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Kuwait lifts most curbs, eases restrictions on unvaccinated

- PCR test, quarantine scrapped for vaccinated travelers
- Unvaccinated people can travel, enter malls, cinemas

- Offices, mosques, public transport return to full capacity
- No weekly PCR test for under-16 unvaccinated students



KUWAIT: Female cadets are all smiles as the Saad Al-Abdullah Police Academy celebrated the graduation of a new batch of male and female police officers yesterday. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat (See Page 4)

By Ahmad Jabr

KUWAIT: Kuwait took one step closer to returning to normal life yesterday by lifting almost all coronavirus restrictions. During its weekly meeting, the Cabinet cancelled pre-departure and on-arrival PCR test requirements as well as quarantine for passengers entering Kuwait who are fully vaccinated against COVID-19. The Cabinet also decided to allow people unvaccinated against COVID-19 to travel to Kuwait and enter malls and cinemas, provided they produce a negative PCR test result valid for 72 hours.

People who are partially vaccinated are not required to bring a PCR result on arrival, but must quarantine for seven days, which can be ended with a negative PCR test. Unvaccinated people can travel, but to enter Kuwait they must carry a negative PCR test certificate issued at least 72 hours before the flight's date, must remain in home quarantine for seven days after arrival and must undergo a PCR test on the seventh day to end the quarantine. The new measures become effective as of Feb 20.

The Cabinet also agreed to restore employee capacity at state departments to 100 percent from March 13 and allow public transportation to carry passengers at full capacity. Mosques are allowed to

end physical distancing, while indoor conferences and meetings are also allowed to take place. Social gatherings including weddings are also allowed indoors or outdoors provided health protocols are followed.

The Cabinet also announced that children under 16 who are unvaccinated against COVID-19 can enter schools without the need to bring a negative PCR test certificate every week, while only students who test positive or show symptoms must be isolated.

HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah said in a press conference later yesterday that Kuwait managed to overcome the latest COVID-19 wave "with the least damage on the economic, health and social levels". He credited health workers' efforts, along with the government's plan "led by the health ministry" in helping make this possible.

The premier however warned that easing restrictions does not mean ending health precautions, particularly wearing facemasks. He expressed gratitude to citizens and residents alike for their "cooperation and commitment to health protocols", which he said greatly helped overcome the new wave quickly.

On Jan 10, the Cabinet had adopted restrictions to curb the spread of the Omicron coronavirus

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News in brief

Zionist PM visits Bahrain

MANAMA: Prime Minister Naftali Bennett arrived in Bahrain yesterday for the first-ever official visit by a Zionist head of government to the Gulf state. "I'm going to meet the king, I'm going to meet the crown prince," Bennett said on the tarmac shortly before departing, referring to Bahrain's King Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa and Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad Al-Khalifa. — AFP

Sweden recommends fourth jab

STOCKHOLM: Sweden's public health agency yesterday recommended a fourth dose of the COVID-19 vaccine for people over the age of 80, those in nursing homes and those receiving at-home care. The agency said the jab should be taken four months after the previous dose, at the earliest. In Sweden, more than 85 percent of those over the age of 80 have received a third dose of the vaccine. — AFP

Snake on AirAsia plane

KUALA LUMPUR: An AirAsia passenger plane was forced to divert and make an unscheduled landing after a snake was spotted slithering through the overhead lights, the Malaysian budget carrier confirmed yesterday. In a viral video social media users were quick to link with cult classic "Snakes on a Plane", the creature's silhouette could be seen wriggling in the cabin's light fittings. — AFP

Bro acquitted for 'honor killing'

LAHORE: The brother of a Pakistani social media star who was murdered in one of the country's most notorious "honor killings" was acquitted yesterday after serving less than six years in prison. Qandeel Baloch's brother Muhammad Waseem was arrested and later sentenced to life in prison for strangling her, brazenly telling the press he had no remorse for the slaying. — AFP

Erdogan visits UAE to boost strained ties

ABU DHABI: Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan yesterday visited the United Arab Emirates for the first time in nearly a decade, to revive relations that were long strained by regional disputes. He was greeted in the capital Abu Dhabi by Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, the UAE's de facto ruler, who had travelled to Ankara in

November on the first high-level visit to Turkey since 2012.

That trip "marked the beginning of a new era in relations", Erdogan said at Istanbul airport before leaving for his two-day visit. "We are planning to take steps that will bring relations back to the level they deserve." Ties had been strained as Turkey and the oil-rich Emirates backed opposing sides in the Libyan civil war and sparred over issues such as gas exploration in the eastern Mediterranean.

Relations were particularly tense after Saudi Arabia, the Emirates and Bahrain in 2017 cut all links with Qatar, a close ally of Ankara.

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ABU DHABI: Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan meets Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan during an official ceremony yesterday. — AFP

Zionist forces kill Palestinian teenager

SILAT AL-HARITHIYA: Zionist forces shot dead a Palestinian teenager in the West Bank during what the army yesterday described as an operation to demolish the home of a Palestinian. The Palestinian health ministry identified the youth as Mohammed Abu Salah, 17, who was killed after Zionist forces late Sunday entered the village of Silat al-Harithiya near the flash-point town of Jenin in the occupied West Bank.

Salah's mother, Rafika Abu Saleh, told AFP that when her son left their home in the nearby village of Al Yamun, he said he was going to a wedding party, but in fact went to the scene of the clashes, where he was shot in the head. Soldiers and border police had entered the village "to



JENIN: Mourners carry the body of Palestinian teenager Mohammed Abu Salah, who was killed after Zionist forces entered the village of Silat al-Harithiya, during his funeral yesterday. — AFP

demolish the floor of the residence in which the terrorist Muhammad Jaradat resided", the army said in a statement.

The Zionist entity has blamed Jaradat and others for the fatal shooting of a Jewish settler in the illegal West Bank outpost of Homesh in December. The army said "violent riots" broke out ahead of the planned demolition, "with the participation of hun-

dreds of Palestinians", some of whom hurled explosives at Zionist troops.

"The troops identified a number of armed rioters, and fired towards them in order to neutralize the threat," the army said about the operation which continued in the early hours of yesterday. The military did not comment directly on the teen's death.

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Gulf states stress women's rights to Taliban in aid talks

DOHA: Gulf envoys stressed yesterday that women must be able to work and go to school, in talks with the Taliban foreign minister as Afghanistan's hard-line Islamic rulers made a new bid to unblock foreign aid. Amir Khan Muttaqi, a key member of the Taliban leadership that took over Kabul six months ago, met in Doha with ambassadors from the six-nation Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) on the first full day of his latest mission, where he is also to hold talks with European envoys.

The Taliban have been struggling to unfreeze billions of dollars of assets abroad and get sanctions lifted as it faces pressure over its treatment of women and supporters of the Western-backed government toppled last year. The Taliban tweeted pictures of the smiling foreign minister entering yesterday's meeting with representatives from Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. But diplomats said no promises were made by Afghan officials inside.

Arab envoys emphasized the need to help Afghanistan's "urgent humanitarian needs" as the country confronts widespread hunger caused by

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Local

Amir receives Defense, Interior, Foreign Ministers

Sheikh Nawaf congratulates Bahrain on 21st charter anniversary



KUWAIT: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah meets His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah, Defense Minister Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah, Interior Minister Sheikh Ahmad Al-Mansour Al-Sabah, and Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Al-Sabah. —Amiri Diwan photos



His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah meets His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem.

KUWAIT: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah at Dar Al-Yamama yesterday. His Highness the Amir, in the presence of His Highness the Crown Prince, also met National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem.

Furthermore, His Highness the Amir, in the pres-

ence of His Highness the Crown Prince, received His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah, Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah, Deputy Prime Minister and Interior Minister Sheikh Ahmad Al-Mansour Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, in addition to Foreign Minister and State Minister for

Cabinet Affairs Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah. In other news, His Highness the Crown Prince received Deputy Prime Minister, Oil Minister and Minister of Electricity and Water and Sustainable Energy Dr Mohammad Al-Fares.

In other news, His Highness the Amir sent a cable to King Hamad Bin Essa Al-Khalifa of Bahrain, con-

gratulating him on the 21st anniversary of the National Action Charter. His Highness the Amir praised Bahrain's achievements and wished the Bahraini King everlasting health and wellness and further progress and prosperity to his country. His Highness the Crown Prince and His Highness the Prime Minister sent similar cables. —KUNA

Foreign Minister receives outgoing ambassadors

KUWAIT: Minister of Foreign Affairs and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah received yesterday Pakistan's Ambassador to Kuwait Said Sajad Haider and Tanzania's Ambassador to Kuwait Aisha Salem, on the occasion of ending their tenures. During the meeting, the Kuwaiti Minister praised the ambassadors' contributions to bolster ties. —KUNA



KUWAIT: Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah meets Pakistan's Ambassador to Kuwait Said Sajad Haider. —KUNA photos



Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah meets Tanzania's Ambassador to Kuwait Aisha Salem.

Kuwait eager to boost trade, investment with Iraq's Kurdistan

IRBIL: Kuwait's Consul in Iraq Omar Al-Kandari said that Kuwait is looking forward to boosting trade exchange and investment with Iraq's Kurdistan region. Kuwaiti businessmen and companies aim to invest further in the region, especially with the facilitations Kurdistan is providing for businessmen, Kandari said yesterday, after his meeting with President of the Chambers of Commerce in Kurdistan Dara Khayat. He added that he had held several meetings with companies and businessmen to set grounds for exchanging experience and allowing Kuwaiti companies to invest in the region. He also met with governmental officials to learn of their plans to create multi-income sources. Khayat noted that Kurdistan and Kuwait share strong historical ties, adding that the two sides need to enhance their trade cooperation further. Meanwhile, he said the region has good relations with the GCC states, and most of them have direct aviation routes to Kurdistan. Khayat expressed his desire that Kuwait Airways would also open a direct route to the region too. The current investment rate in Kurdistan is over \$57 billion, with 940 projects in different fields. Local investment is 85 percent, nine percent foreign and six percent joint investments. —KUNA



IRBIL: Kuwait's Consul in Iraq Omar Al-Kandari meets with President of the Chambers of Commerce in Kurdistan Dara Khayat. —KUNA

Kuwait lifts most curbs, eases...

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variant in Kuwait, including reducing staff at state departments to 50 percent and urging the private sector to reduce staff as well, applying physical distancing at mosques, canceling in-person confer-

ences and meetings and cutting public transportation passenger capacity to 50 percent.

Meanwhile, Government Communication Center Chairman and Government Spokesman Tareq Al-Mezrem denied as "untrue" reports about the resignation of the government, Foreign Minister and State Minister for Cabinet Affairs Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah, or any other minister. "All what has been circulated on the resignation of the government, the foreign minister or any other government member is totally untrue," the spokesman said on Twitter.

attacks on the Gulf country, prompting stepped up UAE defense cooperation with the United States and France. Erdogan said in a weekend op-ed in the Emirati English-language daily Khaleej Times that "Turkey and the UAE together can contribute to regional peace, stability and prosperity".

Following Sheikh Mohammed's visit in November, the UAE announced a \$10 billion fund for investments in Turkey, where the economy has been reeling and inflation last month surged to a near 20-year high. During this visit, Erdogan was expected to sign 12 agreements with UAE partners, ranging from media and communications to economic and defense deals, Turkish media reports said.

His trip "will open a new, positive page in bilateral relations," Anwar Gargash, adviser to the UAE president, said in a tweet. UAE Economy Minister Abdullah bin Touq Al-Marri said his country considered economic cooperation in various areas, including defense, an integral part of its strategy and vision of the future. "I believe that this is a vision shared by both the UAE and Turkey, and the UAE is keen to expand its partnership with Turkey in various vital fields in addition to the defense sector," he told state news agency Anadolu in remarks published yesterday. —AFP

Zionist forces kill Palestinian...

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Abu Salah's body, draped in a white sheet, was hoisted by mourners ahead of his funeral, with the burial attended by hundreds of people, including masked gunmen who fired into the air.

The army had set up checkpoints in the area, removing rubbish bins which had been set on fire by Palestinian protesters. It later said it had completed the demolition and withdrawn from the village. The Zionist entity regularly destroys the homes of individuals it blames for attacks on Zionists. The practice, which often fuels tensions, has been con-

demned by critics as a form of collective punishment. The Zionist entity insists it deters attacks.

The army said Jaradat was responsible for the death of Yehuda Dimentman, killed when gunmen sprayed a settler car with roughly a dozen bullets as it drove out of Homesh in December. Two others were injured in the attack. Dimentman was studying at a religious school in Homesh, which has remained open despite the Zionist entity not recognizing the settlement.

Homesh had been evacuated by Zionist forces in 2005 but settlers have nevertheless continued to operate there, fueling tensions with Palestinians. The Zionist entity arrested four people days after the December shooting. Around 475,000 Zionist settlers live in the West Bank, alongside some 2.9 million Palestinians, in communities widely regarded as illegal under international law. —AFP

Erdogan visits UAE to boost...

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Those relations were restored in Jan 2021. The Turkish president's UAE visit is his first since 2013, when he was prime minister, and his first as head of state.

To greet Erdogan on his trip - which will take him to the Expo 2020 Dubai world fair today - the host country lit up the world's tallest building, Burj Khalifa, in the red and white of the Turkish flag. Erdogan and Sheikh Mohammed discussed opportunities for cooperation, particularly in the economic and development fields, and the latest regional developments, said the official WAM news agency.

The crown prince said the UAE was keen to cooperate with Turkey "to confront a number of common challenges that the region is witnessing" through dialogue and diplomatic resolve. The Emirates face a growing threat from Yemen's Iran-backed Houthis rebels, who have launched several drone and missile

Gulf states stress women's rights to...

Continued from Page 1

drought as well as an economic crisis that has driven up chronic unemployment, said a GCC statement. While highlighting that there should be "non-interference" in Afghanistan's affairs, they "stressed" the importance of a national reconciliation plan that "takes into consideration the interests of all components of society and respects basic freedoms and rights, including women's right to work and education".

The ambassadors also raised fears that "terrorist groups may be able to launch attacks from Afghanistan's territory against other countries". They

insisted that the country must not be exploited to fuel the illegal drugs trade. Muttaqi, who is to hold a key meeting with European nations and other international representatives on Wednesday, made no comment after the meeting.

No country has yet recognized the Taliban government and the latest talks came only days after President Joe Biden said that \$7 billion held in US banks would be split between a fund to aid Afghanistan and to compensate victims of the Sept 11, 2001 attacks. European governments and international finance institutions are also holding back billions in aid.

Meanwhile, the Taliban said yesterday Afghanistan will be forced to reconsider its policy towards the United States unless Washington reverses a decision to freeze part of the country's assets as compensation for victims of the September 11 attacks. —AFP

Local

Residents aged 60+ question reason behind 'double insurance'

New rule means paying separate government and private insurances

By Ben Garcia

KUWAIT: An expat couple who are both senior citizens have asked why they must pay KD 500 each for private health insurance in addition to mandatory government health insurance of KD 50 each. All residents aged 60 years and above without a degree must pay a maximum amount of KD 823 if they want to work, live or continue to stay in Kuwait.

