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Biden, Putin discuss Ukraine; Kremlin slams 'provocations'

Kuwaitis urged to leave Ukraine • Kuwaiti, bedoon students can return without PCR



KYIV: Demonstrators shout slogans as they march during a rally yesterday held to show unity amid US warnings of an imminent Russian invasion. — AFP

MOSCOW: Russian leader Vladimir Putin yesterday slammed Western claims of an imminent Moscow invasion of Ukraine as a "provocation" as he began new crisis talks with US President Joe Biden. Weeks of tensions that have seen Russia surround its western neighbor with more than 100,000 troops intensified after Washington warned that an all-out invasion could begin "any day" and Russia launched its biggest naval drills in years across the Black Sea.

Russia's defense ministry added to the febrile atmosphere by announcing that it had chased off a US submarine that it alleged had crossed into its territorial waters near the Kuril Islands in the Pacific. The ministry said it had summoned the US defense attache in Moscow over the incident.

The military maneuvers gave added urgency to a hastily arranged call yesterday between Biden and Putin aimed at defusing one of the gravest crises in East-West relations

since the Cold War. "President Biden's secure call with Russian President Putin convened" at 1604 GMT, a White House official told reporters.

Meanwhile, the Kuwaiti foreign ministry yesterday urged Kuwaiti citizens planning to travel to Ukraine to delay their travel "for the time being". The ministry, in a statement, also called on Kuwaiti nationals currently present in Ukraine to leave the country immediately "for sake of their safety". It advised Kuwaitis in Ukraine to contact the Kuwaiti Embassy in Kyiv on the phone numbers +380-63-665-0066, +380-63-503-0966 and +380-63-956-6664. Kuwaiti citizens and bedoon students (holders of article 17 passports) in Ukraine are not required to present a PCR test certificate upon arrival at Kuwait International Airport, the Directorate General of Civil Aviation said. Putin began his afternoon by holding talks with France's Emmanuel

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News in brief

Kishan fetches \$2m in IPL auction

BANGALORE: India's rising star Ishan Kishan fetched a whopping \$2 million in the auction for the Indian Premier League - the world's most valuable cricket tournament - yesterday. Five-time champions Mumbai Indians bought back the 23-year-old Kishan, a wicketkeeper-batsman, in a fierce bidding war on a dramatic first day in Bangalore that witnessed auctioneer Hugh Edmeades collapse. Ten teams, including two new additions in Lucknow Super Giants and Gujarat Titans, started with a total purse of nearly \$75 million to spend across two days. — AFP

Morocco lecturer jailed

RABAT: A Moroccan court has jailed a lecturer for a year for sexually harassing a female student, a lawyer said yesterday, as a "sex for grades" scandal rocks the kingdom's academic institutions. "The defendant was found guilty of sexual harassment by the Tangiers court of first instance," said Aicha Guellaa, a lawyer for the student. He "was sentenced to a year in prison without parole and a fine of 50,000 dirhams (\$5,300) in damages," Guellaa said. The lecturer was one of several charged in recent weeks as female students in the country broke their silence about sexual blackmail. — AFP

OPEC+ faces 'chronic' struggle

LONDON: The International Energy Agency on Friday raised its forecast for world oil demand in 2022 but warned of a "chronic" failure by OPEC and its allies to meet their output targets. The 13 members of the Saudi-led Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and their 10 allies, including Russia, had cut production sharply in 2020 as prices collapsed after the COVID pandemic emerged. The group, dubbed OPEC+, began to increase output last year, renewing every month a target of 400,000 barrels per day, as demand and prices recovered after countries began to lift COVID restrictions. — AFP

Canada police evacuate key border bridge

WINDSOR, Canada: Canadian police yesterday began clearing a key bridge of truckers protesting COVID-19 restrictions, even as authorities in Ottawa braced for renewed demonstrations expected to bring thousands to the federal capital. The provincial supreme court in Ontario had ordered truckers to end their blockade of the strategic Ambassador Bridge, which links the city of Windsor in Canada to Detroit, Michigan in the US.

The protest has forced major

automakers in both countries to halt or scale back production, and Washington on Friday urged Ottawa to use its federal powers to end the blockade. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau promised "an increasingly robust police intervention," adding that borders cannot remain closed and "this conflict must end."

Ontario province, heavily dependent on the auto industry, has declared a state of emergency. But while Canadian police began the process of clearing the Ambassador Bridge - tents erected in traffic lanes were taken down, and some trucks had left the scene by mid-morning yesterday - protests continued, there and elsewhere. As police backed by armored vehicles advanced slowly on the bridge, dozens of demonstrators continued to block the way.

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Booster efficacy wanes significantly by fourth month

WASHINGTON: The efficacy of third doses of the Pfizer and Moderna mRNA vaccines wanes substantially by the fourth month after administration, a new study by the US Centers of Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) said Friday. Though it's now

well documented that vaccine efficacy goes down after two doses, relatively little has been published on the duration of protection after a booster.

The new study was based on more than 241,204 visits to the emergency department or an urgent care clinic, and 93,408 hospitalizations, which are more serious, among adults with COVID-19-like illness during Aug 26, 2021-Jan 22, 2022. Vaccine efficacy was estimated by comparing the odds of a positive COVID test between vaccinated and unvaccinated patients and using statistical methods to control for calendar week, geographic area, while adjusting for age, the level of local transmission, and

patient characteristics like comorbidities.

During the Omicron-predominant period, vaccine efficacy against COVID-associated emergency department or urgent care visits was 87 percent during the two months after a third dose, but fell to 66 percent by the fourth month. Vaccine efficacy against hospitalization was 91 percent in the first two months, but fell to 78 percent by the fourth month after a third dose.

"The finding that protection conferred by mRNA vaccines waned in the months after receipt of a third vaccine dose reinforces the importance of

Continued on Page 2

Do masks in class damage development?

WASHINGTON: Two years into the pandemic, concerns around the effect of masks on the linguistic, emotional and social development of children are taking center stage. In the United States, calls to lift mask mandates at school have multiplied in recent weeks, including within the scientific community, at a time when new cases

of COVID-19 are plunging. Scientific studies have shown that masks do indeed impact children's ability to recognize faces and emotions. As with adults, masks can also interfere with verbal communication. But experts are divided on the long-term effects on children's development.

The first fear concerns the learning of language, which takes place in the first years of life. Children learn to speak through social interactions, and in particular look at the mouths of adults in order to dissect syllables. This path being blocked, it seems logical to suppose a harmful effect.

Continued on Page 2



WINDSOR, Canada: Canadian police deploy yesterday to move protesters blocking access to the Ambassador Bridge and demanding an end to government COVID-19 mandates. — AFP



HYDERABAD: Students wearing facemasks and face shields attend a class at a government girls' primary school on Friday. — AFP

Local

Airfares almost back to pre-pandemic levels

Travel agent explains factors that affect ticket prices

By Ben Garcia

KUWAIT: Airline ticket prices have fallen in recent months to nearly pre-pandemic levels for many destinations. Airfares to some European countries such as UK and France are now at KD 150 to KD 250 depending on the airline and destination city. Meanwhile, return tickets to India are available for KD 110-KD 120, while tickets to the United States can be bought for KD 250-KD 300 compared to almost KD 1,000-KD 1,500 in 2021. Meanwhile, tickets to Dubai are back at KD 60-KD 70.

"Demand is high now and people want to travel outside the country. There are many bookings to Europe and East Asia, plus the US. Inquiries are never ending, as people want to travel," a travel agency executive told Kuwait Times on the condition of anonymity.

“Demand is high and people want to travel”

Disparities

But there are still disparities in airfares to some destinations, including Manila. Kuwait Times spoke to some travel agencies and confirmed ticket prices to Manila range from KD 260 to as much as KD 615. One travel agent explained that the difference is due to different factors, such as the airline, flight

date and whether it's a direct or indirect flight.

"The prices of direct flights are definitely expensive compared to tickets for connecting flights," she explained. On the other hand, she expected prices could soon drop after the Philippine government lifted a quota for arriving passengers per flight. "We are expecting a drastic change in the prices of tickets to the Philippines in the coming days, because almost all airlines flying to the Philippines are now operating the route again," the travel agency executive said.

Normal prices

As for India, a travel agent confirmed that tickets are almost at normal prices. "Nowadays, we have round tickets for KD 110 to KD 120 to most cities in India," he said. "The good news is that there are more airlines that want to resume flights to several destinations, including India, so it means cheaper prices are likely coming soon."

Although there are some hopes that everything will eventually go back to normal, especially in the travel and tourism sector, many countries have adopted several health measures such 'no PCR test no flight' or 'no vaccine no entry' policies. The airlines are also cautious, demanding all passengers must undergo a PCR test; some within 72 hours,



some 48 hours. "Although, some countries don't require a negative PCR test result on arrival, airlines are playing safe. They demand all passengers must be vaccinated and present a negative PCR test result before boarding the aircraft," she said.

Meanwhile, Kuwait Airways and Jazeera Airways, the two main carriers from Kuwait, have resumed flights to several destinations and are now aggressively hiring new crews and workers to meet rising demand.

IATA renews Kuwait Airways' IOSA certificate

KUWAIT: Kuwait Airways announced the renewal of the IATA Operational Safety Audit (IOSA) from the International Air Transport Association (IATA), an accredited international evaluation system designed to assess the operational management and control systems of airlines. The Operational Safety and ERP, Operations, Ground Handling and Cargo, Engineering and Security departments functioned to carry out this audit and to apply it in accordance with the standards of IATA. KAC added in a press statement that the Operational Safety and ERP Department accomplished this audit with extraordinary efficiency and professionalism, noting its keenness on constantly improving and developing its operational system in accordance with international safety standards for airlines and air transport.

Kuwait Airways affirmed that it renders enormous attention to the safety and security of its aircraft and its valued passengers and is keen to conduct comprehensive checks and maintenance periodically for its aircraft, whether relating to maintenance within or outside the aircraft, where safety comes among the fundamental objectives in all Kuwait Airways operations and services it provides to passengers.

Burgan Bank honors retail banking staff

KUWAIT: Burgan Bank recently honored a number of its top-performing Retail Banking and Customer Experience Management employees and branches, in recognition of their hard work and achievements over the past year. The Bank recognized these employees and teams for delivering an outstanding level of customer service, which reflects positively on the overall customer experience and satisfaction with the bank.

The ceremony held for the occasion was attended by many representatives of the bank's senior management. Sixty seven employees from the retail banking and customer service departments were awarded valuable prizes. The ceremony also recognized nine of Burgan Bank's branches for offering an exceptional banking experience to customers. The branches recognized during the ceremony were selected based on the quarterly review conducted to monitor the branches' overall performance and their ability to reflect Burgan's culture and core values within the workplace.



Commenting on the occasion, Naser Al-Qaisi, Chief Retail Banking Officer at Burgan Bank, said, "With the increasingly fierce competition in the banking sector, the true benchmark of success for a Bank is the quality and exclusivity of its banking services, in addition to the level of customers' satisfaction with these services. Achieving and maintaining success in these areas is only possible through a talented and professional team operating in a workplace that embraces their capabilities and values their efforts. Burgan Bank's initiative to honor its outstanding employees serves as a catalyst for

motivating its workforce to reach high standards of performance and collective success consistently. Undoubtedly this reflects positively on our organization and confirms our commitment to the highest international standards of service and quality."

Ahmad Al-Armali, CEM Senior Manager at Burgan Bank, said, "Burgan Bank recognizes that its institutional success relies in large part on the dedication, efficiency and talent of its customer service employees. Their professionalism at all levels is what truly sets the Bank and its customer offering apart from others in the market. Therefore,



Naser Al-Qaisi

our team's success in demonstrating excellence while maintaining strong and sustainable customer relationships is an achievement that is worth highlighting and celebrating."

Burgan Bank has a special evaluation system that is carried out on a regular basis to select distinguished employees in various departments. The system takes a number of performance indicators into consideration including the CEM exam, individual performance quality and level, commitment to high-quality service, personal discipline, leadership, creativity, and teamwork competencies.

Biden, Putin discuss Ukraine; Kremlin...

Continued from Page 1

Macron that the French presidency said lasted one hour, 40 minutes. Macron's office said "both expressed a desire to continue dialogue" but reported no clear progress. The Kremlin said Putin told Macron that Western claims of a planned Russian invasion were "provocative speculation" and could spark a conflict in Ukraine.

Russia yesterday added to the ominous tone by pulling some of its diplomatic staff out of Ukraine. The foreign ministry in Moscow said its decision was prompted by fears of "possible provocations from the Kyiv regime". But Washington and a host of European countries cited the growing threat of a Russian invasion as they called on their citizens to leave Ukraine as soon possible.

Britain and the United States also pulled out most of their remaining military advisers while the US embassy ordered "most" of its Kyiv staff to leave. Dutch carrier KLM announced that it was suspending commercial flights to Ukraine until further notice.

Booster efficacy wanes...

Continued from Page 1

further consideration of additional doses to sustain or improve protection," the authors concluded. Speaking at a White House COVID briefing on Wednesday, President Joe Biden's top medical advisor Anthony Fauci said it was likely that fourth doses would more likely be needed for subsets of people who mount weaker immune responses, such as the elderly and immunocompromised.

In a separate development Friday, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) authorized a new lab-grown antibody treatment by pharmaceutical company Lilly called bebtelovimab. The drug is administered as an intravenous injection over at least 30 seconds and has been green lighted for the treatment of mild-to-

The prospect of frightened Westerners fleeing their country prompted Kyiv to issue an appeal to its citizens to "remain calm". "Right now, the people's biggest enemy is panic," Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said on a visit to troops stationed near the Russian-annexed peninsula of Crimea.

Several thousands also braved the winter call to march through Kyiv in a show of unity in the face of the growing fears of war. "Panic is useless," said student Maria Shcherbenko as the crowd waved Ukraine's blue-and-yellow flags and sang the national anthem. "We must unite and fight for independence."

Washington on Friday issued its most dire warning yet that Russia had assembled enough forces to launch a serious assault. "Our view that military action could occur any day now, and could occur before the end of the Olympics, is only growing in terms of its robustness," US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan warned.

US military assessments had earlier said the Kremlin may want to wait for the Beijing Winter Olympic Games to end on February 20 before launching an offensive so as not to offend Russia's ally China. Ukrainian leaders have been trying to talk down the prospects of an all-out war because of the damaging effect it was having on the country's teetering economy and public morale. — AFP

moderate COVID among people 12 and over at high risk of severe disease. Data supporting the authorization came from a clinical trial that showed the drug has strong promise against Omicron. Lilly's previous antibody treatment was de-authorized by the FDA after it was found to be ineffective against this variant.

Meanwhile, the World Health Organization said Friday that it had prequalified the arthritis treatment tocilizumab for use in patients hospitalized with severe COVID-19, in a bid to increase access to the pricey drug. The monoclonal antibody, used in anti-inflammatory drugs made by Swiss pharma giant Roche, has been shown to reduce the risk of death and also hospitalization time in certain patients suffering from severe COVID.

WHO has, like the United States and the European Union, already recommended its use to treat severe COVID in hospital settings. But it remains in short supply and is very expensive - a single dose reportedly goes for up to \$600 in lower-income countries. WHO said, adding though that its prequalification should help make it more accessible. —AFP

Do masks in class damage...

Continued from Page 1

"You do look at faces when you're learning to talk," Diane Paul, of the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) told AFP. "But it's not the only way."

Children also learn by listening to the voices and following the gestures and eye movements of those around them. Paul notes that those with visual impairment also learn to speak well - and that masks are not worn permanently, for example at home. "At least at this time, there aren't studies that have directly assessed the long-term impact of speech and language development when young children interact with adults who wear masks," says the expert.

"But there are studies that demonstrate that children can tune into these different communication cues and gestures when an adult's mouth isn't

visible." A 2021 study demonstrated that infants were able to recognize unique words through a mask, just as well as without. But according to another, conducted in France, masks can interfere with learning to read among children with learning difficulties.

In general, research remains rare on the subject. But, says Paul, "I really do not see any cause for alarm." According to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), "the limited available data indicate no clear evidence that masking impairs emotional or language development in children". The agency recommends masking in public for those aged two and up, while the World Health Organization suggests the age of five.

But among psychiatrists, the story is a little different. "More important is the emotional side," says Manfred Spitzer, who's also a specialist in cognitive neuroscience at the University of Ulm in Germany. He notes that the first thing lost with a mask is the sight of a smile. "In educational settings, there is a lot of implicit feedback back and forth between teacher and child," he told AFP. "If you impair this ongoing communication, you will certainly interfere with successful teaching." — AFP

Canada police evacuate key...

Continued from Page 1

"Enforcement continuing, individuals who are located within the demonstration area are subject to arrest," the Windsor police warned on Twitter. "People are advised to immediately vacate the area."

The protesters have been warned that they could face heavy fines, jail time and loss of their driver's licenses if they continue obstructing traffic. The Ambassador Bridge is vital to the US and Canadian auto industries, carrying more than 25 percent of merchandise exported by both countries.

Two other US-Canada border crossings remain blocked by protests: one linking Manitoba province to the US state of North Dakota, and a second one in Alberta province.

Yesterday morning, crowds of protesters were collecting in Ottawa - the epicenter of the movement - for the third consecutive weekend. Hundreds

of people, some waving Canadian flags, again occupied the city center, walking under snowy skies between the huge trucks that have paralyzed the capital and infuriated many locals.

"I've been supporting the cause from the beginning," said 38-year-old Marc-Andre Mallette, whose backpack bore patches representing both the Canadian and the Quebec flags. "I'm not vaccinated, and I'm not dead," added Mallette, a sewer worker from the town of St Armand, near the US border.

John Pacheco, who said he has been coming to the demonstrations three times a week, brought his 15-year-old daughter Sophia yesterday. Describing himself as a "Catholic activist", he said he is happy to see that the truckers' movement has spread, with copycat protests in France, the Netherlands and New Zealand.

Protests began about two weeks ago when demonstrators drove into Ottawa to demand an end to a vaccination requirement affecting truckers crossing the international border. But the movement has spread, as the protesters - mostly insisting they want to protect their freedoms, but some displaying swastikas or Confederate flags - are now demanding an end to all vaccine mandates, whether imposed by the federal or provincial governments. — AFP

Local

Saleh Al-Ojairi laid to rest



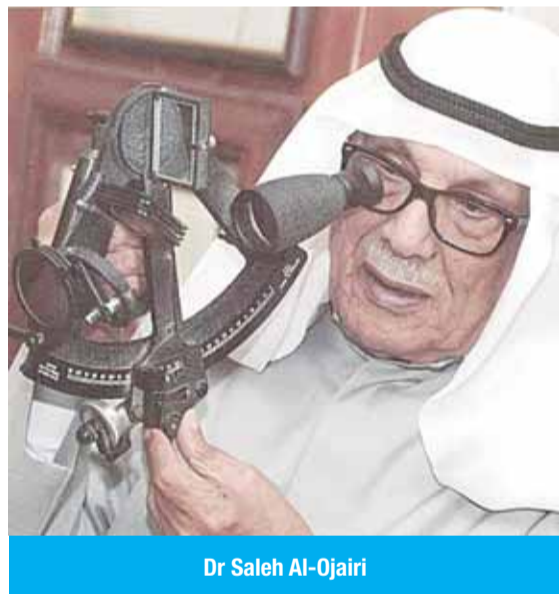
KUWAIT: The late astronomer and meteorologist Dr Saleh Al-Ojairi was laid to his final resting place on Friday at the Sulaibikhat cemetery. A large crowd of mourners attended the funeral, including National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem and Minister of Amiri Diwan Affairs Sheikh Mohammad Al-Abdullah Al-Sabah. —Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat

VO Kuwait produces docudrama on Saleh Al-Ojairi's life

KUWAIT: VO, the first Kuwait-based integrated youth platform for incubating young talents, announced yesterday that the platform is currently producing the largest television drama documentary (docudrama) titled 'Intergalactic' on the life of the late Kuwaiti astronomer, Dr Saleh Al-Ojairi. The docudrama is adopted from Dr Soad Al-Sabah's book on the scientific journey of Dr Ojairi and written by Kuwaiti script writer, Mezyad Al-Mosharji.

