter of a century. Beya, 67, served as the head of migration under long-ruling former president Joseph Kabila until 2019, when Tshisekedi won election in the first peaceful handover of power since the country won independence from Belgium in 1960. Beya remained in the key security post when Kabila—who had ruled since taking over from his father in 2001 - and Tshisekedi fell out badly in late 2020.

Tuesday's presidential statement stressed that the "democratic process initiated by the first peaceful transfer of power in January 2019 is a sacred achievement to be preserved at all costs". "The situation is under control," the statement added. Tshisekedi had travelled to Addis Ababa to attend a two-day African Union summit, which ended on Sunday with leaders condemning a recent "wave" of military coups on the continent. The president returned home on Saturday night, with his entourage denying that he had cut short his stay. —AFP

For Ukraine's forces, the deserted streets and apartment blocks of Pripjat—empty since residents were evacuated following the nuclear reactor disaster in 1986 - made an ideal training ground. Troops in winter camouflage practiced clearing armed attackers from buildings, targeted mortar fire and took on snipers in urban conditions. Emergency service workers staged evacuations—a speaker on a drone telling residents to clear out—and fought fires caused by fighting.

"As there are no civilians around here we can conduct exercises with real ammunition in a situation as close to actual urban warfare as possible," said one National Guard serviceman, giving only his call sign Litva. But conducting exercises inside the exclusion zone has its own risks. Ahead of the training—the first of its kind staged in Pripjat—workers with Geiger counters had to scan the

route to check there were no radioactive hotspots. "It has all been checked and it doesn't present a danger," Litva said confidently, as he clutched his automatic rifle to his chest.

Some Western leaders insist the threat from Russia's massed forces is real and urgent—but authorities in Kyiv have cautioned against stirring "panic". Ukraine's defense minister Oleksiy Reznikov played down the likelihood of an incursion by Russian forces sent to Belarus for joint drills. While the US has said that their number could reach 30,000 - Reznikov insisted that the "several thousand" Russians currently across the Belarusian frontier were not enough to attack. He also pointed to difficult terrain as a major obstacle—and the threat from radiation if they tried to push through the exclusion zone towards the capital Kyiv. —AFP

International

Hindu pride, Muslim fears overshadow key India poll

Demolition of centuries-old Babri Masjid shakes secular foundations

AYODHYA: Hindu worshippers from across India gather each morning to pray in Ayodhya, near where a historic mosque was torn down three decades ago by religious zealots - triggering inter-faith riots that killed thousands of people. The demolition of the centuries-old Babri Masjid shook the country's secular foundations and paved the way for the rise of Hindu nationalism as its dominant political force. Workers are now erecting a Hindu shrine where the mosque once stood, and Muslims fear a coming election in India's most populous state could see such endeavours repeated elsewhere.

"This is no ordinary temple," Anil Mishra, a member of the trust overseeing the construction project, told AFP. "This is a national temple that carries the emotions and feelings of the masses." In a cordoned off area nearby, a crowd of devotees chant mantras to Ram, one of the most worshipped deities in the Hindu pantheon, who is said to have been born at the site thousands of years ago.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party was instrumental in campaigning against the mosque, built by the Muslim Mughal dynasty which ruled much of the Indian subcontinent centuries ago. Since its 1992 destruction, the party has enthusiastically backed the construction of a temple to Ram in its stead and the rejuvenation of several other religious sites. It is now banking on efforts to style itself as the custodian of India's majority faith to secure re-election in Uttar Pradesh when the state of more than 200 million people votes in marathon seven-week polls starting Thursday.



Chief minister accused of encouraging violence

edge of the BJP's efforts to refashion secular India into a Hindu nation. Its chief minister, Yogi Adityanath, has been accused of encouraging vigilante violence against the state's Muslim population and introducing discriminatory laws to marginalize the community. The saffron-robed hardliner, 49, is known for his inflammatory religious rhetoric and is considered a possible successor to Modi, more than two decades his senior.

His administration has introduced a law to make interfaith marriages more difficult and closed Muslim-run slaughterhouses to protect cows - a sacred animal in Hinduism - while critics say it has turned a blind eye to mob violence directed at those accused of eating beef. The city of Mathura, near the capital New Delhi, is popularly held to be the birthplace of Krishna - another senior god - and Hindu hardliners claim another Mughal-era mosque there was partially built over a temple to the deity. Comments from senior BJP figures have foreshadowed another looming religious confrontation in the city.

"Grand temple construction ongoing in Ayodhya... (now) getting ready for Mathura," Yogi's deputy Keshav Prasad Maurya said last month. Muslims in the city are already angry after years of discrimination under the BJP and fearful of what another election victory could bring. "They have jailed young Muslims for treason, are stopping us from eating what we want and have compounded our job losses by shutting meat shops and restaurants," said resident Mohammad Yameen.

'They have jailed young Muslims'
Political analysts say Uttar Pradesh is a petri dish for hardline Hindu governance and the blunt

'National pride and self-respect'
Uttar Pradesh has struggled through India's recent economic downturn, with widespread



AYODHYA : Laborers and engineers work on stone blocks at the under-construction site for a temple to Ram - one of the most worshipped deities in the Hindu pantheon, in Ayodhya in India's Uttar Pradesh state. —AFP

unemployment in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. But the BJP has managed to galvanize support from legions of the Hindu faithful who have praised the party for delivering on its promise to build the Ayodhya temple.

"We are really happy and hope that it is a grand structure," said Kusum Gupta, 59, a pilgrim who travelled more than 1,000 kilometers to visit the site. Champat Rai, another member of the trust managing the temple work, said its construction was the culmination of "500 years of struggle" and rivaled India's independence from the British in national significance.

The temple will be "a symbol of national pride and self-respect", Rai told AFP, adding that the mosque's demolition had symbolically cast off the historical shackles of Muslim rule during the Mughal dynasty. "No other country in the world keeps the symbols of its slavery alive," he said. An army of construction workers have toiled around the clock since Modi laid the foundation stone at a ceremony 18 months ago. One of them, 23-year-old Manikandan, told AFP it was the "luckiest day" of his life when he was asked to help build the temple. "What else could you ask for as a Hindu?" —AFP

Deja vu in Hong Kong as virus restrictions spark panic buying

HONG KONG: Shoppers thronged Hong Kong's markets fearing a shortage of food yesterday, familiar scenes in a city that is back under grueling COVID restrictions in contrast to much of the world. Hong Kong has followed mainland China in maintaining a strict "zero-COVID" policy that has kept infections low through targeted lockdowns and extensive social distancing measures.

Yesterday the city recorded 1,161 new infections, a daily record but a number that pales in comparison with outbreaks around the world. The Omicron-fueled spike has alarmed authorities and leader Carrie Lam announced renewed curbs on the 7.5 million residents of the financial hub. In scenes reminiscent of early 2020, when the coronavirus first emerged in China, Hong Kongers this week scrambled to stock up as panic set in over food supply shocks.

"It feels like the government isn't prepared at all, and we ordinary citizens can only look out for ourselves," a woman surnamed Siu, 42 said yesterday. She was among the throng of morning shoppers anxious over fresh produce supply, which the city

mostly imports from the mainland. This week a cross-border truck driver tested positive for COVID, spurring a temporary hold-up of delivery trucks.

Hong Kong's vegetable supply has since decreased by about a third, the government said. The shortage-coupled with business savvy among suddenly popular veg sellers-has sent produce prices in Hong Kong's wet markets soaring with shelves in supermarkets sitting bare. "I don't remember vegetables ever being this expensive," Siu said, adding that her daily grocery bill had doubled this week. Choy sum-a leafy green popular in Chinese cuisine-now costs around HK\$25 (\$3.20) for a half kilo, double its usual price. A vegetable stall owner told AFP his supply, sparse earlier in the week, has recovered-for now. "Hopefully things can get back to normal-I don't know how long we can keep this up," he said as he fielded shouted requests from customers.

'Very dispiriting'
Unlike much of the rest of the world-where governments opting to adapt to a new COVID-present normal have gradually opened up-Hong Kong's "zero COVID" policy has meant doubling down on restrictions. The latest area to see anti-COVID measures bite was Discovery Bay, a wealthy suburb home to some 20,000 well-heeled residents, when they were ordered to be tested en masse after the virus was found in a major sewage pipe.



HONG KONG: Shoppers buy vegetables a day after many shops ran out of some produce in Hong Kong, as stricter COVID-19 restrictions come into force following the city's highest infection numbers since the pandemic began. —AFP

Leader Lam on Tuesday said it was still the best strategy, given the city's low vaccination rate among the elderly, as she introduced new measures banning public gatherings of more than two people. More significantly, Lam announced that meetings in homes of more than two families were forbidden. She also ordered religious sites and hair salons to close by Thursday-sending Hong Kongers rushing to barbers for a last-minute trim. Five hair salons in Central district said they were fully booked. —AFP

News in brief

Cyclone death toll hits 30

ANTANANARIVO: The death toll from Cyclone Batsirai, which left Madagascar on Monday morning, has risen to 30, according to an updated count from authorities, and could rise further as bodies continue to be found in the rubble of collapsed houses. Yesterday morning, Madagascar's disaster management agency (BNGRC) announced that the number of dead on the Indian Ocean island had risen from 21 to 30 the previous evening. The BNGRC said that 94,000 people were victims of Batsirai with 60,000 now homeless. Many NGOs and UN agencies have begun to deploy resources and teams to help the victims of the cyclone which brought heavy rain and winds of 165 kilometers per hour. The tropical cyclone hit Madagascar overnight from Saturday to Sunday, on a 150-km-long, sparsely populated and agricultural eastern coastal area. As the cyclone moved inland it caused flooding that ravaged rice fields in the country's central "breadbasket", raising fears of a humanitarian crisis. —AFP

Zionists hit missile targets

JERUSALEM: Zionists launched strikes against targets in Syria yesterday, hitting anti-aircraft batteries in response to a missile fired from Syria, the military said. Sirens were sounded in the northern Arab city of Umm Al-Fahm after the Syrian missile launch but it exploded in mid-air, the Zionist Defense Forces tweeted. "In response to the anti-aircraft missile launched from Syria earlier tonight, we just struck surface-to-air missile targets in Syria, including radar & anti-aircraft batteries," the IDF said. Syrian state media said the country's air defenses had been activated against Zionist fire "in the vicinity of Damascus". Citing a military source, it said aerial attacks began shortly before 1:00 am and were accompanied at 1:10 am by surface-to-surface missile strikes "from the direction of the occupied Golan". "Our aerial defenses confronted the enemy's missiles and shot some of them down," the Syrian news agency SANA said. —AFP

Terror attacker denies claims

PARIS: The only assailant still alive after the terror attacks that rocked Paris in November 2015 said yesterday that "I didn't kill anyone. I didn't hurt anyone" as he took the stand for the first time in the trial over the jihadist massacres. "I didn't cause even a scratch," Salah Abdeslam told the court in a sudden outburst before he was to be questioned over the worst peacetime atrocity carried out on French soil, which saw 130 people killed. Abdeslam, 32, reiterated his claim of being a member of the Islamic State group, but said the court was making a mistake in wanting to "make an example" of him by inflicting a potential life sentence. He sought to distance himself from the team of assassins who were all killed in the wake of the attacks, appearing to imply that he had had a last minute change of mind. —AFP

England to end COVID isolation

LONDON: England will scrap the legal requirement to self-isolate after testing positive for COVID-19 later this month if infection levels remain stable. Prime Minister Boris Johnson unexpectedly announced yesterday. The proposed move would be one of the most dramatic easings of coronavirus rules taken by any country so far in the pandemic, as Johnson doubles down on a strategy of trying to 'live with COVID'. However it is likely to prove controversial, with health experts warning much of the world still needs to be vaccinated and UK opposition politicians asking whether the government's scientific advisers support the planned change. Johnson, dogged by revelations of apparent breaches of the Covid rules at Downing Street that have led to calls for him to quit, had earlier said he aimed to end the self-isolation rules on March 24. —AFP

Insurgency weakening: Captured jihadists in Mozambique confess

MOCIMBOA DA PRAIA: Rare interviews with captured members of a jihadist group terrorising northern Mozambique point to low morale in their ranks and to an insurgency that is losing steam in the face of Rwandan forces. The Rwandan army late last month let journalists interview some of the fighters that it had captured since launching operations in the troubled region last July.

Linked to the so-called Islamic State, the extremist group has rampaged across towns and villages in north-

ern Mozambique since 2017 with the goal of establishing a hardline caliphate. It is known locally as Al Shabab, although it has no link to the group with a similar name in Somalia. Jusuf Mohamed, a Mozambican member, said the insurgents had lost ground in recent months. The militants never feared Mozambican soldiers, the detained fighter, who appeared in his twenties said.

But since Rwandan defense forces deployed in the country six months ago, they have "started to get afraid and have become very weak." "They've actually lost their power," he told reporters at a Rwandan base in Cabo Delgado province a few days after being captured, his hair cut short and wearing a floral tan-and-red shirt. They "now run away as soon as they hear the first Rwandan gunshot."

He said their commanders had instructed them "not to attack" the Rwandans. Behind him, an assortment of

seized equipment including rocket-propelled grenades, rifles and mobile handsets lay on a canvas sheet. Mohamed and other jihadists were being held by Rwandan forces, but were soon to be handed over to Mozambican authorities.

After the jihadists last year attacked the northern port city of Palma, killing dozens, Rwanda in July deployed around 1,000 troops to the wider province. Fellow detained militant Madi Muhamed Sadi agreed that the jihadists were struggling to retaliate against "the new army." All they "do now is run" whenever their positions are raided, said Sadi, a Tanzanian in a navy-blue linen shirt. It was unclear when Sadi joined the rebels, but he said most of the group's leaders were Tanzanian. "There was also one Mozambican, then three white guys, two of whom died before I arrived," he said. "There are also some Arabs... They speak Swahili." —AFP

Albie Sachs, pillar of S African justice, isn't afraid of riots

CAPE TOWN: Even after the riots that shook South Africa last year, anti-apartheid hero and former top judge Albie Sachs believes the progressive constitution he helped draft will protect the country. He is not naive about the challenges facing his admittedly imperfect nation. But at 87, he has lived through enough of the arc of history to see the bend toward justice.

In 1988, two years before Nelson Mandela was released from prison, he lost an arm and the use of one eye when South Africa's white supremacist regime staged a car bombing against him in neighboring Mozambique. He was in exile there with fellow members of the African National Congress.

After Mandela was elected to become South Africa's first black president in 1994, he left the ANC so that he could ascend to the constitutional court, the highest in the land. "I am not politically active, but

the values I was fighting for are in the constitution," he said. As a young law student in the 1950s, Sachs liked to visit Mandela and Oliver Tambo in Johannesburg, where they had set up the country's first black law firm. They would offer the white Jewish boy who showed up at their door tea along with their insights, he recalled.