Kuwait Times spoke to a couple who renewed their iqamas as they still wish to stay in the country. "I paid KD 1,646 in all for me and my wife's residency. This is a large sum of money, but this is the law in Kuwait, so I closed my eyes and paid the amount. I don't want my wife and me to be illegal," said 65-year-old Tatay Severino yesterday.

Severino said he has spent the majority of his life in Kuwait running a small business. "My mistake was that I was not able to finish college, so I have to pay extra for my residency," he said. The Public Authority for Manpower has mandated that expatriates aged over 60 without a university degree to pay KD 500 in annual private health insurance along with the KD 250 annual fee for the renewal of their work permits.

Coverage

The insurance policy will cover the medical treatment of insured residents at private hospitals and clinics for a maximum amount of KD 10,000 per year, KD 8,000 of which is for coverage at hospitals. The insured residents are fully covered for treatment at hospitals, which includes hospital stays, cost of doctors' consultations, surgeries and radiology services. The policy covers the treatment of chronic diseases.

The policy allocates KD 1,500 annually for treatment at outpatient clinics including medicines - at a maximum of KD 300 per year, medical examinations, one-day surgeries and others. The policy also allocates KD 500 for primary dental treatment that includes fillings, lab tests, drugs and gum treatment. According to the policy, treatment at hospitals is fully covered, but patients are required to pay 10 percent for each doctor's visit, diagnostic tests and medicines at outpatient

clinics, along with 10 percent for dental treatment.

Last week, Severino and his wife went to the residency department of the ministry of interior to renew their iqamas. They were advised to go to a private insurance company to pay the KD 500 policy. "But I don't understand why I have to pay double insurance. I paid KD 1,007 plus an additional KD 100, also for insurance. Why two health insurances?" he asked.

39 years

Severino has been in Kuwait for 39 years, and his wife for 35 years. "Even if I don't agree with this amount, I don't want to be illegal, so I paid. I have stayed in Kuwait longer than in my own country (the Philippines). I love this

country very much and would even like to be buried here. This law is unfair, but we need to follow it," he conceded.

To renew their iqama, a senior citizen must go directly to the insurance company and pay KD



500, plus a service charge of KD 3.5. The renewal process can be done through a private company that processes visas (normally present outside the residence department), who take KD 5 as service charge. After paying the insurance, the next payment will be for the work permit, set by the government at KD 250, in addition to KD 50 for government health insurance.

The new law was passed in 2020 and was supposed to be implemented in Jan 2021, but was suspended due to fierce opposition by lawmakers, businesses, NGOs and individuals.



My mistake was that I was not able to finish college

COVID-19 panel meets to discuss latest developments

KUWAIT: The COVID-19 ministerial committee briefed yesterday Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah on the latest development concerning the coronavirus pandemic. In a meeting held in Seif Palace, Sheikh Hamad — also chair of the committee - was informed on the recent improvements in lowering infection rates nationwide as well as an increasing the number of those receiving booster vaccine jabs. The meeting also touched on government

reports connected with the spread of COVID-19 in addition to decisions aimed at curbing the spread of the virus.

Kuwait reported 2,562 new COVID-19 cases yesterday in addition to one death and 5,406 recoveries. Meanwhile, the number of patients in ICU's reached 90, while the number of patients hospitalized dropped to 394. Total active cases also dropped to 35,446. The percentage of daily new cases to new tests dropped to 9.2 percent while the percentage of recovery reached 93.7 percent, according to the health ministry's bulletin. In the meantime, the Ministry of Health has allowed staff to request annual leaves again starting from yesterday following the improvement of the health situation in Kuwait related to the COVID-19 pandemic.



KUWAIT: Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah chairs the COVID-19 ministerial committee meeting. —KUNA

EU budget chief eyes more financial cooperation with Kuwait

KUWAIT: The European Union's (EU) budget chief said yesterday it was imperative to bolster financial and economic cooperation with Kuwait, citing the country as a major investor in the single-currency bloc. Discussing the global economy's rebound from the COVID-19 pandemic with top Kuwaiti officials, European Commissioner for Budget and Administration Johannes Hahn expressed the bloc's eagerness to keep Kuwaiti investments in the EU flowing. He underlined EU and global efforts to cushion the economic blow from the COVID-19 pandemic, including a European recovery plan worth two trillion euros to set the recovery process in motion, describing the essence of the scheme as a "stimulus package." A separate EU fund, worth more than 800 million euros, called "Next Generation EU," aims to pump money into green projects across the fields of energy, climate and the environment, he added. The visiting EU budget chief had earlier held talks with Kuwait's central bank governor Dr Mohammad Al-Hashel and senior finance ministry officials, focusing on matters of mutual concern. —KUNA



European Commissioner for Budget and Administration Johannes Hahn

Indian Ambassador meets Education Minister



KUWAIT: Indian Ambassador to Kuwait Sibi George met yesterday with Dr Ali Fahad Al-Mudhaf, Minister of Education, Higher Education and Scientific Research yesterday and discussed, inter alia, bilateral

ties, ways to enhance bilateral cooperation, especially in the domain of education, issues related to Indian engineers, Indian students including examinations, and other matters of mutual interest.

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investment plan
secures higher
education for children

KUWAIT: Considering its pioneering role in offering unique solutions and innovative products, Kuwait Finance House (KFH) has continued its distinction in fulfilling customers' aspirations and providing the best investment plans and solutions according to the highest international standards. KFH is keen to meet the customers' desires in terms of achieving the highest levels of education for their children, which is the best investment, thus, to secure their university education. Therefore, KFH designed the long-term investment plan "Jameati" to prepare the children for a bright future.

The investment plan for university education "Jameati" provides solutions that enable customers to save monthly amounts, and provide higher investment profits on savings, in addition to takaful coverage. Among the conditions of the investment plan is that the age of the son or daughter be less than 14 years, and the age of the customer must range between 21 and 61 years. The investment period ranges from four years to 18 years.

The investment plan "Jameati" advantages include the following: the investment amount or monthly payments may be amended at any time and the amounts shall be automatically transferred on monthly basis from the customer account to the flexible investment plan "Jameati" account. Also, the customer can withdraw 60 percent of the balance in the first year and 60 percent every year after the first withdrawal. The saving amount and accrued profit during the investment period shall fall due upon expiration of the investment plan. The investment plan can be cancelled at any time and the invested amount and profits accrued on the date of closing shall be refunded to the customer.

Long term investment plans provided by "KFH" encourage and inspire customers to enhance future planning and saving culture, determine family spending priorities and enhance chances of increasing family income through innovative and flexible solutions with rewarding investment returns.

KISR organizes
fourth forum
of inventions

KUWAIT: Under the patronage of the Acting Director General of the Kuwait Institute for Scientific Research Dr Mane Al-Sedrawi, the Marketing and Commercial Operations Sector at the Institute is organizing the fourth invention forum of the Kuwait Institute for Scientific Research, in cooperation with: Qatar Foundation for Education, Science and Community Development, Qatar University, Kuwait University, and the Center Sabah Al-Ahmad for Giftedness and Creativity of the Kuwait Foundation for the Advancement of Sciences.

The forum is held with the aim of spreading awareness in the field of patents and commercial marketing, and finding the best innovative solutions to confront the various kinds of problems encountered by research institutions, whether public or private, as well as promoting cooperation between the scientific research sector in the country and private sector institutions, in order to serve the development plans of the state.

The forum presents the latest patents obtained by the institute, with an indication of their commercial applications and opportunities for transferring them to the private sector, which in turn invests in them and puts them on the market. KISR's interest in this comes within the framework of a broader trend of patenting in the accredited international bodies, and its efforts in this direction have resulted in the registration of 43 patents during the last five years.

The forum looks forward to achieving positive steps towards developing the business environment in Kuwait, opening promising investment and commercial markets and prospects for the private sector, and creating new job opportunities, while diversifying sources of national income. Through it, strategic projects with vital sectors in the country are explored, and advanced solutions and technologies are explored to support sustainable development and find the best ways to implement them in an integrated manner. The forum will be broadcasted on 'Zoom' platform today at 10:00 am.



Dr Mane Al-Sedrawi

Police Academy celebrates
new officers' graduation

KUWAIT: The Saad Al-Abdullah Police Academy celebrated the graduation of a new batch of male and female police officers yesterday. Senior Interior Ministry officials led by Deputy Prime Minister and Interior Minister Sheikh Ahmad Al-Mansour Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah attended the ceremony. —Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat

Kuwaiti team restores hope to children affected with cancer



KUWAIT: As the entire world stands in solidarity for International Childhood Cancer Day today, a Kuwaiti team of doctors specializing in retinoblastoma diagnosis and treatment stands out as part of efforts in alleviating pains of affected children and restoring hope in their hearts. Retinoblastoma, in itself a rare type of cancer, is the most common type of cancer affecting children's retina, as one out of 17,000 children could be affected by this type of cancer. The global COVID-19 pandemic, while a debilitating crisis, contributed to the success of the team's mission as it was formed emergently during airport closures since patients could not travel to receive care abroad.

Dr Abdullah Al-Baghli, Chief of Al-Bahar Eye Center and a consultant ophthalmologist, commented that the formation of such a medical team is considered an unprecedented, worthy of note, an achievement for the ministry of health. He further commended the magnanimous efforts of the specialized team members as they have successfully managed to reduce the number of patients traveling abroad to receive medical care. Team leader Dr

Adnan Al-Wayel said that a team of specialists was formed during critical times, consisting of doctors, radiologists, and genealogists to diagnose and treat new cases as well as monitor patients who have already received treatment abroad prior to the pandemic. Dr Wavel further illustrated that the team is comprised of specialists from Al-Bahar center as well as other centers, adding that diagnosis is done within 48 hours maximum and according to protocol adhering to highest medical standards.

Dr Alaa Al-Ali, assigned with monitoring work of the team, said meanwhile that retinoblastoma is considered one of the most lethal cancers infecting children's retinas as the tumor grows quite rapidly, indicating that early diagnosis and treatment could save a child's life. Dr Ali added that the team diagnosed and treated 10 children aged between three months to two years, as well as continued treatment process with children who received care abroad, all of whom are in advanced stages of treatment.

Dr Ali stressed the importance of parents' awareness and attention to early signs of this disease i.e., whitening of eye pupils, eyes that do not appear to

look in the same directions, less common symptoms include eye reddening and bulging of eyes. As for treatment methods, Dr Ali named several ways including laser treatment, chemotherapy, cauterization, indicating that radiology and examination are done under full anesthesia, adding that eye excision might be necessary for advanced cases, so cancerous cells don't spread to the child's brain.

Head of C unit in radiology and tumors department within Kuwait Cancer Control Center, Dr Ahmad Bushehri stated that much progress has been made in radiotherapy and most cases that require it are advanced cases irrespective to surgery or chemotherapy. He illustrated that recently, a little girl was treated via radiotherapy and is now in stable condition. Pediatric Neuro-radiologist at Ibn Sina hospital, Dr Fatima Dashti, commented that children are diagnosed via MRI, not CT scans, so children are not unnecessarily exposed to radiation. Dr Dashti added that after treatment, the radiology department conducts periodic examinations every six months to monitor the child's responsiveness to the treatment. —KUNA

Indian Embassy
pays tribute to
Lata Mangeshkar

KUWAIT: Indian Embassy, Kuwait held a musical evening to pay tribute to the legendary Indian singer Bharat Ratna Lata Mangeshkar who passed away last week. Mangeshkar, affectionately called 'the Nightingale of India' was India's most in-demand singer as she boasted a back catalogue of thousands of songs spanning numerous genres and a total of 36 languages. "The hearts and souls that she touched through her thousands of songs will always miss her and her legacy will live on forever. Her "mere watan ke logon ..." will continue to inspire every Indian and several generations to come," Indian Ambassador Sibi George said in his address.

He said many in Kuwait still recall her visit to Kuwait and her performance here. "After the news of her demise broke out, many in Kuwait shared their



grief on this loss. Here in the embassy, we observed two days of mourning when our national flag was flown at half-mast. I received so many messages of condolences from our Kuwaiti friends and diplomat colleagues. I thank each one of them for sharing our

grief," the ambassador said. Several well-known singers and dancers performed during the event and paid homage to Mangeshkar. The musical evening was organized by the cultural wing of the embassy and Indian Cultural Network (ICN).



Deepfake democracy: S Korean candidate goes virtual for votes

Iran says Vienna talks 'complicated' but 'no impasse'



KYIV: Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky (R) and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz hold a joint press conference in Kyiv yesterday. Scholz landed in Kyiv for crisis talks with Zelensky, ahead of a visit to Moscow to head off what Berlin said was the "very critical" threat of a Russian invasion of Ukraine. —AFP

US reaffirms dire Russian invasion warning

Scholz heads to Kyiv to calm 'critical' Russia war threat

KYIV: Washington reaffirmed its warning Sunday that Russia could invade Ukraine at any moment as German Chancellor Olaf Scholz landed in Kyiv in a bid to head off a crisis that Berlin said had reached a "critical" point.

Kyiv also scrambled to keep its airspace open after KLM became the first major airline to suspend its operation because of the threats posed by Russian troops conducting military drills across Ukraine's frontiers. Western countries are winding down their diplomatic missions and urging their citizens to leave immediately after a frantic week of diplomacy failed to calm one of the most explosive standoffs since the Cold War.

US President Joe Biden briefed Ukrainian leader Volodymyr Zelensky about an hour-long conversation with Russia's Vladimir Putin he had on Saturday that brought made no breakthrough. Zelensky's office said the Ukrainian leader had invited Biden to visit Kyiv "in the coming days" to show his moral support and deliver "a powerful signal" to Russia. Washington made no mention of an invitation in its readout of the 50-minute call.

But US national security advisor Jake Sullivan issued a grim assessment that an invasion that could begin "any day now" would likely start with "a significant barrage of missiles and bomb attacks". Western leaders are pushing back against Putin's demands that the US-led NATO alliance withdraw from eastern Europe and never expand into Ukraine.

But Putin is dismissing calls by Biden and others to pull back Russian forces from Ukraine's frontiers. Washington has warned that the Russian deployments—estimated at 130,000 soldiers backed by various missiles and tanks—was sufficient to launch a major attack "any day". Germany's Scholz said on

the eve of his crunch trip to Kyiv and Moscow today that Western allies would "immediately" sanction Russia if it invaded. "In the event of a military aggression against Ukraine that threatens its territorial integrity and sovereignty, that will lead to tough sanctions that we have carefully prepared," he said. "We assess the situation as very critical, very dangerous," a German government source added.

Memories of MH17

The Dutch carrier KLM on Saturday became the first major airline to indefinitely suspend flights to the former Soviet republic because of the rising

ing more isolated in the heat of the crisis. "The airspace over Ukraine remains open and the state is working on preempting risks for airlines," the ministry said after the meeting.

Industry analysts believe other international airlines may soon also ban flights into Ukraine because of the growing cost to insurers. The travel industry is still haunted by the memory of Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 being shot down while flying near eastern Ukraine's conflict zone in July 2014.

All 298 passengers aboard the Amsterdam-Kuala Lumpur flight died. Ukraine's infrastructure ministry acknowledged that "some carriers are facing difficulties linked to fluctuations on the insurance market". "The state is prepared to support airlines and provide them with additional financial guarantees in order to support the market," it said.