"The departure of Dr Saleh Al-Ojairi is a great loss for Kuwait, and our condolences on his loss will remain for generations to come. As the most experienced, well-known and highly regarded astronomer in Kuwait and the Arab world, his life deserves to be showcased to the world in a well-written and largely produced TV series taking the viewer back to the thirties, forties and fifties of the last century," stated Riham Al-Ayyar, CEO of Kuwait. The docudrama will showcase the great scientific and astronomical contributions founded by the late Dr Al-Ojairi and his profound impact on the field in Kuwait and the Arab world constituting an inspiring beacon for generations.

In her official statement, Ayyar, confirmed that VO has already started working on the large-scale television drama documentary that will soon be released as a tribute to the life of Kuwait's astronomer, Dr Ojairi. She also men-



Dr Saleh Al-Ojairi

tioned that the production team gathered all the information and conducted a thorough research on his life. The studies founded for the official script are currently being reviewed by specialized cadres in the fields of documentation and TV drama writing.

Founded in July 2020, VO nurtures and supports Kuwaiti talents and inspiring initiatives in various fields including entrepreneurship. The platform launched its all-inclusive creative hub and official mobile-application in 2021 and is currently establishing an academic program for Kuwaiti youth and a 'smart' app to nurture their talents while promoting their creative productions on a seamless, high-tech and efficient digital platform.

Kuwait renews adherence to UN charter's goals

NEW YORK: The State of Kuwait has renewed adherence to the multi-party international order and objectives of the United Nations convention for sake of boosting global governance to maintain the human race's security and peace. The Kuwaiti stance was expressed by Minister Plenipotentiary Talal Suleiman Al-Fassam during the first deliberations by the UN General Assembly of the UN Secretary's report themed "our common agenda." The novel coronavirus has inflicted heavy losses for humanity at various levels, thus it has become imperative to boost social, health, economic and environmental systems, Fassam said, noting necessity to recover from impact of the pandemic reach equality for all peoples of the world.

He called for enhancing women's role and achieving gender equality with respect of rights and chances and spare the next generations the scourge of wars. Moreover, the Kuwaiti envoy noted the need to specialize priority for achiev-



Talal Al-Fassam

ing sustainable development on a collective basis for all peoples of the world. Furthermore, the Kuwaiti delegate said that solidarity of the nations is a necessity to eradicate poverty and secure equal opportunities for all peoples of the world for education, health, political participation, as well as with respect of empowering the youth and women. —KUNA

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P.O.Box 1301 Safat, 13014 Kuwait.
Email: info@kuwaittimes.com
Website: www.kuwaittimes.com

News in brief

Youth Authority launches 'professional initiator'

KUWAIT: Kuwait's Youth Authority yesterday launched the second edition of the "professional initiator," designed to empower young Kuwaiti citizens to launch businesses. The authority said the program, part of the state development scheme and the government task program, aims to guide the Kuwaiti juniors toward feasible investment sectors. Moreover, it aims to diversify productivity, enable the young citizens launch start-ups in the private sector, in addition to providing spaces for medium and small enterprises. It envisages five training programs with respect to pre-incubation in technological sector, industrial, information and communication systems, creativity, industrial intelligence, digital programs, crafts and micro enterprises. The three-month program kicks off in March and registration is open on www.youth.gov.kw.

Kuwait condemns Houthis' attacks

KUWAIT: Kuwait Foreign Ministry strongly condemned on Friday the attack launched by Houthi militia from Yemen on Abha International Airport in Asir Province, southwestern Saudi Arabia. In a statement, the ministry said that the continuation of such terrorist acts on civilian areas is a flagrant violation of international law that undermines the security of the Kingdom and the region. These attacks require serious and quick action by the international community to deter such criminal terrorist acts and hold the perpetrators accountable, the statement added. The Ministry affirmed the State of Kuwait's firm and complete stand by the sisterly Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in all the measures it takes to maintain its security and stability, expressing wishes for a speedy recovery for the injured. On Thursday, a drone was intercepted near Abha International Airport. According to media reports, the drone was hit in the skies above the airport and 12 civilians from various nationalities were wounded with debris at the air facility.

Kuwait crude oil drops to \$92.14 pb

KUWAIT: Kuwait crude oil decreased by 41 cents to reach \$92.14 per barrel (pb) on Friday compared with \$92.55 pb on Thursday, Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) said yesterday. In the global market, the Brent crude rose by \$3.03 to \$94.44 pb and the West Texas Intermediate crude climbed by \$3.22 to settle at \$93.10 pb.

Foreign Minister receives call

KUWAIT: Minister of Foreign Affairs and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah received a phone call from the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Democratic Republic of Algeria Ramtane Lamamra. During the phone call, they discussed bilateral relations and the latest developments in the regional and international arenas.

Authority calls for easier tourism for the disabled

By Abdellatif Sharaa

KUWAIT: Kuwait Society of the Disabled's Deputy Chairman Fahad Al-Sahly participated in the second round of Dubai International Summit to ease tourism for those with special needs, held with participation of international experts and concerned government authorities. Sahly said the summit succeeded in its first and second rounds in establishing a new phase of this type of tourism for the disabled, who represent around 15 percent of the total travelers around the world.

"We must benefit from the results of the summit in supporting our ambitious efforts towards revitalizing tourism in Kuwait in order to fulfill the goals of the national development plan and New Kuwait 2035 vision,"

he said. He added the summit focused on the challenges facing around one billion people according to statistics of the World Health Organization (WHO). Helping facilitate their movement requires strengthening legislations, laws and infrastructure that meet their needs and their right to discover the world with ease, he said.

Sahly added the lost opportunities for the economy and international tourism reach around €142 billion annually due to the disabled refraining from traveling because of the lack of services and suitable facilities in many cities around the world. He said the summit urged joint international cooperation to make service facilities friendly to the disabled at airports, aircrafts, hotels, transportation, shopping centers and other areas.



Fahad Al-Sahly

Photo of the Day



KUWAIT: The sun sets over Kuwait City as seen from the Liberation Tower. —Photo by Shakir Reshamwala

Kuwait registers 5,150 COVID cases on weekend

Daily infections continue to decline

KUWAIT: Kuwait's daily COVID-19 infections continued to decline over the weekend, registering a total of 5,150 cases in two days. Kuwait's Ministry of Health said yesterday that 2,254 people tested positive for the novel coronavirus during the previous 24 hours, while one person died of the virus over the same period. On Friday, the ministry reported 2,896 new cases and one death. On the other hand, Kuwait recorded a remarkable rise in recoveries, reporting 5,855 yesterday and 5,871 on Friday. The weekend's figures bring total cases up to 599,038, total deaths to 2,519 and total recoveries to 555,350.

Kuwait continues to help people in need abroad

KUWAIT: The Kuwaiti relief associations, namely Kuwait Red Crescent Society (KRCS), have pursued humanitarian activities abroad aiding those in need, particularly refugees struggling to cope with the difficult winter conditions. In Jordan, KRCS teams distributed winter clothes and aided up to 1,200 Syrian refugee families. The Kuwaiti humanitarian campaign was inaugurated at a shanty town in the Jordanian capital, with aid by the Jordanian Red Crescent. KRCS Chairperson Dr Hilal Al-Sayer, who attended the activity, indicated that the society distributed coupons to the Syrian refugees at the camp and other locations in the country to buy necessities for the winter season. Dr Sayer, however, indicated that many of the Syrian refugees needed other forms of help, such as education and housing, thus he appealed to the international community to

Meanwhile, the number of patients in intensive care units stood yesterday at 92, down from 96 on Friday, while patients in hospital dropped to 412 from 453 on Friday. Active cases yesterday were 41,170, down from 44,772 the day before. Medical swabs conducted over the past 24 hours hit 24,223, pushing the total tests to 7,279,467, the ministry said yesterday. The percentage of daily new cases to new deaths reached 9.3 percent yesterday, while the percentage of recoveries reached 92.7 percent according to the health ministry's bulletin. —KUNA



SARAJEVO: Officials at Kuwait Embassy in Bosnia-Herzegovina donate dialysis device to Travink Hospital. —KUNA

give a hand for easing their hardships and improve their livelihood.

Moreover, the KRCS teams distributed gifts and material assistance to children at the Amman shanty town, drawing deep appreciation on part of the residents. The visiting Kuwaiti delegation, headed by Dr Sayer, had also gone to a clinic in Amman where the society covers costs for treating patients, with support from Kuwait Finance House. Some of the patients were Palestinians and others from Syria.

Furthermore, KRCS launched a full-scale medical program, conducting more than 90 surgeries, in collaboration with Jordanian medical personnel. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kuwait's Embassy declared that it had received a donated dialysis device, to be shifted to Travink Hospital in the capital Sarajevo. In war-stricken Yemen, the Kuwaiti Abdullah Al-Nouri Charity dug a water well in the province of Al-Dalea' in the south, as part of the seven-year 'Kuwait by Your Side' campaign. —KUNA

Dermatologists not allowed to perform liposuction: Consultants

By Abdellatif Sharaa

KUWAIT: Two plastic surgery consultants said some dermatologists perform liposuction in their clinics illegally, adding violating the law and carrying on with such operations endangers patients' lives. They demanded tighter supervision by the medical licenses department and advised patients to ask the doctor about their qualifications and whether they are allowed to do the procedure.

Health Ministry plastic, head, face and jaw surgery consultant Dr Emad Al-Najadah said dermatologists are not allowed to do liposuctions like plastic surgeons according to decision 245/2017. He said what goes on in Kuwait's clinics is illegal, be it with general or local anesthesia, because general anesthesia requires hospitalization. He said the plastic surgeon must be a specialist, and such a specialist must have a PhD, while most dermatologists in Kuwait only have master's degrees. Najadah said there must be strict supervision, but unfortunately



Dr Emad Al-Najadah



Dr Hisham Burizq

there is laxity by the patients towards themselves, and this is because of social media and not making sure about the doctor's qualifications.

Burns surgeries consultant Dr Hisham Burizq said a law was published in the official gazette and approved by health minister four years ago mentioning all types of plastic surgeries and who can perform them in each specialty. He said the law is enforced by the medical licenses department, and while violation of the law is possible as the case is all over the world, the licenses department must ensure doctors follow the rules and impose punishments if necessary. He said what is important is to make patients more aware, because the department cannot inspect everyone.



Its navy lost, Ukraine girds for Russian warship drills

US sanctions have stopped Bangladesh killings: Activists

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TEHRAN: Iranians take part in a rally marking the 43rd anniversary of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, at the Azadi (Freedom) square in Tehran. —AFP

Iranians mark Islamic revolution

Marchers remain in vehicles amid COVID restrictions

TEHRAN: Tens of thousands of Iranians drove through Tehran on Friday to mark the 43rd anniversary of the country's Islamic Revolution, staying in vehicles rather than marching on foot because of COVID restrictions. Due to the pandemic, state television said that—again this year—there should be “no gathering or marching” by those celebrating the 1979 overthrow of the shah's regime.

Instead, people travelled by car, motorcycle and bicycle, to converge on the capital's iconic Azadi (Freedom) Square, despite chilly temperatures. Some had draped the red, white and green Iranian flag over their cars. Others chanted slogans of

“Death to America” and “We will resist until the end” from windows as they drove by. They looped around the roundabout, before some got out of their vehicles to let loose balloons and take selfies in front of Azadi Tower, a massive monument at the city's western entrance.

A number of US flags were also burned by people chanting “We will not surrender”, said an AFP photographer at the square. State television broadcast footage of similar rallies in other major cities, including Isfahan, Mashhad, Tabriz and Shiraz. Demonstrators bore portraits of Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei as well as the late

Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, founder of the Islamic republic, and revered general Qasem Soleimani, killed by a US air strike at Baghdad airport in January 2020.

This year's anniversary is the first since ultra-conservative President Ebrahim Raisi took office in August. The celebrations mark the day that the shah's government fell after Shiite cleric Khomeini returned from exile. Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi had already fled Iran after months of protests against his rule. The coronavirus has infected more than 6.7 million people in Iran and killed more than 133,000, according to official figures. Iran, which

has a population of around 85 million, is the Middle East country hardest hit by the pandemic.

Nearly 55 million people have so far received two doses of anti-COVID vaccines. Alongside the pandemic, Iran's economy has been battered by sanctions reimposed by the United States since 2018, when then-president Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew from a landmark nuclear deal. Iran is currently engaged in negotiations with Britain, China, France, Germany and Russia directly and with the United States indirectly to revive the agreement formally called the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA. —AFP

Nine dead in feud between Philippine Muslim clans

COTABATO, Philippines: Nine people were killed and three injured in the southern Philippines yesterday when a convoy of SUVs was shot at in an ambush linked to a feud between rival Muslim clans, police said. The attack occurred in a region with a long history of violence, and a short drive from where 58 people—including 32 journalists—were murdered in the nation's worst political massacre in 2009.

Clan leader Peges Mamasangad and eight others were killed as they travelled down a farm-lined road in Maguindanao province, according to police. Both the victims and attackers were led by former commanders of a Muslim guerilla group that waged a bloody, decades-long insurgency in the region before a peace agreement was signed in 2014, provincial police spokesman Fhaeyd Cana told AFP.

Authorities are looking for suspects led by Mamasangad's rival, Cana said, adding the two families were involved in a long-running blood feud. Well-armed Muslim families in the mainly Catholic country's lawless south at times resort to clan warfare to settle disputes that can last for generations.



GUINDULUNGAN, Philippines: Philippine police investigators look for evidence next to bullet-riddled vehicles after a convoy of SUVs was ambushed along a farm-lined road in Guindulungan town, Maguindanao province, in the southern island of Mindanao yesterday, leaving nine people dead. —AFP

“[Guindulungan town] police described this attack as a rido,” Cana said, using the local term for blood feud. The attack was the province's bloodiest since the 2009 massacre, he added.

Five clan members were among the gunmen found guilty of those killings. The family's leaders were sentenced to 30-year prison terms in 2019. Both the main suspect in Saturday's attack and the slain Mamasangad were once commanders of the Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces, the military arm

of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front. The front signed a peace deal with Manila in March 2014, ending decades of rebellion that claimed tens of thousands of lives. Its leaders now head a self-ruled area in the former battlefields that includes Maguindanao.

However, the decommissioning of thousands of former guerrilla fighters and their weapons has been delayed by the coronavirus pandemic as well as technical issues. —AFP

A ‘number’ of British citizens detained in Afghanistan: UK

KABUL: A “number” of British nationals are being detained in Afghanistan, the UK government said yesterday, adding that it had raised the issue with the country's Taliban authorities. The foreign ministry's statement to AFP came a day after the Taliban released two overseas journalists who had been detained, including a former BBC correspondent.

“We are providing support to the families of a number of British men who have been detained in Afghanistan,” the ministry said, without specifying how many British nationals were being held and by whom. “UK officials have raised their detention with the Taliban at every opportunity, including when a delegation travelled to Kabul this week.”

A British delegation led by Hugo Shorter—the head of the UK's mission to Afghanistan but based in Qatar—flew to Kabul to meet foreign minister Amir Khan Muttaqi earlier this week.

Shorter said he had discussed the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan, as well as human rights abuses, with Taliban officials during his trip to the country. On Friday, Western media reports said at least six British citizens were being detained in Afghanistan, including former BBC correspondent Andrew North, who was released later that day. The Taliban authorities did not comment when contacted by AFP. Also among British nationals detained is Peter Jouvenal, who has been held since early December, a statement released by his friends said.

A journalist turned businessman, Jouvenal is also a German citizen and is married to an Afghan woman. He might have been “detained in error” as he was in Afghanistan to discuss investments in the country's mining industry, the statement said.

“He is being held without charge, and with no freedom to contact his family or lawyers,” it said, adding that Jouvenal had been the cameraman for a CNN interview with the late Al-Qaeda founder Osama bin Laden in 1997 in Afghanistan. “Before his arrest he was working openly and had frequent meetings with senior Taliban officials.”

On Friday, the Taliban released North and another foreign journalist after the two were detained while on an assignment for the UN refugee agency in Afghanistan. It was unclear when they were detained but the agency said it was “relieved” that the two and their Afghan colleagues were free. Taliban government spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said they had been detained because they did not possess valid identity cards and documents. —AFP

Spain, Portugal hit by winter drought

MADRID: In central Portugal, a sustained drought has revealed the ruins of a village that was totally submerged underwater when a large reservoir was created nearly 70 years ago. “I have never seen that!” says Carlos Perdigao, 76, as he gazes at the ruined stone houses of Vilar which were swallowed up by the Zezere river when a dam was opened in 1954.

Vilar stands on the banks of the river, surrounded by cracked yellow earth, another sign of the ongoing dry spell during what is normally a rainy winter season, with the drought also hitting neighbouring Spain.

Weather services in both countries say it was the second driest January

on record since the year 2000.

The current drought is extraordinary because of “its intensity, scale and length”, says climate scientist Ricardo Deus of Portugal's meteorology agency IPMA. Of Portugal's 55 dams, 24 are only holding half of their water capacity, and five are below 20 per cent, according to the European Union's Copernicus Earth observation service.

The Algarve, Portugal's southernmost province, and one of Europe's top tourism destinations, is one of those most affected by the drought. Meanwhile Spain only got a quarter of the precipitation it normally gets in January, said the AEMET weather service. The dry spell, which began at the end of 2021, is ruining crops, leaving farmers struggling to feed livestock and hampering hydroelectricity production.

Earlier this month, Portugal ordered five of its hydropower dams to suspend water use for electricity



FIGUEIRO DOS VINHOS, Portugal: This photograph shows a general view of the Ribeira de Alge river, where the level of water drop considerably almost to a point where a person can cross the river by foot, in Figueiro dos Vinhos, central Portugal. —AFP

production in order to prioritize human consumption. Nearly 30 per cent of Portugal's electricity comes from hydropower dams. And in Spain, Agriculture Minister Luis Planas on

Tuesday said the government was “concerned” about the drought and would adopt the “necessary measures” depending on how the situation evolves. —AFP

International

Its navy lost, Ukraine girds for Russian warship drills

Ukraine braces for a feared invasion from more than 100,000 Russian troops

SEA OF AZOV, Ukraine: Ukrainian captain Oleksandr Surkov looks askance at his patrol boat's machine guns and laments how futile they would be fending off an attack from Russian warships now steaming across the Black Sea. "Our weapons are mostly designed to protect our state borders, not to wage war," the 32-year-old says as his boat bobs through grey mist enveloping the coast of Ukraine's industrial port of Mariupol.