'Non-racism'
Today, the courts that Sachs helped create come under regular attack, especially from former president Jacob Zuma and his supporters. When Zuma refused to testify before an anti-corruption panel last year, the constitutional court sent him to prison.

Anger among Zuma's supporters sparked the riots in July that left more than 350 people dead, in the deadliest unrest of the democratic era. Yet Sachs believes the courts can withstand such pressure. "The judiciary is very strong," he told AFP in his sunlight-filled Cape Town home. He had stayed up late the night before working on a manuscript, then risen early for a morning swim in the cold blue waters of the nearby Atlantic. He slipped away to make coffee, but quickly returned to resume his defence of the constitution.

"The whole of parliament was involved in the cre-



JOHANNESBURG: South African activist, lawyer, writer and a former judge appointed by Nelson Mandela to serve on the first Constitutional Court of South Africa, Albie 'Albie' Louis Sachs, poses for a portrait outside of the Constitutional Court of South Africa building in Johannesburg. —AFP

ation of the constitution-the main core of people who had been inside the resistance to apartheid, in exile," he said. "It stands for freedom and social justice. Non-racism and non-sexism are foundational principles." From the beginning, Sachs said the ANC wanted to guard against the pitfalls of corruption seen in other newly independent African countries. —AFP

Business

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 10, 2022

Zain strategic partner of 'Kuwait Codes'

Initiative launched by CODED to empower next generation of Kuwaiti programmers

KUWAIT: Zain, the leading digital service provider in Kuwait, announced its strategic partnership of 'Kuwait Codes', an educational coding program for high school students in Kuwait. The initiative, considered the first-of-its-kind in the nation, is launched by CODED Academy for the second time with the aim of empowering the next generation of young Kuwaiti programmers.

The announcement was made during the press conference held at CODED Academy's campus in Shuwaikh, attended by Chief Corporate Communications and Relations Officer of Zain Kuwait Waleed Al-Khashti, Chief Operating Officer of CODED Hashem Bahbahani, Chief Executive Officer of CODED Ahmad Marafi, and the program's sponsors.

Commenting on the partnership, Zain Kuwait's Chief Corporate Communications and Relations Officer Waleed Al-Khashti said: "We are pleased today to announce our strategic partnership with 'Kuwait Codes', through which we renew our continuous collaboration with our partners at CODED to help empower and create the next generation of Kuwaiti programmers and developers".

Al-Khashti added: "A great part of our corporate sustainability strategy initiatives center around youth and education sectors, and we are well aware of

the accelerating importance of digital skills in the future of education and the economy. That's why we have put the development of programming and digital skills of the youth at the forefront of our priorities. This is especially true given that Zain is one of the biggest national companies in the Kuwaiti telecom sector and one of the most leading digital service providers in the region".

Al-Khashti concluded: "We are proud that Zain is one of the main strategic partners of CODED throughout the past recent years, which has contributed to empowering hundreds of young programmers and developers to the local market. We wish our colleagues at CODED all the best of luck with 'Kuwait Codes', which is the first of its kind in the country".

Chief Executive Officer of CODED, Ahmad Marafi, commented: "We are proud to announce our strategic partnership with Zain to launch 'Kuwait Codes', a program for high school students in Kuwait. Zain was and will always be one of the leading companies in tech innovation and leadership, in addition to its well-focused social responsibility in supporting educational programs".

Chief Operating Officer of CODED, Hashem Bahbahani, said: "As part of our goal to empower young talents, we are



KUWAIT: Waleed Al-Khashti poses for a photo with Ahmad Marafi, Hashem Bahbahani and the program sponsors during the conference.

honored to have Zain as a strategic partner of 'Kuwait Codes' to help us develop the skills of high school students in Kuwait. The intense workshops will focus on developing websites, video games, as well as iPhone and Android apps".

CODED launches 'Kuwait Codes' for the second time, and the initiative is considered the first of its kind in Kuwait. The program aims at creating a technically advanced generation by offering an opportunity to high school students to learn and develop programming skills at four main streams: Developing iPhone and Android apps, designing websites,

and building video games.

'Kuwait Codes' welcomes high school students of 14-17 years from across public and private schools in Kuwait. The free program continues for 6 weeks, where students learn the most basic skills that can empower them to build their own projects. Over 500 students were accepted for the first edition of the program in 2020, and the current edition aims at accepting 1000 students.

Through supporting this unique program, Zain seeks to offer the best educational environment for high school students in Kuwait to nurture their tal-

ents, enrich their skills, and promote tech innovation within them. Zain believes in the important role tech innovation plays in building the future and progressing national economy. Zain is keen on playing a vital role as an integrated digital service provider in light of the rapid digital changes witnessed by the modern world. The company always seeks to reach new levels of excellence with its customers through offering the best innovative services, meeting their needs and aspirations, as well as supporting programs and initiatives that embrace tech innovation and aim at developing it.

WHO urges rich countries to pay up for COVID plan

GENEVA: The WHO yesterday urged rich countries to pay their fair share of the money needed for its plan to conquer COVID-19 by contributing \$16 billion as a matter of urgency.

The World Health Organization said the rapid cash injection into its Access to COVID Tools Accelerator could finish off COVID as a global health emergency this year. The WHO-led ACT-A is aimed at developing, producing, procuring and distributing tools to tackle the pandemic: vaccines, tests, treatments and personal protective equipment.

ACT-A gave birth to the Covax facility, designed to ensure poorer countries could access eventual vaccines, correctly predicting that richer nations would hog doses coming off the production lines.

Covax delivered its billionth vaccine dose in mid-January. ACT-A needed \$23.4 billion for its program for the year October 2021-September 2022 but only \$800 million has been raised so far.

The scheme therefore wants \$16 billion up front from wealthy nations "to close the immediate financing gap", with the rest to be self-funded by middle-income countries.

Omicron impetus

WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said the rapid spread of the Omicron variant made it all the more urgent to ensure tests, treatments and vaccines are distributed equitably. "If higher-income countries pay their fair share of the ACT-A Accelerator costs, the partnership can support low- and middle-income countries to overcome low COVID-19 vaccination levels, weak testing, and medicine shortages," he said in a statement.

"Science gave us the tools to fight COVID-19; if they are shared globally in solidarity, we can end COVID-19 as a global health emergency this year."

Just 0.4 percent of the 4.7 billion COVID tests administered globally during the pandemic have been used in low-income countries. Meanwhile only 10 percent of people in those nations have received at least one vaccine dose. The WHO said the vast inequity was not only costing lives and hurting economies, it was also risking the emergence of new, more dangerous variants that could rob current tools of their effectiveness and set even highly-vaccinated populations back by many months.

Ramaphosa call

ACT-A has come up with a new "fair share" financing model on how much each of the world's wealthy countries should contribute, based on the size of their national economy and what they would gain from a faster recovery of the global economy and trade. On the 2020-21 ACT-A budget, only six countries—Canada, Germany, Kuwait, Norway, Saudi Arabia and Sweden—met or exceeded what would have been their fair share commitments.

South African President Cyril Ramaphosa, who co-chairs the ACT-A facilitation council, said inequitable access to COVID vaccines, tests and treatments was simply prolonging the pandemic. "I urge my fellow leaders to step up in solidarity, meet their fair shares, and help reclaim our lives from this virus," he said. Ramaphosa and Norwegian Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Store, his fellow co-chair, have written to 55 capitals—all high-income countries, G20 upper middle-income nations, and two other middle-income states—outlining their "fair share" and encouraging them to cough up. —AFP

High energy prices put more pressure on Turkish people

ANKARA: When temperatures plunged well below freezing in Ankara and energy prices soared, Dondu Isler had to make a tough choice to both stay warm and keep her soaring utility bills down.

She turned off the heating in two bedrooms of her apartment. "Only the living room and the kitchen were heated, but at a minimum. We try to keep warm with blankets," the 61-year-old woman said.

Energy prices in Turkey and other countries have soared in the past year due to recovering demand and geopolitical tensions. But Turks have also seen their overall purchasing power dwindle dramatically amid a currency crisis and two-decade high inflation that reached almost 50 percent last month.

Isler and her husband do not know how they will pay their bills, rent and food in the future. Their only income is the meager retirement benefits—worth 2,400 Turkish liras (\$177) a month—earned by her husband, who worked as a construction site guard. They paid 380 liras for electricity and gas in December. Their January bills more than doubled to 960 liras. Other Turks face the same problem as electricity bills soared between 52 percent and 127 percent in January, depending on consumption. Adding gas, many Turks have found themselves with bills that have doubled or tripled.

Some bars now even add an extra charge of four liras (29 cents) to customers who drink on heated terraces. The currency crisis came last year after President Recep Tayyip Erdogan put pressure on the central bank to cut the main interest rate despite rampant inflation—the opposite of conventional economic thinking to fight off rising prices. The lira lost 44 percent of its value against the dollar last year as Turks rushed to buy gold and foreign currency. Many Turks have fallen below the poverty line, which stands at \$4.3 per day.

Breakfast is a 'luxury'

Inflation has become a sensitive subject in Turkey, less than 18 months before a general election during which the rising cost of living will likely dominate. The

Shaken by fracking quakes, Texas is forced to act

HOUSTON: "You get used to it. The walls shake," says Sam, a resident of Midland, a town in west Texas where hydraulic fracturing for oil and gas—known as "fracking"—is causing more and more earthquakes. "Then another tremor comes a second later, like a truck passing nearby," said the 44-year-old, who did not wish to disclose his last name.

Echoing his words, three quakes rocked the ground in just one day on February 4. This region of the Permian Basin, from which 40 percent of US oil and 15 percent of its gas are extracted, experienced nine earthquakes greater than three-magnitude in 2019, 51 in 2020 and 176 in 2021, according to market intelligence firm Sourcedata. What causes earthquakes is not fracking itself, but injecting the wastewater into wells. The Railroad Commission of Texas, which regulates oil activities, has had to impose new rules on water disposal.



ANKARA: A man carries bags of fruits he bought from an open market in Ankara. —AFP

opposition accused the state statistics agency of underestimating the rate of inflation and independent Turkish economists said consumer prices reached over 110 percent in January. Hacer Foggo, founder of the Deep Poverty Network NGO, said record inflation was impoverishing every segment of society.

"Several families have been forced to drastically cut the amount they spend on food. Breakfast foods like eggs, cheese and olives have become luxuries," she said. Once relatively resistant to crises, the middle class is now also under pressure.

"They've seen their rent double or triple, and they're forced to look for small homes or in areas further away from the city centre," Foggo said.

But the consequences for the poorest are more dramatic since they can no longer count on financial assistance from their friends or family. "We believe 160,000 children and young people have dropped out of school in 2021. I personally know several of the families helped by our NGO," she said.

"Some feel obliged to contribute to the family

income and leave school to work. Others leave school because they cannot pay for transport or other expenses." With sharp increases in food including basic goods and baby formula, which has risen by 55.6 percent, malnutrition is now a serious risk for children, Foggo warned. Some mothers are forced to "give their babies dehydrated soups" instead of formula, she added. Ali Golpinar, a village chief in a less affluent district in Ankara, has raised funds for the poorest in his neighborhood for years. "But we are struggling to raise money because no one has the means to participate," he said.

Energy bill triples

Even the association he created where local women can take part in sewing, cooking or jewelry design workshops for free has been affected by higher energy prices. "Our electricity bill was 93 liras in December. After the price increase, it rose to 348 liras with the same amount consumed," Golpinar said. Electricity companies cut power off from many residents' homes after they could not pay their bills, he added. —AFP

'Fox guarding the henhouse'

Drilling companies must deal with huge quantities of water that come up when fracking—water makes up about 80 percent of the fluid pumped out of the ground. Almost 4,000 active wells have been drilled specifically to collect the wastewater in the Permian Basin. "As you get more and more water getting pumped into the ground... you're filling up these spaces," said Joshua Adler, CEO of Sourcedata, which helps oil companies improve water management.

"In some of these spaces, you got these cracks or fault lines. You're pushing it harder and harder, and maybe you hit that fault line and maybe it makes it slip and that's an earthquake." Since 2012, daily oil production have multiplied five-fold in the Permian Basin, so water injections into wells has also multiplied.

"In Oklahoma, they basically kind of dragged their feet for years and denied that there was any problem" when earthquakes increased in the 2010s, Adler said. In Texas, as soon as earthquakes increased, the Railroad Commission started to study the issue, he said. "They didn't wait until it was a giant problem."

Between September and January, it defined three geographical areas at risk. In the most populous, Gardendale, where the cities of Midland and Odessa are located, it ordered the suspension of deep injections of water into seven wells in mid-December. After four more earthquakes of magnitudes between 3.1 and



HOUSTON: This region of the Permian Basin experienced nine earthquakes greater than three-magnitude in 2019, 51 in 2020 and 176 in 2021.

3.7, it extended the measure to 26 more wells.

The regulator is waiting for industry proposals in the two other areas identified, Stanton and Northern Culberson-Reeves. But Neta Rhyne, 72, who lives near Northern Culberson-Reeves, believes that "it's like asking the fox to guard the chicken coop."

Last week, she again asked the Railroad Commission, as she has been doing since 2016, for a hearing following new requests to drill water disposal wells in her region. She fears an earthquake could affect the source of one of the largest natural spring-fed pools in the world, a stone's throw from her home in Balmorhea Nature Park, Toyahvale. —AFP

Business

Germany gas storage stocks drop to a 'worrying' level

Central bank boss sees inflation over 4% in 2022

BERLIN: Germany's gas stocks have fallen to a "worrying" level, an economy ministry spokeswoman said yesterday, as fears over a possible invasion of Ukraine by Russia put further pressure on energy supplies. "Of course we are monitoring the situation of the storage levels and that is certainly worrying," said the spokeswoman during a regular government press conference.

Stocks were now at 35-36 percent, under the "critical level" of 40 percent which the German government deems is necessary to withstand seven straight days of an extreme cold snap. To overcome a 30-day streak of more moderate cold weather, the storage should be half full. Stocks never slid below 71 percent in 2020, according to data from the industry group Gas Infrastructure Europe. With around 40 percent of gas consumed in Europe coming from Russia, Moscow is suspected of taking advantage of the tensions on the world market to reduce supply and drive up prices. In an interview this week with Die Zeit weekly, EU leader Ursula von der Leyen said that there are "increasingly signs that the Kremlin is using gas deliveries as political leverage."

Meanwhile, the new head of the Bundesbank said he expected to see inflation in Germany above four percent in 2022, adding pressure on the European Central Bank to tighten its monetary policy in response to soaring prices. "Bundesbank experts currently expect inflation to be well over four percent in 2022," Joachim Nagel told the German weekly Zeit in an interview.

Inflation increased over the course of 2021 in Germany, finally coming to rest at 3.1 percent for the year. Nagel's inflation call is above the last official prediction made by the German government, which expects the figure to rise slightly to 3.3 percent in 2022,



BERLIN: Germany's gas stocks have fallen to a 'worrying' level, an economy ministry spokeswoman said yesterday.

and above that previously made by his own institution, which had consumer prices rising by 3.6 percent.