Foreigners fleeing

The worries about air travel come with a growing number of Western governments winding down their missions and advising citizens to get out. The US State Department on Saturday ordered all non-emergency embassy staff out of Ukraine.

Russia cited fears of "possible provocations from the Kyiv regime" as it also began pulling out some embassy staff. "I am leaving because of the situation, because I value my life," Moroccan native Airrane Bouziane said before boarding his flight home.

"I think the soundest choice to make is to leave Ukraine now," the 23-year-old entrepreneur said. The diplomatic drawdown has touched the staff of the Organization for Security and Co-operation (OSCE) monitoring mission in Ukraine.

The OSCE has served as the world's eyes and ears for the eight-year conflict across Ukraine's

Russian-backed separatist east that has claimed more than 14,000 lives. But images on social media showed convoys of its white SUVs leaving various parts of the conflict zone as staff moved to comply with their respective governments' travel advisories.

The OSCE said that "certain participating states" had asked their members of the monitoring missions to "leave Ukraine within the next days". But it stressed that its mission continued "in 10 cities throughout Ukraine". The Ukrainian government has been trying to preempt the flood of foreigners leaving the country by calling for calm and criticising US warnings of possibly imminent war. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said on Saturday that "all this information is only provoking panic and not helping us". —AFP



Ukrainian leader invites Biden to visit Kyiv

risks. Ukraine's budget airline SkyUp said on Sunday that its flight from Portugal to Kyiv was forced to land in Moldova because the plane's Irish leasing company had revoked permission for it to cross into Ukraine. SkyUp added that European leasing companies were demanding that Ukrainian airlines return their planes to EU airspace within 48 hours.

Ukraine's infrastructure ministry responded by holding an emergency meeting aimed at maintaining foreign travel and keeping the country from becoming

Ghana activist in court on treason charges

ACCRA: A popular Ghanaian activist who organised protests against President Nana Akufo-Addo's government was charged with treason yesterday after making a comment about organising a coup on social media. Oliver Barker-Vormawor, leader of the #FixTheCountry movement, which held protests in the West African country over economic hardships among other issues, was detained as he flew in from Britain on Friday.

A court in Ghana's capital Accra arraigned him yesterday on the treason charge and remanded him in police custody until February 28, an AFP correspondent said. Outside the court, around 150 protesters rallied in support of the activist, chanting "We are all Oliver" and "Free Oliver" after he was taken inside.

"Democracy is for the people and by the people but under this government we can't free our minds... Free speech is under threat," said Raphael William, leader of the local wing of the FixtheCountry group. Barker-Vormawor had posted on social media that he would stage a coup if parliament passes a controversial bill.

The legislation would impose a 1.75% tax, popularly known as the E-Levy, on electronic transactions including payments via mobile phones. "If this E-Levy passes... I will do the coup myself. Useless Army!" Barker-Vormawor said in a series of posts on Facebook.

A police communique said the posts contained a "clear statement of intent with a possible will to execute a coup". Akufo-Addo's second term has seen a series of protests over economic problems and brawls in the hung parliament as the government tries to push through tough policies it believes could salvage the ailing economy.

The #FixTheCountry hashtag began as a popular social media protest on Twitter and has since grown into a pressure group supported by the main opposition National Democratic Congress (NDC) to stage protests on the streets. In January last year, soldiers were forced to enter Ghana's parliament to break up fights between rival lawmakers at odds over the election results giving Akufo-Addo another term. — AFP

Finance chief tipped as UK's first Hindu PM

LONDON: British finance minister Rishi Sunak is on a meteoric trajectory that could, if Boris Johnson is forced out, propel him next door to 10 Downing Street to become Britain's first Hindu prime minister. It would mark a historic landmark, for a descendant of immigrants from Britain's old empire in India and East Africa, to take command of the world's fifth largest economy.

A details-oriented policy wonk, the 41-year-old has promoted a carefully curated image on social media since he took over as chancellor of the exchequer two years ago at the beginning of the COVID pandemic. In India, he is better known through his wife Akshata. She is the daughter of Indian tycoon Narayana Murthy, the billionaire co-founder of information-technology group Infosys.

Already wealthy through his prior business career, Sunak was named as Britain's first Hindu chancellor on February 13, 2020, and swears his oath of allegiance as an MP on the Bhagavad Gita. Later that year, he marked the Hindu festival of Diwali

by lighting oil lamps on the front step of his official residence at 11 Downing Street—while urging other Hindus to stick to England's then COVID lockdown.

That same evening of November 13, 2020, Johnson and his partner Carrie were allegedly violating the lockdown by partying with friends to celebrate the downfall of his then-chief advisor Dominic Cummings.

The apparent rule-breaking and history of mendacity attached to the "partygate" premier are in contrast to the teetotal Sunak, who admits only to a fondness for Coca-Cola and sugary confectionaries.

Traditional Tory

Sunak was barely known to the British public when Johnson made him chancellor, after only five years in Conservative politics. COVID-19 was then spreading, but not yet grounds for panic. A month later, Johnson ordered the first nationwide lockdown, forcing the young chancellor to craft a massive financial rescue package to safeguard millions of jobs.

But while UK unemployment is now falling, Britons under Sunak's watch are also facing a cost-of-living squeeze with inflation accelerating at the fastest pace in decades. While Johnson appears happy to splash the cash, Sunak has earned plaudits from Tory backbenchers for insisting that



LONDON: Britain's Home Secretary Priti Patel (L) and Britain's Chancellor of the Exchequer Rishi Sunak pose for pictures during a reception to celebrate the British Asian Trust at The British Museum in London. —AFP

future generations must not be made to pay the bill.

Fiscal rectitude is key, he says, and his family values mark another return to Tory tradition after the thrice-married Johnson. Sunak is also the first person born in the 1980s to hold one of the so-called four great offices of state: Prime minister, chancellor, foreign secretary and home secretary.

He is the member of parliament for Richmond in Yorkshire, northern England—a safe Conservative seat he took over in 2015 from former party leader and foreign secretary William

Hague, who described Sunak as an "exceptional individual". Theresa May gave the Brexit supporter his first job in government in January 2018, making him a junior minister for local government, parks and troubled families.

Sunak's grandparents were from Punjab in northern India and emigrated to Britain from eastern Africa in the 1960s. They arrived with "very little", Sunak told MPs in his maiden speech in 2015. Sunak's father was a family doctor in Southampton on the southern English coast, and his mother ran a local pharmacy. — AFP

International

Macron's conservative rival under pressure after campaign rally

'If you want orators, there's plenty of them in the campaign'

PARIS: French conservative presidential candidate Valerie Pécresse yesterday defended her performance at her first campaign rally, after coming under fire both for failing to inspire supporters and for adopting language used by the far right.

Pécresse, a veteran politician who is one of President Emmanuel Macron's three main challengers on the right, acknowledged to RTL radio she was "more at ease when speaking directly to the public" than at a podium in front of 6,000 people.

"If you want orators, there's plenty of them in the campaign. I'm someone who gets things done," added greater Paris region chief and former minister Pécresse, complaining that "no-one looks at" her detailed manifesto for the April vote.

She has faced disappointment from her Republicans camp over the weekend rally, supposed to re-launch the campaign after a string of high-profile defections to Macron and failure to outstrip her far-right competitors, Eric Zemmour and Marine Le Pen. A former higher education and budget minister, Pécresse won the Republicans nomination on a platform she described as "one-third Margaret Thatcher and two-thirds Angela Merkel".

Polls show her having the best chance of all Macron's rivals of beating him if she makes it to the second round of the election on April 24, but her failure to energize conservative voters has cast

doubt over her chances of setting up a duel with the former banker.

Recent voter surveys have shown her support slipping while Zemmour and Le Pen hold up. In TV appearances, senior Republicans figures vaunted Pécresse's performance on Sunday.

But one fellow former minister under Sarkozy told broadcaster BFMTV anonymously that Pécresse "didn't seem to know how to use the teleprompters or play with the crowd." Media have reported harsh criticism of Pécresse in private from Sarkozy himself, and the former president-still a crucial voice on the mainstream right-has yet to formally back the candidate.

'Great replacement'

As well as criticism from the right, Pécresse has been attacked from the left for her use of the phrase "great replacement" in Sunday's speech. The conspiratorial belief that white Europeans are being deliberately supplanted by non-white immigrants has inspired extreme-right figures like Christchurch mass shooter Brenton Tarrant. Pécresse claimed that when she said that France could avoid both "a great relegation", meaning a decline in France's global standing, and "great replacement", she was attacking Zemmour for his use of the latter phrase.

"That means that I won't resign myself to Zemmour's theories and extreme-right theories,



PARIS: French conservative party Les Républicains (LR) presidential candidate Valerie Pécresse gives a speech during a meeting at the Zenith de Paris, in Paris, ahead of the April 2022 French presidential election. —AFP

because I know another path is possible," she told RTL. "It's something I've been saying for months, so I don't even understand this uproar," Pécresse added. But she also reiterated her claim that there are "zones of non-France" in the country due to immigration. Socialist candidate Anne Hidalgo herself struggling in the polls-said Sunday that the conservative had "crossed yet another Rubicon" by adopting the language of extreme-right con-

spiracy theories.

Meanwhile activist organisation SOS Racisme said in a statement that "Valerie Pécresse's words are not worthy of a major contender for the presidency of the Republic". "Valerie Pécresse is wrong to want to send signals to radicalised voters, because those voters will never get enough hate to satisfy them," SOS Racisme's president Dominique Sopo said. —AFP



Second round of the election on April 24

News in brief

US airline makes emergency landing

WASHINGTON: An "unruly passenger" forced an American Airlines plane to make an emergency landing in the US city of Kansas on Sunday after crew and others onboard subdued the person, the airline said. Flight 1775 from Los Angeles to Washington diverted mid-journey to Kansas City where it was met by law enforcement. "An unruly passenger displaying erratic behavior ... was ultimately subdued by our crew and with the help of other passengers," the airline said in a statement. The Federal Bureau of Investigation confirmed the incident and said in a statement that the passenger had been taken into custody, with the matter "ongoing." —AFP

Navalaya slams Kremlin 'cowards'

MOSCOW: The wife of jailed Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny lashed out at Russian authorities yesterday, on the eve of a new trial that could extend his sentence by over a decade. Navalny, President Vladimir Putin's most vocal domestic critic, was jailed last February for two and a half years on old fraud charges after surviving a poisoning attack that he and the West blame on the Kremlin. Today, a new hearing has been scheduled at his penal colony outside Moscow on additional fraud and contempt of court charges against Navalny. —AFP

Police kill knife-wielding man

PARIS: French police shot dead a man who lunged at them early yesterday with a long-blade knife at Paris's busy Gare du Nord train station, police sources said. The man attacked two police officers on patrol at the station, the terminus for trains from London, with a 30-centimetre (12-inch) knife with ACAB (All Cops Are Bastards) written on the blade, said a police source, who asked not be named. "The police used their firearms, thus eliminating all danger, both for themselves and for travellers," Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin wrote in a tweet. The attack occurred around 7:00 am (0600 GMT), he said. A France Television journalist who was at the train station at the time posted a video of the incident on social media, in which two gunshots can be heard. —AFP

Germany urged to save citizen

PARIS: Germany must act immediately to prevent the hanging of a national detained in Iran who risks the death penalty on charges vehemently denied by his supporters, his family and activists said yesterday. Anti-regime activist Jamshid Sharmahd, 66, appeared in court in Tehran earlier this month charged with "spreading corruption on earth" over accusations of involvement in a bombing at a mosque in 2008. If convicted on this charge, which campaigners say is often used against opponents of the government, he could face execution. "It is of the utmost importance that the German federal government act immediately to prevent the planned state assassination of Mr Sharmahd," his daughter Gazelle and more than two dozen other activists said in an open letter to German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock. —AFP

Tear gas fired at Sudan protest against coup

KHARTOUM: Sudanese security forces fired tear gas yesterday at protesters rallying against last year's military coup and the arrest of several political figures and pro-democracy activists, an AFP correspondent said.

Thousands of demonstrators rallied in the capital Khartoum and its twin city of Omdurman, AFP reporters said. Protests also took place in other parts of the country, including in the eastern city of Port Sudan and in the western Darfur region, according to witnesses.

In Khartoum, protesters carried the Sudanese flags and red balloons as well as banners that read: "Today is the nation's love day" as the rallies coincided with Valentine's Day. Other shouted slogans demanding authorities release several people arrested since the October military power grab.

"We are demanding the release of resistance committee members and politicians who were unjustly arrested and some of whom are facing fabricated charges," protester Khaled Mohamed told AFP.

Security forces fired tear gas at crowds who rallied near the presi-

dential palace in central Khartoum, an AFP correspondent said. Regular mass protests have rocked the troubled northeast African nation since the October 25 military takeover led by army chief Abdel Fattah al-Burhan.

The power grab derailed a fragile power-sharing agreement between the army and civilians which had been negotiated after the 2019 ouster of longtime autocrat Omar al-Bashir. Since the coup, authorities have arrested many activists who belong to so-called resistance committees who have been instrumental in organising protests.

"The number of people detained arbitrarily and without criminal charges has exceeded 100," the Sudanese Professionals Association said yesterday. The group, which also calls for anti-coup protests, said the detainees aged between 16 and 16. On Sunday, Sudanese authorities arrested Mohamed al-Fekki, a civilian former member of the ruling Sovereign Council which led the country under the 2019 power-sharing agreement.

Last week, authorities arrested ex-minister Khaled Omar Youssef



OMDURMAN, Sudan: Sudanese protesters hold placards during a demonstration calling for civilian rule and denouncing the military administration, in the capital Khartoum's twin city of Omdurman, yesterday. —AFP

and Wagdi Saleh, the spokesman of Sudan's main civilian bloc, the Forces for Freedom and Change (FFC). Those arrests came one day after they joined an FFC delegation for talks with UN special representative Volker Perthes, as part of efforts launched last month to resolve Sudan's deepening crisis.

Demonstrators on Monday also

held up pictures of protesters killed since the October coup. An independent group of medics say at least 79 people have been killed and hundreds wounded in a crackdown on the pro-democracy demonstrators. On Saturday, Burhan said investigations were underway to determine who was behind those deaths. —AFP

Iran says Vienna talks 'complicated' but 'no impasse'

VIENNA: Iran yesterday said talks with world powers in Vienna to restore the 2015 nuclear deal are "complicated and difficult" but have not hit an impasse. "The negotiations are complicated and difficult as they have reached key issues that need serious political decisions especially by Washington," foreign ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh told a news conference.

But "there is no impasse in Vienna", he added.

Trial opens over jihadist murder of French priest

PARIS: Four alleged accomplices in the murder of an 85-year-old French priest went on trial in Paris yesterday after years of investigation into one of several attacks to have rocked France in recent years. Father Jacques Hamel had his throat slit at the foot of the altar while celebrating mass on July 26, 2016, at his small church in Saint-Etienne-du-Rouvray, a working-class suburb of Rouen in north-west France.