"But if they attack, we will defend ourselves with every weapon we have." Surkov's worries reflect that of Ukraine as a whole as it girds for a feared invasion from more than 100,000 Russian troops who have encircled the ex-Soviet state from nearly every side. Ukraine's old navy-stationed almost entirely in the Crimean port of Sevastopol-practically vanished when Russia annexed the peninsula and took all its ships in 2014. Military analysts say Ukraine now has just one major warship and a dozen or so patrol and coastal craft of the type captained by Surkov.

Russia has sent six more warships into the region for a week of naval drills involving dozens of navy ships starting this weekend. Ukrainian military analyst Mykola Beleskov says Russia now has 13 major battleships in the Black Sea on Ukraine's southwestern coast that can enter the landlocked Sea of Azov on its southeast at any point. "The situation is tense," Beleskov said. Captain Surkov agrees.

"The presence of Russian patrol boats is growing," Surkov says. "They are whipping up tensions."

'Prepare for the worst'

Mariupol lies on the edge of the front line separating government-controlled territory from that overseen by Russian-backed separatists in the rebel stronghold Donetsk. It came under repeated attack in the early months of the separatist conflict as the

rebels tried to grab its port-vital for Ukraine's lucrative steel exports-and establish a land bridge between Russia and Crimea.

Ukrainian forces were able to hold the line at a heavy cost. The UN estimates that the entire separatist conflict has claimed more than 14,000 lives and forced 1.5 million from their homes.

Coast guards patrolling the waters off Mariupol today doubt they would be able to repel a serious Russian amphibious assault that might accompany any land invasion from Ukraine's east and north.

"The six Russian ships that entered the Black Sea region have weapons that can be used on land as well as at sea. They have missiles," border guard captain Igor Chernov said. "We have to hope for a diplomatic solution," added Surkov. "But we have to prepare for the worst."

'Difficult to pull off'

Naval forces expert Nick Childs of London's International Institute for Strategic Studies said an amphibious assault on Ukraine would not be easy to pull off-even for someone of Russia's military might. "There has been much attention paid to movements of Russian amphibious ships into the Black Sea to bolster forces already there," Child said. "However, amphibious operations would present hazards for Russian forces, and Ukraine has some coastal defense capabilities, including anti-ship missiles in development."

Ukrainian analyst Beleskov agreed that an amphibious landing would be "very difficult to pull off". "We have good defenses in Odessa and along the Black Sea coast," he said. "If they limit themselves to an amphibious landing alone, we would survive."

'Massive assault'

But veteran Russian military analyst Pavel



MARIUPOL, Ukraine: A patrol boat casts off the border base in Ukraine's Black Sea port of Mariupol on Friday. Russia has sent six additional warships into the region for a week of naval drills involving dozens of big navy ships starting this weekend. —AFP

Felgenhauer said the Kremlin has been preparing such an attack for nearly a year. "They staged an amphibious landing drill on the Opuk firing range in Crimea last April," Felgenhauer said. "The plan is to concentrate a massive amphibious assault force of 10,000 troops in the first wave. The Ukrainians would never be able to repel that," he said.

"And then the second wave would come. An amphibious landing would be very hard to fight off because of Russia's superiority not only at sea, but

also in the air."

The idea of a war of such scale breaking out at any time is leaving captain Surkov and his family feeling increasingly stressed. He says he has spent almost all his time at sea since the start of the year because of the Russian war games. "My wife is feeling nervous because I spend so little time at home," the captain says. "She is always asking me if everything is alright. But things are getting heated." —AFP

News in brief

Japan factory fire kills 5

TOKYO: Five people have died in a blaze at a rice cracker factory in Japan, police said yesterday, with firefighters working through the night to extinguish the inferno. Around 30 workers were on site when the fire broke out at the facility in northern Niigata prefecture around midnight, local media reported. The cause of the fire is unclear. "We confirmed the death of four women between 60s and 70s and we also found an unidentified body," a police spokesman told AFP without giving further details. — AFP

Grades row: Spain teen held

MADRID: A 15-year-old boy has been arrested in Spain on suspicion of shooting dead his parents and 10-year-old brother following a row over bad school grades, police said yesterday. The incident occurred on Tuesday evening in a rural area just outside Elche, about 20 kilometers (12 miles) from the southeastern port city of Alicante. It was not discovered until Friday night by a relative who turned up to check on them, a police spokesman said. — AFP

Nicaraguan oppn figures guilty

MANAGUA: Three key opposition figures in Nicaragua including a former deputy foreign minister have been found guilty of "undermining national integrity," a rights group said Friday, in a continuing crackdown on opponents of President Daniel Ortega. A total of 46 opposition figures, including seven former presidential candidates, were jailed last year before a fraught presidential election that saw Ortega re-elected for a fourth consecutive term. The Nicaraguan president has accused them of plotting to overthrow him with the support of Washington. — AFP

Bus blast in China kills one

BEIJING: A bus exploded in northeastern China yesterday, killing one person and injuring dozens more, public security officials said. Footage circulating online shows the vehicle by a roadside with its windows shattered as debris lay scattered around. Witnesses said they heard a loud noise when the explosion occurred but that the bus did not catch fire, state broadcaster CCTV reported. One person was killed by the blast in the city of Shenyang in Liaoning province, while two others were seriously injured, according to a statement by the local public security bureau. — AFP

Iceland's PM tests positive

REYKJAVIK, Iceland: Iceland's Prime Minister Katrin Jakobsdottir has tested positive for COVID-19 after contracting the virus from a family member, she announced on Facebook yesterday. "My youngest son tested positive for COVID-19 on February 1. Since then, another member of our household has also contracted the virus, so it was no great surprise when I tested positive last night", she wrote in a post. Jakobsdottir, 46, will isolate at home for at least five days, in line with recommendations in Iceland. — AFP

For Georgians, Ukraine tensions revive painful war memories

TBILISI, Georgia: As tens of thousands of Russian troops mass near Ukraine's border, many in fellow ex-Soviet state Georgia are feeling a frightening sense of déjà vu. In 2008, during the Summer Games in Beijing, Russia launched a devastating ground assault against the small Caucasus country on its southern border.

Georgia was battling pro-Russian militia in its separatist region of South Ossetia, after they shelled Georgian villages. The fighting in August 2008 only lasted several days, but claimed more than 700 lives and displaced tens of thousands of ethnic Georgians.

Today Georgians are seeing frightening parallels as Western capitals warn of another possible Russian attack on Ukraine. "It's horrible what we see these days in Ukraine," said Zina Tvaladze, a mother of two displaced from separatist-controlled South Ossetia. "It looks like Russian President Vladimir Putin is ready to

shed the blood of Ukrainians and of his own soldiers just because he wants to restore the Soviet Union," she said.

In 2008, the 53-year-old told AFP, the separatists "burned our house as Russian troops nearby watched. We were lucky to escape execution." At the centre of both crises is a years-old Western promise that the two ex-Soviet countries would be able to join the US-led NATO military alliance.

Just three months before the Georgian war, NATO heads of state had agreed that both Ukraine and Georgia would "become members of NATO". The move angered Putin, who views any expansion towards Russia's borders as a security threat, despite the West stressing that NATO is purely a defense organization.

The 2008 fighting in Georgia ended after just five days with a European Union-mediated ceasefire. The Kremlin recognized independ-

Paris police clamp down on Canada-style 'freedom convoy'

PARIS: A French "freedom convoy" of cars and vans began arriving in Paris yesterday for a protest over coronavirus restrictions, but the police moved quickly to prevent a Canadian-style blockade of the capital by issuing hundreds of fines. Inspired by the truckers that shut down the Canadian capital Ottawa, thousands of demonstrators from across France said they planned to form "a mass of vehicles that the security forces would find impossible to contain".

Several hundred vehicles, mostly vans, mobile-homes and cars, converged on the main ring road around the city after spending the night camped on the outskirts of the capital.

But the police acted quickly, issuing 283 fines for "participation in an unauthorized protest" by mid-morning. The demonstrators include anti-COVID vaccination activists, but also

people angry at fast-rising energy prices, some of whom took part in the "Yellow Vest" protest movement of 2018/2019.

Just two months ahead of presidential elections and with the government desperate to avoid a repeat of the "Yellow Vest" riots that shook the capital, Macron said Friday he understood the "fatigue" linked to the COVID-19 pandemic.

'Fatigue leads to anger'

"This fatigue also leads to anger. I understand it and I respect it. But I call for the utmost calm," he told the Ouest-France newspaper. Nearly 7,200 officers have been deployed to prevent a blockade, with the Champs-Elysees avenue, which was the epicenter of the "Yellow Vest" protests, under particularly heavy guard. Police showed off their anti-blockade arsenal on Twitter, publishing photographs of loader tractors for the removal of barricades as well as trucks equipped with cranes or water cannon.

Gendarmerie armored vehicles have also been deployed in the streets of the capital for the first time since the "Yellow Vest" protests. Prime Minister Jean Castex vowed to remain steadfast. "If they block traffic or if they try to block the capital, we must

stop, the coast guard ship opened fire in "self-defense."

The baby died in its mother's arms. Over 100 people have lost their lives since 2018 in sinking in the area between Trinidad and Tobago and Venezuela-only around 100 kilometers (60 miles) apart-as scores of migrants try to escape the crisis-hit South American nation. Venezuela has demanded an "exhaustive investigation" into the incident.

On Friday, Trinidad's National Security Ministry said a "repatriation exercise was carried out" of 35 migrants, who had illegally entered the island's territorial waters, in accordance with bilateral agreements between the two countries. The fate of the

four remaining migrants from that boat was not clear. Trinidadian Prime Minister Keith Rowley sought to downplay the gravity of the incident, denouncing "the hysteria around this matter" and saying that similar incidents take place in other countries. The route is heavily trafficked by people smugglers transporting migrants on overloaded boats that are prone to overturning.

According to the UN, some five million Venezuelans have fled the country of 30 million since 2015, with 25,000 choosing to go to Trinidad and Tobago, a country of 1.3 million, which says it has recorded the arrival of 16,000 Venezuelans. —AFP



TSKHINVALI, Georgia: In this file photo taken on August 30, 2008 Russian tanks move along a street as children play with a toy truck in Tskhinvali. —AFP

ence for the two breakaway statelets of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and established permanent Russian military bases there. Several years later, in 2014, Russian troops annexed the Crimean peninsula from Ukraine. They began backing Kremlin-friendly separatists in Ukraine's east in an ongoing

conflict that the United Nations says has since killed 13,000 people.

More than 13 years after the war in South Ossetia, China is holding the Winter Olympics. As European leaders scramble to avert any Russian invasion, Georgian politicians have been voicing solidarity with Ukraine. — AFP



PARIS: A demonstrator stands amidst tear gas at the Place d'Italie in Paris yesterday as convoys of protesters so called "Convoi de la Liberté" arrive in the French capital. — AFP

be very firm about this," he told France 2 television. The convoys set out from Nice in the south, Lille and Vimy in the north, Strasbourg in the east and Chateaubourg in the west.

They are demanding the withdrawal of the government's vaccine pass, which is required for access to many public spaces, and more help with their energy bills. "People need to see us, and to listen to the people who just want to live a normal and free

life," said Lisa, a 62-year-old retired health worker travelling in the Chateaubourg convoy, who did not want to give her surname.

Paris police banned the gathering saying it posed a threat to public order and said protesters who tried to block roads would face fines or arrest. The order prohibiting the assembly of convoys was upheld on Friday by the courts, which rejected two appeals. —AFP

International

US sanctions have stopped Bangladesh killings: Activists

Washington slapped sweeping sanctions against RAB force on Dec 10, 2021

DHAKA: From Russia to North Korea to Zimbabwe, the impact of diplomatic sanctions has long been questioned. But Bangladeshi activists have no doubts: extrajudicial killings have suddenly stopped since punitive US measures were imposed two months ago, they say.

Around 2,500 Bangladeshis have allegedly been killed by security forces since Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina came to power in 2009, according to rights group Odhikar, which maintains detailed records, with hundreds more enforced disappearances. It has tallied nearly 1,200 such deaths in the last four years, or an average of 25 per month. But since Washington on December 10 imposed sweeping Magnitsky Act sanctions against the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) elite security force including seven of its top officers, killings have totaled zero, it says.

"I wish this sanction was slapped a lot earlier," said Afroza Islam Akhi, whose brother vanished eight years ago. "A lot of lives would have been saved." Akhi is now a coordinator for Mayer Daak, which represents hundreds of families of victims of enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings.

The RAB was set up in 2004 to tackle Marxist insurgents and Islamist extremism as well as curb human trafficking—goals it pursued mercilessly and officials say effectively. More recently its targets have largely been alleged criminals and drug dealers, with authorities insisting that deaths have only occurred during exchanges of fire in legitimate law enforcement operations.

But critics say political opponents have also died at the hands of security forces and that gunfights are staged to deny the victims due legal process. Akhi's brother Sajedul Islam Suman was among at least 18 activists with the main opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) allegedly picked up by RAB officers in December 2013 in the run-up to national elections.

"My mother went to the RAB headquarters every day for more than a year as we heard RAB

officers detained him," Akhi told AFP. "But he never returned."

'Every bone broken'

Nur Khan Liton, head of Bangladesh's top rights group Ain O Salish Kendra, said the US sanctions have directly improved the country's rights situation. "People are happy with it and many have started speaking out," he said. According to activists, almost all victims of extrajudicial killings are detained and then shot dead.

Rita Begum last saw her 14-year-old son Rakib Howlader handcuffed and detained at a police station in old Dhaka in 2018. The next day her father told her the boy—accused of peddling drugs—had been beaten to death and then shot to make it appear he had died in an exchange of fire.

"Every bone in his body was broken and then he was shot," she told AFP. "I didn't get justice." When she tried to file a complaint, she said, "police came to my house. They held a pistol to my head and made me sign a lot of papers. They even threatened to rape my daughter."

"I want the American sanctions to prevail," she added. "I don't want to see any more mothers losing their children. I don't want anybody else to suffer my fate. I lost my gem of a boy."

'Nervous about the future'

In some cases RAB officers have been prosecuted, with at least 26 people including an RAB commander sentenced to death for seven murders in the central city of Narayanganj in April 2014. Dhaka and Washington normally have warm relations, co-operating on security issues and with Bangladesh often voting alongside the United States at the United Nations.

The sanctions include asset freezes and visa bans and were imposed on the RAB and current or former RAB officials, including its ex-head Benazir Ahmed, now the national chief of police. The move—at a time when China is pour-

'Difficult decision'

In a speech in parliament on Friday, Berdymukhamedov said he reached "a difficult decision" about his leadership because of his age, adding that the country needed "young leaders", the state information service TDH reported. Berdymukhamedov said the proposal to involve "youth" leaders was "approved" at the session, in further quotes that appeared on TDH's website early yesterday.

"In this regard, the Chairman of the Central Commission for holding elections and referendums was instructed to start relevant work in accordance with the constitution and legislation of Turkmenistan," Berdymukhamedov said he wished to remain in politics in his role as chairman of parliament's upper chamber.

Serdar Berdymukhamedov's rapid emergence as a force in Turkmen politics has fuelled speculation over what could be the first hereditary succession in the former Soviet region of Central Asia. While presidential relatives in the five-country region that also includes Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are often viewed as wealthy and highly-powered, none have scaled the heights of Serdar Berdymukhamedov in such a short time. Since 2018, Berdymukhamedov has moved between important posts at dizzying speed, becoming deputy foreign minister, provincial governor for the Akhal region outside the capital Ashgabat and minister for industry

three-day rampage, torching much of Honiara's Chinatown. The unrest was sparked by opposition to veteran Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare and partly fuelled by poverty, unemployment and inter-island rivalries, but anti-China sentiment also played a role.

US officials said they were particularly concerned about China's growing influence in the Solomons. Beijing said in December it would send police advisors and riot gear to the country as foreign peacekeepers began leaving the Pacific nation after being deployed during the deadly protests.

A subplot to November's unrest was Sogavare's efforts to forge closer ties with Beijing after abruptly breaking off the island's long-time ties with Taiwan in 2019. China balks at any official exchanges between other countries and self-ruled Taiwan, which it sees as its own territory awaiting reunification. The Solomons government said in December it had accepted Beijing's offer of six "liaison officers" to train its police force and equipment including shields, helmets, batons and other "non-lethal" gear.

The decision on the embassy was revealed on Blinken's visit to Fiji, the first US Secretary of State to

Your Freedom & Rights", "Free Aus Freedom Now", or "No forced drugs" written above a symbol of a syringe. Police estimated there were up to 10,000 protesters. They were "generally well behaved", a police spokesman said.

Three people were arrested including one man who drove his truck through a roadblock. Two others were taken into custody for a breach of the peace. Australia says 94 percent of people aged over 16 have had at least two COVID-19 vaccinations. Though getting the job is voluntary, it is generally required for people entering the country and for those working in a range of professions deemed at particular risk such as caring for the elderly. Some Australian states such as New South Wales have begun to relax proof-of-vaccine requirements for entry to pubs, restaurants or shops.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison, who must call a general election by mid-May, called on the protesters to



DHAKA, Bangladesh: In this picture taken on February 9, 2022, father Mohsin Howlader (right), mother Rita Begum (center) and younger brother of Rakib Howlader, a 14-year-old boy who died during his arrest by the police in 2018, look at his pictures during an interview with AFP at their house in Dhaka. — AFP

ing investment into one of Asia's poorest countries—stunned Dhaka, with the foreign secretary summoning the US ambassador to convey "discontent".

But the sanctions constitute a "tactical strike" on the understanding between the security forces and ruling party and "put the whole security establishment under renewed international scrutiny", said Sydney-based Bangladesh researcher Mubashar Hasan. They have also raised anxiety among Bangladeshi officials for whom the West is a popular retirement and training destination, he added.

He pointed out that the Biden administration

has begun to target businesses connected to governments that it says suppress human rights, such as China. "Many Bangladeshi businessmen tied with the ruling party are nervous about the future," he said. There was no response to repeated requests by AFP to the RAB and the national police for comment. Dhaka denies its officers are involved in extrajudicial killings or enforced disappearances.

But Shahab Enam Khan, a professor at Jahangirnagar University, said: "Sanction from the US on the law enforcement agencies or personnel is a lesson and perhaps nobody wants it to be repeated." —AFP

Turkmenistan to hold snap vote on March 12

ASHGABAT, Turkmenistan: Turkmenistan yesterday announced a snap presidential election for March 12 after autocrat leader Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov said he was ready to step down, with his son expected to succeed him. A former dentist and health minister, the 64-year-old succeeded the country's founding president Saparmurat Niyazov in December 2006 after his death and has ruled with an iron fist since.

"The president ... gave us an instruction to prepare for early presidential elections on March 12," a spokesman for the election commission, Bezergen Garryev, told AFP by telephone. Gas-rich Turkmenistan, a former Soviet republic, is one of the world's most repressive, secretive states and little is known about how the regime makes day-to-day decisions.

Berdymukhamedov is its main face. His pastimes—including horse riding, mass cycling, composing songs and authoring books—are widely covered on the internet. His 40-year-old son Serdar Berdymukhamedov is now the second most powerful government official with a broad purview over the economy as vice-premier.