The outcome for Europe's largest economy will have a significant bearing on the eurozone, where inflation unexpectedly rose to 5.1 percent in January, the highest level since records for the currency club began in 1997. The shock figure, published the day before the ECB's meeting, heaped pressure on the Frankfurt-based institution to follow other central banks in bringing forward rate hikes.

At the meeting, Nagel's first since taking office at the beginning of the year, ECB policymakers left the

"step-by-step" reduction in their bond-buying program untouched. But in her press conference afterwards, ECB President Christine Lagarde failed to repeat her previous assertion that a rate rise was "very unlikely" this year.

Instead, Lagarde said the ECB would not be "rushed" and would take a "data-dependent" approach. The ECB has long kept interest rates at record lows, including a negative deposit rate that charges financial institutions to park their cash with the central bank overnight. "If the picture does not change until March, I will advocate normalizing monetary poli-

cy" at the next ECB meeting, Nagel said. "The first step is to end net purchases during 2022," Nagel said, referring to the ECB's bond-buying program, its main crisis fighting tool, aimed at keeping borrowing costs low to stoke economic growth.

"Then interest rates could rise already this year," he added. With his comments, Nagel announced himself as a "hawk" among the 25 members of the governing council, picking up the mantle from his predecessor Jens Weidmann, an arch advocate of tighter monetary policy. "In my estimation, the economic costs will be significantly higher if we act too late than if we act early," Nagel said.

Trade surplus

Germany's trade surplus narrowed for the fifth year in a row in 2021, official data showed yesterday as a global supply crunch hampered exports, including in its key auto sector. The trade balance of Europe's biggest economy showed a surplus of 173.3 billion euros (\$197.9 billion) last year, down from 180.4 billion euros in 2020, the federal statistics office Destatis said in a statement.

Germany's is known for its export-driven economy, with the country usually racking up a trade surplus, where it exports more than the value of its imports. While the industrial nation's exports of nearly 1.4 trillion euros in 2021 exceeded imports of 1.2 trillion euros, imports grew faster-by 17 percent-than exports which rose by 14 percent, Destatis calculated. In December, the trade surplus was down on a seasonally adjusted basis to 6.8 billion euros from 10.9 billion euros in November. In gross figures, the trade surplus was still down at seven billion euros. — AFP



In this file photo, motorists queue for fuel at a BP petrol station in west London. BP returned to profit in 2021 as oil and gas prices. — AFP

BP swings into profit, accelerates carbon reduction

LONDON: BP returned to profit in 2021 as oil and gas prices surged, rebounding from a huge loss the prior year when the pandemic struck, the British energy giant revealed Tuesday as it also accelerated plans to cut carbon emissions. BP posted a net profit of \$7.6 billion (6.7 billion euros) last year, compared with a loss after tax of \$20.3 billion in 2020, the company said in a statement. "2021 shows BP doing what we said we would-performing while transforming," said BP chief executive Bernard Looney. The company announced plans to accelerate its target to reduce operational carbon emissions.

"We are accelerating the greening of BP," Looney said. "This allows us to raise our low carbon ambitions, and we are now aiming to be net zero across operations, production and sales by 2050 or sooner-unique among our peers." Greenpeace acknowledged that BP was indeed leading the way among rivals on tackling carbon reduction but stressed that its efforts had to be matched by other oil majors to deliver firm results.

"BP may be the most ambitious of the oil giants to pivot away from wrecking the climate with their core business but it's no longer possible to solve this problem one oil company at a time," Charlie Kronick, Greenpeace senior climate adviser, said. "It will simply be too little, too late." Kronick called on governments to "end the growth in fossil fuels and to massively raise ambition to reduce emissions and to build a green

energy economy". Friends of the Earth echoed those sentiments. "It's time to rapidly scale up investment in renewables and energy efficiency while winding down fossil fuel production to create affordable renewable energy for everyone," the organization said in a statement. BP meanwhile added on Tuesday that it aims to reduce operational emissions by 50 percent by 2030.

That compared with its previous target of 30-35 percent by the end of the decade on its path to net zero by mid-century. "The past two years have reinforced our belief in the opportunities that the energy transition presents-to create value for our shareholders and to get to net zero," added Looney, who became BP chief executive when the coronavirus began taking hold worldwide in early 2020.

BP is aiming also to accelerate net zero life-cycle emissions from the energy products it sells, notably oil and gas, by 2050 or sooner. The new target is "a significant advance from the previous aim of a 50-percent reduction".

Cash surplus

BP on Tuesday also said it would return \$4.15 billion to shareholders via a share buyback thanks to a surplus cash flow. Group revenue ballooned 49 percent last year to \$157.7 billion, with oil and gas prices rocketing thanks to rebounding demand for energy as economies reopened from lockdowns. Like its rivals, BP slumped deep into the red in 2020 as the COVID-19 pandemic slashed energy demand and prices. That resulted in top oil companies shedding thousands of jobs. Prices have since rebounded sharply, with the benchmark Brent North Sea oil contract trading at \$94 per barrel this week-the highest level in more than seven years. Surging crude prices are, however, weighing on business costs and individuals' spending power as inflation worries mount worldwide.—AFP

represented a boost to the UK economy. "The investment will drive growth and create jobs," he added in the joint statement.

Britain's renowned film industry has been boosted in recent years by online players, including also Netflix, seeking facilities for their own productions. At the same time, the pandemic has triggered a surge in the streaming of films and television shows, benefitting also the likes of Disney+. Shepperton studios, situated just south of London, has also struck an agreement with Netflix, broadcaster of "The Crown"-the hit series chronicling the life of Queen Elizabeth II.

"Shepperton has long been synonymous with top-tier television and movies and we're proud that it will be home to many Prime Video original productions in the years to come," Jennifer Salke, head of Amazon Studios, added yesterday. Amazon Studios recently announced that it was switching production of the second season of its Lord Of The Rings series to the UK from New Zealand. It comes as US-owned entertainment groups Sky and Sunset Studios are in the process of building separate film and television studios close to London to help meet strong demand for streamed content. — AFP

China tech worker's death reignites overtime debate

BEIJING: The sudden death of a young employee at a Chinese internet giant has reignited a debate about the grueling culture of overtime work in China's tech industry, with the firm describing his passing as a "wake-up call". China's internet lit up this week over the brain haemorrhage death of a 25-year-old content moderator who had worked throughout a week-long public holiday for short-video streaming site Bilibili. Bilibili confirmed the employee's death in a statement late Tuesday and said they had apologized to his family.

"The death of this excellent worker is not only an enormous loss to the company, but has also served as a wake-up call to us," Bilibili wrote, identifying the man only by his online username. "We should make active improvements in checking up on the physical health of employees to prevent similar tragedies from happening again," the statement added.

The incident follows a spate of sudden deaths of young tech employees in recent years, which have sparked debate over the industry's notorious "996" culture of working 12 hours per day, six days a week-previously endorsed by entrepreneurs including

Alibaba founder Jack Ma. The hashtag "Bilibili worker suddenly died after working overtime during Lunar New Year" went viral on the Twitter-like Weibo platform on Monday when a workplace blogger reported the man's death, citing anonymous colleagues claiming that he was forced to work overtime.

The same day, a Weibo user claiming to be the man's sister wrote a long post thanking the blogger and alleging that Bilibili tried to suppress news of his death internally. "Is it that hard to give a sincere apology? Does my brother's twenty-something-year-old life not count?" she wrote, in a post that gained over 870,000 likes. Some Weibo users claiming to be Bilibili employees accused the firm of forcing content moderators to work 12-hour shifts without breaks during the Spring Festival holiday.

The firm said the employee died of a brain haemorrhage Friday evening, having sought medical treatment after he did not show up to work that afternoon. However, Bilibili denied overtime allegations, saying the employee "was assigned to work eight hours per day with two days off after five days of work, as part of the Spring Festival shift rota". Several Chinese tech firms have pledged to cut working hours after complaints and activism among employees, including a crowd-sourced spreadsheet of different firms' working hours compiled last year which mysteriously got deleted.

Since last year, Beijing authorities have pushed to improve labor conditions for gig economy workers serving giant tech platforms, as part of a regulatory crackdown on the industry. — AFP



Stock markets rise on eve of US inflation data

NEW YORK: Stock markets climbed yesterday on the eve of highly anticipated US inflation data, with sentiment buoyed by easing geopolitical tensions between Russia and Ukraine. Oil prices extended losses on hopes of an international deal over Iran's contested nuclear program. Europe's travel sector was lifted by this week's outlook from German tourism giant TUI, which stated that post-pandemic holiday demand is high across all regions.

Nevertheless, investors remain cautious before Thursday's critical US inflation print for January. Forecasts are for another pop up from the four-decade-high seven percent seen in December, while a big miss in either direction could have big consequences for markets.

'Markets could get jittery'

"Inflation figures from the US ... will be a major influence on the direction of markets as the figures will be digested by the Federal Reserve in its next decision on whether to raise interest rates or not," said AJ Bell analyst Russ Mould. "With expectations that inflationary pressures are going to get worse in the near-term, markets could get jittery as we approach the data release." A higher reading will pile pressure on the Fed to embark on a more aggressive tightening campaign-but a weaker figure would temper those worries.

"The inflation data has continued to rise faster than

many anticipated and we're now in a situation where central banks are racing to catch up and get to grips with price pressures," said Oanda's Craig Erlam. "Many still expect we'll see an orderly return to inflation targets over the forecast horizon with moderate rate increases but the risk of inaction becomes far greater than the alternative."

With speculation swirling over the Fed's plans to battle soaring prices, global equities have fluctuated wildly since the start of the year as traders try to position themselves for a series of interest rate hikes that are likely to begin in March. The prospect of the removal of cheap cash-which has pushed markets to record or multi-year highs-has particularly hit tech firms as they are more susceptible to higher rates. However, the sector helped New York's three main indexes to healthy gains on Tuesday, and Asia followed suit.

Hong Kong led the way, jumping more than two percent thanks to a 6.8 percent surge in market heavy-weight Alibaba after Japan's SoftBank allayed fears it was planning to offload some of its huge holdings in the e-commerce giant. Alibaba had taken a hit earlier on speculation about the share sale, which compounded the Chinese firm's woes after suffering hefty losses owing to Beijing's crackdown on the tech sector. Still, investors remain nervous and today's US January inflation print is front and centre this week. Forecasts are for another pop up from the four-decade-high seven percent seen in December, while a big miss in either direction could have big consequences for markets.

A higher reading will pile pressure on the Fed to embark on a more aggressive tightening campaign but a weaker figure would temper worries. "The inflation data has continued to rise faster than many anticipated and we're now in a situation where central banks are racing to catch up and get to grips with price pressures," said OANDA's Craig Erlam.—AFP

Business

NBK OIL MARKET REPORT

Oil soars above \$90 on supply worries and geopolitical risk

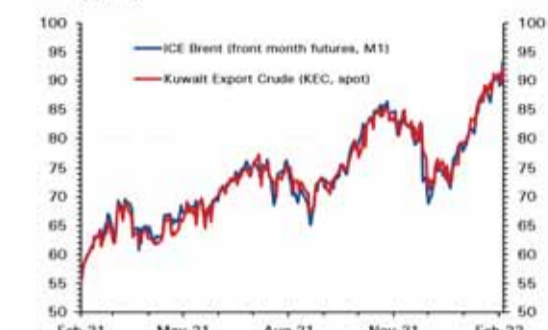
IEA now sees oil demand topping pre-pandemic levels this year

KUWAIT: Oil's surge in 2022 shows little sign of easing, with Brent hurtling past \$90/bbl to settle at a fresh seven-year high of \$93.3/bbl (+20 percent ytd) on 4th February. Local marker, Kuwait Export Crude, stood a shade under at \$92.3/bbl (+16 percent ytd). Oil's latest gains came amid news that US shale oil producers in the Permian basin had shut-in production due to freezing temperatures. Also adding to the bullishness was an against-consensus, sizeable oil stock draw (-7.7 mb) in the US, driven by heating fuel demand, while US retail gasoline prices have also spiked to 2014 levels (\$3.42/gallon). Only upward movements in the US dollar, linked to Fed rate tightening expectations, profit-taking and the prospect of Iranian crude returning have managed to check, albeit temporarily, oil's recent advance.

The strength of oil demand has surprised amid surging Omicron cases worldwide. While winter fuel switching to oil for power generation has been a factor, it has been the resilience of global economic activity that has stood out. The International Energy Agency (IEA) cited this in its upgrade of oil demand growth estimates for both 2021 and 2022 by 200 kb/d to 5.5 mb/d and 3.3 mb/d, respectively. The IEA now sees oil demand topping pre-pandemic levels this year, at 97.5 mb/d. Moreover, in November, OECD commercial oil stocks fell to their lowest levels in six years at 2.76 billion barrels (-354 mby/y).

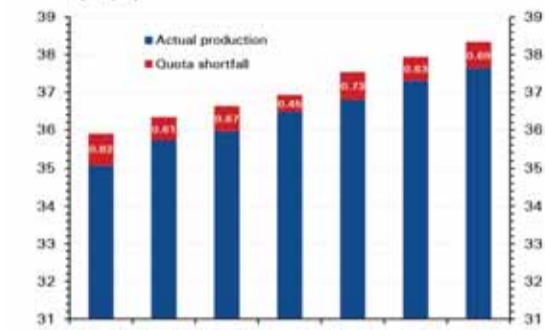
Amid better than expected oil demand, there-

Chart 1: Crude oil prices (\$/bbl)



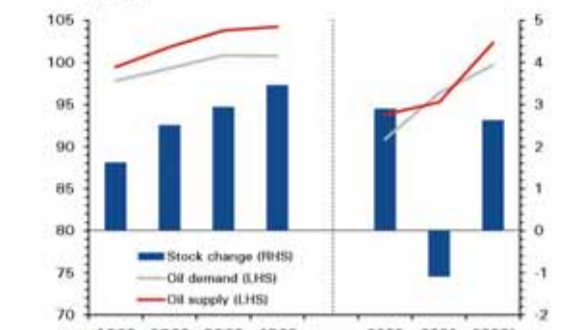
Source: Refinitiv, KPC

Chart 2: OPEC+ production and shortfall (mb/d)



Source: OPEC, S&P Global Platts

Chart 3: Demand-supply balances (mb/d)



Source: OPEC, IEA, NBK estimates

fore, market sensitivity to supply-side factors remains acute. Compounding this has been heightened geopolitical risk linked to but not exclusive to Russia-Ukraine tensions. The main thrust of the bullish impulse is that supply shortfalls look structural rather than temporary, a legacy of underinvestment since 2014 and mismanagement, leaving global crude production spare capacity much diminished. Actual or perceived supply outages due to conflict or natural phenomena such as extreme weather could therefore have an outsized impact on oil prices.