The two 19-year-old assailants, Adel Kermiche and Abdel-Malik Petitjean, also seriously injured one of the worshippers they took hostage before being shot and killed by police as they tried to leave the church. They claimed in a video to be members of the Islamic State, which later called them its "soldiers" retaliating for France's fight against jihadists in Syria and Iraq.

Hamel's murder came as the country was on high alert over a series of jihadist attacks that began with

Iran is engaged in negotiations with Britain, China, France, Germany and Russia directly and with the United States indirectly to revive the deal formally called the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). The deal offered Tehran sanctions relief in exchange for curbs on its nuclear programme.

But the US unilaterally withdrew from the JCPOA in 2018 under then-president Donald Trump and reimposed stiff economic sanctions, prompting Tehran to begin rolling back on its commitments. The drive to salvage the 2015 nuclear deal resumed in late November. "If the US and European parties show real determination", an agreement can be reached very soon in Vienna, Khatibzadeh said yesterday. "We need objective guarantees to make sure the US does not leave the agreement once again and that it honours its commitments," he added.

a massacre at the satirical newspaper Charlie Hebdo in January 2015 and which have claimed more than 250 lives in total. It also raised questions about the ability of French intelligence agencies to prevent such attacks, since Kermiche was wearing an electronic bracelet at the time after anti-terrorism police learned he had twice tried to go fight in Syria.

Three men appeared in the dock on Monday on charges of conspiracy with terrorists, with prosecutors saying they knew of the attackers' plan. Jean-Philippe Jean Louis, Farid Khelil and Yassine Sebailia were all in contact with the assailants, with Jean Louis also travelling with Petitjean to Turkey just weeks before the attack in an attempt to reach Syria. They have denied the charges of conspiracy with terrorists, with their lawyers calling them "scapegoats." They face up to 30 years in prison, with hearings scheduled for the next four weeks.

'Pounce on the infidels'

A fourth suspect, Rachid Kassim, a Frenchman who became a key Islamic State recruiter and is the alleged instigator of the attack, has been charged with complicity in the killing by helping to choose the target and providing advice.

"Pounce on the infidels like a hungry lion pounces on its prey," Kassim told them in audio and social

The goals of the negotiations are to have the US return to the deal by lifting its anti-Iran sanctions and to have Iran return to full compliance with its commitments under the agreement. "All JCPOA sanctions with any labels must be lifted at the same time," Khatibzadeh said. Different parties to the agreement have in recent weeks signalled progress in the talks with some saying the negotiations are in their final stage.

Ali Shamkhani, secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, in a tweet yesterday said the negotiations have reached the stage the can be commented on with "certainty" and not speculation. "The US political decision to realise or refuse to accept the requirements of forming a reliable and lasting agreement based on the principles accepted in JCPOA can replace speculations," he said. —AFP

media conversations discovered by investigators. Police also say Kassim was behind the chilling murder of a police officer and his companion in front of their three-year-old son in Magnanville, a Paris suburb, just a few weeks before Hamel's murder.

He is believed to have been killed in 2017 during a coalition airstrike near Mosul, Iraq, where he lived, but is being tried in absentia since the death has not been confirmed. Despite the absence of the main culprits, Hamel's relatives and the victims are hoping to learn how the young men came to embrace the extremist ideology that led to the attack.

Guy Coponet, who was critically injured while being held hostage in the church, said he hoped for "justice to be done" for the young men on trial as well as for the victims. "If those who are responsible can ask forgiveness from all those who suffered, I think we will have won our day," Coponet, now 92, said before entering the Paris courtroom, where he is expected to testify Thursday. Catholic Church officials have launched the process to seek beatification for Hamel, a first step to canonisation or sainthood, which is currently being examined by the Vatican. Pope Francis, who approved a fast-track process for Hamel, called him a "martyr" who died for his faith, which means there is no requirement of a proof of miracles in his case. —AFP

International

Deepfake democracy: South Korean candidate goes virtual for votes

'Words that are often spoken by Yoon are better reflected in AI Yoon'

SEOUL: In a crowded campaign office in Seoul, young, trendy staffers are using deepfake technology to try to achieve the near-impossible: make a middle-aged, establishment South Korean presidential candidate cool. Armed with hours of specially-recorded footage of opposition People Power Party candidate Yoon Suk-yeol, the team has created a digital avatar of the frontrunner — and set "AI Yoon" loose on the campaign trail ahead of a March 9 election.



AI Yoon has attracted millions of views since making his debut

From a deepfake video of Barack Obama insulting Donald Trump to failed New York mayoral candidate Andrew Yang campaigning in the metaverse, AI technology has been used in elections before. But AI Yoon's creators believe he is the world's first official deepfake candidate — a concept gaining traction in South Korea, which has the world's fastest average internet speeds.

With neatly-combed black hair and a smart suit, the avatar looks near-identical to the real South Korean candidate but uses salty language and meme-ready quips in a bid to engage younger voters who get their news online. It's been a huge hit. AI Yoon has attracted millions of views since making his debut January 1.

Tens of thousands of people have asked questions, but it's not the usual policy-related fare. "President Moon Jae-in and (rival presidential candidate) Lee Jae-myung are drowning. Who do you save?" one user asks AI Yoon. "I'd wish them both good luck," the avatar snaps back.

Meta-snark

At first glance, AI Yoon could pass for an actual can-

didate — an apt demonstration of how far artificially generated videos, known as deepfakes, have come in the last few years. The real Yoon recorded more than 3,000 sentences — 20 hours of audio and video — to provide enough data for a local deepfake technology company to create the avatar.

"Words that are often spoken by Yoon are better reflected in AI Yoon," said Baik Kyeong-hoon, the director of the AI Yoon team. What the avatar actually says is written by his campaign team, not by the candidate himself.

"We try to come up with humorous and satirical answers," Baik told AFP. The approach has paid off. AI Yoon's pronouncements have made headlines in South Korean media, and seven million people have visited the "Wiki Yoon" website to question the avatar.

"If we had only produced politically correct statements, we would not have this reaction," Baik said. "The political establishment has been too slow in the face of a fast-changing society," he added. When answering questions posed by users, AI Yoon mockingly refers to President Moon and his rival Lee as "Moon Ding Dong" and "Lee Ding Dong".

"I want to ask Moon Ding Dong this question: Who is our real enemy?" AI Yoon says, in a thinly-veiled swipe at what his critics say is the president's more conciliatory approach towards Pyongyang. North and South Korea remain technically at war and Moon has met with Pyongyang's leader Kim Jong Un four times since taking office — an approach candidate Yoon rejects as too soft.

The avatar politician has also used humour to try and deflect attention from Yoon's past scandals, for example claims he received inappropriate fruit gifts from a construction company when he was a senior prosecutor.

"I am not beholden to persimmons and melons. I am only beholden to the people," AI Yoon said — although his campaign was later forced to acknowledge he had accepted some gifts. The kind of script used by the campaign for AI Yoon draws on the language used in the online gaming world, Kim Myuhng-joo, professor of information security at Seoul Women's University, told



SEOUL: This picture taken on February 7, 2022 shows Baik Kyeong-hoon (L), director of the "AI Yoon" team, making a video clip using "AI Yoon", a digital avatar of South Korean presidential candidate Yoon Suk-yeol of the opposition People Power Party, at an election campaign office in Seoul. — AFP

local media. "AI Yoon reads off the scripts compiled by its creators, who do not mince words," Kim said. Ko Sam-seong, a staffer for Yoon's main opponent Lee, accuses the cyber-candidate of "downgrading political decorum".

But the snark is working: while polling for the March 9 election remains neck-and-neck, Yoon has pulled ahead of rival Lee Jae-myung with voters in their 20s.

AI future

Tech-savvy Baik and his two other team members — all in their 20s and 30s — are some of the youngest staffers in the sprawling Yoon campaign. They come with AI Yoon's responses in rapid-fire brainstorming sessions,

which can take as little as 30 minutes, in contrast to the carefully-honed rhetoric usually found in public policy debates.

South Korea's election monitor allows AI candidates to campaign on the condition it is clearly identified as deepfake technology, and does not spread misinformation. The technology has more often been flagged as harmful — the 2018 deepfake video of Obama was produced by Oscar-winning filmmaker Jordan Peele to warn viewers about trusting material they encounter online.

But Baik thinks AI is the future of election campaigns. "It's so easy to create huge amounts of content with deepfake technology," he told AFP. "It is inevitable that this will be used more and more." — AFP



COLOMBO: Sri Lankan television journalist Chamuditha Samarawickrama, who had criticised the powerful ruling Rajapaksa family and their allies in recent broadcasts, including on YouTube, gestures during an interview with AFP after armed men attacked his house, in Colombo. — AFP

Gunmen attack high-profile Sri Lanka TV journalist

COLOMBO: Armed men stormed the home of a high-profile Sri Lankan television journalist critical of the government yesterday, police said, sparking condemnation by local media rights groups. Chamuditha Samarawickrama, who had criticised the powerful ruling Rajapaksa family and their allies in recent broadcasts, including on YouTube, was shaken but unhurt after the pre-dawn raid, police said.

"They carried weapons to intimidate the guard and gained access to the housing compound," a police official said adding that forensic experts had been called in to launch an investigation. "There were at least three armed men and they travelled in a white van," Samarawickrama told AFP. "I heard shots fired. They smashed my windows and threw faeces at the house. It was captured on CCTV."

"I don't know who is behind this attack, but I want to tell them that they can't silence me." Local media rights organisations denounced the attack on Samarawickrama who is both liked and loathed for his

confrontationist interviews with public and business figures on his programme "Truth With Chamuditha."

"This attack underscores the dangerous environment in which journalists have been working in Sri Lanka in recent decades," said local media rights group the Free Media Movement. "It is ironic that this (incident) comes less than a week after we commemorated journalists who were killed or otherwise victimised." According to Reporters Without Borders (RSF), at least 14 journalists were murdered during the 2005-15 presidency of Mahinda Rajapaksa, the current prime minister and elder brother of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa.

Two weeks ago, police began investigating Samarawickrama and his Hiru TV network for polemic against law enforcement and allegedly making a false complaint of a threat to his life. He had broadcast last week an interview with a former police officer who had secured political asylum in Britain after claiming that he was being persecuted during a previous Rajapaksa administration.

The latest assault comes weeks before the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) is due to take up Sri Lanka's rights record over long-standing allegations of abuses. UN rights chief Michelle Bachelet had called for "renewed attention" to the intimidation of journalists, lawyers and activists in Sri Lanka after the Rajapaksa family returned to power in 2019. — AFP

omatic cases to hospitals and quarantine facilities has filled up beds and amplified wait times.

"The onslaught of the fifth wave of the epidemic has dealt a heavy blow to Hong Kong and overwhelmed the city's capacity of handling," leader Carrie Lam said in a statement issued Sunday night. The surge in cases has increased wait times "for admitting people who test positive to isolation facilities," she added.

Surrounded by patients queuing for tests all of last week, the city's hospitals on Sunday told people who have "stable or have mild symptoms" to stay at home. But Lam said the government "will spare no effort to implement" the "zero COVID" strategy and that China will help the city to bolster testing and quarantine resources.

Hong Kong has struggled to persuade its elderly population to get vaccinated with only around 50 percent of people over the age of 70 receiving a jab. The government has repeatedly said its "zero Covid" policy is meant to buy more time for them to get inoculated.

Researchers warned Friday that by the end of March, the city could be racking up 28,000 daily infections. Hong Kong had only recorded a touch over 12,000 cases by the end of 2021. — AFP

Famine looms on doorstep of DRC capital

KINSHASA: "It's hard to eat here. There are no fields and no food. Life is hard," says Albertine Nzale, traditional chief of Kinduti, on the outskirts of the DR Congo capital, Kinshasa. The village sits at the end of a bumpy track through the savanna outside the largest city in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

There are no grain stores in its straw-roofed huts, no crops or farms along the 35-kilometre (22-mile) dirt road through the grassland. Just men pushing ancient bikes loaded with sacks of charcoal under a sweltering sun. Albertine, 80, is worried for the village's future and wants help. "We don't have a school or a hospital," she says. "We need tools and farm machinery to cultivate the land."

Most people here struggle to find enough food, locals tell AFP. In November 2021, the UN's World Food Programme (WFP) and Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) said the food crisis in the DRC touched a quarter of the vast country's population — nearly 27 million people. And those suffering were not just in the country's conflict zones in the east, but in and around the capital to the west.

UN aid

Kinduti nurse Neron Mokili acknowledges that wild pigs sometimes destroy land around the village. But he also blames the food shortage on "lazy and impatient" locals who prefer to produce charcoal than till the soil. Traditional chief Fely Moba, 58, takes a more nuanced position.

"Not everyone in Kinduti owns land they can farm. They have to buy food from the people who do own the land. Except most people haven't got enough mon-

ey," he explains. COVID restrictions-lockdowns, curfews, markets shutting down-have added to the economic woes of this already fragile region.

Last year, the WFP teamed up with UN children's agency UNICEF and the government to help locals buy food. Between March and December 2021, they gave at least \$402 (354 euros) in cash to 21,000 households. The project, which helped feed 130,000 individuals, aimed to "change people's lives and make them more independent", Mathilde Vaultier, WFP director for the DR Congo, tells AFP.

Many Kinuti locals say the money went on basic necessities-food, schooling for their children, medical treatment. Some, like food stall holder Elisee Nguza, managed to invest some of the cash in more long-term, income-generating activities.

"Things were really difficult during lockdown. There just wasn't any money around. The WFP cash helped me pay the kids' school expenses and build my business up," explains the 48-year-old mother of five.

Famine 'only one step away'

Both Nguza and village nurse Mokili, who also runs a chemist shop, say they have invested in farming. Pululu Maimona, a farmer who owns 20 hectares of forest and has ambitions of starting pig production, poured his aid cash into a fish-farming project he started in 2019. "When I emptied the tanks in October, I got 300,000 Congolese francs' worth (150 dollars' worth) of big fish out," the 63-year-old smiles.

"If people work hard, we won't have this food shortage... I don't just work for my family. I work for the community. As they say, when one person works, several get to eat". The WFP says Nsele district, where Kinduti is situated, faces food "stress", meaning locals have to sacrifice other basic needs in order to afford food.

"We're not strictly talking of famine here," explains Vaultier, but with 75 percent of people "have difficulty" getting enough to eat, "famine is only one step away". "Projects like ours try to stop them tipping over that edge." — AFP



BRUSSELS: A Participant in the so-called "Freedom Convoy" (Convoi de la Liberté) waves a French flag as he welcomes cars on a parking lot outside Brussels yesterday. Belgian authorities intercepted 30 vehicles as police scrambled to stop a Canada-style protest convoy against COVID regulations from reaching Brussels. — AFP

Belgian police scramble to block anti-vaccine convoy

BRUSSELS: Belgian authorities said yesterday they had intercepted 30 vehicles as police scrambled to stop a Canada-style protest convoy against COVID regulations from reaching Brussels.

Demonstrators in the self-proclaimed "freedom convoy" were seeking to head north to the seat of the European Union in defiance of a Belgian ban after a weekend trying to block traffic in France.

Brussels mayor Philippe Close told local RTBF radio that a total of 400-500 cars and vans had been

spotted en route for the Belgian capital. "About 30 have been blocked and the others have vanished into thin air," Close said.