US to reopen Solomon Islands embassy to counter China clout

NADI: The United States will re-establish an embassy in the Solomon Islands, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said yesterday, in an effort to counter China's influence in the politically troubled Pacific island.

Blinken announced the move during a visit to nearby Fiji, where he met virtually with around 18 Pacific island leaders to stress Washington's attention to the region in an attempt to curb Beijing's push for greater influence. The United States closed its embassy in the Solomons Island capital Honiara in 1993 and is now represented by a consulate there, directed from the US embassy in Papua New Guinea.

The move comes just a few months after riots in the island chain of 800,000 people in November when protesters tried to storm parliament and then went on a

Thousands protest vaccine mandates in Australian capital

SYDNEY: Thousands of protesters marched through Australia's capital to the parliament building yesterday to decry COVID-19 vaccine mandates, the latest in a string of rallies against pandemic restrictions around the world. Demonstrators packed Canberra's streets before massing outside the parliament, some waving the red Australian ensign flag associated with "sovereign citizens" who believe national laws do not apply to them. Protesters, many with children, rallied under bright skies brandishing banners proclaiming "Fight for



ASHGABAT: In this file photo taken on June 3, 2020, Turkmenistan's President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov delivers a speech. —AFP

in less than two years.

Last year he rose to the rank of vice premier in the cabinet presently headed by his father, gained a seat on the powerful security council and was appointed the nation's auditor-general—a role that allows him to oversee the spending of government bodies. Friday's session in parliament's upper house marked the anniversary of those promotions for Berdymukhamedov junior as well as the 15th anniversary of the first of three crushing electoral victories for his father as president. —AFP



NADI, Fiji: US Secretary of State Antony Blinken (left) takes part in a joint press availability with Fiji's acting Prime Minister Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum in Nadi, Fiji yesterday. —AFP

arrive on the island in 37 years. The administration of President Joe Biden says despite its current preoccupation with the Russian threat to Ukraine, it sees the "Indo-Pacific"—where China is increasingly expanding its footprint—as the crucial focus of future security, political and economic strategy. —AFP



CANBERRA: Thousands of protesters march towards the parliament building in Canberra yesterday. —AFP

act peacefully. But the Australian leader also said he understood their concerns, and stressed that the states—not the federal government—were responsible for many of the vaccine requirements. —AFP

Myanmar junta says to free over 800 prisoners

YABGON: Myanmar's junta yesterday announced an amnesty for more than 800 prisoners, as it held a parade and show of force in the capital to mark the country's Union Day. The country has been in turmoil since last year's coup, with mass protests and a subsequent military crackdown that has killed more than 1,500 civilians, according to the UN's human rights office. Junta chief Min Aung Hlaing issued the "pardon order"—a regular feature of major holidays in the country—for 814 prisoners, state media said, marking the 75th Union Day. The annual holiday commemorates an agreement between independence hero Aung San and several ethnic groups to form a Union of Burma independent of British rule.

Those given amnesty will be mostly from prisons in commercial hub Yangon, junta spokesperson Zaw Min Tun told AFP. He did not say whether Australian academic Sean Turnell—who has been detained for more than a year—would be among those released.

The economics professor was working as an adviser to civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi when he was arrested last February, days after she was ousted by the military. He has been charged with violating Myanmar's official secrets law and faces a maximum penalty of 14 years in prison if found guilty. About 100 people gathered outside Yangon's Insein prison yesterday morning hoping to be reunited with loved ones, AFP correspondents said.

Four minibuses left the prison around noon local time (0530 GMT) and drove away, with those inside waving as people in the crowd shouted the names of relatives. Thin Thin Aye, 46, waited in the hope her son—jailed last year for incitement against the military—would be among those freed.

She kept waiting even after the last bus pulled away and prison staff said no other prisoners would be released. "I hope my son will be released as soon as possible and I want him to stay with our family," she told AFP through tears.

'Where was the union?'

The junta marked Union Day with a show of force in the military-built capital Naypyidaw. Hundreds of troops paraded alongside civil servants waving national flags in unison, and there were choreographed dances. Helicopters carrying the country's yellow, green and red flag flew overhead, followed by jets trailing the same colors in smoke.

In a speech to troops, Min Aung Hlaing repeated the military's claim of massive fraud in 2020 elections won by Suu Kyi's party. He also invited the myriad ethnic armed organisations that have been fighting Myanmar's military—and each other—for decades to sit for peace talks. The Karen National Union, whose fighters have clashed repeatedly with junta troops in the east, said it would not attend talks. "They say it was union day, but where was the union?" spokesman Padoh Saw Law Nee told AFP. "They stole power from the civilian government. They are not the official government." "The message for Union Day is at complete odds with the reality that is Myanmar," said independent analyst David Mathieson, adding the junta was not sincere about peace. —AFP

Business

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 13, 2022

Erdogan slashes VAT on basic foods as inflation skyrockets

Citing inflation, Fitch downgrades Turkey to 'B+'

ISTANBUL: Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan yesterday slashed sales tax on dairy products, fruit, vegetables and other basic food items from 8 percent to 1 percent as inflation surges to a near 20-year high. The rising cost of living has become a major source of public discontent in Turkey, where it is expected to feature prominently in next year's presidential election.

Inflation hits 48.69 percent in January, the highest level since Erdogan's Islamic-rooted party stormed to power two decades ago. Erdogan said the fall in VAT would apply to a host of products, including cooking oil and dried fruit. "All these reductions will help in our fight against inflation," he said.

Protests are planned across Turkey this weekend over falling purchasing power. Last month, Erdogan changed the head of the state statistics agency Tuik for the fourth time since 2019. Turkish media reported that he was unhappy with the inflation figures it published. The opposition and some economists believe that the official figures grossly underestimate the reality.

Meanwhile, Fitch Ratings on Friday downgraded Turkey's debt from BB- to B+ with a negative outlook, citing high inflation and a lack of confidence in policymakers to turn the tide. The downgrade comes after data released earlier in the month showed inflation hitting a two-decade record of nearly 50 percent in January, though some economists estimate it is much higher than that.

"Policy-driven financial stress episodes of higher

frequency and intensity have increased Turkey's vulnerabilities in terms of high inflation, low external liquidity and weak policy credibility," Fitch said in announcing its decision. The agency added that it "does not expect the authorities' policy response" to "sustainably ease macroeconomic and financial stability risks."

Although inflation is rising across the world, thanks in part to easy money policies adopted to cushion the blow of the COVID-19 pandemic, Turkey's problems are dramatically more acute because of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's unorthodox economic approach.

Erdogan rejects the idea that inflation should be fought by hiking the main interest rate, which he believes causes prices to grow even higher—the exact opposition of conventional economic thinking.

The price spike complicates the president's path to re-election in 2023, and Fitch warned there was a "high" risk of "additional destabilizing monetary policy easing or stimulus policies" ahead of the polls. "There is an elevated degree of uncertainty about the authorities' policy reaction function in the event of another episode of financial stress, as political considerations limit the central bank's ability to raise its policy rate," Fitch added.

The government hopes inflation will fall after pressures—including a minimum wage hike in January and rising energy bills—subside and new currency support measures kick in.



ISTANBUL: Turkish housewife Dondü Isler, 61, does some shopping in Ankara. —AFP

The central bank paused a four-month streak of interest rate cuts in January, providing relief for the lira, which has held largely steady this year. Fitch's

decision comes after S&P Global Ratings in December downgraded its outlook for Turkey's debt to negative from stable. —AFP

The troubled California factory at Tesla's core

SAN FRANCISCO: Tesla can hardly make enough electric vehicles to meet booming demand, but behind the world's most valuable auto brand is its troubled California factory that makes most of those cars.

The Fremont plant near San Francisco has seen a spate of sexual harassment lawsuits, years of racism allegations—including a California civil rights agency complaint this week—and even a murder last year between workers in its parking lot. Experts, accusers and lawyers described a place with a combustible mix of massive pressure to deliver on CEO Elon Musk's ambitious goals, contracts that restrict workers' recourse and a corporate culture of role breaking.

Tesla did not respond to a request for comment, but in a rare statement on equality this week said it strongly opposed discrimination and has a workforce that is overwhelmingly non-white.

"A narrative spun by the DFEH (California's civil rights agency) and a handful of plaintiff firms to generate publicity is not factual proof," Tesla statement said. The Fremont factory is a sprawling 370-acre (150-hectare) site across the Bay from San Francisco that Tesla says has the capacity to make some 600,000 vehicles a year, far ahead of its site in Shanghai or two that will come online in Texas and Berlin.

Its production has ramped up fast—with the number of vehicles delivered increasing by 87 percent in 2021, the company reported in January. Musk tweeted two years ago that he sees the company producing 20 million cars per year by 2030.

"Problems have plagued the factory because they have been reinventing a wheel that Ford or GM invented decades ago," said analyst Rob Enderle. The plant, which Tesla took over in 2010 and today has more than 10,000 workers, was operated by GM for decades and then under an arrangement between the American auto giant and Toyota that ended in 2009. "We've heard consistently from workers over the years that they're put under an incredible amount of pressure on the production line, to produce cars so quickly that in fact, many have become injured as a result," said Steve Smith, communications director at the California Labor Federation.

Tesla has pushed back in past years saying injuries were falling. The Fremont plant has also had other trouble, including when a Tesla worker allegedly shot and killed a colleague last year outside the plant after work following a dispute.

At the same time, the factory has been dogged for years by allegations of racist abuse against workers — which resulted in a strongly worded lawsuit this week from the California Department of Fair Employment and Housing calling the site a "racially segregated workplace."

"It's about time," ex-plant worker Owen Diaz told AFP of the suit. Diaz, who is Black, was awarded \$137 million by a California jury in October after he alleged the company turned a blind eye to racist abuse he faced at work. He said colleagues referred to him using slurs in 2015 and 2016, but when he complained there were negative consequences for him. —AFP

Telework in metaverse precursors already a reality

SAN FRANCISCO: Depending on his mood, Jeff Weiser settles down to work in a Parisian cafe, a mysterious cave or high above the Earth, thanks to the budding metaverse.

Weiser lives in the midwestern US state of Ohio but his workplace is in a faux realm accessed using virtual reality head gear. While still the stuff of science fiction for most people, forerunners of the metaverse vision for the internet's future are already de rigueur for handfulls of people beyond the gamer and techno-hipster crowds.

Weiser, founder of a translation start-up, spends 25 to 35 hours each week working with Oculus VR gear on his head in his home in the city of Cincinnati. A VR application called "Immersed" lets him synch screens such as his computer and smartphone to his virtual world, shutting out distractions around him at home.

Along with "increased focus," the ergonomics are "perfect," Weiser said. Display screens hover where they are easily seen and can be changed to any size. Weiser taps on his keyboard without seeing it, and appears from the outside to be speaking to himself.

But in his virtual world, he interacts with

avatars of colleagues as far away as Argentina and Ireland. The pandemic boosted use of telework technologies that make it possible for colleagues to collaborate as teams despite being in different locations. The Holy Grail is to replicate the kind of personal contact possible in offices.

Persistence

Florent Crivello co-founded Teamflow, a startup that tailors software for workers to collaborate virtually from their computers. "We are building the metaverse for work," Crivello said, who added VR headsets aren't quite ready for "prime time".

"All of our collaboration tools are still on desktop; we want to meet people where they are." Teamflow virtual offices look like on-screen game boards with meeting rooms, sofas and more. Workers are represented by round icons that feature their picture, or live video of their face, and can initiate chats with colleagues by moving their "pawn" close to that of a co-worker.

If the person virtually approached has a microphone hooked up, they can automatically hear each other like they would be able to in real life. Key to the experience is "persistence," the fact that



AUSTIN: Gavin Menichini, using the Oculus Quest 2 VR headset, gives a demonstration of the Immersed Virtual Reality program which can be used for many applications including virtual meetings at the Immersed offices in Austin, Texas. —AFP

the virtual environment exists whether a particular worker is in it or not, said Crivello. "That's a defining characteristic," he noted.

For example, Teamflow users who "write" on a virtual white board in a faux meeting room will find it there when they return the next day. About 1,000 people use the Teamflow app every workday.

VR app "Immersed", for its part, said it

has won tens of thousands of users after a difficult period at the end of 2019, when the company almost disappeared.

"The adoption curve was in the disillusioned phase, it was the bottom of the valley and we ran out of money," said Immersed co-founder Renji Bijoy. "When I told my team that they could go look for jobs, all seven of them said unanimously, 'We're not going anywhere.'" —AFP

Indian industrialist Rahul Bajaj dies at 83

MUMBAI: Veteran industrialist Rahul Bajaj, whose name was synonymous with road transport in India, died yesterday aged 83, his company said. He "had not been keeping well", the Bajaj Group said in a statement, adding he would be cremated today in Pune, western India.

Bajaj was born into the Indian elite—his grandfather was one of Mahatma Gandhi's closest aides. He led the eponymous family-owned conglomerate for more than 40 years, and was best known for overseeing the stratospheric success of the Bajaj Chetak scooter in the 1970s and '80s.

The sturdy and affordable vehicle—based on a design by Italy's Vespa and named after the legendary horse ridden into battle by a Hindu Rajput king in the 1500s—became wildly popular with the Indian middle class following its 1972 launch. But in the heavily regulated economy of the time the firm was only allowed

to make 6,000 units a year, leading at one point to a 10-year waiting list. Bajaj was considered relatively clean in a country where corruption is widespread.

After stepping down as head of the firm in 2005, he served a term in the upper house of the Indian parliament, for the Congress party. He was unusually outspoken for an Indian billionaire, many of whom seek to avoid conflict with the authorities.

After Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party came to power in 2014, Bajaj said industrialists feared criticizing the government despite a plunging growth rate and weak economy. "If we criticize you there is no confidence that you will appreciate that," Bajaj had reportedly said at a private event in 2019 in the presence of home minister Amit Shah.

Last year, he expressed concerns over the impact of strict lockdowns imposed by the government to curb the spread of the coronavirus. But Modi tweeted yesterday that he was "pained" by Bajaj's demise, adding that he would be remembered for his "noteworthy contributions to the world of commerce and industry" and was a "great conversationalist".

Fellow industrialists paid tribute, with Harsh



MUMBAI: In this file photo taken on May 17, 2007, veteran industrialist Rahul Bajaj gestures during a press conference in Mumbai. —AFP

Goenka, chairman of conglomerate RPG Group, tweeting: "The 'spine' of Indian business cracks." Bajaj, he added, "was a visionary, straight talking and very respected for his value systems. An era ends!" Kiran Mazumdar-Shaw, the billionaire founder of Indian biotechnology company Biocon, said the country had "lost a great son & nation builder". —AFP

Coca-Cola says 25% of packaging will be reusable by 2030

NEW YORK: Coca-Cola, under pressure from environmentalists over its packaging policies, has pledged to use reusable containers for at least 25 percent of its beverages by 2030. The soda giant announced the pledge, saying it would be implemented globally through the glass and plastic bottles it sells to consumers and through the containers

used at soda fountains and dispensers. Refillable containers accounted for about 16 percent of total volumes in 2020, Coca-Cola said.

"Reusable packaging is among the most effective ways to reduce waste, use fewer resources and lower our carbon footprint in support of a circular economy," said Ben Jordan, senior director of packaging and climate at Coca-Cola. But the coalition #Breakfreefromplastics, which has rated the company the world's top plastic polluter because of its historic use of single-use plastic containers, offered only measured praise. "Coke's announcement that they are expanding their reusable packaging target globally is definitely a step in the right direction,"

said Emma Priestland, global corporate campaigns coordinator for the group.

"The company's string of broken promises in the past, however, compels us to welcome this announcement with some skepticism." The advocacy group As You Sow, which has drafted a shareholder proposal urging greater use of refillable bottles, praised the announcement.

Conrad MacKerron, the group's senior vice president, said he was "pleased" by Coca-Cola's commitment, adding that, "this action has the potential to substantially reduce the amount of single-use plastic bottles used, many of which end up as ocean plastic pollution." —AFP

Business

Turbine ‘torture’ for islanders in Greece as wind farms proliferate

Seaside villagers lose the modest income from tourism and fishing

AGII APOSTOLI, Greece: Until a few years ago, Agii Apostoli was a picturesque seaside village on the eastern coast of Evia, drawing a modest income from tourism and fishing. Now it is ringed by towering wind turbines whose night lights and whirring sounds are tantamount to daily “torture”, locals say.

“Longterm visitors ask us, why did you allow this crime to take place?” laments Stamatoula Karava, a local employee involved in a local cultural association. With their aviation lights flashing through the night in the surrounding hills, the turbines “have completely ruined the view,” she says.

Evia, 80 kilometers (50 miles) east of Athens and Greece’s second largest island after Crete, was among the first of the country’s regions to host wind farms some two decades ago. But they have since mushroomed, mainly in the more sparsely populated south of the island, environment groups say.

The municipality of Karystos alone, with an area of 672 square kilometers, has more than 400 turbines, some of them along the area’s main road. The oldest ones have now fallen into disuse, yet there are no plans to remove them and recycle their parts, says Chryssoula Bereti, who chairs the Karystos anti-wind farm front. “It’s a scandal,” she fumes. In line with EU clean energy targets, Greece has reduced its once-overwhelming reliance on lignite for electricity production to around 10 percent currently.

Forty percent of Greek power plants are now gas-fired and 30 percent run on renewable resources, of which 18 percent are wind turbines.

Hydroelectric plants and imports account for the remainder. According to the Regulatory Authority for Energy (RAE), Greece’s power production watchdog, the maximum capacity of wind turbines in the country increased more than sixfold between 2019 and 2021 to 8,205 MW.

With its propensity for high winds, Evia is a natural location for wind farms, notes RAE chairman Athanasios Dagoumas. But critics say that this expansion has gone too far. “Wind turbines have been installed on mountain peaks, in forests, near archaeological sites, on islands, in protected habitats... it’s as if energy production is the only possible activity in this country”, says Dimitris Soufleris, a lawyer and spokesman of the environmental association of the Evia town of Kymi.

“We cannot have so many wind farms in Greece,” he said. In past months, protests against wind farm development have been held in Agrafa, central Greece, as well as the islands of Andros, Skyros and



AGII APOSTOLI, Greece: A photograph shows wind turbines alongside the provincial road of Evia island near Agii Apostoli. — AFP

Tinos. Soufleris notes that another 18 turbines are scheduled to be installed near Agii Apostoli.

Nikos Balaskas, a local engineer whose house in Agii Apostoli is less than 400 meters (450 yards) from the nearest wind turbine, has sued the company. “As an engineer, I’m not opposed to green energy. But there have to be standards. This is torture, we can no longer sleep for the noise,” he said.

There are similar concerns in the nearby coastal town of Styra, where another 14 wind turbines are to be located. “This is going to cause enormous damage to our region,” says local hotel chairwoman Afroditi Lekka, noting that thousands of hikers visit the area annually.

In response to the mounting criticism, the conservative government of Prime Minister Kyriakos

Mitsotakis last month announced that six mountain ranges in central Greece, the Peloponnese, Crete and the island of Samothrace would be given additional protection status against future energy infrastructure development. “Planned licenses in these areas were withdrawn,” says RAE’s Dagoumas.