OPEC+, tasked with restoring the 9.7 mb of pandemic-linked supply cuts, has struggled to

raise aggregate output at the scheduled monthly rate of 400 kb/d. December's OPEC+ production of 37.6 mb/d (excluding OPEC-3 and Mexico) was again below target, by an estimated 690 kb/d. Preliminary MEES figures for OPEC-10 output in January show only 180 kb/d of the 254 kb/d added, leaving cumulative output 540 kb/d below the ceiling.

Kuwait, Saudi and the UAE have more or less consistently delivered on their quotas. These three, along with Iraq and Russia, hold the bulk of OPEC+ spare capacity, about 5 mb/d currently. This could diminish to less than 3 mb/d in 2H22, the IEA estimates. This excludes Iran, though, which,

once unshackled from US sanctions could supply markets with an additional 1.2-1.5 mb/d of oil.

The near-term, tight oil market structure is at odds with the consensus outlook for the rest of the 2022, however, which is one of stock builds. Oil forecasting agencies see oil supplies outrunning demand on a combination of OPEC+ and US shale-led non-OPEC output increases. Brent futures point to a drop of \$9 to \$84/bbl by December, reflecting the expectation of looser fundamentals down the line. But should demand surprise on the upside and supply falter further then a rise in prices to above \$100 in the near term cannot be ruled out.



IKEA recalling a limited number of Huvudroll veg balls 1000g FROZEN

KUWAIT: IKEA urges all customers who have bought Huvudroll vegetable balls 1000g frozen with the best before date 2022-10-26 to contact IKEA for a full refund, due to risk of plastic pieces in the product, by mistake. The safety and quality of the food we offer is our number one priority. We want to offer our customers products they can trust, that are produced in a responsible way, without making any compromises on food safety and quality.

Despite this it has come to our attention that plastic pieces from a broken production line have contaminated; by mistake; one specific best before date of Huvudroll vegetable balls 1000g frozen. Therefore, products with this best before date are being recalled.

Huvudroll veg balls 1000g frozen with best before date 2022-10-26 can be returned to any IKEA store for a full refund. Proof of purchase (receipt) is not required. IKEA apologizes for any inconvenience this recall may cause.

Maersk sees profits soar on record freight prices

COPENHAGEN: Danish shipping giant Maersk yesterday posted record-beating profits in 2021, as container freight prices continued to soar due to the global supply chain crunch caused by the COVID pandemic. For the full year, Maersk registered a net profit of \$18 billion (15.8 billion euros), the highest profit ever recorded by a Danish company.

For 2022, Maersk predicted a "solid first half" would be followed by a "normalization" of the sector early in the second part of the year. Demand for shipping plunged at the start of the pandemic, but has rebounded strongly since mid-to-late 2020.

As a result, sales for 2021 jumped by 55 percent to \$61.8 billion, with the Ocean container shipping segment soaring by 65 percent. Earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation and amortization (EBITDA) almost tripled to \$24 billion, thanks to lower costs and optimization of its logistics chain, Maersk said. Its main competitors, Italy's MSC and France's CMA CGM, have also posted record profits for 2021.

Shipping customers have had their patience put to the test and had to dig deep into their pockets as the supply chain disruptions plague the container shipping segment. In the fourth quarter, the sector experienced "exceptional conditions with significant and persisting bottlenecks, while the volumes were down", Maersk said in its annual report. —AFP

Al-Sayer announces spectacular February promotion

KUWAIT: Mohamed Naser Al-Sayer & Sons has announced the spectacular February promotion for Toyota. As part of the campaign, four Toyota models including Highlander HEV, Hilux Adventure, LC 70 pickup and RAV4 HEV will be handed over to four lucky winners, selected through four electronic raffle draws conducted at the Ministry of Commerce and Industry - Consumer Protection Department.

A chance to win big with Toyota

During the campaign valid until 28 February 2022, for every KD 500 spent, customers will get one chance to enter one of the four weekly draws to be held in the following order:

- First draw on 8 Feb for Hilux Adventure.
- Second draw on 15 Feb for Highlander HEV.
- Third draw on 22 Feb for LC70 pickup.
- Fourth and final draw on 6 Mar for RAV4 HEV.

Hilux adventure - Adventure is everywhere Top of new Hilux range, are available in single cab and double cab variants, the adventure grade is tailored for dual-usage and leisure users who want all convenience and diverse capabilities of a pick-up combined with more adventurous and sophisticated styling and the highest levels of equipment specification.

Adventure-exclusive exterior styling details

include bespoke front grille and bumper, skid plate, over fender, door handle, wheel, and tail-gate designs.

Highlander Hybrid- a new level of style & efficiency

7-seater Highlander combines all the familiar Toyota SUV attributes of comfort, drivability, and safety with low emissions, greater fuel efficiency, Intelligent All-Wheel Drive (AWD), space on demand, and an impressive 1,500 kg towing capacity.

LC 70 - Driving beyond all expectations

Land Cruiser performance and reliability are legendary and has earned its title as King of the 4WDs. Overwhelming superiority in functionality plus exciting, sophisticated design, the new LC 70 will become a new legend.

RAV4 - Do it in style

RAV4 brings more sport and more utility back while further enhancing the agile handling, everyday comfort and exemplary fuel efficiency that established the RAV4 as a firm favorite. RAV4 is designed to tackle urban, suburban, and great outdoor adventures with equal finesse. The look is tougher, and there's greater capability with a new all-wheel-drive system, yet the ride is smoother and quieter, with new comfort touches inside. In addition to the above, customers will also benefit from:

- Warranty for 5 years open mileage
- Complimentary service packages
- Free registration and third-party insurance
- 24/7 Musada Roadside assistance



LuLu Hypermarket launches 'LuLu Hala February' promotions

KUWAIT: LuLu Hypermarket, the retail-leader in the region, launched its annual LuLu Hala February celebrations on February 1, with all outlets of the hypermarket decked-up in glittering lights, decorative arches, bunting and Kuwait flags. As the month-long Hala Festival coincides with celebrations to mark the National and Liberation Days during the last week of February, the artistic themes and backdrop images center around these two commemorative days.

Small and large national flags flutter everywhere, while color combinations of the flag form the tone for many of the decorations visible around the hypermarket's outlets. Large cut-outs of iconic structures and colorful images of buildings and places in Kuwait further add to the festive ambiance.

A slew of promotions will be held throughout the month of February,

starting with the 'Voucher' promotion on 3rd February. During this promotion, every purchase worth KD 5 will enter the shopper in a draw with the chance of winning 131 gift vouchers worth a total of KD 15,000.

Each week of the LuLu Hala February festival will be made even more exciting with a 'Brand of the Week' promotion, offering amazing discounts on products from that specific brand. In addition, there will be a 'Product of the Day' promotion on each day of the month-long festival, during which one specific product labeled 'Special Deal of the Day' will be on offer at a very special price. From 16 February, LuLu Hypermarket outlets will feature a 'Proudly from Kuwait' promotion highlighting special products produced in Kuwait, including farm-fresh fruits and vegetables offered at attractive prices.

Additionally, to mark Kuwait's 61st



anniversary of National Day on 25 February, 61 exciting offers will be available right from 23 February. Also, for six days from 23 to 28 February, 600 trolley-load of purchases will be available totally free to the lucky winners of this promotion. In addition, during the entire festival period beginning from 2 February, special discount sales will be held on select product

categories, including on fashionwear, footwear, ladies bags, eye-wear, toys and accessories for babies.

The month-long LuLu Hala February festival is a continuation of the brand's commitment to making shopping at any LuLu Hypermarket outlet an exciting and enjoyable experience throughout the year for customers.

Brazil posts highest January inflation since 2016

RIO DE JANEIRO: Brazil's inflation rate slowed in January, but still came in at the highest level for the month since 2016, the government said yesterday, underlining the country's struggles to stem surging prices. The monthly inflation rate for January was 0.54 percent, down from 0.73 percent in December, but still the highest level in six years for the first month of the year, said the national statistics institute, IBGE.

The annual inflation rate came in at 10.38 percent, up from 10.06 percent at the end of last year and far above the central bank's target of 3.5 percent. Latin America's biggest economy has been hit

hard by global inflationary pressure driven by pandemic-linked supply-chain shortages, and frustration over surging prices has emerged as a major threat to far-right President Jair Bolsonaro as he gears up to seek reelection in October.

January's price increases were led by a 1.11-percent rise in food prices, which hit the budgets of poor households especially hard. That is a demographic where Bolsonaro is aggressively courting voters, trying to gain ground in the polls against leftist ex-president Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, the current front-runner. Brazil's central bank has responded to the inflation spike by launching one of the most aggressive monetary tightening cycles in the world, raising the benchmark interest rate from an all-time low of two percent in March 2021 to 10.75 percent Wednesday.

Analysts say the inflation rate looks close to peaking, and predict the central bank will soon start slowing its rate hikes. "The headline (inflation) rate should start falling again this month,"



Brazil's economy has been hit hard by global inflationary pressure driven by pandemic-linked supply-chain shortages.

said Olivia Cross of Capital Economics. The central bank "still looks on course to slow the pace of tightening, as it signaled at its meeting last week," she said in a note. —AFP

Business

The story of a start-up: Now on Gulf Bank's 'Let's Talk Business' podcast

From a KD 5,000 idea, Bleems becomes one of the largest businesses in Gulf

KUWAIT: "Your hobby is the secret of your success." Many believe in this saying, but very few apply it. Entrepreneurship is also seemingly not for everyone, with very few business owners opting to take on the entrepreneurial challenge full time. Suleiman Al-Tarrah and Abdullah Al-Khuzam are among those who preferred to make their hobbies their full-time job, taking the plunge in entrepreneurship and leaving their full-time jobs (and respective guaranteed salaries) behind.

With a strong vision in mind, the ambitious and educated Kuwaiti youth began to monitor the existing opportunities between flower shops and customers, putting forth solutions that would become the starting point for their company in 2012. Ten years later, Bleems, which launched with a capital of KD 5,000, would become one of the largest platforms for gifting roses and sweets in the Gulf region.

The story of Bleems is one of adventure and success. To learn more, Gulf Bank spoke with Suleiman Al-Tarrah, CEO at Bleems, who was a guest on Gulf Bank's "Let's Talk Business" podcast.

The program, hosted by Tareq Al-Saleh, Deputy General Manager of the Economic Research Unit at Gulf Bank, presents entrepreneurial stories within a simplified economic framework, targeting budding entrepreneurs who are considering starting businesses of their own. The Bank's new podcast is part of its overarching strategy of fostering economic and community sustainability in Kuwait.

Prudent decisions

Al-Tarrah, who holds a Bachelor's degree in Accounting from Kuwait University and a Master's in Business Administration from the University of Portsmouth in the UK, says that passion alone is never enough; rather, your decisions must be thoughtful, and your steps must be slow, with both decisions and steps needing to be guided by experience.

He pointed out that his partner, Abdullah Al-Khuzam, had the necessary experience, as he was one of the founders of Kuwait's first flower business websites, which he had launched in 2006. When the idea of Bleems was first presented to Al-Khuzam, he agreed without hesitation.

He stated that the idea of Bleems is very similar to the idea behind Gulf Bank's WISE digital investment platform. Both ideas found opportunities within the



Tariq Al-Saleh hosts guests during the 'Let's Talk Business' podcast.

existing market, and took it upon themselves to launch businesses that would meet customers' needs.

He added: "For example, shops were suffering from customers booking floral bouquets and not receiving them, or paying half the amount and not returning to pay the rest of the price. Consumers were also suffering from the lack of diversity in prices, products and designs, and no floral service was available 24 hours a day."

He added: "We decided to follow a digital market model, which is characterized by low capital costs, and free cash flows. We also focused a lot on marketing - especially for flowers, sweets and general occasions."

Al-Tarrah spoke proudly about the company's first day, saying, "I will not forget the first day of launching our company in January 2012, and I will not forget the profits we made on that first day - just over KD 60."

Leaving their daytime jobs

He continued, "In the beginning, we ran the company from our workplaces through the phone. At the time, it was our only option as we did not have the money (yet) to hire employees and pay them salaries." Al-Tarrah said: "This situation continued for a while until the company grew, our profits increased, and we started hiring. At the beginning of 2015, one of the partners left his daytime job to pursue Bleems. I also initiated my resignation from the investment company I was working with and switched to becoming a full-time business owner."

One year later, my partner, who was employed at a bank at the time, also joined me. By far, the most difficult decision for any entrepreneur is to leave their daytime job and guaranteed salary, only to jump into the unknown with self-employment."

Business model

He added: "We adopt a flexible business model, moving from one strategy to another very easily. Our revenues are derived from commissions ranging between 10 percent and 20 percent, as well as from our digital ad revenue from our website and app. Our expenses are mainly from marketing costs, while our fixed costs are rent and salaries."

Regarding how they maintain product quality, Al-Tarrah said, "If the product arrives in any way that is different from the picture, or if it is damaged, the vendor will be notified and the amount will be returned to the customer. If the issue is repeated, the penalty clause will be activated - and this is according to the legal agreements signed by both parties."

Business during the pandemic

On the impact of the pandemic, Al-Tarrah said, "We were only greatly affected by the 10 days of complete lockdown. When the world started opening up again, we were back in full gear."

He added: "We have a highly efficient financial management strategy, which provided us with buffers even

before the pandemic. From the beginning, we were keen to maintain some liquidity that would cover rent for the next year, and salaries for a period of six months. During the pandemic, we made sure to pay our employees the salaries they were due. As business owners, we also recognize that we are responsible for our employees' families, and cannot cut off their livelihoods under any circumstances."

Financing and exits

He stressed that the company relies on self-financing and did not seek funding or assistance from banks or government agencies. At the same time, Bleems is not seeking financing offers from investors at the current moment, as the company has sufficient liquidity for business continuity and future expansion. However, this does not negate the fact that every business is open to new opportunities, whether it is by acquisition, listing, or the entry of a strategic investor.

He revealed that Al-Adailiya Holding Company, which owns Bleems, is currently investing in the perfumes and cosmetics industry with a major company in Kuwait and the Gulf, and that he expects the project to be announced very soon. It is worth noting that "Let's Talk Business" is Gulf Bank's newest podcast, created in collaboration with Belmokhba, a local creative content creation and production house. Episodes air on Gulf Bank's digital and social media channels.

Kuwaiti banks are pioneers in region

Al-Tarrah said: "The Kuwaiti banking sector is a pioneer in terms of the services it provides. When we expanded into other Gulf markets, we found major differences that pointed us in favor of Kuwaiti banks, their technological services, understanding, development and empowerment."

Four tips for entrepreneurs

Al-Tarrah gave four tips to entrepreneurs:

1. Don't strive for perfection. Half of a working project is better than a complete project that doesn't work. When you have a negotiable product or service, put it on the market and follow the evaluation.
2. The feasibility study will not fully reflect your reality; consider it a roadmap.
3. Investing in technology and applications is important to keep pace with market developments.
4. It is not necessary to spend a lot on advertising from day one; rather, your marketing can be gradual.