He said several dozen vehicles were in a car park on the edge of Brussels, where police had decided to direct the protesters and they could negotiate heading to the city centre "on foot". "It is a matter of not allowing Belgian capital to be taken hostage," he warned.

In an effort to stop protesters circumventing checks, police also closed part of a major motorway heading to the city from the east. The self-proclaimed "freedom convoy" is one of several worldwide inspired by a truckers' standoff with authorities in Canada.

More than 100 vehicles on Saturday managed to converge on the Champs-Élysées in Paris despite a heavy police deployment to keep them out of the city.

Security forces used teargas to disperse protesters and detained dozens in scenes reminiscent of the "yellow vest" clashes of 2018 and 2019. — AFP

HK leader says city 'overwhelmed' by Omicron wave

HONG KONG: Hong Kong's health facilities have been overloaded by an "onslaught" of COVID-19 infections, its leader said, even as authorities cling to a "zero-COVID" policy despite an unprecedented rise in cases fuelled by the Omicron variant.

Authorities have adhered to mainland China's policy of stamping out the smallest outbreak with mass quarantine, widespread tracking, and prolonged social distancing measures since the start of the pandemic.

But the extremely contagious Omicron variant breached the Chinese territory's defences in late December, piling up more than 8,000 infections in a few weeks with researchers warning that daily cases could exceed 25,000 by next month. While the infection rate remains low compared to major cities around the world, Hong Kong's policy of sending even asymp-

Business

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 15, 2022

Hopes for recovery in focus at Asia's biggest airshow

Aviation sector expects 2022 will mark a turning point in the region

SINGAPORE: Asia's biggest airshow takes place in Singapore this week with the aviation sector hoping 2022 marks a turning point in a region where tough curbs have left coronavirus-battered airlines struggling to recover.

The event, which takes place every two years and kicks off today, brings together hundreds of airlines, plane manufacturers and other industry players to display their latest equipment, network, and strike deals. But the pandemic—which has been the biggest crisis to ever strike the sector—will cast a long shadow, with industry leaders focused on the question of whether air travel will finally pick up in the Asia-Pacific.

While the United States and Europe have eased restrictions and demand has rebounded, Asia lags far behind, with foreign tourists barred and mandatory quarantines still in place in many countries.

There are positive signs for 2022 — several places, such as Australia, New Zealand and the Philippines, are lifting bans on overseas visitors—but industry figures warn there is a long way to go. “We’ve seen the recovery come in very, very strong in North America and Europe when the restrictions were eased,” Anand Stanley, the Asia-Pacific chief for European plane-maker Airbus, told a forum before the airshow.

“Asia still has to follow that track. We still have semblances of a quarantine-based regime, border closures. This has to be lifted so that the freedom of movement returns and in turn the demand returns.” Data highlights the slow pace of recovery—the region’s airlines carried 16.7 million pas-

sengers last year, just 4.4 percent of volumes seen in 2019, according to the Association of Asia Pacific Airlines (AAPA).

‘Many obstacles’ to recovery

With the Asia-Pacific rebound nascent and Singapore currently battling a fierce Omicron wave, the four-day airshow is likely to be muted with about 600 companies taking part, down from over 900 at the last edition in 2020. Participants will be required to take daily virus tests, while the public have been barred from attending a series of aerial displays as authorities look to cut infection risks, with the aerobatics instead to be live-streamed.

Nevertheless, key players such as Boeing, Airbus and engine-maker Rolls-Royce will still be attending, and the show will be a rare opportunity to hold in-person meetings with customers to drum up new business. Leck Chet Lam, managing director of the airshow’s organizer Experia, said the event remains a platform for finding solutions “so that we can be ready for the recovery”.

“We are starting to see green shoots in the industry... Passenger travel numbers are up, flight frequencies are up,” he said. For the industry, the only way for Asia to chart a course to such a recovery is if governments in the region finally drop restrictions and pivot towards living with COVID-19. “We need governments to get their act together,” said Alex Feldman, US aircraft-maker Boeing’s Southeast Asia chief.

They have to “coordinate and simplify the requirements for safe travel”, he added. But Shukor



SINGAPORE: Military and commercial aircraft are seen on static display during a preview of the Singapore Airshow in Singapore Sunday. —AFP

Yusof, an analyst with Malaysia-based Endau Analytics, said he doubted a recovery would start this year.

“There are still many obstacles for airlines to

surmount,” he told AFP. “There’s been little effort to streamline air travel and worse to formulate a new doctrine to deal with a post-COVID landscape.” —AFP

Toshiba sets March date for vote on spin-off plan

TOKYO: Japanese conglomerate Toshiba said yesterday it would hold an extraordinary meeting of shareholders on March 24 to vote on its plan to spin off its devices unit. The ballot will not be legally binding but is intended to “confirm the views of our shareholders regarding moving forward”, Toshiba said, with a binding resolution to be voted on some time in 2023.

But the board will hope the vote produces solid enough support for its revised proposal, which also includes selling “non-core” business including Toshiba Tec and other units.

CEO Satoshi Tsunakawa said he would seek a majority mandate from shareholders at the meeting, rather than a more stringent two-thirds majority. Toshiba last November announced a proposal to spin off two new businesses, one dealing with infrastructure and the other devices.

But last week it revised the plan, saying spinning off a single unit would be less costly and time-consuming and make it easier to list the new firm.

Once a shining symbol of Japan’s advanced technology and economic power, Toshiba more recently has faced a series of scandals and losses. It had appeared to be staging a recovery early last year and rejoined the prestigious first section of the Tokyo Stock Exchange.

But it was plunged into uncertainty in June when shareholders voted to oust the board’s chairman after revelations the firm sought government help to influence a boardroom ballot proposed by activist shareholders. The vote also came on the heels of an unexpected buyout offer from a private equity fund associated with then CEO Nobuaki Kurumatani, with allegations it was intended to blunt the influence of activist investors.

Reception to its initial plan to split into three firms was mixed, and while some analysts said the proposal could help maximize value, there was public opposition from several key shareholders.

The shareholder meeting was announced as Toshiba yesterday downgraded its annual operational profit forecast, citing the semiconductor shortage and rising costs. The firm cut its operating profit expectations for the year to March to 155 billion yen (\$1.34 billion) against an earlier forecast of 170 billion yen.

Annual sales are now seen at 3.34 trillion yen, compared with a previous 3.35 trillion yen forecast.

“We adjusted the annual outlooks to reflect the impact of rising cost of raw materials and transportation as well as the continuing semiconductor shortage,” the company said. It posted net profit of 55.1 billion yen for the three months to December, up from 40.1 billion yen a year earlier.

For the nine months to December, the storied firm’s net profit nearly tripled to 114.9 billion yen, against 43.6 billion yen in the same period the year before. Mio Kato, an analyst at Lightstream Research who publishes on Smartkarma, said the third-quarter results “should not drive a big reaction in my view”.

“Overall I don’t think there will be any major change in investor perception,” he told AFP, adding that the quarter was likely driven by “semiconductor supply chain and some incremental lockdown-related impact”. —AFP

Cost-cutting Turkish Airlines boss to lead Air India

MUMBAI: A former Turkish Airlines boss who oversaw extensive cost-cutting, Ilker Ayci, was yesterday named as the new head of loss-making and newly-privatized Air India, owners Tata group said. Ayci’s appointment makes him the airline’s first foreign CEO and Tata Sons chairman N Chandrasekaran said in a statement he “would lead Air India into the new era”.

Tea-to-steel conglomerate Tata bought back the flag carrier—which it originally set up — in a 180-billion-rupee (\$2.4-billion) deal in January after 69 years under state ownership. Once similarly state-owned, Turkish Airlines was privatized in the mid-2000s and subsequently transformed into a major international player, one of few global airlines to reliably make profits.

India to sell 5% of insurance giant LIC in huge IPO

NEW DELHI: India plans to sell a five percent stake in insurance giant LIC in what could potentially be the country’s largest initial public offering, according to a regulatory filing Sunday.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s government is desperate for proceeds from the IPO of the Life Insurance Corporation of India and the sale of other state assets to help fix its tattered public finances.

Founded in 1956 by nationalizing and combining 245 insurers, LIC was synonymous with life insurance in post-independence India for decades until the entry of private companies in 2000. Despite a steady decline in market share, LIC continues to lead the pack with 64 percent of the life insurance market in the country of 1.4 billion people. With staff of more than 100,000 people, its vast assets under management of 36.7 trillion rupees (\$491 billion) equate to nearly 16 percent of India’s gross domestic product. LIC in turn is one of India’s biggest institutional investors, with significant stakes in Indian blue-chip stocks like Reliance, TCS, Infosys and ITC. According to LIC’s draft prospectus filed with the market regulator on Sunday, the government plans to sell around 316 million shares in the IPO, which is expected to take place in March.

While the pricing has not yet been set, analysts expect the IPO to dwarf that of payments firm Paytm, which raised \$2.5 billion in November in India’s largest public share sale to date.

Courting first-time investors

The government hopes LIC’s IPO will attract legions of first-time investors to the stock market, in a country where less than five percent of people have trading accounts. It will be a crucial step in Modi’s policy to “monetize and modernize” state-run companies and plug an estimated 16-trillion-rupee budget deficit this financial year in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic.

Earlier this month, the government drastically cut its divestment target for the current year from 1.75 trillion rupees to 780 billion rupees. Of this, the government has raised only 120.3 billion rupees by selling stakes in

Ayci—who is close to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan—was appointed chairman in 2015 and the following year described his firm as “one of the most profitable airlines in the world” over the previous decade. Loss-making Air India is the direct opposite: a monumental burden on the public purse for decades, consuming 1.1 trillion rupees (\$14.7 billion) in public money since 2009.

Ayci, 51, stepped down from his Turkish Airlines post last month. The coronavirus pandemic plunged his firm into losses of \$836 million in 2020, but it returned to profit in the first nine months of 2021, with analysts crediting a focus on freight cargo and cutting employee costs. In a CEOWorld Magazine column last year, Ayci himself said his airline had achieved “what most other airlines could not” by cutting costs and capital expenditure during the pandemic. Whether he will be able to turn around the notoriously challenged Air India remains to be seen.

“We will utilise the strong heritage of Air India to make it one of the best airlines in the world with a uniquely superior flying experience that reflects Indian warmth and hospitality,” Ayci said in a statement. He was an advisor to Erdogan in 1994 and the

various state-owned entities this financial year, government data shows.

This puts New Delhi on course to miss its privatization target for a third straight year despite concluding the long-delayed sale of flag carrier Air India to the Tata Group last month. The IPO of LIC though will require additional transparency of the insurance behemoth’s operations, which has more than 2,000 branches and an army of around one million “LIC agents”. LIC’s real estate assets include vast offices at prime locations in different Indian cities, including a distinctively curved Art Deco building in Mumbai’s financial district and a 15-storey LIC Building in Chennai that was once India’s tallest building.

The firm is also believed to own a large collection of rare and valuable artwork that includes paintings by MF Hussain—known as the Pablo Picasso of India—although the value of these holdings has not been made public. Srinath Sridharan, an independent markets commentator, likened LIC to one of India’s “family jewels” and said that a successful IPO by the government could pave the way for others.

“If they can get this right, running a large entity and yet having the ability and agility to take care of minority shareholders’ concerns, I think... it will be far easier to divest smaller entities, mid-sized entities,” Sridharan said.

After the listing, which is expected in March, LIC will be one of India’s biggest publicly listed companies alongside giants such as Reliance and TCS.

How big is the firm?

LIC was created in 1956 and was synonymous with life insurance in post-independence India until private firms were allowed entry in 2000.

The company holds a two-thirds share in the domestic life insurance market. It manages assets of 36.7 trillion rupees (\$491 billion), which equates to nearly 16 percent of India’s gross domestic product. It has more than 100,000 employees and one million insurance agents.

LIC’s real estate assets include big offices at prime locations in various Indian cities, including a 15-storey building in the southern city of Chennai and a distinctively curved head office in the heart of Mumbai’s financial district. The firm is also believed to own a large collection of rare and valuable artwork that includes paintings by MF Hussain—known as the Pablo Picasso of India—although the value of



Ilker Ayci

Turkish president acted as a witness at Ayci’s wedding in 2018. The Tata group now operates four separate airlines in India and is imposing wholesale change at the top of Air India as it seeks to revive the ailing airline. —AFP



NEW DELHI: A man exits the office of the state-owned insurance group and investment company Life Insurance Corporation (LIC) in New Delhi yesterday. —AFP

these holdings has not been made public.

Why is the IPO taking place?

Asia’s third-largest economy was already grappling with a prolonged slowdown even before the start of the coronavirus pandemic. India has recorded its worst recession since independence due to the COVID-19 crisis. Efforts to contain the spread of the virus, such as through stringent lockdowns, created a significant budget deficit and pushed millions into joblessness and poverty. The IPO of LIC will give a boost to the government’s efforts to raise much-needed cash through privatisations, which are running badly behind schedule.

The government has raised just 120.3 billion rupees by selling stakes in various state-owned entities this financial year, well short of its target of 780 billion rupees. Srinath Sridharan, an independent markets commentator, likened LIC to one of the Indian government’s “family jewels”.

Is it an attractive investment?

LIC is a household name in India and has a strong grip on the life insurance market in the vast South Asian nation despite the entrance of private players.

The company is offering its millions of policyholders the opportunity to invest in the IPO at a discount, promoting the offer through television advertisements and full-page newspaper ads. Analysts expect retail investors, including many first-timers, to show strong appetite for snaring a stake in the venerable company. —AFP

Business

High US inflation puts Fed's credibility on the line: Bullard

'Fed should 'front load' its actions and raise the benchmark borrowing rate'

WASHINGTON: The Federal Reserve needs to accelerate the pace of interest rate increases to fight rising inflation, but can do so in a way that doesn't roil financial markets, St Louis Fed President James Bullard said yesterday.

"Our credibility is on the line here," Bullard said on CNBC. After consumer prices saw their biggest jump in 40 years in January, he said the Fed should "front load" its actions and raise the benchmark borrowing rate to one percent by July. Bullard, a voting member of the Fed's policy-setting committee, caused a sharp reaction by markets last week with similar comments on the need to remove stimulus from the economy provided during the COVID-19 pandemic. The consumer price index in January jumped 7.5 percent compared to a year earlier, its largest increase since 1982. Bullard said the data capped four months of worrisome reports indicating that "inflation is broadening and possibly accelerating in the US economy."

"We've been surprised to the upside on inflation. This is a lot of inflation in the US economy," he said. Bullard said he would try to convince his central bank colleagues of the need to move quickly, but defer to Fed Chair Jerome Powell. "I do think we need to front load more of our planned removal of accommodation than we would have previously," he said.

"However, I think we can do it in a way that's organized and not disruptive to markets." The Fed's next policy meeting is set for March 15-16, and some economists say the central bank could even make an aggressive, half-point increase to signal its determination to contain rising prices. UK economy rebounds by record 7.5 percent from pandemic in 2021.

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



WASHINGTON: An employee weighs a cut of meat for a customer at Canales Quality Meats in Eastern Market in Washington, DC. — AFP

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.