Similar steps have also been taken in the north of Evia, which was devastated by wildfires this summer, he adds. RAE’s Dagoumas notes in the past two years solar parks have overtaken wind farm investments owing mainly to “the implementation of a new automatic system” that facilitates the application for the investors and lower average cost. “The wind farms cannot be implemented everywhere, it has to be high wind capacity, for the photo-voltaics there is much more space for them”, he says. — AFP

US consumer price inflation hits four-decade high

WASHINGTON: Inflation in the United States was as hot as ever last month, with consumer prices seeing their largest annual jump in nearly four decades as costs rose for a wide range of items. The Labor Department said the consumer price index (CPI) climbed 7.5 percent over the 12 months to January, its largest increase since February 1982, while it rose by 0.6 percent compared to December, more than analysts expected. The data defied hopes by President Joe Biden’s administration that the wave of price increases sapping his public approval would show signs of decelerating in the first month of 2022, and further bolstered expectations that the Federal Reserve will soon increase interest rates.

In a statement, Biden acknowledged that inflation “is elevated” but “forecasters continue to project inflation easing substantially by the end of 2022.” “And fortunately, we saw positive real wage growth last month, and moderation in auto prices, which have made up about a quarter of headline inflation over the last year,” he said. An array of factors is seen as driving the price increases, from the Fed’s easy money policies meant to support the economy during the pandemic to supply chain snarls, shortages of components and labor and robust demand from American consumers. The White House has attempted to reign in the increases by announcing initiatives to increase semiconductor production and tackle alleged price fixing in the meatpacking industry. Biden tried to drum up enthusiasm for his stalled Build Back Better spending plan by saying it would lower drug prices. However, the Fed is the institution best placed to stem the price hikes, said Jason Furman, a former chair of the White House Council of Economic Advisers during Barack Obama’s presidency, under whom Biden served as vice president.—AFP



Net Income

186

Million KD



Customers



Revenue



EBITDA



EPS

The Board of Directors recommended a cash dividend of **23** fils per share for the second half of 2021, subject to Annual General Assembly and statutory approvals. This dividend follows the semi-annual dividend of 10 fils distributed in 2021, totaling 33 fils per share for the year 2021

FY 2021 results

Business

NBK ECONOMIC REPORT

Driven by households, Kuwait's credit up 6.3% in 2021, highest since 2015

KUWAIT: Kuwait's domestic credit ended the year on a relatively strong note, increasing by 1.6 percent q/q in 4Q2021 with growth at 6.3 percent for the full year, the highest since 2015. For the sixth consecutive quarter, household lending was the main growth driver, while business lending is yet to recover from the pandemic-related slowdown.

Business credit remained flat for the second consecutive quarter to record 1.4 percent growth for the full year. While the pandemic-induced shock continues to weigh on the growth in business credit, we believe that relatively high repayments and write-offs were also a factor behind the weak business credit expansion in 2021. Growth of the various sectors differed markedly with the construction and trade sectors remaining the weakest for the second year in a row, falling by 10 percent and 9 percent y/y, respectively.

In contrast, credit growth in the industry (+16 percent y/y) and oil/gas (+14 percent y/y) sectors was very solid. Credit to real estate, by far the largest component of business credit with a 43 percent share, inched up by just 1 percent in 2021, the weakest growth in five years.

Household credit growth continued to be very strong, though softened compared with 3Q2021, finishing the year at 13.3 percent y/y the fastest annual

expansion since 2013. This strong growth was driven by personal consumption loans as well as housing loans, which rose by around 15 percent and 13 percent, respectively. The six-month deferral of household credit instalments for Kuwaiti borrowers (which expired in 4Q2021), the ongoing robust demand/high valuations in the residential real estate sector, and the continued solid consumer spending are some of the key factors behind this multi-year record expansion in household lending.

In addition, credit growth in 2021 got a boost from a solid expansion in lending for securities purchase, which increased by 9 percent (after being on a decreasing trend in the previous five years) buoyed by a 26 percent gain in the Boursa Kuwait All-Share Index. For 2022, credit growth will likely be supported by the further normalization of economic activities given the major pickup in vaccination rates and the expected ongoing easing of pandemic-related restrictions. Whether 2022 will be the "end-of-the-pandemic year" remains to be seen, but in all cases the disruption to economic activities has generally been milder with each subsequent infection wave, boding well for economic and credit growth in 2022.

In the context of elevated oil prices and robust non-oil growth in Kuwait, business credit should be

supported by a likely improvement in project awards and by the pent-up demand for capital spending (CAPEX) given muted CAPEX by corporates since the outbreak of the pandemic. As for household credit, growth is expected to soften (but remain relatively robust) given no more blanket deferrals of household credit instalments, which have strongly supported growth in the past two years. On the other hand, passage of the mortgage law in one form or another will be a game changer, providing significant growth potential for the banks given the very strong demand for housing loans.

Private sector deposits

Meanwhile, domestic deposit growth continued to be muted, falling by 1.6 percent in 2021. Despite elevated oil prices, government deposits dropped by 7.2 percent (KD 571 million) in 2021, likely related to the liquidity issues facing the government. Private-sector deposits were broadly flat in 4Q2021, to finish the year registering a slight (0.4 percent) decrease.

Looking at the breakdown of KD private-sector deposits shows that current and saving accounts (CASA) expanded by around 5 percent in 2021, while the more expensive time deposits fell by 6.4 percent. While this remains favorable for the

banks, it marks a sharp deceleration from 2020 when CASA surged by 24 percent and time deposits decreased by 8 percent. The record-low interest rate environment (banks shedding expensive institutional deposits to defend margins and depositors facing lower opportunity cost from keeping funds in CASA) and the deferral of credit instalments have been two key drivers for the changing composition of private sector deposits over the last two years.

The lack of growth in domestic deposits over the past year led to an increase in the domestic loans-to-deposits ratio to 95 percent at the end of 2021 from around 88 percent one year ago, reflecting the slightly tighter liquidity situation.

Interest rates on hold

The Central Bank of Kuwait's (CBK) discount rate has remained at 1.5 percent since March 2020 but will likely start trending up in 2022 (though not necessarily one-for-one with US rates) given that the US Federal Reserve will be hiking rates several times this year. However, given the tighter liquidity situation, interest rates (weighted average as calculated by the CBK) on KD-denominated deposits have bottomed out and actually have started to very gradually trend higher in the past few months.

stc wins 'Outstanding Leadership and Growth' award

KUWAIT: Kuwait Telecommunications Company - stc, a world-class digital leader providing innovative services and platforms to customers, enabling the digital transformation in Kuwait, announced that it has won the 'Outstanding Leadership and Growth' award from MEA Business, the region's first augmented reality enabled business magazine, in recognition of the company's various achievements and initiatives. The award was presented to stc during the Technology Achievements Awards 2021, after the Company met and exceeded the criteria set by the judging panel.

stc received the award after submitting all the supporting documents requested by MEA Business, in addition to the independent process executed by the MEA Markets team of gathering and assessing information from a variety of publicly accessible sources. The recognition also reflects the wide range of innovative offerings introduced by stc, including new-to-market solutions that leverage the Company's strong and widespread 5G network. Through its strategic vision of enabling digital transformation in Kuwait, stc focused throughout the past several years on investing in developing and enhancing its 5G infrastructure, providing individual customers and corporates with the highest quality solutions through its reliable high-speed connectivity.

Despite the unprecedented circumstances witnessed since the onset of the pandemic, stc managed to successfully market its offerings and continuously develop its network to provide the latest fifth generation technology both on a local and regional level. stc also strengthened its network through a parallel frequency spectrum, which in turn enriched the user experience in terms of coverage quality, speed and latency on local and international servers, ensuring seamless usage of its premium solutions.

The Company had also successfully complete the commercialization step of implementing end to end



Maziad Al-Harbi

5G Stand Alone (SA) as the 2nd most disruptive development of the comprehensive 3GPP 5G compliant network. The Company also accomplished its vision of offering the widest network coverage of 5G Sub 3GHz, while accelerating digital transformation through advanced Business

Support Systems to fulfill a wide range of industry focused solutions. 5G SA delivered multiple benefits by including enhanced coverage, increased uplink bandwidth and improved network latency with international servers.

Commenting on the award, stc CEO, engineer Maziad Al-Harbi said, "When considering the diverse needs of our customers, we aim to take on a leadership role in the market by offering flexible, automated, and reliable solutions that can accelerate their digital strategies. Our range of solutions provides start-ups, SMEs, and enterprises with new-to-market products that enhance efficiency in operational functions, while streamlining the transformation of traditional ways into digitized concepts. This award recognizes the effort and hard work from the stc and solutions by stc teams in identifying lucrative and innovative solutions that greatly benefit the Company's diverse customer base."

Al-Harbi added, "We are proud to receive this award which recognizes stc's leading position in the market and identifies the various areas of growth the Company has focused on in the recent term. On behalf of stc, I would like to thank all those who played a role in implementing the Company's growth strategy, especially the Technology team, which led to this recognition. I would also like to thank the MEA Business team for their diligent assessment process and cooperation. stc will continue to leverage its digital solutions, strong network infrastructure, and network of international partners to deliver exceptional offerings to its valued customers."

over KD 100 until 14th February. These gifts include gift vouchers, gift cards, diamond pendants, and also calls from their brand ambassadors.

Talking about the launch of the limited edition jewelry for Valentine's Day, Ramesh Kalyanaraman, Executive Director, Kalyan Jewellers said, "Our newest collection curated for the occasion of Valentine's Day is affordable, lightweight, stylish and complements the theme of the occasion with distinctive designs. The collection is attractive and matches the higher quality associated with the brand."

As part of the Kalyan Jewellers' 'We Care' COVID-19 guidelines, the company has instituted the highest level of safety and precautionary measures across all showrooms to safeguard the health and safety of both customers and staff alike. The company has also appointed a 'Safety Measure Officer' to ensure safety protocol guidelines are strictly followed.

designs. This limited-edition BeMine collection features an exciting range of intimate heart-themed jewelry which includes pendants, rings, earrings and bracelets, in Diamonds and Gold exclusively designed for the upcoming Valentine's Day celebration.

John Paul Alukkas, Managing Director, Joyalukkas Group said "As the world negotiates its way back to a new normal, we have to find new and exciting ways to keep rooted and connected. This is an ideal occasion to gift our special ones with something memorable. The Joyalukkas Gold Cash back offer is valid till 19th February and Diamond cash back offer is valid till 26th February 2022 across all Joyalukkas showrooms in Kuwait."



Kalyan Jewellers launches limited edition jewelry

KUWAIT: February is the season to bestow yourself and your loved ones with gifts that they will cherish forever and will signify your love for them. Celebrating the spirit of Valentine's Day, Kalyan Jewellers, a leading jewelry brand, has launched an exclusive collection for everyone who wants to gift special jewelry that highlights the uniqueness of their companionship. This unique line comprises lightweight gold jewelry including pendants, rings, earrings and more - studded with precious stones and diamonds. The collection also includes jewelry with exquisite motifs in rose gold.

Celebrating this season, Kalyan Jewellers has also announced a "Spin and Win" offer for all their customers with assured gifts for all purchases made

Joyalukkas cash back offer and BeMine collections

KUWAIT: Joyalukkas has announced their Cash back offer by unveiling beautiful new designs under their popular BeMine collection. To make it more attractive an exciting offer of KD 10 worth gift voucher when you purchase diamond, polki and pearl jewelry worth KD 200 and get KD 5 worth gift voucher when you purchase gold jewelry worth KD 250.

The 2022 collection of 'Be Mine' is amazingly versatile in terms of the occasions you can wear them, and during this season it is definitely the best time to surprise your loved one with some chosen

Ooredoo Business upgrades its Push-to-Talk service

KUWAIT: Businesses that aim to sustain its market position and stay afloat through the challenges occurred due to the rapid technological evolutions, need to constantly evolve and invest in the future of their businesses to maintain the same potential for growth and improvement.

In an environment of constant change, the needs and demands of individual and corporate customers change accordingly. Thus, Ooredoo business, the trusted technology partner for your business solutions, strives to exceed its customers' expectations efficiently and effectively through offering comprehensive, all-inclusive services for group communication.

Push-to-Talk (PTT) is one of the group communication services Ooredoo business offers to its corporate customers in partnership with Telo Systems, the leading manufacturer of innovative broadband push-to-talk solution enabling employees to connect at the push of a button.

Push-to-Talk is an enhanced communications service offered for different industries such as the security, manufacturing and logistics along with many other industries that require a private



Essa Al-Moosa

voice-based network with multi-party communications, with instant access to the corporate digital network. That is, providing a seamless communication process, time saving and maximizing productivity. Push-to-Talk also

provides GPS and route history tracking services for maximum efficiency.

Since its rollout and due to its distinguished features and advantages, the service has always grabbed a remarkable attention from the business sector and corporates. On this occasion, Essa Al-Moosa, Executive Director of Business & Consumer Sales, Ooredoo Kuwait, said: "In today's business environment, responding to change is necessary. Responding to change equals adapting new strategies, enhancing capabilities and skills, and improving products and services to remain viable and profitable."

"Continuously developing Ooredoo's services is a critical factor in sustaining our leading position in the Kuwaiti market, along with maintaining our existing customers and attracting new ones. Hence, we remain consistent in delivering our promise to customers with the goal of dramatic improvement that is consistent customer satisfaction level" Al-Moosa added.

KIB first bank in Kuwait to offer one-stop-shop for all real estate services

KUWAIT: With a legacy spanning more than four decades in real estate, accumulating with it a wealth of extensive technical expertise and knowledge, Kuwait International Bank (KIB) continues to successfully provide its full range of real estate services to its clients, through its dedicated multisectoral Real Estate Department (RED). Considered a one-stop-shop for an integrated full suite of real estate services, KIB's RED offers real estate financing, advisory and consultancy service, real estate appraisal, as well as property management.

Dealing with all types of real estate - from private housing, investment buildings, complexes, and hotels, to hospitals, schools, and factories, KIB's RED provides its innovative solutions for both individuals and companies alike. These primarily include offering Islamic financing services for all real estate needs through multiple financing products, such as the Islamic Murabaha, leasing and several others. Other essential services include all forms of real estate appraisal, which entails the inspection of real estate, doing economic feasibility studies for projects, determining the economic rent amounts for various real estate units, as well as estimating the construction cost of various real estate projects.

Speaking about the set of integrated real estate services offered at KIB, General Manager of the Bank's Real Estate Department, Jassim Al-Abdulhadi, reaffirmed that part of providing these services to clients - at the required standards and level of efficiency - is based on employing a specialized in-house technical team, comprising highly qualified engineers and real estate specialists. Noting that among the tasks required of them is to provide technical advice on various real estate projects, in addition to following up on project works.

Among the additional services provided by the RED's appraisal team, is preparing the engineering and construction guide report and contributing to the preparation of the annual real estate report of various regions of Kuwait, given KIB's decades-long presence within the real estate market, since its inception in 1973 under the name

"Kuwait Real Estate Bank". In fact, KIB's RED is considered a go-to, official reference in Kuwait for governmental bodies and financial institutions when it comes to real estate appraisal.

Also, with reference to the real estate consultancy services provided by KIB, Al-Abdulhadi stated that the RED aims to direct its clients' investments to the best opportunities in light of the changing local market trends, owing to the Bank's long experience in the field, which enables it to predict and respond to these changes quickly and effectively, in addition to possessing the sufficient resources and tools to support all customer segments with their real estate plans.

One of the most prominent solutions that KIB also provides within its real estate service offerings, is Property Management. Al-Abdulhadi reiterated that it has been developed over the course of 45 years to offer its clients a comprehensive suite of property management services that meet the needs of real estate owners. Some of which include rent collection and marketing of residential and commercial units, the provision of periodic and urgent maintenance services, along with timely problem solving and resolution of legal disputes. Other services also include preparing reports and statements for property owners, and conducting public auctions based on the client's requirements.

"With the increase in number of real estate properties, and the inability of its owners to dedicate enough time in their busy schedule to properly manage and follow up on its maintenance, there has become an urgent need for reliable partners to take this burden off their shoulders. At KIB, we gladly offer to run all operations related to the management of properties, with a firm commitment to dealing with full accountability and transparency throughout the entire duration of real estate management. We always promise to preserve our clients' properties, maintaining its market value and high occupancy rate, and by keeping this promise, we succeeded in expanding our client base and sustain our leading position within the real estate market," concluded Al-Abdulhadi.



Jassim Al-Abdulhadi

Gulf Bank records net profit of KD 42m in 2021, an increase of 46% over 2020

BoD recommends a cash dividend of 7 fils per share and 5% bonus shares

KUWAIT: Gulf Bank K.S.C.P. ("Bank") announced its financial results for the year ending 2021. The Bank reported a net profit of KD 42 million, an increase of 46 percent compared to the year 2020. Earnings per share were up 40 percent to 14 fils and the Board of Directors is recommending distribution of a cash dividend of 7 fils per share, representing a 50 percent cash payout ratio, in addition to 5 percent bonus shares, for shareholders' approval at the annual general meeting to be held in March 2022.

Gulf Bank recorded an operating significant non-performing loans coverage ratio of 615 percent including total provisions and collaterals.

Compared to 2020, total assets increased by 7 percent to KD 6.6 billion, gross loans and advances to customers



Jassim Mustafa Boodai



Tony Daher

the overall Kuwaiti economy."

Recognition

As a testament for its endeavors to be the leading Kuwaiti Bank of the Future, Gulf Bank was recognized by several prestigious organizations. During 2021, Gulf Bank was privileged to be awarded the 'Best Innovation in Customer Experience' award in recognition of its recent transformation journey that has embraced a multi-experience approach, strengthening its market differentiation with enhanced customer and employee experiences. The Bank was also recognized for its creativity and innovation across various fields, including: 'Best Marketing Manager', 'Best Sustainability Initiative' for the Gulf Bank 642 Marathon, 'Best National Work' award for the Bank's National and Liberation Day advertisement, and 'Best Direction' award for Gulf Bank's flagship product 'Al-Danah millionaire draw'.



Earnings per share were up 40% to 14 fils

Credit Ratings

Gulf Bank continues to be well recognized in terms of its creditworthiness and financial strength internationally, rated "A" by three leading credit rating agencies.

- Moody's Investors Service maintained the Long-Term Deposits Rating of "A3" with a "Stable" outlook.
- Fitch Ratings revised the Bank's Long-term Issuer Default Rating to "A" with a "Stable" outlook.
- Capital Intelligence affirmed Gulf Bank's Long-term Foreign Currency Rating of "A+" with a "Stable" outlook.

income of KD 170.1 million for the year 2021, an increase of 7 percent compared to the year 2020. The increase in the net profit was mainly driven by a 6 percent or 7.5 million increase in net interest income, a 13 percent or 4.2 million improvement in non-interest income, and a decline of 26 percent or 16.4 million in total provisions.

As for asset quality, the non-performing loans (NPL) ratio stood at 0.9 percent as of 31 December 2021, lower than the prior year level of 1.1 percent. Additionally, the Bank continues to have

climbed by 10 percent to KD 4.8 billion, and shareholders' equity increased by 5 percent to reach KD 666.5 million. Customer deposits reached KD 4.3 billion, an increase of 7 percent compared to the prior year. The Bank's regulatory capital ratios remained strong as the Tier 1 ratio of 14.5 percent was 5.0 percent above the regulatory minimum of 9.5 percent and the Capital Adequacy Ratio (CAR) of 16.7 percent was 5.2 percent above the regulatory minimum of 11.5 percent.