BAISE, China: A resident undergoing a nucleic acid test for the COVID-19 coronavirus in Baise in China's southern Guangxi region. — AFP

Why has a lockdown in Chinese city sent aluminum prices surging?

BEIJING: The COVID lockdown this week of a relatively unknown Chinese city sent global prices of aluminum rocketing to a 14-year high. Why did the outbreak in Baise spark fears around the world about the key metal?

Where is Baise?

Located near the border with Vietnam, Baise is nicknamed the "aluminum capital of southern China". Home to around 3.5 million people, Baise is a hub for aluminum mining and production. It produces about 2.2 million tons of the commodity per year—more than 80 percent of the output in the resource-rich Guangxi region. Guangxi is China's main alumina-exporting region, shipping out around 500,000 tons of the aluminum component per month. China is the world's biggest producer of aluminum, a crucial component in major industries including automobiles, construction and consumer goods.

Why was Baise locked down?

At just under 190 cases, the Baise coronavirus outbreak is tiny compared with caseloads in other parts of the world. China, however, has a zero COVID strategy, using strict, targeted lockdowns, travel restrictions and mass testing to eliminate infections. Baise was locked down Monday, leaving most of its residents under home confinement and others unable to leave rural counties and townships under the city's jurisdiction. The national COVID strategy has helped maintain some economic growth during the pandemic, but its enforcement has caused frequent disruptions at key manufacturing and shipping hubs in recent months.

How did it impact aluminum?

Baise's local industry association said Tuesday that while aluminum production was largely at normal levels, the transportation of ingots and raw materials was seriously impacted by travel restrictions during the lockdown. That in turn sparked fears about supply that cascaded through China and then around the world.

"The sudden outbreak in our city has exacerbated market expectations of hindered logistics flows, as well as expectations of phased supply tightening caused by an output drop," the association said.

A major industrial park in Baise containing several factories has been sealed, affecting the movement of workers, raw materials and aluminum ingots, it added. Yesterday, some aluminum smelters in southwest China resumed production, monitor Shanghai Metals Market (SMM) reported. But some refineries of the component alumina in Guangxi have stopped production because of the outbreak, it said. Huayin Aluminium, a major smelter in Baise, slashed production capacity by about 1.2 million tonnes owing to transportation blockages, according to Chinese commodity research firm Antaika.

Was Baise the only driver of the price surge? -

The global aluminum price surge was sparked by the Baise lockdown but other major factors were already at play too, analysts said. The timing of the lockdown also played a part. China's domestic aluminum shortage had already been exacerbated by the Lunar New Year holidays, during which most factories nationwide ground to a halt or reduced output. The break was followed by the Baise lockdown, meaning inventories could not be replenished normally. Prices of aluminum were already expected to rise after the holidays, which concluded Monday, because of low domestic inventories and solid demand from manufacturers, according to the SMM. Furthermore, Antaika said Tuesday that alumina industries in three other provinces have also reduced production.

What about the rest of the world?

The global aluminum market is already facing a large production deficit this year, with demand outstripping supply as the world economy recovers from the pandemic. Further, aluminum production is linked to the stability of other supplies. Analysts said the ongoing Russia-Ukraine crisis had caused widespread fear that Europe's gas supply from major producer Russia will be hit if the situation escalates. US President Joe Biden made a categorical vow Monday at a meeting with Germany's Chancellor Olaf Scholz that the massive Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline from Russia to Europe will "end" if Moscow invades Ukraine. "Aluminum production requires significant amounts of energy and gas is the primary fuel source. Fears that Nord Stream 2 could be halted are pushing prices higher," City Index analyst Fiona Cincotta told AFP.—AFP

Union says Starbucks fired organizing body at US store

WASHINGTON: A union representing Starbucks employees on Tuesday accused the coffee chain of firing workers attempting to organize in the US state of Tennessee.

Starbucks Workers United said employees comprising "almost the entire union organizing committee" at a store in Memphis were fired weeks after two Starbucks stores in New York became the first to formally organize. "I was fired by Starbucks today for 'policies' that I've never heard of before and that I've never been written-up about before," Nikki Taylor, who worked as a shift supervisor, said in a statement released by the union.

"This is a clear attempt by Starbucks to retaliate against those of us who are leading the union effort at our store and scare other partners." A Starbucks

spokesperson confirmed on Tuesday that seven workers were fired, but said the terminations were over violations of safety and security policies.

"We respect our partners' rights to organize," the spokesperson told AFP, noting that "we also expect our partners to follow the policies we have at our stores."

"We are not engaging in any anti-union activities," he added. In December, two Starbucks stores in Buffalo, New York became the first in the United States to vote to unionize, and workers at more than 50 stores are now trying to do the same. The coffee chain, which in October announced it was lifting its minimum wage to \$15 an hour, has stressed that it is not against organized labor, but argued that the issues raised by workers do not justify a union.

Starbucks Workers United, whose members include the workers in New York, said the company fired employees in Tennessee after they allowed reporters to hold interviews in the store after it had closed for the day. "Starbucks chose to selectively enforce policies that have not previously been consistently enforced," such as a ban on going behind the counter when no employees are working "as a subterfuge to fire union leaders," the statement said. The union said it would file charges with the National Labor Relations Board. — AFP



US seizes \$3.6bn of stolen bitcoin in record haul

WASHINGTON: The US Justice Department announced Tuesday it had recovered more than 94,000 bitcoin stolen in 2016, currently valued at \$3.6 billion, a record seizure. A couple accused of seeking to launder the bitcoin were arrested in New York, the department said. Ilya Lichtenstein, 34, and his wife Heather Morgan, 31, were set to appear in federal court over the charges later in the day.

They face up to 20 years in prison. Lichtenstein and Morgan allegedly sought to launder the proceeds of 119,754 bitcoin—then valued at \$65 million—that were stolen during a 2016 hack of the virtual currency exchange Bitfinex. "Today's arrests, and the Department's largest financial seizure ever, show that cryptocurrency is not a safe haven for criminals," deputy attorney general Lisa Monaco said in the statement. Prosecutors said some of the stolen cryptocurrency was sent to a digital wallet controlled by Lichtenstein, who describes himself on

social media as a "technology entrepreneur, coder and investor."

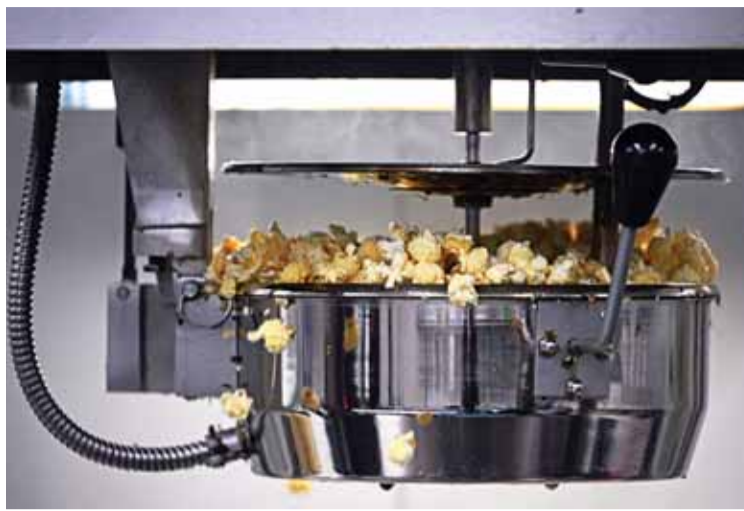
Gold and NFTs

About 25,000 of the stolen bitcoin were transferred out of the wallet over the next five years "through a labyrinth of cryptocurrency transactions," and some of the funds were deposited into accounts the couple opened online, including by using false identities. One of Morgan's aliases is "Razzlekhan." A video posted online under that name shows a young blonde woman rapping near the New York Stock Exchange. In the song, the woman refers to herself as a "crocodile of Wall Street" and a "risk-taker." The couple combined "old-fashioned methods" and "very complex transactions," a prosecutor said at a press briefing.

The funds were used to buy items such as gold or digital NFTs (non-fungible tokens), according to US officials. The remaining bitcoin, now valued at \$3.6 billion, was recovered last week by US investigators.

They executed a search warrant to scour the couple's online accounts and were able to recover the security key that gave them access to the digital wallet. Bitfinex has offered a multimillion-dollar reward for information leading to the recovery of the stolen funds, but the Justice Department declined to say whether that played a role in the arrest of Lichtenstein and Morgan.—AFP

Lifestyle | Features



A photograph shows popcorn in the laboratory of the Natais popcorn factory in Bezeril, southwestern France. — AFP photos

PANDEMIC SETS SALES OF MICROWAVABLE POPCORN A-PINGING

While the closure of cinemas during the pandemic has eaten into popcorn sales, demand for the microwavable form of the popular snack has reached new records, according to Europe's biggest producer. Natais is a small family-run company nestled in the rolling hills of southwest France, with the snow-capped Pyrenees visible in the distance. Set up by its current chief executive Michael Ehmann in 1994, the popcorn maker employs a workforce of 140 and, with annual sales of 65 million euros (\$75 million), currently commands a share of nearly 40 percent of the European market.

It supplies more than 80 percent of France's cinemas, but overseas sales account for more than 90 percent of annual turnover and Natais exports to more than 50 countries, including its main markets of Britain, Romania, Germany and Spain. At the factory's towering silos visible from miles around, fully automated production lines fill up to 300 bags of microwavable popcorn per minute, while others fill sacks ranging in size from 25 kilograms to 930 kilograms (55 pounds to 2,050 pounds) — of popcorn destined for cine-



A photograph shows popcorn boxes on the production line of the Natais popcorn factory.

mas. "The health crisis has had negative consequences for our network of suppliers to cinemas, but also positive consequences,

because sales of microwavable popcorn have risen sharply," Ehmann told AFP. Last year indeed saw sales of microwavable bags taking off, according to sales director

Helene Ricau. "The market was already expanding in Europe, but with the health crisis, microwavable popcorn has exploded," she told AFP. "During the lockdowns, people discovered popcorn as a sort of comfort food in these gloomy times." Natais sold more than 200 million bags of popcorn in Europe in 2020 and 207 million in 2021, Ricau said. "We're targeting annual growth rates of 4.0-5.0 percent in the coming years. Unlike in the US, the market has not yet reached maturity in Europe," she said.

Ecological agriculture

Natais cooperates with 220 farmers, including 28 who work on an ecological basis. While some of the farmers are in South Africa to ensure supplies across the whole year, the majority are local. One of them, Pierre Alem, said his family has tilled the soil since the French Revolution. His 199-hectare (490-acre) farm grows not only popcorn corn, but also rapeseed, barley, sunflowers, and corn for animal feed. Alem said his father first started growing popcorn corn in 2008 on around 20 hectares, but has since more than doubled

the surface area which now yields around 200 tons each year.

Natais provides the seeds and pays him to grow grain and vegetables in between harvests, an ecological form of agriculture that seeks to 'capture carbon in the soil... and prevent erosion,' Alem said. But popcorn corn 'brings more added value compared to corn for animal feed,' he said. It hasn't been only the closure of cinemas that has eaten into sales, but once they were reopened many countries required spectators to wear their masks throughout the film and snacks were banned.

At a cinema in Blagnac, near Toulouse, 16-year-old high school student Rayan Aguilar complains that he hasn't been able to eat popcorn while watching a film. 'Cinema without popcorn, it's weird,' he says, impatient for the lifting of the ban in France next week. The manager of the 15-screen multiplex, Jean-Baptiste Salvat, said that turnover had fallen by 20-30 percent as a direct result of the ban. 'Popcorn is one of the top products at the confectionery counter,' he said. — AFP

Climate change threatens Hadrian's Wall treasures in England

Nineteen hundred years after it was built to keep out barbarian hordes, archaeologists at Hadrian's Wall in northern England are facing a new enemy: climate change, which threatens its vast treasure trove of Roman artefacts. Thousands of soldiers and many of their families lived around the 73-mile (118-kilometre) stone wall, which crosses England from west coast to east coast, marking the limit of the Roman Empire and forming Britain's largest Roman archaeological feature.

The wall was begun in 122 AD during the reign of emperor Hadrian and marked the boundary between Roman Britannia and unconquered Caledonia, helping to keep barbarian raiders out of the empire. The Roman soldiers who lived there left behind not just wooden structures but the fascinating detritus of everyday life that allows archaeologists today to reconstruct how they lived in the windswept north of the empire.

They include the fort of Vindolanda, some 33 miles west of the modern day city of Newcastle upon Tyne, a Roman settlement at the original eastern end of the wall, then named Pons Aelius. "A lot of the landscapes at Hadrian's Wall are preserved under peat bog and marsh-very wet, very moist ground, which has protected the archaeology for almost two millennia," Andrew Birley, director of excavations and chief executive of the Vindolanda Trust, told AFP. "But as global warming takes place, climate change takes place," he added.

The ground heats up more rapidly than the air temperature, caking the previously moist soil and letting oxygen in through the resulting cracks. "When that oxygen gets in there, things that are really delicate, that are made of leather, textile, items of wood, crack, decay and are lost forever," said Birley.

Under threat

Over the years, the dramatic landscape around the wall has revealed stone and wooden structures, leather shoes and clothing, tools, weapons and even handwritten wooden tablets, feeding knowledge of what Roman life in Britain was like. Only

around a quarter of the site at Vindolanda has been excavated, and the fort is just one of 14 along Hadrian's Wall, a designated UNESCO World Heritage site since 1987 and one of Britain's best-known ancient tourist attractions.

"All of this, all this masonry, all of the ground behind me was under the ground. It was under a farmer's field 50 years ago," said Birley. "Less than one percent of Hadrian's Wall has been explored archaeologically and a lot of that landscape is protected in this wet peat land environment and that's a landscape that's really under threat." Behind him, dozens of Roman shoes from all genders, ages and social strata are displayed, just a small sample of the around 5,500 leather items so far found at the site alone.

Thanks to the black, peaty soil, many of the artefacts have kept a fascinating level of detail. "They are fantastic because they've completely changed our perception of the Roman Empire the Roman army, they've changed it from being a male preserve to lots of women and children running around," he said. "And without these artefacts surviving, we wouldn't have had that information and that's the sort of stuff that's under threat because of climate change."

Race is on

Events are taking place all this year to mark the 1,900 years since construction of the wall began. Birley says the anniversary is an opportunity to reflect on how to make sure the wall and its artefacts will still be around in another 1,900 years.

"The Roman army embarked on one of the most massive construction pieces in the whole empire," he said. "In this fantastic rural landscape all around me, they transformed it, creating Hadrian's Wall, a barrier right across the heart of the country." Now, instead of defending Roman Britain from unconquered Caledonia to the north, the race is on between archaeologists and climate change. "Can we find out what's happening to these sites? Can we intervene where we can to protect sites? And can we rescue material before it's gone forever?" — AFP

In Iraq's Mosul, library rises from ashes of IS reign

The storied library of Iraq's Mosul University boasted a million titles before Islamic State group jihadists rampaged through it, toppling bookshelves and burning ancient texts. Now, almost five years after their defeat, the war-battered northern metropolis is trying to rebuild the pride of the city long known as a literature hub boasting countless booksellers and archives guarding rare manuscripts. Mohamed Younes, technical director of the prestigious university library, recalls the carnage he witnessed after Mosul was recaptured from IS in mid-2017 following long and gruelling street battles.