On Thursday, 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. "The truth is the president can do very little to lower inflation. He can and should do everything he can on supply (and he is doing most of it already) but (it) won't add up to much," he said in a tweet.

"The Fed needs to hike in March," he added.

The yearly increase was an acceleration from the seven-percent gain seen in December, while the month-on-month change was the same as in that month, with the data showing prices rising for a wide range of goods. Groceries and other items in the food-at-home category were up one percent, much higher than the 0.4 percent increase in December. For the 12-month period, they were up 7.4 percent.

Energy prices rose 0.9 percent on a monthly basis, and climbed 27 percent for the year, though the data did show a monthly decline in gasoline prices.

Used cars, which have seen major price gains as the economy recovered and a semiconductor shortage constrained supplies of new cars, saw prices rise 1.5 percent last month, less than their increase in December. If there was good news to be found in the report, Ian Shepherdson of Pantheon Macroeconomics said it could be found in new car prices, which climbed throughout 2021 as manufacturers slashed production due to shortages of crucial semiconductors.

While they were up 12.2 percent compared to January 2021, the increase compared to December was zero, according to the data. "This is a significant development," Shepherdson said.

"Rising inventory, on the back of increasing chip supply, is both boosting sales and capping prices. We expect new vehicle prices to fall outright over the next few months. Used vehicle prices will fall, too." — AFP



CBK governor receives EU delegation

KUWAIT: The Governor of the Central Bank of Kuwait (CBK), Dr Mohammad Y Al-Hashel, received the European Commissioner for Budget and Administration, Johannes Hahn and his accompanying delegation, in the presence of senior officials from the Ministry of Finance and the Kuwait Investment

Authority. The attendees discussed the most prominent global economic developments and post-COVID-19 prospects for the global economy, amongst other topics of mutual interest.

In a statement, Dr Al-Hashel noted that the meeting discussed the global economic outlook and the robust economic recovery after the pandemic, which had unprecedented economic impacts on all countries, as well as other issues relating to finance and banking. The governor concluded by stressing the importance of exchanging views with policymakers in the major economies to enhance cooperation between the State of Kuwait and the friendly countries in the economic and financial fields.

of judges. In Hungary's case, the commission has raised concerns over public contracts, conflicts of interest and corruption in the spending of EU funds.

'Basic values'

If the ECJ gives its imprimatur, the mechanism should be implemented "immediately", said Manfred Weber, parliamentary chief of the right-wing European People's Party. "We cannot... defend our basic principles when it comes to (Russian and Chinese leaders) Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping and on the other hand not apply them at home," Weber said. "It's not an East-West conflict, or one between left and right, it's a matter of the functioning of the EU and the protection of our most basic values and freedoms."

But the commission must first publish implementation guidelines, and it may be weeks or even months before the mechanism swings into action. Legislative elections set for April 3 in Hungary, where nationalist Prime Minister Viktor Orban will be up against a six-party opposition alliance, may complicate matters. The new mechanism will apply to expenditures from the EU budget and post-Covid recovery plans—those of Poland and Hungary have yet to be approved by the European Commission.

The measure, sought by the European Commission, parliament and several member states including the Netherlands as a means to protect EU finances, was hammered out in 2020.

Sophie Porschlegel, a senior analyst at the European Policy Centre think tank, called it "the most effective instrument available to the European Union so far" to address degradation of the rule of law by populist governments. "But it is extremely specific," she said. "It doesn't recognize the systemic crisis that you have in these countries." — AFP

Stocks recoup some losses after Russia sees 'chance' in Ukraine crisis

WASHINGTON: Global equities were able to claw back at least some of their earlier losses yesterday after Russia suggested there might be a "chance" of reaching an agreement with the West over Ukraine. Stocks on Wall Street opened almost flat, even if they subsequently slipped into the red, and European markets—which had fallen sharply earlier in the session—managed to recoup some of the lost ground by mid-afternoon.

"The tone changed suddenly... following a headline that Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov said there is a chance for agreement on security issues," said Patrick O'Hare at Briefing.com.

In what appeared to be a possible climbdown amid raging tensions over Ukraine, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov told President Vladimir Putin that there was a "chance" of reaching an agreement on security with the West. "The fact that the door has not been shut to further talks... is a good thing," O'Hare said.

"Hence, the negativity seen earlier has dissipated some, yet there is still a major cloud of uncertainty hanging over the market."

Earlier, markets had fallen even more sharply after the United States warned that Russia could attack Ukraine within days. Russia's main stock market was down more than four percent while the ruble fell against the dollar.



HONG KONG: People walk past a sign showing the numbers for the Hang Seng Index before it closes, as Hong Kong shares fell by the most in two weeks yesterday as the fifth wave of COVID-19 infections in the city worsened. — AFP

Russian stocks, ruble claw back losses

MOSCOW: Russia's main stock market and the ruble clawed back some losses yesterday after the foreign minister said there was a "chance" of reaching an agreement on security with the West.

The RTS index was down just over two percent in late afternoon trading, as other world markets also came off their lows. It had dipped more than four percent in earlier trading, as Western countries feared Moscow was preparing for an imminent invasion of Ukraine.

Since the start of the year, the RTS index has shed

But even as that small glimmer of hope appeared in the Ukraine crisis, remarks by a top US Federal Reserve official that the central bank needed to accelerate the pace of interest rate increases to fight inflation threatened to dampen some of the nascent optimism. "Our credibility is on the line here," St. Louis Fed President James Bullard said on CNBC. After consumer prices saw their biggest jump in 40 years in January, he said the Fed should "front load" rate increases to rise by a full point by July.

\$100 oil?

The Ukraine crisis also sent oil prices sharply higher amid a pick-up in crude demand as economies reopen after the coronavirus pandemic and people return to a more normal life. In earlier Asian deals, Brent had climbed as high as \$96.16 and WTI crude to \$94.94 per barrel, stoking renewed concern over elevated inflation.

"Russia is the world's second-largest exporter of crude oil and the largest exporter of natural gas," said Commerzbank analyst Carsten Fritsch. "If Russia invades Ukraine, crude oil and natural gas prices can be expected to surge significantly. In this case, Brent would probably exceed \$100 per barrel."

Europe has for months already suffered from soaring natural gas prices, which have fuelled rocketing domestic energy prices and sparked decades-high inflation.

"In the event of a Russia-Ukraine escalation we could be seeing a significant increase in domestic energy prices since much of Europe is heavily reliant on Russian oil and gas supplies," said XTB analyst Walid Koudmani. "As energy prices have been a key contributor to the recent record levels of inflation, a further increase could spill over into the majority of the economy and potentially hinder an already fragile post-pandemic economic recovery." — AFP

around nine percent. The Russian currency, meanwhile, traded at more than 76 rubles to the dollar. It had passed the 80 rubles to the dollar mark in January, a first since November 2020. The euro stood at more than 86 rubles.

The Russian central bank suspended purchases of foreign currency last month to limit the losses. Highlighting the growing market concerns, the ruble and stock market fell even though oil prices soared past \$95 per barrel, a rise that usually helps shares and the currency of the top crude producing country. During a televised meeting with President Vladimir Putin on Monday, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said "there is always a chance" to reach an agreement with Western countries over the standoff. He told Putin that dialogue with leaders in European capitals and Washington should continue and that "opportunities are far from exhausted" for a resolution.—AFP

Business

Brazil resort town Atafona disappearing into the sea

Once idyllic coastline becomes an underwater graveyard of wrecked structures

SAO JOAO DA BARRA, Brazil: Vultures roam the sand in the Brazilian resort town of Atafona amid the ruins of the latest houses destroyed by the sea, whose relentless rise has turned the local coastline into an apocalyptic landscape. The Atlantic Ocean advances an average of six meters (nearly 20 feet) a year in this small town north of Rio de Janeiro, which has long been prone to extreme erosion—now exacerbated by climate change.

The sea has already submerged more than 500 houses, turning the once idyllic coastline into an underwater graveyard of wrecked structures. One of the next to lose his home will be Joao Waked Peixoto. Walking through the jumbled rubble of what was once his neighbors' house, he looks at what is left: a fragment of a blue-painted room strewn with tattered magazines, a bicycle and other remnants of life.

"When will we have to leave? That's an unknown," he says. "The sea advanced three or four meters in 15 days. Our wall might not last until next week." Waked Peixoto's grandfather built the house as a vacation home, a beachfront getaway with large rooms and a garden. During the coronavirus pandemic, Waked Peixoto and his family moved in full-time.

But it now looks inevitable the house will be swallowed by the sea. "It will be a shame to lose this house, because it holds so many memories of my whole family," he says.

Extreme erosion

Atafona, a town of some 6,000 people, has long suffered from extreme erosion. It is part of the four percent of coastlines worldwide that lose five



SAO JOAO DA BARRA, Brazil: View of the remains of a house at Atafona beach, Atafona neighborhood, in Sao Joao da Barra, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. —AFP photos



SAO JOAO DA BARRA, Brazil: Aerial view of a man collecting debris from a house that fell the day before at Atafona beach, Atafona neighborhood, in Sao Joao da Barra.

meters or more every year. The problem is being exacerbated by global warming, which is causing sea levels to rise and

Bulhoes of Fluminense Federal University. But Atafona has had a "chronic problem" for decades, he says. The Paraiba do Sul river, whose mouth is in Atafona, has shrunk because of mining, agriculture and other activities that drain it upstream.

"In the last 40 years, that has drastically reduced the river's volume, meaning it transports less sand to Atafona," says Bulhoes. With less sand, the town's beaches have stopped regenerating naturally, ceding ground to the sea.

Construction on the coast has only made the problem worse, by stripping away sand dunes and vegetation, the beaches' natural defenses. The

result has been disastrous for the tourism and fishing industries. "Large boats can't come through the river delta anymore... and the money disappeared along with them," says Elialdo Bastos Meirelles, head of a local fishermen's community of some 600 people. "The river is dead."

'Abandoned'

Local authorities have studied several plans to curb the erosion, including building dikes to reduce the force of the ocean's waves and hauling sand from the river delta to the beach.

Bulhoes, the geologist, proposed the latter, which is modeled on similar initiatives in the Netherlands, Spain and the

United States. But the projects exist only on paper so far. The county under-secretary for the environment, Alex Ramos, told AFP no one had yet come up with a definitive solution, and that any plan would have to gain environmental regulators' approval first.

In the meantime, the county has launched a social assistance program that pays 1,200 reais (\$230) a month to more than 40 families who lost their homes to erosion. But critics accuse the local government of a lack of political will. "We keep hearing promises," says Veronica Vieira, head of neighborhood association SOS Atafona. "But this town has been abandoned. It's an apocalypse. It makes you want to cry." —AFP

Sea has already submerged more than 500 houses



Memac Ogilvy appoints first regional Chief Growth Officer for MENA

KUWAIT: Memac Ogilvy has appointed Regional Managing Director, Samer Abboud as its first Regional Chief Growth Officer for MENA. Abboud will expand his remit, while retaining his current responsibilities in Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, and Iraq, where he has overseen growth and success for the past three years. The role was introduced to help drive modern growth across the agency's five business units: Advertising, Brand, & Content; Public Relations; Health; Experience; and Growth & Innovation. Abboud will work closely alongside the agency's Chief Executive, David Fox, its regional leaders, and country MDs to spearhead Go-To-Market and Go-To-Client strategies that deliver sustainable success throughout its 11 offices in nine countries.

The move comes as part of a wider strategy to further enhance its delivery of modern creative solutions for brands' rapidly evolving needs, contributing to the agency's promise of being the region's number one creative partner and platform for cultural, social, and economic growth.

"2021 was a transformational year for Memac Ogilvy, as we rose above the challenges of the pandemic with innovative, effective communications that inspire brands and people to impact the world," said Abboud. "I am honored and privileged to be accepting this role, and I look forward to bringing further diversified talent and clientele to our agency through impactful, transformative, and innovative work that matters."

Memac Ogilvy's Chief Executive, David Fox, said, "Samer's proven ability and track record of forming winning teams in challenging markets, showcasing global best practices, and introducing new technologies and innovative growth strategies for our agency and clients is proof alone that he was built for this role. Having successfully launched our Doha office in 2012, growing it into one of our most significant markets, before transitioning into our regional hub, he has demonstrated time and again his dynamism, agility, and passion for leading brilliant teams to sustained success. That's what this role is all about—delivering that same sustained success for all clients, across all business units, and in all markets. I congratulate Samer on a promotion well-deserved and look forward to sharing more success with him and our network."

Samer Abboud brings more than 20 years of experience into the new role, having worked with numerous global brands and government entities across a range of markets. He absorbs the Regional Chief Growth Officer role following a year in which his region exceeded its 2021 targets, delivering marquee clients and projects in growth markets along the way. In 2021, Memac Ogilvy contributed significantly to Ogilvy's EMEA success, which was the most awarded region in the most awarded network in the world. Moreover, it's largest office, in UAE, ranked number eight in the WARC best agencies in the world.

Burgan Bank successfully establishes sustainable financing framework

KUWAIT: Burgan Bank K.P.S.C. successfully established a sustainable financing framework in accordance with the applicable International Capital Market Association (ICMA) and Loan Market Association (LMA) Principles. The framework will govern the deployment of proceeds from sustainability bond and loan issuances towards financing projects and companies that deliver positive environmental and social impact. The framework also addresses the mechanism via which undeployed sustainability bond and loan proceeds will be managed, and how allocation and impact reporting will take place for the benefit of current and prospective stakeholders.

Majed Essa Al-Ajeel, Chairman of Burgan Bank Group, declared: "This framework is a core component of the bank's broader sustainability agenda. This agenda was developed in response to a rapid, global shift towards sustainability and in light of Kuwait's New Vision 2035, which contributes to the achievement of a number of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals".

Masoud M J Hayat, the Vice Chairman and Group CEO of Burgan Bank Group, stated: "We are proud that Burgan is the first Kuwaiti bank and one of the first regional banks to establish a sustainable financing framework. This initiative demonstrates the bank's upmost commitment to sustainability and positions it to be a key and leading player in the



Majed Essa Al-Ajeel

Masoud M J Hayat

transformation Kuwait and other regional countries to more sustainable economies".

"Strategically, the framework is a conduit for matching international financiers that have deep-rooted sustainability values together with like-minded bank clients looking to undertake sustainability initiatives for the benefit of many communities", added Hayat.

Dalal Yousef Al-Sane, Head of Debt Capital Markets at Burgan Bank, elaborated: "Emerging markets are expected to actively pursue environmentally and socially responsible ways to fund renewable energy, education and healthcare projects, among many other impactful sustainability initiatives. This, coupled with the relative scarcity of sustainability bond and loan issuances from emerging markets, is expected to significantly augment the aggregate value and volume of such issuances in the coming years."

"To facilitate the inflow of sustainability funds, key economic agents in emerging markets are progressively addressing the international investor communities' demand for transparency about sustainability plans, activities and targets.

Consequently, the establishment of sustainable financing frameworks that outline the eligibility criteria for financing sustainability projects and companies is becoming increasingly important," added Al-Sane.

HSBC acted as the sole ESG Structuring Agent for the framework. Burgan Bank obtained a Second-Party Opinion on the framework from a leading international Second-Party Opinion Provider, which assessed the framework's alignment with the applicable ICMA and LMA Principles.