Commenting on the results, Jassim Mustafa Boodai, Gulf Bank's Chairman said: "Despite a backdrop of a turbulent pandemic year, Gulf Bank weathered the challenges and achieved another year of strong performance and growth. In 2021, we showed an ability to adapt and excel in serving our customers, employees, and communities while positioning the Bank for future success and market leadership."

Boodai added: "In addition, we continued to make significant headway and progress towards our 2025 strategy, to consolidate our position as the leading Kuwaiti Bank of the future. We aim to provide customers with simple and innovative services to enable sustainable growth for the Bank and have set the foundation by fostering a performance-driven culture, introducing new technology solutions, and adopting world-class risk management practices."

Digital transformation journey

During these challenging and uncertain times, Gulf Bank remained resilient, reflecting its strength, stability, and its support towards stakeholders. Tony Daher, CEO of Gulf Bank, commented: "As part of our ongoing digital transformation journey, we are proud to announce that we have successfully accomplished several milestones during

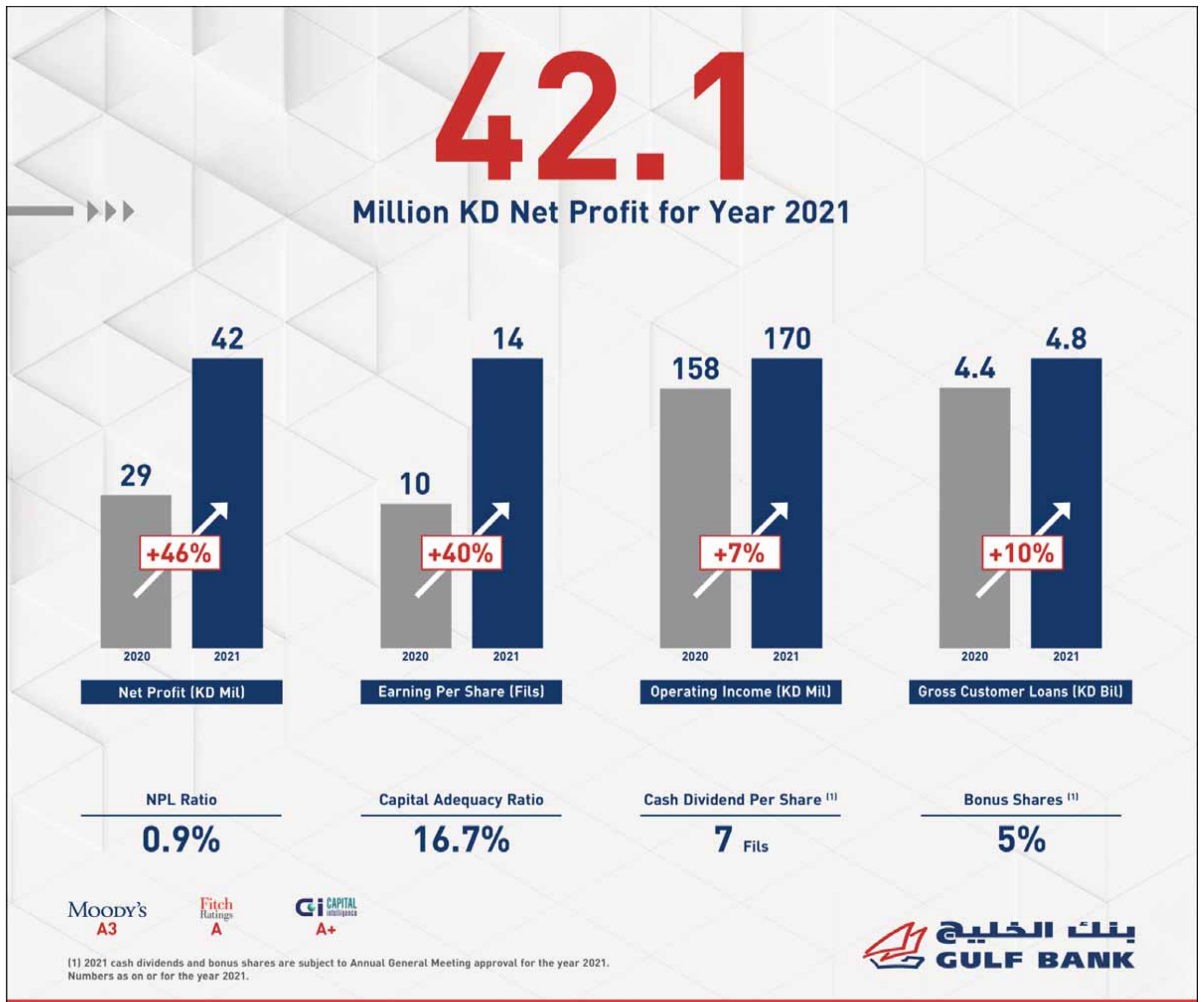
2021. We launched the new MX.3 treasury platform in partnership with Murex for the development and automation of the Bank's capital markets and treasury business. In addition, we have embedded digital elements into our corporate banking on boarding process, allowing our SME customers to digitally onboard and apply for a range of the Bank's merchant services, cards and financing solutions." Daher added: "We aim to create exceptional engagement across all touch-points throughout the customer journey while maintaining the highest standards of privacy and security. Our customers can now open bank accounts in just under a minute, marking a new era of digital banking services in Kuwait with the simplest and fastest digital onboarding process."

Sustainability

Sustainability is an important and integral part of Gulf Bank's strategy. Daher added: "We believe that integrating sustainability and ESG considerations into our practices and activities will enable us to further strengthen our customer experience, offering sustainable products and services for the market, and positioning us as a key leader of sustainability initiatives amongst local and regional financial institutions. We remain committed towards our stakeholders, community, and

Appreciation

Boodai concluded his remarks by stating: "I would like to thank everyone who contributed to these great results, specifically our shareholders for their ongoing trust, and our employees for their commitment and dedication. I would also like to thank the Central Bank of Kuwait for their continuous support. Last but not least, I want to thank our clients for their loyalty, and reiterate our commitment to offering them the best banking experiences."





Models walk the runway for Christian Cowan during New York Fashion Week: The Shows at One World Observatory in New York City. — AFP photos

Play and glitter: New York Fashion Week kicks off amid COVID

Experimentation, play, and glitter: a coronavirus-impacted New York Fashion Week got under way Friday with Fall/Winter 2022 shows by Proenza Schouler and Christian Cowan. In its collection, presented in an art gallery in Manhattan's trendy East Village, New York brand Proenza Schouler played with shape, contrasting fitted waists with loose or slightly rounded skirts.

Designer Lazaro Hernandez said the idea was to exaggerate and juxtapose different forms to respond to "this whole body obsession these days with social media and everyone showing the body." Model Bella Hadid wore an outfit featuring buttoned sleeves, accentuated shoulders, and a black velvet hooded top-giving off a Catwoman vibe. "Experimentation and

play are key, perhaps now more than ever," Proenza said of its collection.

Glamour and glitter

Christian Cowan—who has dressed Lady Gaga and rappers Cardi B and Lil Nas X—presented his collection in the observatory atop the One World Trade Center skyscraper that replaced the Twin Towers felled on 9/11. The show had the

atmosphere of a nightclub, highlighting the British designer's taste for glitter and glamour.

Ahead of the runway, the label teased fans with what might be in store by posting an image of the "Freedom Tower" all in pink on its Instagram page. Despite pandemic restrictions and the Omicron variant upsetting preparations, several other brands have opted for in-person shows, including Michael Kors, Altuzarra, Tory Burch, Brandon Maxwell and Telfar.

A notable absence was Tom Ford, chair of the Council of Fashion Designers of America (CFDA) that organizes the event. He was due to close the week next Wednesday but canceled at the end of January due to a surge of COVID-19 cases among his team. "We have tried

everything possible to avoid canceling our New York show but ultimately are faced with the sad fact that we will simply not have a completed collection in time," he said.

For several years now, New York has had to deal with big names deciding to skip the event in favor of displaying their latest collections elsewhere. Some designers are also choosing to eschew the classic runway calendar, with growing criticism that the frantic pace of fashion is out of step with sustainability.

The absence of top creators like Christopher John Rogers—the CFDA's women's designer of the year 2021 — and Kerby Jean-Raymond's Pyer Moss brand, also provided an opportunity for emerging talents to grab the headlines.

Or at least that is the hope of labels such as Melke and Dauphinette, which promote sustainable and ethical fashion.

"It is really rewarding realizing that people can see the work that I've been doing and they think that it deserves a place amongst a bunch of other very successful brands," 26-year-old Emma Gage, who founded Melke during the pandemic, told AFP. "It kind of really solidifies you as someone that people know is going to be around for a long time," she said inside her small studio in Bushwick, Brooklyn. —AFP



Models walk the runway for Proenza Schouler during New York Fashion Week: The Shows.

Lifestyle | Features



A couple strolls at the Tuileries garden in Paris on February 11, 2022. — AFP photos



A couple shares food on the Garonne river bank in Toulouse, southwestern France on February 8, 2022.

Valentine's Day: Flowers, chocolates or a good whipping?

Saint Valentine's Day may now be celebrated worldwide but traditions are often very different and sometimes have nothing at all to do with romance. While in Europe it's all about couples cozying up, in the United States it is as much about schoolchildren celebrating friendship while in Japan women give chocolates to their bosses. From pagan festival to marketing ploy, we look at the rich Valentine's mix:

All whipped up

Valentine's Day was once a rather violent affair. Its origins are thought to go back to the Roman purification festival of Lupercalia when naked young men would whip young ladies to make them more fertile. Down the centuries that evolved into only slightly less raucous lotteries that paired young men off with young women at medieval carnivals.

Martyr to his heart

The day is also, of course, associated

with the cult of third century Roman Christian martyr Saint Valentine. He literally lost his head over love-decapitated on the orders of the Emperor Claudius, they say, for secretly performing weddings. According to the legend, Valentine cured his jailer's blind daughter and the day before his death slipped her a note signed "Your Valentine". Unfortunately there was no happy ending.

Love letters

In England the exchange of messages known as "valentines" on February 14 developed with the rise of the postal service in the 19th century, with the sender often signing off "Your Valentine".

Love spoons

They did things differently across the border in Wales. Their festival of love is held on January 25 and celebrates a fourth-century Welsh princess called Saint Dwynwen. Unlucky in love, broken-hearted Dwynwen sought solace in reli-

gion and became a nun, praying for others to find true love. Among the gifts traditionally exchanged between lovers, and would-be ones, are carved Welsh wooden love spoons.

My darling Galentine

The celebration took a commercial turn in the mid-19th century in the US, with the invention of mass-produced greeting cards. Promoters quickly got the idea to extend the "tradition" beyond lovers, with schoolchildren now expected to bring a Valentine card for every one of their classmates. Today it has become a \$20-billion business and has even spawned Galentines Day, when "gals" go out together and eat waffles.

Hot choc

The Japanese Valentine tradition began after World War II when confectionery makers thought up the wheeze of having women offer chocolates to their bosses and boyfriends on February 14. A

half-century later, the practice has become an annual ritual, with millions of Japanese women giving pralines or ganaches to show affection, friendship or professional respect. But not any chocolate will do. The "giri choco", for example, are standard chocolates reserved for work colleagues while the superior "honmei choco" are the sign of true love.

Not in public

Valentine's Day is less loved in some parts of the world however, with some Muslim countries including Pakistan, Indonesia, Malaysia and Saudi Arabia taking a dim view. Although the day is very popular in Iran, people have to show their affection modestly. The sale of heart-shaped balloons, for example, is rather frowned upon by traditionalists. — AFP

What's next for TikTok's music industry revolution?

With a billion users, TikTok has rapidly become one of the most important players in the music industry, and now has its sights set on revolutionizing the way artists are discovered and get paid. Success stories such as Lil Nas X whose "Old Town Road" became effectively the biggest-selling US single of all time after going viral on TikTok have demonstrated the power of the short-form video app. Major labels, which initially freaked out over TikTokers using their music without a license, quickly realized they needed to get on board.



Global Head of Music at the video-focused social networking service TikTok Ole Obermann, poses at the TikTok UK offices, in London. — AFP

"When a disruptive tech platform appears, understandably the rights-holders get uncomfortable," TikTok's head of music Ole Obermann told AFP. He was brought in from Warner Music in December 2019 to thrash out deals with the labels. "Obviously we had to pay out substantial amounts of money. The good news is we're totally licensed now and we're talking to them every day about new things that haven't been done before."

'Changing everything'

Meanwhile, TikTok has continued to create viral sensations that are reshaping the musical landscape. Sometimes, it's old songs given a new lease of life, such as recent crazes for Fleetwood Mac's "Dreams" or Boney M's "Rasputin". But often it's new or independent artists, who no longer need the backing of record labels to find a massive audience.

"It's hard to overstate how much this is changing everything," said Tom Rosenthal, a London-based musician whose songs have been used on 1.6 million TikTok videos. "Major labels are kinda crapping their pants because the tradition-

al systems of marketing no longer apply. (TikTok) is a great leveller. You can do it on your own," he said. Some artists are becoming huge without even knowing about the app. That was the case with Nigerian popstar CKay. His 2019 single "Love Nwantiti" was a decent-sized hit in his home country, but then TikTok users got hold of it, and by November 2021 it had surpassed 15 billion streams and topped charts from Asia to Europe to North America.

'On to something'

The major labels say they are not concerned. "TikTok has become an impressive motor for discovering music... and some independent artists use it very well," Jean Charles Mariani, head of strategy in Paris for Universal Music, told AFP. "But labels remain indispensable for the majority, because we have a deep expertise in the uses of this platform."

TikTok is already thinking about next steps. Its latest service, SoundOn, offers unsigned artists a simpler way to upload songs, get paid and find distribution. Obermann hints this could see TikTok become more like a record label. "We think we're on to something," he said, highlighting recent viral hits by unsigned acts Muni Lang and Games We Play. "It's early days in deciding exactly how we work with these artists on building their careers. But we see we can play a much bigger role in the artist discovery process in a very hands-on way."

Pent-up demand

Obermann also hopes to revolutionize the way that songs are used for adverts—a part of the business that is currently worth around \$500 million globally per year but could be worth much more. "Traditionally, it meant something like a big car brand licensing Celine Dion's 'I Drove All Night' for their TV ads," he said. "But we have about one million small and medium businesses who want to make TikTok ads using music. And it's an absolute nightmare because our licenses don't include commercial usage."

Currently, each commercial use requires TikTok to get special permission from the label and all the songwriters, which can take months. "It's extremely inefficient. If we can redesign the way that works, (the global licensing business) would go from \$500 million to several billion within a few years. There's that much pent-up demand. We're really working on that." Other ideas include live-streaming concerts and direct sales, with some artists already flogging vinyls and merch through the platform. But will TikTok disappear as quickly as it arrived? The ghost of MySpace, a previous revolutionary force in music, haunts its successors. "That's something we think about every day when we wake up," said Obermann. "We're confident TikTok has tipped into the cultural zeitgeist to a tremendous extent at this point. But it's always day one and you have to keep reinventing yourself to stay relevant." — AFP



Musician and user of the video-focused social networking service TikTok Tom Rosenthal, composing in his studio at his house, in London. — AFP

How to be a TikTok music megastar

Tom Rosenthal is a 35-year-old singer-songwriter from London. He had already built a decent career over a decade, but when he joined TikTok in 2020 he said the impact was "seismic". His songs—including hits like "Lights Are On", "It's OK" and "Go Solo"—have been used on 1.6 million TikTok videos, driving fans to other music services where he has picked up hundreds of millions of streams. Rosenthal gave AFP a few tips on the secrets of his TikTok success.

Good video

"Some things are a must: you will not go viral without the lyrics written on the screen. It's a funny thing, but lyrics have never been more important than now. "It has to be lit really well. Face is key—you've got to show your face. You can't be off by a tree. "In the swiping culture, the first milliseconds matter. You can't be fumbling with a guitar. "People often do it by speaking first: 'Here's a song about Nelson Mandela...' or whatever. That's better than if you just start singing a song about Nelson Mandela." Don't get fancy, he adds: "TikTok doesn't reward high production costs. Me sitting here in my studio singing a song is no different than if I had 50 oiled-up dancers in a football stadium."

Simple hooks

"There's a crudeness to my piano style. It's gentle, melodic and rhythmic, but quite blocky—not up and down the keys like a virtuoso. That means it edits nicely for TikTok videos. "They're hooky lines, which is important because you only get 15 seconds (the most common time for TikToks). Plus, I've got a pleasant, inoffensive voice—you're not going to throw up in your tea if you hear it. "TikTok is a great leveller. Anyone can do it. Maybe you've got two chords on the guitar. You can put it on TikTok and millions of people can find it."

Ignore the easy money

"When one of my songs goes viral, the

labels rush in and they are absolutely praying that I'm 22 and haven't got a clue what's going on and will take £20,000 (around \$25,000) for the rights. "I tell them: 'I know exactly how much these songs are going to be worth so if you want to start talking, fine, but it's going to be in the many millions.'

"As soon as they realize I know even a handful of things about how this business works, they disappear. "There's still a place for record labels, they'll be fine. But if you're doing well as an independent artist and you're slightly good at organization, you don't need them. "A friend had 200 million streams, but unfortunately he was with a major label and he's yet to see a penny from it. That should have been close to a million quid. It's unbelievable what they get away with it."

You can't force it

"I've seen artists of significant calibre who write a whole album that they think will be perfect for TikTok and it's totally flopped. "It doesn't work for an artist to say, 'My song deserves to be viral'. Sixty thousand songs are released every day—it's not for them to decide, it's for the listener. "The songs that have shot off for me, I haven't said: 'I want these songs to do well, I'm going to make a nice campaign and a special video where I wear a gold suit in a fancy studio.' "I've done nothing. The songs are out in the world, people I don't know have used them. You can't control it."

But you can connect

"With TikTok, you know people are listening but they might not know who you are. You have to connect to them, and say: 'I'm the one who did that song, come over here for a bit.' Connect your face to the sound. "There's a lot of moaning pop stars at the moment, saying: 'Oh no, I'm not a content creator, I'm a musician, I couldn't possibly make a video explaining what I do.' But really it's not that hard to make the occasional video!" — AFP

Shunned by French studios, 'Amelie' director turns to Netflix

He made perhaps the most famous French film of the century so far in "Amelie", but Jean-Pierre Jeunet was forced to turn to Netflix after failing to find a traditional backer for his new movie. The US streaming giant has found great success in poaching lauded filmmakers who increasingly struggle to get funding elsewhere, including Martin Scorsese ("The Irishman"), Alfonso Cuaron ("Roma") and Jane Campion ("The Power of the Dog"). Jeunet had similarly trouble finding studio support for his movie, "Big Bug", a dystopian comedy set during a war between humans and robots that premiers on Netflix on Friday.



"Almost no one wanted my new film in France. I came close to a full-blown depression," Jeunet told AFP. "I heard the same words, the same phrases as I did for 'Delicatessen' (his 1991 debut) and 'Amelie': it's too weird, too detached and therefore too risky." Netflix, however, called at just the right time. "They said yes to the project in 24 hours," Jeunet said. The streaming platform has faced some of its biggest obstacles in France, a country with strict rules about how long films must wait between a cinema release and home-viewing. In order to win concessions, it has poured money into the French film industry—a boon for riskier propositions like Jeunet.