A librarian shows a book from the collection of Mosul central library, founded in 1921.

"When we came back, we saw... the books pulled from the shelves, thrown on the ground and burned," he said. Thousands of texts on philosophy and law, science and poetry which in some way contradicted the IS's extremist world view had gone up in flames. Some of the most valuable titles were sold on the black market. "Before, we had more than a million titles, some of which couldn't be found in any other university in Iraq," said Younes. When the jihadists were first at the gates of the city, he said, "we were only able to move the rare books and a number of foreign periodicals."

With the IS group's brutal takeover of Mosul, 85 percent of the collection was lost. Before IS, Mosul University was "the mother of all books," said former student Tarek Attiya, 34, who is now enrolled at Tikrit university. "There is a huge difference between what used to be and the situation after IS," he said.

Refurbished building

Now there is a revival going on to, with the help of donations, slowly line the library shelves with books again. The library building, refurbished with financing from a UN agency, is set to reopen this month. Four floors high with a sleek glass exterior, it will have an initial 32,000 books. It will also feature a digital trove of e-books, with a view to eventually rebuilding a million-strong collection. Ahead of the opening, the books have been housed in the narrow premises of the university's engineering



A picture shows the front of a bookshop in Iraq's northern city of Mosul. — AFP photos

faculty where shelves are overflowing and titles are stacked on every available surface.

Significant donations from Arab and international universities have been received to "enable the revival of the library," said the director. Renowned figures in Mosul and across Iraq have also contributed by "dipping into their personal" collections, he added. The northern metropolis of Mosul has historically been a hub for merchants and aristocrats, with a rich cultural and intellectual life. A commercial crossroad of the Middle East, Mosul was able to preserve thousands of rare and ancient works, notably religious texts. Iraq's first printing press was operating in Mosul in the second half of the 19th century.

Appetite for reading

Signs of Mosul's fledgling cultural revival have begun to take root-at least where there was anything left to save. The library of the Waqf, the state body that manages Islamic endowments, once contained manuscripts dating back 400 years, said its head, Ahmed Abd Ahmed. But, he added sadly, "they have all disappeared."

Elsewhere in the city, Al-Nujaifi street, historically lined with booksellers, still bears the scars of destruction wrought by the jihadists. Many shops are abandoned, and mounds of rubble lay under old stone arches-but a handful of shopkeepers have reopened their doors after paying out of pocket for restoration work.

Mosul's central public library-which was founded a century ago last year, and had boasted more than 120,000 titles-reopened its doors in late 2019, after restoration. "We lost 2,350 books on literature, sociology or religion," said its director Jamal al-Abd Rabbo. But he added that public donations and purchases had allowed him to rebuild the collection up to 132,000 titles. Old leather-bound books with worn spines and creased pages still line the library's shelves. Crucially, the public's appetite for literature remains unbroken, he said, and "some of our visitors come daily, for an hour or two, to read." — AFP



An Iraqi youth sits at a stall for books and school supplies in Iraq's northern city of Mosul.



A picture shows a section of Hadrian's Wall near the wall's mile castle 39 near Hexham, northern England. — AFP



British singer Adele Laurie Blue Adkins aka Adele poses on the red carpet upon her arrival for the BRIT Awards 2022 in London. — AFP photos



British singer Adele Laurie Blue Adkins aka Adele celebrates after receiving the artist of the year award during the BRIT Awards 2022 ceremony and live show, in London.



British singer Adele Laurie Blue Adkins aka Adele performs on stage.

THREE WINS FOR ADELE AT NON-BINARY BRIT AWARDS

British superstar Adele won three awards, including the coveted Album of the Year, at the Brit awards on Tuesday, during a ceremony that did away with gender specific categories for the first time. Adele won best album for “30”, as well as song of the year for her hit single “Easy On Me” and artist of the year, no longer female or male, after which she acknowledged the changing times. “I understand why they changed the name of this award, but I really love being a woman, being a female artist, I do,” she said to applause at the packed O2 arena in London.

“I can’t believe a piano ballad won against so many bangers,” she said after winning song of the year against competition from the likes of A1 & J1, Central Cee, Glass Animals and KSI. Last month, Adele apologized to her fans for postponing her Las Vegas residency, just 24 hours before the opening night, blaming COVID-19 and “delivery delays”.

The Brits said they did away with gendered categories to celebrate “artists solely for their music and work, rather than how they choose to identify or as others may see them.” Sam Smith, who is non-binary, did not submit their album “Love Goes” last year because it did not fit into the male and female categories.

Genre not gender

This year’s nominations featured the biggest number of woman-fronted acts in over a decade, 18, although male artists



British rock band Wolf Alice celebrate after receiving the best group of the year award.

still dominated. Singer-songwriter Ed Sheeran paid homage to his wife as he received the award for Songwriter of the Year and gave two memorable performances at the arena, which had been decorated with mock pylons loaded with fireworks for the occasion. The biggest night for British pop re-introduced genre-based prizes for the first time since 2006, with awards for alternative/rock, pop/R&B, dance and hip-hop/rap/grime voted for by fans rather than music industry insiders. Last year’s winner of British Album of

the Year, Dua Lipa, won the TikTok vote for best pop/R&B act, and Sam Fender won Best Alternative Rock Act, which was presented by Rolling Stone Ronnie Wood. US teenager Olivia Rodrigo won International Song of the Year for “Good 4 U”, while Becky Hill won Best Dance Act, with the dance music category returning after 16 years away from the Brits. “I’ve been a little drum’n’bass raver since I was 12 years old,” an emotional Hill told the audience. Rapper Little Simz was nominated for four awards and took the stage with her

mother to receive the Best New Artist Award on the back of last year’s album “Sometimes I Might Be Introvert”, a backronym of her nickname Simbi. “I want to say to anyone who is watching this at home I am living proof that if you work hard at something, no matter where you come from, no matter your background, no matter your race, you can do something extraordinary,” she said. “So for all the kids. Keep dreaming, keep pushing. I am you. You are me. Blessings. Thank you so much,” said Little Simz, who grew up on a council estate in north London.

‘Where’s Boris?’

Host Mo Gilligan took a swipe at scandal-embroiled British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, inviting him to the ceremony to enjoy some cheese. “Boris I know you’re watching, I know you love a party, come on my guy, come down,” he said, with Johnson’s premiership teetering amid allegations of lockdown-breaking parties at Downing Street. “I know you like a cheese board, look at you, looking for the Dairylea,” Gilligan said referencing processed cheese.

The evening included performances by Liam Gallagher and Anne Marie, who stumbled during her performance of “Kiss My (Uh-Oh)” in front of the 20,000-strong audience, but regained her composure. — AFP

Winners

Album of the year
Adele - 30
Artist of the Year
Adele
Best group
Wolf Alice
Song of the Year
Adele - Easy On Me
Best new artist
Little Simz

Best international artist
Billie Eilish
Best international group
Silk Sonic
Best international song
Olivia Rodrigo - Good 4 U
Brits Rising Star
Holly Humberstone
Best dance
Becky Hill

Best rock/alternative
Sam Fender
Best pop/R&B
Dua Lipa
Best hip-hop/grime/rap
Dave
Producer of the year
Inflo
Songwriter of the year
Ed Sheeran



British rapper Simbiatu Abisola Abiola Ajikawo aka Little Simz celebrates with her mother after receiving the best new artist of the year award.



British singer and songwriter Samuel Thomas Fender aka Sam Fender (left) celebrates after receiving the best rock and alternative artist of the year award by British musician Ronnie Wood (right) during the BRIT Awards 2022 ceremony and live show.



US singer and songwriter Olivia Rodrigo celebrates after receiving the international song of the year award.



British rapper David Orobosa Omoregie aka Dave celebrates after receiving the best hip hop, grime and rap artist of the year award.



British singer and songwriter Rebecca Claire Hill Becky Hill celebrates after receiving the best dance artist of the year award.



British singer and songwriter Edward Christopher Sheeran aka Ed Sheeran celebrates after receiving the songwriter of the year award.

Sports

China naturalized Olympians walk fine line between love and scorn

Freestyle skier Gu inspires ecstasy and adulation among Chinese fans

BEIJING: Eileen Gu and Beverly Zhu were both born and raised in the US before deciding to represent China, but their contrasting fortunes at the Beijing Olympics highlight the fine line between love and condemnation for the host nation's naturalized athletes. Freestyle skier Gu has inspired ecstasy and adulation among Chinese fans, but figure skater Zhu has endured a torrent of online abuse after two blunder-filled performances.

The 18-year-old Gu-known as Gu Ailing in China-cemented herself as one of the faces of the Games by winning gold in the inaugural women's Big Air on Tuesday. "Gu Ailing is taking part in her first Winter Olympics but still landed a 1620 and won gold-she is so, so awesome!" said one widely shared social media post, referring to the high-stakes trick that sealed her win "So happy for you," said another. "Can't wait to see even more amazing performances from you!"

The mood was wildly different for Zhu, who competes under her Chinese name Zhu Yi. The 19-year-old broke down in tears on Monday after falling twice during her routine, after a tumble the previous day almost cost China a place in the final. But her distress failed to win much forgiveness on Chinese social media, where she was savaged for the mistakes. On the Twitter-like Weibo, the hashtag #ZhuYiFellOver racked up 230 million views. "I don't know why someone like this was allowed to represent China," wrote one user. The abuse was so intense that authorities appeared to censor some posts.

Stark contrast

In recent years, the country with a population of 1.4 billion has recruited some foreign-born players to boost its national squads, notably for football and ice hockey. China are by no means the only ones to do it, but the country stands out because it has minimal inward migration and bans citizens from holding dual

nationalities. Yet under President Xi Jinping, the lines appear a bit more blurred.

"If someone is deemed to be able to contribute to the fatherland, the party-state is willing to reward such a person very handsomely," said Steve Tsang, director of the China Institute at London's School of Oriental and African Studies. Gu was born in California to an American father and Chinese mother, and still lives in the United States. She opted in 2019 to compete for China, a decision she described as "incredibly tough".

A star student and part-time model, Gu has won a devoted following in China with her Beijing-accented Mandarin and apparent love for Chinese cuisine. She has landed a string of commercial deals with some of the country's biggest brands, including coffee chain Luckin and shopping site JD.com. "When I come to Beijing," Gu said, "I feel a strong sense of coming home." She has been tight-lipped about her nationality status, however, despite being repeatedly pushed by foreign reporters following her gold on Tuesday.

Zhu, meanwhile, renounced her US citizenship when she chose to represent China. But unlike the universal adoration for Gu, Zhu has been picked on for everything from her limited Mandarin to her family background. Some social media users insinuated, without any evidence, that her Olympic spot was linked to her father, a prominent artificial intelligence expert.

Fine line

With roots in both China and the United States, Gu and Zhu must walk a fine line when expressing either identity. Ties between the two powers have been at their lowest in decades and Washington led a diplomatic boycott of the Beijing Games citing concerns about human rights in China, including in the far-western Xinjiang region. Gu, who has said she wants to use sport to connect people in the two



ZHANGJIAKOU: China's Gu Ao competes in the snowboard men's halfpipe qualification run during the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympic Games at the Genting Snow Park H & S Stadium in Zhangjiakou yesterday. —AFP

countries, describes herself as "American when I am in America, and... Chinese when I am in China". But public scrutiny in both countries may make it harder to maintain a clear divide.

One of Gu's main Chinese sponsors, sportswear brand Anta, has loudly touted its use of Xinjiang cotton that rights groups have linked to forced labour. Some people on Instagram criticized Gu for her fre-

quent use of the social media app, accusing her of being oblivious to the fact that most Chinese people cannot freely access the internet, including Instagram. Gu on Tuesday dismissed the criticism when a journalist asked how hard it was to keep people in China and the United States happy. "I'm not trying to keep anyone happy. I'm an 18-year-old girl out here living my best life," she said. —AFP

Beijing sells troubled Xinjiang as a winter sports paradise

BEIJING: China's vast region of Xinjiang has hit the headlines as a centre of massive alleged human rights abuses, but Beijing is keen it gets recognition for another reason—as a top winter sports destination. As host of this year's Beijing Winter Olympics, China's Communist leadership has declared hopes of transforming its nascent winter sports industry into a \$157 billion powerhouse, and the troubled region of Xinjiang has been given a starring role.

The ballooning sports industry contrasts heavily with claims by rights groups that more than one million people in Xinjiang have been detained in internment camps and forced labor. Beijing has denied all allegations of abuse in Xinjiang—which the United States and several western parliaments have called a "genocide"—and has said such critics are "politicizing" sport. A deluge of state media reports has declared "a ski fever" is taking hold in Xinjiang, while wealthy young urbanites snap selfies with expensive ski gear in front of the region's snow-capped mountains.

The number of domestic ski resorts has quadrupled since Beijing won its 2015 bid to host the Winter Games,

with Xinjiang alone home to 72 resorts. State media has produced waves of reports showcasing remote villagers on the ice, as well as tearjerking profiles of young athletes from the region's ethnic minorities.

In one video, a vlogger from the Uyghur ethnic minority toured a "happy and exciting" novelty snow park in a desert region of southern Xinjiang. A young Uyghur cross-country skier was even chosen to be a final torchbearer in Friday's opening ceremony—a clear political choice from a leadership that minutely choreographs its image on the world stage. "China's policy of vigorously developing ice and snow sports and promoting people's health is benefiting people of all ethnic groups," said foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian this week. "It also reflects that members of different ethnic groups are all part of one large family."

'Ticks all the boxes'

Torchbearer Dinigeer Yilamujiang hails from the mountainous terrain of Xinjiang's Altay prefecture. Satellite data analysis by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute suggests the area contains 12 detention facilities built during the central government's crackdown. But Beijing has sought to rebrand it as the birthplace of skiing, with Chinese academics saying prehistoric cave drawings found in Altay demonstrate that it existed in the region over 10,000 years ago.

Archaeologists, however, have found evidence of early skis in multiple prehistoric societies around the world.

achievement for Kenya and Africa" and added "this is going to motivate more African members".

'A long shot'

Oguta said that nevertheless the world body had voiced some concerns about the viability of the sport in Kenya. And only a year since it joined the WCF, the Kenyan federation has been hampered by Covid, the absence of proper training facilities and a lack of funding. It even had to set up a GoFundMe page to raise money for training abroad to gear up for the upcoming Pacific-Asia Curling Championships in November. Two members were eventually able to travel to the United States in January for a month-long stint to get a feel for training on ice.