Dalal Yousef Al-Sane

Indian shipbuilder accused of record \$3bn bank fraud

MUMBAI: A shipbuilding company has been accused of defrauding India's largest state-run bank and 27 other financial institutions of over \$3 billion, the country's top investigative agency said, in what would be its biggest-ever bank fraud. The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) — India's federal investigative agency—said in a statement that ABG Shipyard had duped 28 banks out of 228.42 billion rupees (\$3 billion).

The alleged theft by the Gujarat-based shipbuilder surpasses the \$2 billion jeweler Nirav Modi was accused of cheating Indian banks out of in 2018, so far the country's largest known bank fraud.

Private lender ICICI Bank was ABG's biggest victim, losing more than \$900 million, according to a forensic audit by Ernst & Young released at the weekend by the State Bank of India, another of its lenders. State-run IDBI Bank—owned by IPO-bound insurer LIC—was next with nearly \$500 million, the document said, followed by the State Bank of India (SBI) itself—the country's biggest state-owned lender—on almost \$400 million. In all, the Indian taxpayer lost \$2 billion to the scheme, according to the audit report figures.

The CBI said the company diverted and misappropriated funds between 2012 and 2017 — even as its lenders worked to resuscitate the ailing firm and save it from liquidation.

The SBI filed a police complaint against ABG Shipyard, its overseas subsidiary, five company directors and "unknown public servant(s) & private person(s)". The CBI raided 13 locations including company offices and the directors' homes on Saturday, it said, "which led to recovery of incriminating documents", and further investigation is ongoing. ABG Shipyard first defaulted on loan payments in 2013 and was named as one of India's 12 biggest defaulters when the country introduced its first bankruptcy law in 2016. The firm was finally ordered liquidated three years later, but four separate auctions failed to find buyers for its assets and it has been trying to sell them privately for the last two years. —AFP



Al-Muzaini Exchange opens its 121st branch in Al-Surra

KUWAIT: Al-Muzaini Exchange, the leading exchange house in Kuwait celebrated its 80 years with its latest opening of its 121st branch in Al-Surra, Kuwait on Sunday by Hugh Fernandes, the

General Manger and Al-Muzaini management.

Hugh Fernandes said: "Today we are delighted to introduce our latest opening that brings Al-Muzaini near to our customers in Al-Surra. We continually invest in our product to ensure a leading excellence of remittances and we know that customer expects fantastic service when it comes to money transfers and foreign exchanges. Our commitment is delivering a great customer experience every time and it is our number one priority. I would also like to congratulate all the winners and thanking them for their trust," he added.

Business

NBK Economic Report

Kuwait economy continued to recover in Q421 on gains in consumer, oil sectors

Higher oil prices help nine-month fiscal deficit narrow to KD 0.7bn

KUWAIT: Kuwait's economy continued its recovery in the final quarter of 2021. This was primarily driven by robust consumer spending and steadily ramping up oil production amid markedly higher oil prices. The price of international benchmark Brent crude topped seven-year highs of \$86/bbl in late October, before setting a new post-2014 high of \$90 in late January 2022. The gains in oil prices and production have been a boon for Kuwait's public finances: by December, the nine-month fiscal deficit had narrowed to 2.1 percent of pro-rated GDP, significantly down on the previous year. Activity in the projects market, meanwhile, also picked up, while real estate sales, though softer in the last quarter, topped pre-pandemic levels in 2021. The improvement in both oil and non-oil fundamentals could see headline GDP

generally more upbeat atmosphere. The new Cabinet headed once again by His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Sabah also included three new MPs. The hope for 2022 is that executive-legislative relations will be conducted in a spirit of compromise and progress. The first test will likely come before mid-year with a new debt law and draft FY2022/23 budget, which envisages reduced spending. The imperative of economic and fiscal reforms remains great, even while higher oil prices have eased system liquidity constraints.

Oil prices rise to 2014-levels

Oil prices closed out 2021 with gains of more than 50 percent, with the Brent crude settling at \$78/bbl by December's close and on the way to recouping all its Omicron-related losses from November. The surge continued in the New Year, with prices breaking through \$90/bbl by late January and hitting seven-year highs.

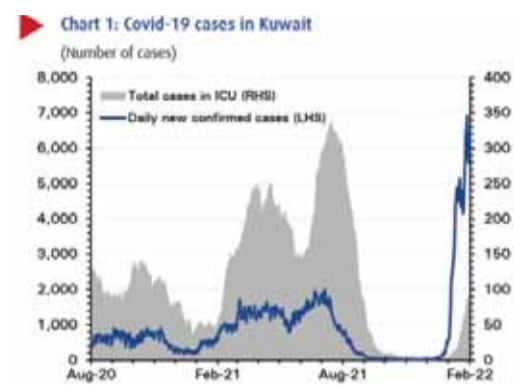
Oil's gains have largely been driven by tighter market fundamentals, as OPEC+ struggles to fully meet its monthly scheduled increase of 400 kb/d: December's output was once again around 600kb/d below overall targeted levels. Concerns have grown that OPEC+ spare capacity, held mostly in a handful of GCC oil producers, would be insufficient to cover global oil demand in the event of supply outages, which have come thick and fast over the last six months, from Nigeria and Libya to Kazakhstan and even the US. Oil has increasingly factored in a higher geopolitical risk premium as well, following Russia's agitations on the Ukrainian border.

Kuwait's crude production rose steadily in 4Q21 at the monthly rate of about 27 kb/d to average 2.5 mb/d in December, and in line with Kuwait's OPEC+ quota. Output is expected to continue rising every month at this rate until May 2022, after which Kuwait's reference baseline increases by 150 kb/d to 2.96 mb/d as per the OPEC+ agreement from July 2021. OPEC+ anticipates that by September of this year all of the 9.7 mb/d or so of crude production that had been withdrawn from the oil market in May 2020 would have been restored.

Inflation rises

Consumer price inflation continued to rise during the fourth quarter, with the headline rate reaching 4.3 percent y/y in December and the core rate (excluding food and housing) somewhat higher at 4.6 percent.

Price gains were generally across the board, but education (+19 percent y/y), food and beverages (+7.2 percent) and clothing and footwear (+5.7 percent) saw the biggest rises.



Having said that food price inflation is well off its peak, while education price gains relate to a one-off increase in tuition fees in September 2021 after schools returned to on-site teaching. September also saw the housing rent index rise for the first time since May 2019. Housing services stood 2.3 percent y/y higher in December. Overall, inflation averaged 3.4 percent in 2021 and could slow to around 3.0 percent in 2022 on expectations of slightly slower consumer spending growth and base effects.

Consumer spending

On consumer spending, KD 2.8 billion was spent (according to Knet figures) in December (+30 percent y/y), bringing total spending in 2021 to KD 28.2 billion, a 37 percent increase on the previous year. Looking ahead to 2022, this high rate of spending growth will be difficult to sustain, so we do envisage some moderation, helped also by 2021's high base level.

Real estate sales eased in 4Q21

The real estate sector put in a strong performance in 2021, with total cumulative sales increasing by 65 percent y/y to a record KD 3.7 billion, easily surpassing pre-pandemic levels. Still, there was some sign of a moderation towards the end of the year. In the final quarter of 2021, the total value of property sales came in lower at KD 816 million (-25 percent q/q; +3 percent y/y), mostly due to fewer residential sector transactions during the quarter (-39 percent q/q; -20 percent y/y). In contrast, investment sector transactions were up in 4Q21 (+5 percent q/q; +20 percent y/y). Commercial sector activity remained well below pre-pandemic levels, though, with sales down 59 percent y/y in 4Q21.

Projects market sees uptick

Project activity picked up significantly in 4Q21, with

the value of awarded contracts jumping to KD 556 million (+279 percent y/y) from KD 152 million in the previous quarter. This was driven by the oil and gas sector, in which the contract for KOC's Jurassic Production Facilities 4 & 5, worth KD 246 million, was awarded. For 2021 as a whole, the total value of awarded contracts increased by 13 percent to KD 1.5 billion. This figure still falls short of the KD 2.4 billion that was originally anticipated for the year and far below the pre-pandemic five-year annual average of KD 3.7 billion, a reflection of government tendering delays, reduced capital spending and pandemic-linked supply chain constraints.

For 2022, MEED Projects forecasts the value of project awards rising to about KD 3.0 billion, most of which are transport-related. With oil prices elevated and the authorities committed to executing their Vision 2035 strategic projects, project activity should accelerate this year, though with pandemic-linked labor and material shortages yet to fully unwind, overall activity may fall short of forecasts.

Government sector

According to data released by the Public Institute for Social Security, the number of employed Kuwaitis rose by 4,733 to 398,615 in 3Q21 (+3.9 percent y/y). The government sector was the destination for 4,708, or 99.5 percent, of these new hires, bringing the total number of Kuwaitis in government to over 308,000 (+5.4 percent y/y), while the oil sector took on 298. The private sector, meanwhile, continued to experience mild attrition, with a small net loss of 278 Kuwaitis quarter-on-quarter to 52,776 (-1,368 y/y, or -2.5 percent y/y) by the end of 3Q21. Kuwait's public finances appear to be on track for a marked improvement in the current fiscal year (FY21/22). Ministry of Finance figures for the first nine months (April to December) show the deficit shrinking to KD 0.7 billion (2.1 percent of pro-rated GDP), which compares favorably with the deficit of KD 5.4 billion recorded over the same period in the previous year.

On the expenditure side, total outlays were up 11.1 percent y/y to KD 13.7 billion over the nine-months, driven by higher spending on salaries (+40 percent y/y), subsidies (+16.7 percent), and goods & services (+14.9 percent). Capex spending increased significantly from last year's especially low base, rising 22 percent y/y to KD 1.1 billion. Only 40 percent of the budget capex allocation was spent, though, and with only three months remaining until the end of the fiscal year, it is unlikely that this component will get close to its full-year budget target.

economic impact of Russia's new Nord Stream 2 pipeline to Germany, which bypasses Ukraine. In 2006 and 2009 disputes, Moscow cut supplies to Ukraine during the winter, sparking knock-on shortages in Europe.

Corruption

Corruption is an endemic problem in Ukraine. In 2019, former comedian Volodymyr Zelensky was elected president after a campaign promising to put an end to corruption. Zelensky previously played a fictional president in a TV show called "Servant of the People", which is also the name of his party. Transparency International puts Ukraine at 122 out of 180 countries in a ranking of public perception of corruption-better than its 2014 rating of 142, but well below its EU neighbors. There is public frustration at what is seen as an out-of-touch, corrupt political elite-which explained the meteoric rise of Zelensky and his party.

Anti-corruption campaigners regularly suffer physical attacks. Activists say they have recorded around 100 such attacks over the past four years.

Chernobyl

The world's worst nuclear accident took place in Ukraine on April 26, 1986, at the Chernobyl nuclear power station. Thirty people were killed in an explosion and many hundreds died of related illnesses, though the exact figure remains disputed. Soviet authorities initially tried to cover up and then play down the disaster. Eventually 350,000 people were evacuated from within a 30-kilometre (19-mile) radius around the plant, an exclusion zone that remains uninhabited, apart from some several dozen elderly residents who returned despite an official ban.

Authorities now say it will only be safe for humans to live there again in 24,000 years. In recent years the site has become a tourist attraction, with the success of HBO's mini-series "Chernobyl" boosting the tourism industry even more.

Borscht and Chicken Kiev

While some in the West think of borscht as synonymous with Russian cuisine, Ukraine claims the beetroot-based soup with cabbage as part of its national heritage dating back to the 14th century. A number of other dishes are contested by Russia and Ukraine, including chicken Kiev. Some versions of its history attribute the invention of the dish to a Russian chef.—AFP



Kuwaitis employed in govt rose 5.4% y/y to 308.2K in 3Q21

growth accelerate to 7 percent in 2022 from around 1.0 percent (estimated) in 2021. Meanwhile, inflation has risen, but remains lower than in some major international economies including the US.

Like other countries, Kuwait has also had to deal with the Omicron virus variant, present since December. Up until then, Kuwait had enjoyed several months of minimal case numbers as the pandemic appeared well contained helped by a successful vaccination drive. However, Omicron-dominated case numbers had surged to a high of 6,913 on 28 January. Hospital admissions have also increased and the government was compelled to reintroduce social distancing restrictions and reduce at-office workforces. Encouragingly, Omicron, appears far less severe in its health outcomes, helped also in part by the population's vaccine-primed immunity. Total patients in intensive care units (ICU) have increased to a current peak of 90, but this is far below the 341 of mid-July 2021 at the peak of the Delta variant period.

In the political sphere, the fourth quarter of 2021 was also notable for the conclusion of the Amiri-sponsored National Dialogue, which led to amnesty for several dissidents, the return of the National Assembly following summer recess, moves to form a new government and a



PHNOM PENH, Cambodia: This photo taken on February 4, 2022 shows people using their smartphones in a park in Phnom Penh. Cambodia is powering up its new national internet gateway, a move activists say will allow the government to further silence the country's embattled opposition voices.—AFP

Cambodia steps up surveillance with new internet gateway

PHNOM PENH: Cambodia is powering up its new National Internet Gateway, a move activists say will allow the government to further silence the country's embattled opposition voices. UN rights experts warn the gateway, which will funnel all web traffic through a state-controlled entry point from February 16, will have a "devastating" effect on privacy and free speech.

It is the latest move by authoritarian ruler Hun Sen to clamp down on dissent in a country that has arrested dozens for online posts in recent years, critics say. Hip-hop artist Kea Sokun, whose lyrics about injustice and corruption have struck a chord with Cambodia's disaffected youth, was among those jailed.

As his music clocked up millions of views on YouTube, plainclothes police came knocking in September 2020. "They kept asking who was backing me?" Kea Sokun told AFP.

He was arrested and convicted of incitement, spending a year behind bars, and now fears the new gateway will lead to more people suffering the same fate. "It will be difficult to freely express opinions," he said. "They arrested me in order to intimidate others." Last year, an autistic teenager, the son of a jailed opposition figure, was sentenced to eight months in jail for Telegram messages deemed insulting to the government.

Clampdown on dissent

Internet gateways are the points on a network where a country connects to the worldwide web. Once fully operational, Cambodia's new National Internet Gateway will channel all traffic through a single entry point controlled by the government. Internet service providers will be ordered to block websites and connections that adversely affect "national revenue, safety, social order, morality, culture, traditions and customs". UN rights experts warned earlier this month that the sweeping new powers will further shrink what is left of

the space for dissent in Cambodia, where Hun Sen has buttressed his 37-year rule by steadily rolling back democratic freedoms.

The Cambodian Center for Human Rights (CCHR) says the new gateway will give the former Khmer Rouge cadre yet more ways to silence opposing voices. In 2021, at least 39 Cambodians were arrested, jailed or had arrest warrants issued against them for online posts that fell foul of government censors, according to the CCHR. Elections are expected next year, and the CCHR says the completion of the gateway now could allow the government to block dissenting views online in the run-up to polls.

Cybersecurity expert Matt Warren, from Australia's RMIT University, said there could be attempts to silence high-profile opposition figures living in exile from weighing into the domestic political debate ahead of the 2023 polls. "Will Cambodians outside the country be able to take part in the social dialogue during the election?" Warren said.