'People mocked me'

To be fair to French studios, the director's track record has been mixed, with 2004's "A Very Long Engagement" and 2013's "The Young and Prodigious T.S. Spivet" failing to match the excitement around his previous films. But for Jeunet, this only underlines what he sees as the hypocrisy of the French film industry—complaining about the financial clout of foreign streaming platforms, while being just as obsessed with money.

"Marketing has all the power and the decision-makers are people who come out of business school and want to tell you how to make your film," he said. "As soon as the film is released, they have their eyes on how many tickets are sold. If it's 200 people, it's a catastrophe. And now (with Netflix) we have half a billion potential viewers—if only one percent watch the film, that's a lot of people." "When I signed with Netflix, people mocked me, saying I shouldn't do it. Now everyone is calling me to say they want to do the same."

'The world is changing'

He rejects the fear that streaming platforms are killing off cinemas. "Things don't replace each other, they add," he said. "Platforms haven't replaced cinemas, which didn't replace the theatre. The big films will always be shown in cinemas. The world is changing, we have to adapt." The studio might have changed, but "Big Bug" remains very much a Jeunet production: "People who like my work will love it; those who don't will love to hate it," he said.

"There are two types of directors: those who renew themselves constantly but don't have any style. And those who, in a certain sense, always make the same film: Tim Burton, Woody Allen... "I fit more into the latter tradition, even if it risks getting tedious more quickly," he said with a chuckle. — AFP

Sports

Switzerland's Gut-Behrami wins the Olympic super-G

Shiffrin fails to win a medal

YANQING: Switzerland's Lara Gut-Behrami added Olympic super-G gold to her world title at the Beijing Games on Friday as a relieved Mikaela Shiffrin finished ninth after flunking her first two events. The 30-year-old Gut-Behrami, who has already won giant slalom bronze at these Games, timed in 13.51sec for victory and the first Olympic gold medal of her career. It was also a first-ever super-G gold for Switzerland.

Austrian Mirjam Puchner took silver 0.22sec behind while another Swiss, 2018 Olympic combined gold medalist Michelle Gisin, claimed bronze. "I had no strategy at all, I just tried to ski," said Gut-Behrami, who finished fourth in super-G at two previous Olympics. "I love super-G, I told myself it's not a different course to lots I have skied before."

"It was a tight race and after finishing fourth twice in the super-G, I was just hoping it didn't happen again this time!" Shiffrin, a double gold medalist in previous Games, struggled between the first two intermediaries and eventually came racing through the finish line 0.79sec off winner Gut-Behrami's pace. It was the first time the US ski star had finished a race at these Games after she produced two unusual mistakes in the slalom and giant slalom this week, skiing out early in both.

"There was nothing sad about today, it's really solid skiing and everything was pretty much on point," said an upbeat Shiffrin, one of the biggest names at the Games. "It's a really big relief to be here now in the finish... that's really nice for my heart to know that it's not totally abandoning everything I

know about the sport." Reigning super-G champion Ester Ledecka, the cross-code star who successfully defended her snowboard parallel giant slalom title on Tuesday, came fifth, behind Austrian Tamara Tippler.

Skiing the 'Rock'

Gut-Behrami laid down a superb top section which saw the racers accelerate to 100 kilometres (60 miles) per hour within eight seconds and move straight into a testing series of jumps swinging into blind gates. It was the first time the women had experienced the "Rock" piste because two World Cup races on the hill were cancelled over Covid restrictions in China.

And it showed as many struggled with the upper section before cascading into the canyon snaking down the rest of the 1.9-kilometre course, man-made with artificial snow in Yanqing. Ledecka became the first woman to win a gold medal in two different sports at a Winter Olympics when she took skiing and snowboarding titles in Pyeongchang four years ago. After her snowboard success in Beijing, the 26-year-old Czech was aiming for an ambitious double-double but it proved too much. "This morning I was trying to convince myself that I'm a skier! It's not that easy," said Ledecka.

Ledecka said Shiffrin, who won super-G gold at the 2019 world championships, had had "no choice" but to get back on her skis after failing to finish either slalom race. "She's one of the greatest skiers of all time and it doesn't really matter if she's going to DNF (did not finish) in two races, it doesn't



YANQING: USA's Mikaela Shiffrin takes part in the women's downhill first training session during the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympic Games at the Yanqing National Alpine Skiing Centre yesterday. —AFP

change anything for me," she said. Italy's reigning Olympic downhill champion Sofia Goggia sat out the

race after failing to recover from a knee injury she sustained in a crash in Cortina last month. —AFP

Rams, Bengals brace for Super Bowl blockbuster

LOS ANGELES: A Los Angeles Rams team bristling with star-power will seek to deny the giant-killing Cincinnati Bengals a Hollywood ending in the Super Bowl today as an NFL season full of plot twists reaches its climax. The first NFL championship game of the post-Tom Brady era sees the Rams play host at their gleaming \$5.5 billion SoFi Stadium against a Bengals side chasing a first Super Bowl crown. Around 100 million Americans are expected to tune in for the biggest annual event on the US sporting calendar, which kicks off at 3:30pm local time (2330 GMT). At the heart of a perfectly scripted season finale is a duel between two talented quarterbacks playing in the Super Bowl for the first time. For the Rams, veteran Matthew Stafford has the chance to finally cash in on his talents after spending 12 seasons with the hapless Detroit Lions before securing a blockbuster move to Los Angeles last year.

The Bengals, meanwhile, are led by the precocious Joe Burrow, who bounced back from a horrific knee injury that ended his rookie season in 2020 to carry Cincinnati to a first Super Bowl appearance since 1989. A Bengals win would also mark the culmination of one of the most striking turnarounds in NFL history. Last season, the team finished with four wins and 11 defeats, only slightly better than their 2019 campaign, which ended in a dismal 2-14 record. Not for nothing were they ridiculed as the "Cincinnati Bungles."

Joe cool

But under head coach Zac Taylor, and buoyed by the arrival of No.1 draft pick Burrow in 2020, the Bengals have become a team transformed. A dogged, never-say-die approach characterized their post-season campaign, which saw them shock AFC top seeds Tennessee before another upset on the road over mighty Kansas City sealed their Super Bowl berth.

While the 25-year-old Burrow delights social media with his penchant for cigars, flashy jewelry and fur coats, he has been laser-focused during this week's protracted build-up. On Friday, Burrow appeared relaxed as he appeared before media for the last time, eager for today's finale. "I'm tired of watching film I just want to go and play," Burrow said, brushing off lofty comparisons to quarterback legends such as Joe Montana and Joe Namath.

"I'm not comparing myself to anyone," he said. "I'm trying to be the best Joe Burrow I can be." Whether Burrow is afforded the time and space to craft another Bengals upset is another question altogether, however. A porous offensive line allowed him to be sacked a whopping nine times during the playoff win over Tennessee. That is a stat that the formidable Rams defense, led by the human wrecking ball Aaron Donald, the best defensive player in the NFL, and veteran pass rusher Von Miller, will have taken note of.

On the offensive side, meanwhile, the Rams have more than enough weapons to puncture the Bengals defense. The 34-year-old Stafford, playing in his first Super Bowl, has an array of targets to aim for, including Cooper Kupp, the best wide receiver in the NFL this season, and Odell Beckham Jr, the charismatic former New York Giants and Cleveland Browns receiver who has flourished since joining the Rams in mid-season. As well as enjoying home advantage, the Rams also have the benefit of having recent Super Bowl experience. —AFP

Italy's tiny curling community rejoices at Olympic triumph

ROME: Italy's curling heroics at the Winter Olympics has unearthed a sudden enthusiasm which the country's tiny curling community hopes will raise its profile enough to compete with more popular winter sports like alpine skiing. Amos Mosaner and Stefania Constantini claimed the first curling title of the Beijing Games on Tuesday when they beat Norwegian husband-and-wife pairing of Kristin Skaslien and Magnus Nedregotten 8-5 to take gold in the mixed doubles.

The pair will defend Italy's first ever Olympic medal in the sport-which is dominated by northern Europeans and North America-on home soil in four years' time, bringing joy to the just 333 people who officially practise curling in the Mediterranean country. "I cried with happiness, it's a victory for everyone in Italian curling," Angela Romei, a member of Italy's national team, told AFP.

Romei, 24, didn't manage to qualify for the Beijing Games but is convinced that her teammates' triumph "is a signal that we are on the right path". Enthusiasts now hope the sport will get a huge boost as Italy prepares to host the 2026 Winter Olympics. The Italian winter sports federation FISG says that the country's curlers are spread over 28

clubs, with only around 20 top-level players and half a dozen professionals.

Italy first competed in Olympic curling in 2006 as host nation for that year's Games in Turin but only qualified for the first time four years ago, with the men's team taking part in Pyeongchang. Mosaner and Constantini are the first Italians to compete in the mixed event, which was introduced as an Olympic discipline in 2018.

"Until the last few days I was often asked 'but is it really a sport?', or 'do you really need to train?'... there was very little awareness or respect," says Romei, who discovered the sport herself via an episode of "The Simpsons". "It's an Olympic sport! It requires physical and mental preparation. The matches are long and you have to know how to keep your head if you make a mistake." While Italy has become a force in curling, it remains difficult to find a place to play the sport.

'Priceless for our sport'

The three main training centers are all located in the far north of the country: Cortina D'Ampezzo, which is hosting the 2026 Games alongside Milan, Pinerolo at the foot of the Alps, and Trento. The stated challenge for the FISG now is to increase the number of players and take the sport to the big cities like Milan and Rome.

"What happened is priceless for our sport," former Italian international Adriano Lorenzi told AFP. Now 61, Lorenzi is a coach at Constantini's Curling Club Dolomiti in Cortina, the heartland of Italian curling and where the country's first curling sheets



BEIJING: Italy's Amos Mosaner curls the stone during the men's round robin session 3 game of the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympic Games curling competition between Sweden and Italy, at the National Aquatics Centre in Beijing on February 11, 2022. —AFP

appeared around 1930. "We are trying to keep the tradition alive," says Lorenzi, who is expecting a big party when Constantini returns home at the weekend. "We have a large pool of young people who we hope will be able to apply for the 2026 Games."

Her and Mosaner's coach Claudio Pescia is hoping for a windfall which will further help curling become a bigger sport in Italy. "For the athletes, it's very important. Italy is very generous if you win a medal," he said. "In general, you then have a program for two years. Some kind of funding for the next two years, then an extra fee for the medal. "But I really hope that not only athletes but the whole movement gets a little bit more funding to take advantage of this momentum we have." —AFP

Beijing Olympics mixed team events showcase greater gender balance

ZHANGJIAKOU: The Beijing Olympics are the most gender-balanced Winter Games ever, with competitors saying the expansion of mixed team events "means a lot" and helps drive up standards in women's sport. More than half of all events at the Beijing Games feature women, thanks to the addition of two more women's events and four new mixed team ones-in ski jumping, aerials, snowboard cross and short track speed skating.

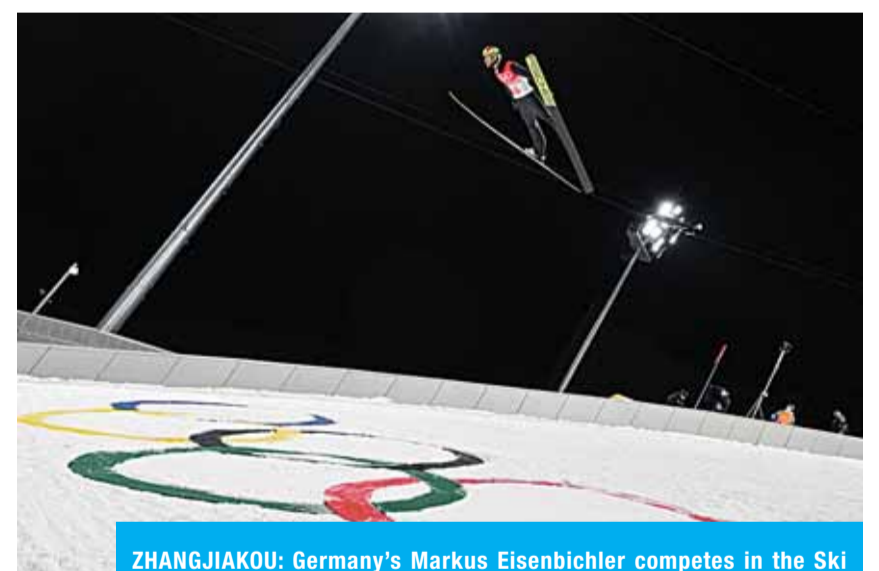
Marion Thenault, who competed for Canada in the freestyle skiing mixed aerials event on Thursday, told AFP that it was "really great" to have athletes of different genders competing against each other. "It means that your team has to be strong on the men's side and the women's side, and it just pushes the sport for both genders," she said after helping her team win the inaugural bronze medal. "I think that's really good because it's a male-dominated sport but here tonight we showed we have strong teams with great females in them."

Competitor Ashley Caldwell, part of

the winning US team, said there was "always room to develop" when it comes to representation in sport but hoped the event could "showcase" women athletes. "I've always pushed myself to do harder tricks to show the world that women can do it," she said. "To have more women in sport at a high level is great for the world-empowering people around the world to respect women and to be in sport."

Record number of women

The two new women's events which have been added to the Beijing Olympics programme are monobob in bobsleigh and Big Air, which was won by California-born Chinese freestyle skiing star Eileen Gu. Women account for a record 45 percent of athletes at the Beijing Games, up from 41 percent in Pyeongchang four years ago. Three countries-Ecuador, Kosovo and Malaysia-have a female athlete at the Winter Olympics for the first time. International Olympic Committee sports director Kit McConnell said greater female representation "is not



ZHANGJIAKOU: Germany's Markus Eisenbichler competes in the Ski Jumping Men's Large Hill Individual 1st Round on February 12, 2022 at the Zhangjiakou National Ski Jumping Centre. —AFP

just a statistic".

"We have record levels of female participation, record numbers of female athletes, record numbers of both female and mixed events at these Games," he said. "Every female athlete that's here has a ripple effect" in terms of investment, he added. For the first time at a Winter

Games, there is also an openly non-binary Olympian-pairs figure skater Timothy LeDuc. "Ashley (Cain-Gribble, their skating partner) and I represent an alternative in pairs skating, a different narrative," LeDuc, who uses the pronouns they/their but whose gender is classed as male on their athlete page, said. —AFP

Oman International Drift Race, 2nd round

KUWAIT: The second round of Oman International Drift Race concluded under the patronage of Sheikh Nizar Al-Shanfari and in the presence of Brigadier Jamal Al-Taei, Deputy Chairman of Oman Automobile Association. Haitham Al-Hadidi (from Oman) won Oman's local drift championship; Tareq Al-Shaihani grabbed the second while Riyadh Al-Mabsali took third. In the Middle East category, Jordan's Ahmad Daham took the first place; Kuwait's Ali Makhseed (second) and Oman's Haitham Al-Hadidi took the third position. In the international category, Lithuania's Tchirba took the first place; Jordan's Daham won second and Britain's Steve took third.



Sports

Embiid continues torrid play to lift Sixers over Thunder

Oklahoma City lose their fourth straight

LOS ANGELES: Joel Embiid poured in 25 points and 19 rebounds to power the Philadelphia 76ers to a 100-87 victory over the Oklahoma City Thunder on Friday. Embiid, who also had five blocks and four assists in front of the crowd of 20,600 at Wells Fargo Center, recorded his 22nd straight game with at least 25 points. Philadelphia played their first game since making a blockbuster trade with the Brooklyn Nets on Thursday that saw former league MVP James Harden join his third team in the last two years.

Philadelphia sent Australia's Ben Simmons, Andre Drummond, Seth Curry and two first-round draft picks to the Nets for Harden and Paul Millsap. Since the players haven't completed their physicals, the 76ers played without all five, leaving them short-handed. Simmons, of Melbourne, has yet to play in a game this season. "It sucks to lose some of my teammates. Seth did such a great job for us."

"But James Harden is one of the best players in the league. It is pretty exciting. You add someone like that and your chances to win the championship are even bigger. I am excited to get on with it," said Embiid. Tyrese Maxey added 24 points and Tobias Harris contributed 17 points and 11 rebounds in the win. Matisse Thybulle added 10 points. Derrick Favors led the Thunder with 16 points while Luguentz Dort and Aleksey Pokusevski added 15 each.

Darius Bazley had 14 points and 15 rebounds as Oklahoma City lost their fourth straight. Embiid scored 11 points in the third quarter as the 76ers led 77-61 going into the fourth. After a 9-2 run, the

Thunder got within 87-75 halfway through the fourth. Theo Maledon hit a three-pointer with 2:41 remaining and the Thunder trailed 88-82. But Harris responded with a three pointer of his own and Maxey made a layup to extend the lead to 11 points.

Head coach Mark Daigneault said he was pleased the Thunder did not make a lot of deals at the trade deadline. "We love our guys. We really like our team," he said. "We like the direction we're headed. We're obviously early in the process. We have a lot of confidence in not only the guys we have right now, but where we're going."

Elsewhere, Jayson Tatum scored 24 points as the Boston Celtics withstood a triple double from Nikola Jokic with a 108-102 win over the Denver Nuggets. The Celtics trailed 88-86 with 8:26 left before outscoring the Nuggets 22-14 to close the game out. Marcus Smart delivered 22 points and Robert Williams finished with 15 points and 16 rebounds as the host Celtics stretched their winning streak to seven games. Former San Antonio guard Derrick White came off the bench to score 15 points in his first game since being acquired in a trade on Thursday.

Triple-double

Jokic paced Denver with 23 points, 16 rebounds and 11 assists in the loss. Jokic has recorded a triple-double in eight of his past 14 games. Aaron Gordon scored 17 points, Facundo Campazzo had 14, Will Barton added 13, and Bones Hyland had 10 for the Nuggets, who have lost four of their last six.