'Gifted sporting nation'

But the team have so far only played one international match—a friendly against Denmark late last year which the Kenyans won 7-5. Despite the challenges, the sport has attracted more than 1,000 enthusiasts, some of them moving on from other sports such as football and rugby. They hope to follow in the footsteps of trailblazing cross-country skier Philip Boit, who became the first Kenyan at the Winter Olympics in 1998, and female alpine skier Sabrina Simader, who competed in South Korea in 2018.

"The challenge to bring a winter sport to Kenya



HAMI: A snowboarder on a run at a ski field in Hami in China's western Xinjiang region. China's vast region of Xinjiang has been in the headlines as a centre of China's alleged rights abuses, but Beijing is keen it gets recognition for another reason - as a winter sports spot. —AFP

Officials claim that over 300 million Chinese have taken part in winter sports since it won the Games bid, a figure that has been enthusiastically repeated by International Olympic Committee president Thomas Bach. By some estimates, China is on track to become the world's biggest skiing nation, with an upwardly mobile class confined within its borders due to COVID-19, said China-based sports analyst Mark Dreyer. —AFP

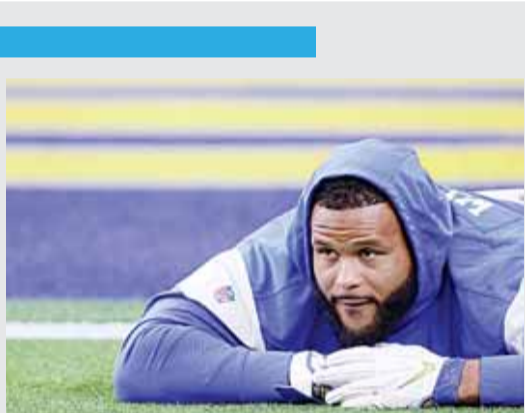
inspires me. It opens a totally new horizon for us since we don't experience winter," says Oguta. The 33-year-old narrowly missed out on a place in the Kenyan women's sevens team which competed in the 2016 Rio Olympics after suffering a knee injury. But she has proved herself to be a versatile sportswoman.

She also helped to establish kabaddi—a contact sport with its origins in India—in Kenya and serves as vice-president of the International Kabaddi Federation. Former Kenyan premier league goalkeeper Haggai Odhiambo Zuma says he too dabbled in kabaddi and rugby before choosing to focus on curling. "I love trying new sports and games," he says. "Kenya is naturally a gifted sporting nation. We have so much potential to bring medals at the Winter Olympics through curling if the government can invest in the ice training facilities and support the players to train abroad."

"If the government can also cater for the development of curling, the sport will bring joy to our nation, (but) nothing in life comes easy." Retired saleswoman Anne Kariuki, who now works as an Uber driver, says she began curling for fun but now hopes to represent her country at the next Winter Olympics. "I enjoy playing curling so much. It's a sport for everyone whatever your age," says the 50-year-old. "I didn't have the chance to compete for Kenya internationally in athletics, so I can't wait to see Kenya compete against the top nations and enter the next Olympics." —AFP



BEIJING: Malta's flag bearer Jenise Spiteri (2nd left) leads the delegation during the opening ceremony of the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympic Games. —AFP



INGLEWOOD: Aaron Donald, #99 of the Los Angeles Rams warms up before the game at SoFi Stadium in Inglewood, California. —AFP

Dominant Donald desperate for Super Bowl glory

LOS ANGELES: Aaron Donald has come a long way since the days when scouts used to wonder if he was big enough to thrive in the brutally uncompromising land of helmeted giants that is the modern National Football League. When the Los Angeles Rams defensive tackle takes to the field for the Super Bowl on Sunday, he will do so as one of the most feared players in the league. A 285-pound (129kg) human wrecking ball packed into a relatively modest 6ft 1in (1.85m) frame, Donald is regarded by many as the best defensive player in the NFL, and one of the greatest ever.

Now the 30-year-old future Hall of Famer is determined to crown a dazzling career with the one item missing from his resume—a Super Bowl ring. "The only thing I'm lacking that I want to achieve is to be a world champion," Donald said. "That's all I'm working for." Sunday's clash against the Cincinnati Bengals in Los Angeles marks the latest stop on a journey that has seen Donald go from being a self-described "lazy" kid to NFL superstar. At the age of 12, his father Archie, introduced him to weight training.

By the time he was 14, he would wake at 4.30am to start pumping iron in the gym that his father had built in the basement of their home. "I was a little lazy probably," Donald recalls. "My work ethic was instilled by my dad." Those grueling pre-dawn sessions gave Donald the physical foundation to thrive at gridiron. Yet even after a successful school and college career, some in the NFL were unconvinced that he had the stature to succeed as a professional.

'Short and scrappy'

One scouting report wondered if he would get "ground up by double teams" while another characterised him with the faintly disparaging tag of "short and scrappy." Donald used the scepticism as fuel. "You always hear things when you're growing up about being undersized," Donald said. "Me personally, it just made me work that much harder."

"Because it made me think 'Okay, maybe I haven't done enough to make them see that I can play at the highest level, no matter how good I am.' "I just worked hard and let my film speak for itself. I've seen myself grow from a young high school kid, to a young college kid, to a young professional to being here now in my eighth year in the league. "It's been a long ride but definitely worth it."

Last month Donald provided one of the signature plays of the NFC Championship game to help the Rams into the Super Bowl, muscling past the San Francisco 49ers offensive line and pressuring quarterback Jimmy Garoppolo into an interception that ended the game. That victory means Donald is back into the Super Bowl for the second time since the Rams were beaten by the New England Patriots in the 2019 showpiece. Donald is determined that this weekend's game at the Rams own SoFi Stadium will have a different outcome. —AFP

Kenya's fledgling curlers set sights on 2026 Games

NAIROBI: A revered athletics powerhouse at the Summer Olympics, Kenya has only ever seen two of its nationals competing at the Winter Games. But a motley crew of Kenyans in the newly formed national curling team are hoping against the odds to qualify for the 2026 extravaganza in Italy. They have plenty of hurdles to overcome—not least the lack of ice in the equatorial East African country. Team members have been forced to improvise, sweeping the curling stones along a gymnasium floor after the country's only ice rink was closed down because of the coronavirus pandemic.

"It's a long shot but being only the second African country to play curling may give us a chance of qualifying to the 2026 Winter Olympics," says Kenya Curling Federation president Laventer Oguta. "But all this will depend on our preparations and support from the government." Kenya officially registered with the World Curling Federation in February 2021, becoming only the second African member after Nigeria. WCF president Kate Caithness described it at the time as a "big

Rainbow-haired snowboarder puts Malta in a rare spotlight

ZHANGJIAKOU: Malta is best known for its Mediterranean sun but Beijing Olympic snowboarder Jenise Spiteri is on an unlikely mission to get her island nation into winter sports. The rainbow-haired Spiteri, who was born in California, has Maltese heritage and is the only athlete representing Malta in the Chinese capital.

She has more than 30,000 subscribers on her YouTube channel and said yesterday she has been up until "four or five in the morning almost every night" updating fans on her Olympic adventure. "It's really cool to see the reaction from people," said the 29-year-old, who finished 21st out of 22 in qualifying for the women's halfpipe, missing the final.

"I've had Maltese people all over the world saying it's so cool to see a Maltese person competing in snowboarding. It's been cool to just reach out." Spiteri fell on her first run in qualifying but managed to complete her second attempt cleanly. Her score of 25.25 was well behind defending champion Chloe Kim's 87.75 in first place. In between runs, Spiteri reached into her pocket and took a bite of a bean-paste bun that she had forgotten she put there.

"When I was strapping in to drop into that second run I felt in my pocket and had my dumplings in my pocket," she said. "I thought having a little bite of it would soften the blow of falling on that run and give me something sweet to enjoy." Spiteri, who did not take up snowboarding until she was 18, said she was hoping to inspire sporting late-starters and also promote winter sports in Malta. "It's not hard to go from Malta into the Alps," she said. "If there's someone there who really wants it, they can move not too far away." —AFP

Sports

Newcastle rock Everton 3-1, climb out of relegation zone

Profligate Man United punished by Burnley's fightback

NEWCASTLE: Eddie Howe urged Newcastle to "stay calm" after they moved out of the Premier League relegation zone with a vital 3-1 win against Everton that plunged Frank Lampard's side deeper into trouble on Tuesday. Howe's team fell behind to Jamaal Lascelles' own goal in the first half at St James' Park. But, on a pulsating Tyneside evening, the Magpies had the perfect response as Mason Holgate's own goal sparked a rousing revival.

Ryan Fraser put Newcastle ahead after half-time and Kieran Trippier's superb free-kick rounded off the hosts' second successive win. Mired in the bottom three for most of the season, Newcastle finally have their heads above water as they battle to avoid sinking into the Championship. Unbeaten in four league games, Newcastle are one place and two points above the relegation zone. Warning his players to stay focused, Howe said: "Consecutive wins in the Premier League are rare, they can change your status and elevate the club. But we have to stay calm and focus on the next game."

"We are in a better place, but football has a way of twisting and turning, so we are not getting ahead of ourselves, we know how tough this league can be." Everton are now in serious danger and Lampard will have been left in no doubts about the size of the task facing him. Lampard's first game in charge was a 4-1 win over Brentford in the FA Cup fourth round on Saturday. But the honeymoon ended much quicker than the former Chelsea boss would have liked.

Everton have failed to win their last six league games and sit uncomfortably just one point above Newcastle. "Of course the players' confidence levels are low, it smacks you in the face," Lampard said. "When I came to the club it was on a bad run of results. There is no magic wand to fix that. It was never going to be easy and this result puts it into sharp focus." The promise of a star-studded spending spree fuelled by Newcastle's Saudi-led owners failed to materialise during the January window.

Knockout blow

Having watched Everton score four for the first time in 42 matches at the weekend, Lampard

started with his new signings-Dele Alli and Donny van de Beek-among the substitutes. However, an injury to Demarai Gray forced Lampard to give former Tottenham midfielder Alli his debut in the 25th minute.

Everton snatched the lead in the 36th minute when Anthony Gordon's free-kick was half cleared to Holgate and the defender saw his shot hacked off the line by Fabian Schar, only for Lascelles to deflect it into his own net. Newcastle drew level thanks to another own goal just 60 seconds later. Remarkably, it was the same two players involved as Lascelles' header from Trippier's cross hit the bar and bounced in off Holgate's thigh.

Carelessly surrendering possession in the 56th minute, Alli's error allowed Allan Saint-Maximin to embark on rampaging run and Fraser met his cross with a close-range finish. Everton had lost their way in a lacklustre manner that will have alarmed Lampard and Trippier delivered the knockout blow in the 80th minute. Netting for the first time since his move back to the Premier League from Atletico Madrid, England right-back Trippier curled his free-kick past Jordan Pickford to spark wild celebrations.

Man Utd frustrated

Meanwhile, Ralf Rangnick blamed a lack of aggression for Manchester United's failure to beat bottom-of-the-table Burnley as a 1-1 draw at Turf Moor saw the Red Devils fall out of the Premier League's top four. With Cristiano Ronaldo left on the bench, United were made to pay for not making more of a dominant first 45 minutes after Paul Pogba put them in front.

Burnley roared back after the break and gave their survival hopes a boost when Jay Rodriguez levelled two minutes into the second half. West Ham's 1-0 win over Watford sees the Hammers leapfrog United into the final slot to qualify for next season's Champions League, while Arsenal and Tottenham remain within striking distance with games in hand. "Again it's a frustrating night for us because we should have won that game easily," said Rangnick. "The first 15-20 minutes of the second



BURNLEY: Manchester United's Portuguese midfielder Bruno Fernandes (right) vies with Burnley's English midfielder Ashley Westwood during the English Premier League football match between Burnley and Manchester United on February 8, 2022. — AFP

half we were just not aggressive enough. One point from a performance like this is just not enough."

United's troubled season hit another bump in the road when they were dumped out of the FA Cup by Championship side Middlesbrough on penalties on Friday. The lessons from that defeat were not learned as again Rangnick's men had more than enough chances to kill the game as a contest before half-time before being punished for a slack piece of defending. For the first time the German left a fit Ronaldo out of his starting line-up for a league match after the 37-year-old played the full 120 minutes on Friday.

However, United's first half performance will add more fuel to the debate on whether they function better as a unit without the five-time Ballon d'Or

winner. The visitors had the ball in the net three times and missed a number of guilt-edged chances, but only had one goal to show for their dominance by half-time. Raphael Varane thought he had scored his first United goal when he leapt to power home Bruno Fernandes' free-kick on 15 minutes. But after a lengthy VAR review, the goal was disallowed for Harry Maguire interfering with Rodriguez from an offside position.

Three minutes later, United did deservedly lead when Pogba thundered in Luke Shaw's cross from the edge of the box. Moments later Burnley captain Ben Mee turned Marcus Rashford's cross into his own net, but was handed a reprieve by a harsh foul given against Pogba in the build-up. "We scored three goals," Rangnick said. — AFP

Inter dump Roma out of Italian Cup on Mourinho's return

MILAN: Inter Milan marked the return of Jose Mourinho to the San Siro on Tuesday by dumping their idol's new team Roma out of the Italian Cup 2-0 and reaching the semi-finals. Mourinho coached in front of an Inter home crowd for the first time since leaving in 2010 but after being warmly welcomed back by supporters in Milan, Roma limply exited the competition thanks to a goal almost straight from kick-off by Edin Dzeko and Alexis Sanchez's second-half piledriver.

The win for Inter, who will meet either AC Milan or Lazio in the last four with those sides facing each other on Wednesday, was the perfect response to losing the derby on Saturday, the tempestuous aftermath of which has led to coach Simone Inzaghi being suspended for the weekend's huge clash at fellow Serie A title chasers Napoli. Portuguese Mourinho is a footballing deity for Inter fans thanks to two magical seasons on the Nerazzurri bench which culminated with the treble triumph of Serie A, the Italian Cup and most importantly the Champions League.

He beat Roma to the league title and cup in a battle of former Chelsea managers with Claudio Ranieri, only seeing off his Blues predecessor to the championship on the final day of the 2009-10 sea-

son. "I won't ever hide that my relationship with Inter is one that will last forever. But I came here to win for Roma and my supporters who today are the Roma supporters," said Mourinho. "We didn't win but apart from the first five minutes I saw a Roma team play well against a team against whom it's not easy to play well."

Mourinho welcomed back

The fans present at the San Siro in much lower numbers than for the derby-made their feelings very clear about their former boss of bosses. The hardcore supporters in the Curva Nord unfurled a banner which read "Welcome home Jose" and chanted his name throughout the build-up to kick-off. Once the teams came out the applause for the home fans hero spread around the stadium, and Mourinho responded by waving and blowing kisses to all four corners of the ground.

Supporters even booed referee Marco Di Bello when he booked Mourinho for protesting at the end of the first half. With the match underway the Inter players were in no mood to do Mourinho any favours, with Roma old boy Dzeko placing home a beautiful volley from Ivan Perisic's cross with just over a minute on the clock. Nicolo Barella then crashed a long-range drive off the bar before Milan Skrinjar headed straight at Rui Patricio from point blank range.

Roma then woke up and after a Rick Karsdorp cross was diverted onto the bar, Nicolo Zaniolo wasted a great chance to level the scores, shooting straight at Samir Handanovic when put one-on-one



Roma's Portuguese head coach Jose Mourinho

by Tammy Abraham. The contest then turned scrappy and not long before the break a tearful Alessandro Bastoni was carried off the pitch after going over on his right ankle, with Inter later saying the defender had twisted it.

Handanovic and Patricio both pulled off impressive stops from distance efforts from Sergio Oliveira and Barella just after the hour mark, but Patricio could do nothing to keep out Sanchez's rocket which ended the tie in the 68th minute. All that was left for the Inter fans was to belt out Mourinho's name one last time and look ahead to a massive week which as well as Napoli away includes the Champions League visit of Liverpool. — AFP

FIFA backs semi-automated offside system to boost VAR

ABU DHABI: FIFA hopes the rolling out of its semi-automated offside technology being trialled at the Club World Cup will not only speed up decision-making but offer increased clarity for football supporters. The optical tracking system was first tested at last year's Arab Cup in Qatar, and the ultimate goal is for it to be fully in use for the World Cup in the Gulf state later this year.

Pierluigi Collina, chairman of FIFA's referees committee, on Wednesday told reporters VAR had proved "very successful" since its introduction but conceded more consistency is needed. "It's not yet at the very, very top... the same speed decision-making process. Being fast and being accurate don't work together," Collina said at the Club World Cup in Abu Dhabi.

"It's important the video officials get an accurate decision, but we are aware we need to reduce the time, particularly with offside." "Sometimes it takes a bit longer to assess an offside decision, particularly in very tight incidents," he said. "The goal is already celebrated, everybody is waiting and then there is a goal disallowed, or the other way round... and then after quite a long time there is the final decision."

The data-driven, limb-tracking technology relies on a series of dedicated cameras and broadcast cameras around the stadium to give the exact position of players on the pitch, offering referees precise information within seconds. To provide improved accuracy, the system currently generates 18 data points per player-tracking the various parts of the body to create a skeletal, three-dimensional model. The aim is to increase that to 29 for the World Cup to provide further precision, according to the head of football technology at FIFA, Sebastian Runge.

Once a final decision is made, the artificial-intelligence driven technology turns the images into a 3D animation that can be displayed on the big screen at grounds. "By taking that data, we can enter the 3D world and we can create animations, that can explain perfectly whether a player was onside, how much of that player was offside or onside," said Runge. "We put that in an animation that will be shared with TV and our giant screen operators and we can inform the spectators in a clearer way on offside and onside decisions."

Despite the ever-growing influence of technology, FIFA insisted the match officials will always make the final call. A dedicated VAR assistant is responsible for monitoring offside, checking incidents as they happen rather than waiting for a stoppage in play. The assistant notifies the main VAR official, who makes the decision and then speaks to the referee. "I know that someone called it 'robot offside'; it's not. — AFP

Suns win their 3rd straight game as Celtics beat Nets

LOS ANGELES: Devin Booker and Mikal Bridges combined for 58 points and JaVale McGee provided a much-needed spark off the bench as the Phoenix Suns won their third straight game with a 114-109 victory over Philadelphia. Booker scored a game-high 35 points and Bridges finished with 23 as the NBA-leading Suns improved to 44-10 with 22 victories on the road in front of a crowd of 20,700 at Wells Fargo Center arena.

"Our goal is what everybody knows it is," coach Monty Williams said. "But our mission is to do stuff like we did tonight along the way." Chris Paul had 16 points and 12 assists, McGee tallied 15 points and 12 rebounds, and Jae Crowder grabbed 14 rebounds for the Suns. Starting centre DeAndre Ayton also scored 10 points.

Phoenix had five players in double figures after having six players score 10 or more in a win over Chicago on Monday. Joel Embiid led the 76ers with 34 points and 12 rebounds, making it his 21st consecutive game with at least 25 points. Tobias Harris poured in 30 points and Tyrese Maxey had 14. Elsewhere, Marcus Smart and Jaylen Brown each scored 22 points as the Boston Celtics handed the struggling Brooklyn Nets their ninth-straight loss with a 126-91 rout in New York.

Boston charged out of the gate to a 28-2 lead just seven minutes in and led 35-16 heading into the second quarter. Brown scored eight points in the Celtics' 14-0 game-opening run. "I don't know how often or if we've ever been so good to start like that before, but it felt good," Brown said. "We knew



PHILADELPHIA: Mikal Bridges #25 of the Phoenix Suns elevates for a dunk during the first quarter against the Philadelphia 76ers at Wells Fargo Center on February 08, 2022. — AFP

some of those guys were out. We wanted to just take care of business early. We didn't want to play around and give them confidence and let them linger into the game."

Jayson Tatum added 19 points as Boston won for the eighth time in nine games. Robert Williams collected 12 points and 11 rebounds, while Dennis Schroder chipped in 11. The Nets fell to 2-10 since Kevin Durant suffered a left knee injury in mid-January. The loss dropped them into eighth place in the Eastern Conference. Brooklyn also played without James Harden (left hamstring), who missed his

third straight game and fifth during the skid.

"Frankly, that's a really good starting five that's playing really good basketball playing against a reserve lineup, so we're asking them to match a high, high-quality NBA starting five," Nets coach Steve Nash said. Also, Trae Young and John Collins combined for 54 points to help the Atlanta Hawks halt a two-game losing skid with a 133-112 victory over the short-handed Indiana Pacers. Young poured in 34 points and 11 assists while Collins delivered 20 points, including 13 in the first quarter. — AFP

Chelsea reach Club World Cup final

Lukaku ends drought • Monterrey beat Jazira for fifth place



ABU DHABI: Hilal's defender Mohammed Al-Breik (right) vies for the ball with Chelsea's defender Marcos Alonso during the 2021 FIFA Club World Cup semifinal match at Mohammed Bin Zayed stadium yesterday. — AFP

ABU DHABI: Romelu Lukaku scored a much-needed goal as Chelsea beat Saudi Arabia's Al Hilal 1-0 yesterday to advance to the Club World Cup final against South American champions Palmeiras. Chelsea's club-record signing had failed to score in five games before arriving in Abu Dhabi, and the Blues are looking for the 28-year-old to find his best form in the second half of the season.

The Belgium international swept in from close range on 33 minutes after a defensive lapse to send Chelsea through to Saturday's final, the second in three years between English and Brazilian teams. Chelsea can join Manchester United and Liverpool as the third English side to win the Club World Cup, having finished as runners-up to Corinthians on their first appearance in 2012.

They may yet have coach Thomas Tuchel in the dugout come the weekend, with the German still isolating back home after testing positive for COVID-19. Al Hilal, coached by former Monaco boss Leonardo Jardim, will contest the third-place play-off against Egypt's Al Ahly as Chelsea's win made it 12 from 12 for Europe against Asian clubs in the tournament.

Despite the presence of former Manchester United and Watford forward Odion Ighalo alongside ex-Porto striker Moussa Marega in attack, Al Hilal struggled initially to test Kepa Arrizabalaga in goal. The Spaniard kept his place in the line-up despite the return of Edouard Mendy following his Africa Cup of Nations triumph with Senegal.

Hakim Ziyech fired a shot narrowly over and

Lukaku failed to make proper contact with Cesar Azpilicueta's low ball across goal, but there was no shortage of service for the Belgian. He held off a defender only to strike straight at Abdullah Al-Mayouf, but Lukaku was presented with the simplest of chances when Yasir Al-Shahrani's failed clearance left him to turn in the opener.

Kai Havertz, whose cross led to Lukaku's goal, clipped an effort against the outside of the post after jinking into the area early in the second half. Ziyech then drew a good stop from Al-Mayouf before Al Hilal, who put six past Al Jazira in the previous round, belatedly sparked into life around the hour.

Arrizabalaga raced off his line to block from Marega and then pulled off a sensational one-hand-

ed save, flying to his left to keep out Mohamed Kanno's curling attempt from 20 m. Matheus Pereira tormented Chelsea on his last outing against them while at West Brom last season, but the Brazilian's fizzing effort into the side-netting was the last glimmer of hope for the record four-time Asian Champions League winners.

Meanwhile, Mexico's Monterrey scored three first-half goals to defeat UAE Pro League champions Al Jazira 3-1 to finish fifth yesterday at the Club World Cup. An own goal from Zayed Sultan gave the CONCACAF Champions League winners a fourth-minute lead, with Rogelio Funes Mori scoring a quick-fire second before Cesar Montes added the third goal. Al Jazira grabbed a consolation through Bruno in stoppage time. — AFP

Shiffrin left 'low' but US finally win Beijing gold

BEIJING: US ski star Mikaela Shiffrin's Beijing Olympics threatened to turn into a winter nightmare but there was long-awaited redemption for snowboarder Lindsey Jacobellis as she won Team USA's first gold of the Games yesterday. Six gold medals were up for grabs on the fifth day of full competition in the Chinese capital, but Shiffrin's wait goes on in her faltering pursuit of a career third Olympic gold in alpine skiing.

The 26-year-old made a shock early exit from the giant slalom on Monday and with the pressure on, suffered the same fate in the slalom, with rival Petra Vlhova of Slovakia taking full advantage. Vlhova produced a stunning second leg to clock a combined total of 1min 44.98sec over the two runs and edge Austria's reigning world champion Katharina Liensberger into silver by eight-hundredths of a second.

In stark contrast, Shiffrin slid wide after just a handful of gates before skiing out in the first leg, then plonked herself down on the snow, head in hands. The American said she felt "pretty awful", although added: "But it won't feel awful forever. I just feel pretty low right now." Shiffrin will compete in three more individual events in Beijing, with the super-G on Friday, followed by the downhill on Tuesday and alpine combined on February 17.

Snowboard cross rider Jacobellis said her infamous fall that cost her the Olympic title in 2006 had "kept her hungry" as she finally got the United States on the gold-medal board. Jacobellis was comfortably in the lead in the final at the 2006 Turin Olympics when she attempted to "style out" her last jump - and fell just before the finish line, coming second. "(People) can keep talking about (2006) all they want because it really shaped me into the individual that I am and kept me hungry and really helped me keep fighting in the sport," said the 36-year-old.



YANQING, China: Slovakia's Petra Vlhova competes in the first run of the women's slalom during the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympic Games at the Yanqing National Alpine Skiing Centre yesterday. — AFP

Another American snowboarder, Chloe Kim, qualified top in the halfpipe after a scintillating first run but then suffered a fall in her second. Along with Shiffrin, the 21-year-old Kim - who made worldwide headlines when she won snowboard gold as a teenager at the 2018 Pyeongchang Games - is one of the stars to watch at this Olympics.

"Well, I fell so it wasn't great," she said of her failed second run which left her sprawled on her stomach as she attempted to land from a trick. She said her first run had gone so well "that honestly for the second I just wanted to try a different line, I've never practiced it before so I'm not surprised that I fell. "But just having so much fun out here... I can't ask for anything more, just enjoying the ride."

'Fear of unforeseen'

Also in snowboard action, but at the other end of his career to Kim, was 35-year-old Shaun White. The three-time Olympic champion - who is twice the age of some of his rivals - will retire from competition after Beijing and is determined to go out with a bang. But he looked more likely to go out in a whimper when he fell in his first run in the halfpipe, before

pulling out a far better second effort to reach the final in an ultimately comfortable fourth place. White admitted he had been worried. "I knew I could do it, I was just like 'what if?' What if I slip or something happens-I hit a snow chunk and it's over. That's the big fear, the unforeseen," said the American.

In freestyle skiing, Birk Ruud enjoyed a dominant victory in Big Air - and was so comfortable that he performed his third jump holding the Norwegian flag. He also wore a gold bracelet on his left wrist in tribute to his father, who died of cancer last April. "I got this from my father before he passed away," said Ruud. "I wanted to say 'thank you' to him, he's with me," he added, touching the bracelet.

Separately, the International Olympic Committee said the medals ceremony for the team figure skating has been delayed by a legal issue. The Russian team won the gold medal with the United States taking silver and Japan bronze, but the ceremony was removed from its scheduled slot on Tuesday. IOC spokesman Mark Adams cited a "legal consultation" with the sport's governing body, the International Skating Union, without giving further details. — AFP

Zouma fined for abusing cat; Adidas cuts ties

LONDON: West Ham yesterday fined Kurt Zouma the "maximum amount possible" for mistreating his cat as the RSPCA charity said it had taken two animals belonging to the France defender into care. The 27-year-old has also lost his deal with sportswear giant Adidas over the disturbing video showing him dropping, kicking and slapping his pet.

The RSPCA animal welfare organization described the video as "very upsetting" and is leading the investigation while cooperating with police. Around 200,000 people have signed an online petition calling for Zouma to be prosecuted as the public backlash intensifies in a country renowned for its love of animals.

West Ham issued a fresh statement yesterday saying Zouma was complying with the RSPCA, including delivering his two cats to the charity for assessment. "Kurt is extremely remorseful and, like everyone at the club, fully understands the depth of feeling surrounding the incident and the need for action to be taken," the club said.

"Separate to the RSPCA's investigation and pending further sanction once the outcome of that process is determined, West Ham United can confirm that Kurt Zouma has been fined the maximum amount possible following his actions in the video that circulated. "The player has immediately accepted the fine and has requested that it is donated to animal welfare charities."

Reports said the fine would total around £250,000 (\$340,000), with standard Premier League contracts allowing for a maximum fine of two weeks' wages. The RSPCA, which is working with police on the case, tweeted that the cats were "safe and in our care". "Our priority is and has always been



Kurt Zouma

the wellbeing of these cats," said a spokesman. "They've been taken for a check-up at a vets and then will remain in our care while the investigation continues. We're grateful to everyone who expressed their concern for these cats. We were dealing with this issue before the video went viral online and are leading the investigation."

Adidas, the defender's official personal kit supplier, confirmed it had cut ties with Zouma, saying in a statement: "We have concluded our investigation and can confirm Kurt Zouma is no longer an Adidas-contracted athlete." Insurance and investment company Vitality announced it was suspending its sponsorship as West Ham's "official wellness partner", saying it was "distressed" by the video.

A spokesman for Heineken UK, West Ham's "beer and cider partner", said it was appalled at the contents of the video and welcomed the actions the club were taking. West Ham had previously said they would be dealing with the matter internally, adding: "We would like to make it clear that we in no way condone cruelty towards animals."

But Zouma, who had previously apologized for his actions, was nevertheless selected by manager David Moyes for Tuesday's 1-0 win against Watford at the London Stadium. Responding to criticism, Moyes insisted he was an "animal lover" but was adamant he had to do what was right for his club, who are fourth in the Premier League table. — AFP