In Chicago, DeMar DeRozan finished with 35



PHILADELPHIA: Aleksey Pokusevski #17 of the Oklahoma City Thunder is blocked by Joel Embiid #21 during the third quarter at Wells Fargo Center on February 11. — AFP

points, six rebounds and six assists to lead the Chicago Bulls to a 134-122 victory over the visiting Minnesota Timberwolves. Also, Caris LeVert and Jarrett Allen each scored 22 points as the Cleveland Cavaliers rallied

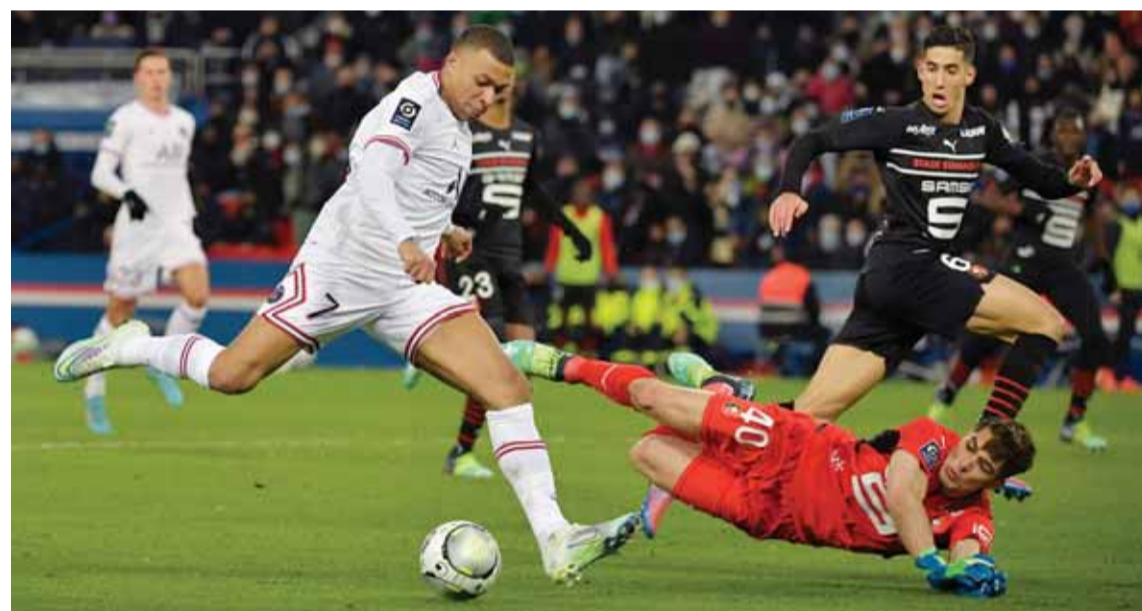
from a 21 point deficit to beat the Indiana Pacers 120-113. It marked the largest comeback of the season for Cleveland, who stormed back from a 20-point deficit Sunday against Indiana. — AFP

Mbappe lifts PSG ahead of Madrid showdown

PARIS: Kylian Mbappe scored an injury-time winner as Paris Saint-Germain warmed up for their Champions League showdown with Real Madrid by beating Rennes 1-0 in Ligue 1 on Friday. Mbappe fired home from a Lionel Messi assist in the third minute of added time at the Parc des Princes having earlier seen a deflected strike come back off the post and been denied a goal by the tightest of offside calls. The result allows PSG to stretch their huge lead at the top of the French table to 16 points before second-placed Marseille play at Metz today.

However, the nature of the performance from Mauricio Pochettino's side suggests they will struggle when Madrid visit for the first leg of their Champions League last-16 tie next Tuesday. Apart from Mbappe's interventions, the evening was most notable for the decision by the 'ultra' groups who provide the most vocal support at the Parc des Princes to not take their seats until half an hour into the game. When they emerged they displayed a series of banners to show their discontent with the management of the club, in particular the sporting director Leonardo.

"The supporters have the democratic right to express themselves but we need to all be together going into an important period of the season," Pochettino said. "There are things we are still trying to correct and we need to be self-critical if this club is to be one of the best in the world." The future of Mbappe continues to dominate headlines in Paris,



PARIS: Paris Saint-Germain's French forward Kylian Mbappe and Rennes' goalkeeper Dogan Alemdar fight for the ball during the French L1 football match between Paris-Saint Germain (PSG) and Le Stade Rennais Football Club at The Parc des Princes Stadium in Paris on February 11, 2022. — AFP

even more so heading into the clash with Madrid, with the expectation still that he will move to the Spanish capital at the end of this season when his contract expires rather than sign a new deal with PSG.

Neymar hoping to return

While he scored his 21st goal in all competitions this season to decide the game, once again Messi's impact was limited, at least until he laid on the winner. The seven-time Ballon d'Or winner continues to look a shadow of his former self in Paris but the hope must be that a Champions League meeting with Real

will bring the best out in him.

It also remains to be seen if Neymar will be able to play any part in that game having not featured since late November due to injury. "We need to be careful when it comes to talking about expectations. He might be there but let's see how things evolve in the coming days," Pochettino said of the fitness of the world's most expensive player.

"If things go well then he could be in the squad and I hope he will be." With the Brazilian missing, and both Angel di Maria and Mauro Icardi left on the bench at kick-off, 18-year-old Dutch prospect Xavi

Gomez inspires Sevilla win to keep pressure on Real Madrid

MADRID: Papu Gomez broke through with an inspired second half goal as Sevilla got back to winning ways on Friday with a 2-0 success against Elche to keep the pressure on Spanish league leaders Real Madrid. Argentine forward Gomez found the space to blast in after an impressive solo run with 20 minutes to go with new arrival Anthony Martial teeing up Rafa Mir to head in a second five minutes later. Second-placed Sevilla ended a series of three consecutive draws to move three points behind Real Madrid who play at Villarreal, sitting sixth, on Saturday.

Sevilla's run of draws had allowed Real to preserve a healthy lead at the top of the table, despite Carlo Ancelotti's side only winning two of their last four games. Injuries had played a part in Sevilla's dip while Ivan Rakitic missing an injury-time penalty in the goalless draw with Osasuna last weekend was particularly hard to take. Martial, who joined on loan from Manchester United in January, was supposed to provide some freshness.

He made his debut against Osasuna but was rusty after barely featuring for United in the first half of the season. "We clearly need more from him," coach Julen Lopetegui said afterwards. And the French player stepped against Elche even though the side from Alicante pegged back Sevilla in the first half. Sevilla's Youssef En-Nesyri proved wasteful, missing three scoring opportunities in the first 20 minutes of a scrappy game with little attacking football.

The striker was replaced by fellow Moroccan international Munir El Haddadi after the break. Gomez provided the spark with his eighth goal for the Spaniards since joining from Italian club Atalanta last year. Substitute Mir came off the bench after an hour and sealed the three points, latching on to Martial's cross to beat Edgar Badia in the Elche goal. For Elche, it was their first defeat of the year after arriving in Seville buoyed by an upturn in form after winning three of their last four matches. — AFP



MOTERA: India's Shreyas Iyer plays a shot during the third one day international (ODI) cricket match between India and West Indies in Motera on February 11, 2022. — AFP

Iyer, Pant set up a thumping 96-run victory for India

AHMEDABAD: Shreyas Iyer and Rishabh Pant hit half-centuries to set up a thumping 96-run victory for India in the third one-day international against the West Indies and sweep the series on Friday. Iyer, who made 80, and Pant, who hit 56, guided India to 265 after they lost three early wickets while batting first in Ahmedabad.

Bowlers, led by pace spearhead Mohammed Siraj, then combined to bowl out the West Indies for 169 in 37.1 overs to seal their first ever ODI white-wash over their opponents. Siraj and fellow pacer Prasidh Krishna took three wickets apiece, while quick bowler Deepak Chahar and left-arm

wrist spinner Kuldeep Yadav also claimed two each.

But it was the 110-run fourth-wicket partnership between Iyer and Pant that made India bounce back from 43-3, having lost two key wickets of skipper Rohit Sharma and Virat Kohli for nought. Chahar and Washington Sundar, who made 33, got useful cameos before India were bowled out on the final ball of the 50th over. For the West Indies, pace bowler Jason Holder stood out with figures of 4-34. Fast bowler Alzarri Joseph struck twice in the same over to take the wickets of Rohit (13) and Kohli-for the second time in the series-to rattle the hosts.

Rohit edged an incoming delivery on to his stumps for 13 while Kohli, who scored eight and 18 in the first two matches, got caught behind in his attempt to flick the ball down the leg side. Dhawan, who returned to the team after recovering from Covid-19 along with Iyer, departed for 10 after a 26-ball stay. But the right-left batting pair of Iyer and Pant got going to rebuild the innings and take the attack to the West Indies bowlers. — AFP

UEFA on verge of 40% leap in European club TV revenues

PARIS: Television rights of European club competitions will jump more than 40 percent from 2024, two sources with knowledge of the negotiations said Friday, a rise linked to the expansion of UEFA's flagship Champions League. The sources said that global deals had been agreed worth 15 billion euros (17.10 billion dollars, 12.57 billion pounds) for the three seasons to 2027, or 5 billion euros a season. The total for this season is expected to be 3.6 billion and for the last pre-pandemic season, 2018-19, was 3.2 billion.

The increase will strengthen UEFA's campaign to discourage any re-emergence of plans for a breakaway super league on the lines of the short-lived rebellion by 12 clubs in April 2021. Three of those clubs, Real Madrid, Barcelona and Juventus, are continuing to fight for a super league in the courts.

According to a UEFA statement released on Monday, the success of the bidding process proved that the new Champions League format, which is to expand the competition from 32 to 36 clubs in 2024 and use the 'Swiss model' to offer more group match days (10 compared to the current six), "holds significant commercial potential." Under the Swiss model, the 36 teams compete in one huge group. After 10 rounds, against opponents drawn before the start, the top 16 will advance to the first knockout round. One result is the total number of Champions League games in a season will increase from 125 to 225.

The plan has also drawn criticism because at least two of the extra four clubs will qualify on the basis of past performance. "We are delighted that our tender has attracted so much interest," UEFA president Aleksander Ceferin said in the statement, adding that the agreements "can generate more revenue for Europe's clubs, especially at this crucial time when there is a need for financial stability."

'Untapped sources of revenue'

UEFA used existing intermediary TEAM Marketing and added another, Relevance Sports, for the negotiations. UEFA also gave a greater role to the European Club Association (ECA), which represents leading clubs across the continent. Ceferin thanked ECA, which is led by Nasser Al-Khelaifi, president of Paris Saint-Germain for its "valuable collaboration", a sign of UEFA's desire to include more clubs in the management of European soccer.

"Nasser had a driving role, he worked with Ceferin as the boss of the ECA," a source close to the negotiations told AFP. The Qatari, who is also the head of media giant beIN which broadcasts the Champions League in France, some Asian countries, the Middle East and North Africa, wrote to the 230 ECA member clubs on Tuesday in a letter, which AFP has obtained.

"We have been able to achieve a level of commercial success never seen before for European club competitions. And beyond that, there are other untapped sources of revenue that we are actively studying," wrote Al-Khelaifi. In addition to the lucrative Champions League, UEFA runs the Europa League and the Europa Conference League as well as the European Supercup, and the Youth League for club under-19 teams. — AFP

Chelsea win Club World Cup

Al Ahly rout nine-man Al Hilal for third



ABU DHABI: Chelsea's players celebrate with their trophy after winning the 2021 FIFA Club World Cup final football match against Brazil's Palmeiras at Mohammed Bin Zayed stadium in Abu Dhabi yesterday. —AFP

ABU DHABI: Kai Havertz scored a penalty deep into extra time as Chelsea defeated Palmeiras 2-1 in the Club World Cup final yesterday to complete their collection of major trophies. Romelu Lukaku's superb header gave the European champions the lead on 54 minutes but Raphael Veiga levelled from the spot for the Copa Libertadores winners just past the hour in Abu Dhabi.

Havertz, the hero in the Champions League final against Manchester City, was Chelsea's match-winner again as he converted a penalty on 117 minutes awarded following a VAR review. Chelsea have now claimed every possible trophy since Roman Abramovich bought the club in 2003, and become the third English side to win the global tournament after Manchester United and Liverpool.

The Blues avenged their 1-0 loss to Corinthians in the 2012 final, but will have little time to celebrate with a critical stretch on the horizon once they return to London. They face Lille in the Champions League last 16 either side of the League Cup final against Liverpool and FA Cup fifth round, playing in four different competitions in 12 days. Chelsea coach Thomas Tuchel was

back in the dugout having flown out to Abu Dhabi on Friday after missing the past two games following a positive test for Covid-19.

Edouard Mendy returned in goal in the wake of Senegal's Africa Cup of Nations victory, at the expense of Kepa Arrizabalaga, whose much improved form is likely to attract interest from other clubs in the summer. Chelsea's decline in the Premier League has coincided with lack of authority and conviction, and despite controlling possession it wasn't until the end of the first half they forced Weverton into a save. Even then, Thiago Silva's searing drive from distance appeared to be going wide. In contrast, Palmeiras were twice left to rue their lack of efficiency as Dudu stabbed well wide before Andreas Christensen made a key intervention to negate a promising attack for the Brazilians.

Lukaku rises to the occasion

Lukaku has struggled to meet expectations after rejoining Chelsea from Inter Milan as the club's record signing, but the Belgian made it two goals in as many games here early in the second half. Callum Hudson-

Odoi, given the nod at left wing-back, whipped in a cross and Lukaku soared above two defenders to power beyond Weverton. Christian Pulisic, brought on 30 minutes in for the injured Mason Mount, curled just wide after tidy interplay with Lukaku, but Chelsea gave Palmeiras a way back in when Silva handled in the area.

Australian referee Chris Beath was recommended to review the incident on the touchline monitor as Palmeiras players and coach Abel Ferreira appealed, and he almost immediately pointed to the spot. Veiga, on target in the 2-0 win over Al Ahly, held his nerve to slam the penalty beyond Mendy, greeted with bellowing roars from many of the near-capacity 32,871 in attendance—the majority wearing the green and white of Palmeiras.

Pulisic again rolled an effort narrowly wide from an inviting lay-off and extra time came as little surprise, Chelsea forced to play an extra 30 minutes for the second time in a week. A frantic scramble inside the six-yard box saw Pulisic bundle against the bar, although an offside in the build-up would have ruled out any goal.

Timo Werner curled over as time ticked away and Palmeiras defended deep, but Chelsea got the late breakthrough when Luan was penalised for blocking Cesar Azpilicueta's volley with his arm. Havertz sent Weverton the wrong way to spark wild celebrations, and a bitter night for Palmeiras culminated in them finishing with 10 men after Luan was sent off for scything down the German.

Al Ahly beat Al Hilal

Meanwhile, Egypt's Al Ahly finished third at the Club World Cup for the second year in a row after thrashing nine-man Al Hilal of Saudi Arabia 4-0 yesterday. Defender Yasser Ibrahim headed the African champions ahead early in Abu Dhabi before Al Hilal had former West Brom attacker Matheus Pereira sent off. Ibrahim scored again on 17 minutes and Al Hilal were soon reduced to nine players when midfielder Mohamed Kanno saw red. Ahmed Abdelkader made it 3-0 late in the first half and Amr El Solia, who started last Sunday's Africa Cup of Nations final against Senegal, capped off the win just past the hour. —AFP

Toothless Man Utd held; Everton boost survival bid

LONDON: Manchester United's top four bid suffered another blow as Southampton hit back to earn a 1-1 draw, while Everton boosted their bid for Premier League survival with a vital 3-0 win against Leeds yesterday. Ralf Rangnick's side took the lead through Jadon Sancho's first Premier League goal at Old Trafford.

But, for the third consecutive game, United failed to build on their lead and were punished when Che Adams slotted in off the inside of the post two minutes into the second half. United are level on points with fourth placed West Ham, but Arsenal are just a point behind with two games in hand, while Tottenham have played three fewer games and are four points back. Cristiano Ronaldo was recalled by Rangnick after being dropped to the bench for a disappointing 1-1 draw at struggling Burnley on Tuesday.

But Ronaldo's goal-drought extended to six games as United produced yet another erratic performance. Rangnick had to cope with more leaks in the press this week that the United players are unhappy with his coaching techniques. The interim boss admitted United need to play with more aggression if they are to keep their top four hopes alive. "It was the third game where we were 1-0 up and I don't think anyone out there should believe that

the players don't care," Rangnick said.

"The question is with the group of players we have, how do we get more compact, more aggressive and even more nasty, it's about defending a lead. This is the major issue but it's not a question of the players not wanting to do that." At Goodison Park, Everton moved five points clear of the relegation zone with their first top-flight win under Frank Lampard. Lampard's side, who beat Brentford in the FA Cup in their new manager's debut, took the lead in the 10th minute when Seamus Coleman met Donny van de Beek's cross with a close-range header.

It was Coleman's first goal in 80 games in all competitions stretching back to 2019. That landmark moment was followed by another rare goalscorer as Everton defender Michael Keane headed in from Anthony Gordon's 23rd minute corner for just his second goal this term. After suffering a damaging defeat at relegation rivals Newcastle in his first league game in charge, former Chelsea boss Lampard was able to celebrate three valuable points when Gordon got the final touch on Richarlison's shot in the 78th minute. Leeds are only one point above Everton after a third successive game without a win.

Second bottom Watford are deep in relegation trouble after a 2-0 defeat against Brighton in new boss Roy Hodgson's first home game in charge. Brighton struck in the 44th minute when Neal Maupay hooked a superb half-volley into the top corner from Tariq Lamptey's cross. Watford were booted off at half-time and there were more jeers at the final whistle after Adam Webster sealed the points from close-range after a goal-mouth scramble. Watford have lost 10 of their last 12 games and are yet to score in three matches under Hodgson. —AFP

Valieva to learn her fate; 6 golds up for grabs

BEIJING: The 15-year-old Russian figure skater Kamila Valieva will learn tomorrow whether she can remain at the Beijing Olympics, the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) said, as questions grew over why it took six weeks for her failed drug test to come to light. The doping scandal surrounding the prodigious teenager threatens to tarnish the Games after the build-up was overshadowed by concerns about COVID and human rights in China. Valieva's Beijing Olympic fate is now in the hands of CAS, which will hold a hearing today.

"It is anticipated that the decision will be notified to the parties in the afternoon of Monday, 14 February," the top sports tribunal said in a statement. That is just one day before Valieva is scheduled to compete in the women's individual competition. Valieva, who starred as Russia won team gold in Beijing on Monday, tested positive for the banned substance trimetazidine after competing at an event in Saint Petersburg on December 25.

However, the International Testing Agency says the World Anti-Doping Agency-accredited laboratory in Stockholm only reported that Valieva had returned a positive case on February 8 - the day after she won team gold. In an interview with AFP, United States Anti-Doping Agency chief Travis Tygart questioned the delay. "The failure to report a test taken in December until after the team event in the Games is a catastrophic failure of the system to protect the public, the integrity of the Games

and clean athletes who had to compete," Tygart said.

Russia's anti-doping agency RUSADA said it had been informed that a sharp rise of COVID-19 infections at the start of the year was to blame for the delay. Valieva practiced in Beijing yesterday. The president of the Russian Figure Skating Federation, Alexander Gorshkov, said: "We have no doubts about the honesty of our athlete. We have to find out...what happened to the December 25 doping sample almost a month and a half after it was sent to a foreign laboratory."

The case is just the latest doping scandal surrounding Russian athletes at Olympic Games in recent years, which led to Russia as a country being banned for two years. Russian competitors are taking part in Beijing under the flag of the Russian Olympic Committee (ROC), providing have been able to prove they were not tainted by a massive state-sponsored doping program focused on the 2014 Sochi Olympics.

Six golds were up for grabs on the eighth day of competition, in biathlon, cross-country skiing, skeleton, ski jumping, snowboarding and speed skating. US pair Lindsey Jacobellis and Nick Baumgartner—who with a combined age of 76 were the oldest pair in the event—triumphed in the mixed team snowboard cross final. It was a second gold of this Games for Jacobellis. Baumgartner, 40, said experience had been key. "That's something about being the veterans," he said. Gao Tingyu, who was the host nation's flagbearer at the opening ceremony, gave China its first men's Olympic speed skating gold when he took the 500m title in a new Olympic record of 34.32sec.

Jaclyn Narracott earned Australia's maiden Olympic medal in a sliding sport with silver in the women's skeleton, as Germany continued their domination with gold for Hannah Neise. British-based Narracott waved an Australian flag in the finish area after taking silver with a time 0.62sec slower than the winner. —AFP