Thailand's then-ruling junta mulled introducing a single internet gateway in 2015 but backed down in the face of opposition from business. Aside from the privacy and rights concerns, industry figures warn that funneling all traffic through a single point leaves the country highly vulnerable to being cut off—either due to a technical fault or a cyber attack.

'Balkanization'

Government spokesman Phay Siphon insisted the internet gateway is needed to crack down on cyber-crime, maintain national security and collect revenue. Cambodians needed to understand that freedom of "expression comes with responsibilities" and that "insulting or manipulating information can affect national security or individuals' reputations," he said. But the new gateway appears to be taking Cambodia down a path beaten by China, which maintains even more sophisticated digital tools to monitor and censor the internet for its citizens, keeping the online world behind a "Great Firewall" and blocking major Western platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube.

"It's the Balkanisation of the internet. You've got the internet in China, you've got the Russian internet, you've got the internet in Saudi Arabia, where they are isolated and monitored," Warren told AFP.—AFP

From borscht to Chernobyl: Five things to know about Ukraine

KIEV: Russia has massed tens of thousands of troops around Ukraine's borders, with the US warning that Moscow could attack its neighbour at any moment and Western leaders scrambling to prevent it.

Here are five facts about the country that in the last decade has been shaken by uprisings, war and loss of territory.

Linked past

Ukraine's history is closely intertwined with that of its giant eastern neighbour Russia, and the word "Ukraine" translates literally to "on the edge". Both countries trace their origins to the ancient state of Kievan Rus, which once stretched from the Black Sea to the Baltic Sea.

Much of Ukraine was part of the Tsarist Russian Empire, though western regions belonged at different times to neighbors, including the Austro-Hungarian Empire. It later became part of the USSR and in the early decades of Soviet rule suffered from a devastating famine known as the Holodomor caused by Joseph Stalin's agricultural policies.

Tensions between Kyiv and Moscow have flared since the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991. After a pro-Western popular uprising led to the ouster of Russian-backed president Viktor Yanukovich in 2014, Moscow annexed the Crimean peninsula and supported separatists in the east of Ukraine.

The conflict has so far cost more than 14,000 lives.

Economic trouble

With the start of the 2014 crisis, the Ukrainian economy went into freefall. That year, GDP dropped by more than six percent, and the following year it fell almost 10 percent with inflation soaring to 40 percent. The economy has since shown signs of recovery but the country of around 40 million people remains one of the poorest in Europe. An average monthly salary is around 500 euros (\$567). Ukraine relies heavily on transit fees for Russian gas to Europe and Kyiv has voiced concern over the



Palestinian man practices rug weaving, despite disability



GAZA: Despite his disability and quadriplegic paralysis, Palestine's Moans Abu Shamala (57 years) practices rug weaving using a small stick because he is unable to move his fingers. Palestinian Red Crescent provides Abu Shamala with all he needs, as part of the association's social services. — KUNA photos

Lohan pokes fun at her past in Super Bowl ad

Lindsay Lohan poked fun at herself during a 30-second Super Bowl advert. The 35-year-old actress returned to TV screens during the Super Bowl broadcast, when she appeared in a commercial for Planet Fitness that joked about her party-loving lifestyle of the past. During the ad, a group of gym-goers ask: "What's gotten into Lindsay?" Then, it's claimed that the 'Mean Girls' star has "never been sharp", as she's seen beating basketball legend Dennis Rodman at a game of 'Jeopardy!'. Lindsay is also seen getting a regular night of sleep, which prompts a group of paparazzi to burst into tears, and is then seen turning her "DUIs to DIYs".



However, it subsequently becomes clear that Lindsay - whose career was overshadowed by personal struggles and legal troubles for a number of years - has managed to transform herself by going to the gym. William Shatner - who played Captain James T. Kirk in the 'Star Trek' franchise - says: "Maybe it's not what's gotten into Lindsay - but what Lindsay has gotten into." Elsewhere, a star-studded list of celebrities featured in a new advert for Uber Eats.

Gwyneth Paltrow made fun of her Goop brand during the Super Bowl ad, as she took a bite out of one of her scented candles. The Hollywood star received a This Tastes Like My Vagina candle as part of her Uber Eats order. As she nibbled on the wax, she said: "This candle tastes funny. Not bad, but funny."

The advert also featured Jennifer Coolidge, who asked herself whether she could eat aluminum foil after it was delivered to her house. She says: "Because it was delivered by Uber Eats, does that mean I can eat it?" Later, comedy star Trevor Noah is seen trying to eat a light bulb. He says: "Thanks to Uber Eats, we don't know even know what food is anymore!" — Bang Showbiz

DREW BARRYMORE NEEDS 'COURAGE' TO LIVE 'NORMALLY'



Friends star LeBlanc splits from girlfriend of six years

Matt LeBlanc has split up from his girlfriend Aurora Mulligan. The 'Friends' actor and the 36-year-old TV producer are said to have called it quits after almost six years together, with an insider suggesting that the pair had decided to strike a "clean break". The pair met after Matt began presenting the British motoring program 'Top Gear' in 2016 and subsequently became a couple after working together on the series. The 54-year-old star left the show in 2019 and moved to Los Angeles and the pair's work commitments are said to have taken a toll on the relationship.

A source told The Sun newspaper:



Drew Barrymore thinks it "takes a lot of courage" to live "normally" again. The 46-year-old actress admitted she is still nervous to go out amidst the coronavirus pandemic and suggested she feels particularly wary about being in crowds when people are not wearing face coverings. Speaking at Christian Siriano's New York Fashion Week show over the weekend, she told E! News: "This is rare for me to be out. I'm seeing everybody mask-less. I know everyone's... You know... "If anyone else has mental gymnastics they need to do to be social, I empathize. It takes a lot of

"Matt and Aurora's relationship has run its course. It's all over. "It's a huge shame and Matt has taken the news particularly hard, as anyone would.

"He and Aurora fell for each other on 'Top Gear' and although there was a pretty big age gap they were a really great match. "But when he announced he was leaving 'Top Gear' and took on other work, it was hard for them. He's mainly based out of LA and was travelling a lot while Aurora was working in the UK." Matt is most famous for his role as Joey Tribbiani in the iconic sitcom 'Friends' but previously revealed that he wouldn't want to reprise the role as he feels he is too old for it. He said: "I don't think anybody wants to see Joey at his colonoscopy!"

Matt can understand why fans of the show - which aired from 1994 to 2004 - are desperate for it to return but he feels that the humor belonged to a particular period in the characters' lives. He shared: "I understand that people really want to see that reunion. But that show was about a finite period in these six characters lives, between 20 and 30." — Bang Showbiz

courage to start living normally."

The '50 First Dates' star decided to go to the show because her "new friend" Christian has been very encouraging in persuading her to get out of the house. She said: "He has actually taken the time to build a friendship with me. I'm so honored because I have only old and few friends, and Christian is my new friend where he says, 'Let me take you out, get out of the house, come with me, let's do this.' "You need someone to encourage you, because I don't leave the house!" Drew turns 47 later this month and just wants to mark the occasion in a low-key

way with her daughters Olive, nine, and seven-year-old Frankie, who she has with ex-husband Will Kopelman.

She said: "I just told the girls I just want to have dinner with them. That's all I care about. "I don't care if it's on the couch watching Netflix with takeout food, or maybe we dare to go to a restaurant." The 'Blended' actress did her own make-up for the fashion show using her Flower Beauty brand. She said: "I did what everyone can see. You can put your own makeup on at home!" — Bang Showbiz

'Ghostbusters' director Ivan Reitman dies aged 75

Ivan Reitman, the acclaimed producer and director of comedies such as "Ghostbusters" and "Animal House" which influenced a generation of moviegoers, has died aged 75, with Sony Pictures paying tribute yesterday to "a great talent and even finer man." "Tonight, the lady with the torch weeps, as do all of us at Columbia, and film lovers around the world. Ivan Reitman was an inseparable part of this studio's legacy, but more than that he was a friend," Sony Pictures CEO Tom Rothman said in a statement posted to the studio's Twitter account.

"A great talent and an even finer man; he will be dearly missed. We send his family all our condolences." AFP has reached out to Reitman's family for further information. The news ignited a wave of tributes, including from some of the stars of 1984's "Ghostbusters," one of the most popular comedies ever made. "I am deeply saddened by the loss of Ivan Reitman. Truly a great man and filmmaker who I had honor and privilege of knowing and working with. Deepest condolences to Jason and the entire family," tweeted actor Ernie Hudson, who played Ghostbuster Winston Zeddemore in the original and its 1989 sequel, and had a cameo in the 2016 reboot. He was referring to Reitman's son Jason, himself a popular director of films such as "Juno" and "Ghostbusters: Afterlife."

"I'm in absolute shock," tweeted Paul Feig, who directed the 2016 reboot with an all-female cast of Ghostbusters. "I had the honor of working so closely with Ivan and it was always such a learning experience. He directed some of my favorite comedies of all time. All of us in comedy owe him so very much. Thank you for everything, Ivan. Truly." "Ivan Reitman was old school in the best way, and kind. I loved working with

him. It's sad he's gone, it makes me feel older and like my childhood movies are more faraway than ever. RIP," tweeted actress Mindy Kaling. In his decades-long career Reitman produced and directed films which helped establish major comedic stars such as Bill Murray, who as well as starring in "Ghostbusters" also starred in Reitman hits "Meatballs" and "Stripes."



Reitman produced the 1978 hit "National Lampoon's Animal House," which became one of the most beloved and chaotic depictions of the system of fraternities and sororities in US colleges. But it was "Ghostbusters" which launched a Hollywood dynasty, with the story of four men dressed in a version of firefighting gear tackling marshmallow monsters and slimy green spirits in a bid to save New York from a supernatural takeover spawning decades of sequels and reboots.

The iconic outfits worn by its four stars remain one of the most popular and recognizable Halloween costumes to this day. Reitman was born in Komarno, in what is now Slovakia, on October 27, 1946. His Jewish parents survived the Nazis but, four years after his birth, fled Czechoslovakia to escape communism. —AFP

Lifestyle | Features



French actor Vincent Lindon (left), French actress Juliette Binoche (center) and French director and screenwriter Claire Denis pose during the photo call for the film 'Avec amour et acharnement' (Both Sides of the Blade) by French director Claire Denis shown in competition during the 72nd Berlinale Film Festival in Berlin.



(From left to right) French actor Nicolas Bridet, Austrian actress Sophie Rois, German director and screenwriter Nicolette Krebsitz, German actor Milan Hems and German producer Janine Jackowski pose after a press conference for the film 'A E I O U - Das schnelle Alphabet der Liebe' (A E I O U - The Quick Alphabet of Love) by German director Nicolette Krebsitz shown in competition of the 72nd Berlinale Film Festival in Berlin. — AFP photos

LOVE IN THE TIME OF CORONA IN FOCUS AT BERLIN FEST

The Berlin film festival has delivered on a promise of "crazy, intoxicating" love stories at its 72nd edition, with diverse movies exploring infatuation and loss around the pandemic-racked world. In time for Valentine's Day, Europe's first major cinema showcase of the year has rolled out a program telling the kind of intimate tales perfectly suited to lockdown-era filmmaking. Acclaimed French director Claire Denis unveiled "Both Sides of the Blade", a powerful drama about mature romance and sudden betrayal starring Juliette Binoche and Vincent Lindon of last year's Cannes winner "Titane". The two play Sara and Jean, a Parisian couple who become ensnared in a love triangle when her former boyfriend resurfaces as Jean's new business partner.

Although Sara and Jean still share deep love and an active life, she starts to find his presence suffocating-not least while cooped up due to COVID-and begins meeting her ex for secret trysts. "When you are yourself torn between a past and a present or between two loves, this impossibility to go back once desire is set in motion-that's a complex situation," Binoche told AFP. "There is no right or wrong solution... you just have to get through it as dignified and honestly as possible."

Shedding 'shame'

Younger men awakening passion in



British actress Emma Thompson (right) and Irish actor Daryl McCormack pose during the photo call for the film 'Good Luck to You, Leo Grande' by Australian director Sophie Hyde, presented in the Berlinale Special Gala section, during the 72nd Berlinale Film Festival in Berlin.

older women takes centre stage in "A E I O U - A Quick Alphabet of Love", starring Austrian theatre star Sophie Rois, and "Good Luck to You, Leo Grande" with Emma Thompson. While Rois tutors a purse snatcher who ends up seducing her during diction lessons in her flat, Thompson's widow character seeks instruction from a charming sex worker. The British actress said the comedy, which was rapturously received at its live premiere after screening online at Sundance last month, felt radical because it showed an ageing woman shedding "shame" about her body.

In one of the festival's highlight performances, French actor Denis Menochet in "Peter von Kant" plays a successful director waylaid by his passion for a capricious young actor. Director Francois Ozon said the performance worked because Menochet showed the humbling nature of love. "I was trying to bring out the suffering of Peter von Kant-he's not very lovable until you see him suffering."

'Against the odds'

Tragic loss has also preoccupied many of the world's directors during the pandemic, with the tender Chinese dra-

ma "Return to Dust" and "A Piece of Sky", set in majestic Alpine vistas, moving Berlin audiences to tears. Chinese director Li Ruijun, 39, tells the tale of Cao, the timid fourth son of a rural family, and the disabled Ma, who are cast off by their clans and pushed into an arranged marriage. Despite their isolation and grinding poverty in remote Gansu Province, an unexpected love blossoms between them.

Li, unable to attend the festival due to coronavirus restrictions, wrote that he wanted to tell a story of "eternal love, against the odds". "A Piece of Sky" shows a young waitress and a farmhand who stay devoted to each other even as his personality changes drastically due to a brain tumor. Their battle with illness plays out against the backdrop of stunning mountain landscapes, something Swiss director Michael Koch said reminded people that much in life is beyond their control. "From time to time nature reveals its destructive potential and anyone who grows up in the mountains has an awareness that in the end nature is always stronger than you," Koch, also 39, told AFP. He said love, too, had a way of reminding people of their powerlessness. "Love is bigger than you and if you have it, it's so strong that doesn't matter what happens, it will remain." — AFP

Olympic mascot cakes land Chinese bakers in trouble

Chinese bakers looking to cash in on the popularity of the Beijing Winter Olympics mascot have ended up on thin ice after market authorities cracked down on sweet treats shaped like the cartoon panda. Officials cited licensing concerns for their swoops on the gastronomic homages to Bing Dwen Dwen, and one case of copyright violations-for producing pirated mascot dolls-has already landed a person in jail.



A figure of the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympic Games mascot Bing Dwen Dwen is seen during the venue ceremony for the men's speed skating 10000m event.

Depicted in a full-body ice suit, Bing Dwen Dwen has sparked long queues at Olympic souvenir shops-with many willing to fork out more than the official price to get their hands on one amid shortages. While its name officially means "ice child" in Mandarin, it is more colloquially translated as "ice chubster". It is often seen

alongside Shuey Rhon Rhon, a lantern mascot for the Winter Paralympic Games.

Authorities have said they are investigating several businesses using the Olympics symbols without permission. One bakery in the southeastern province of Jiangsu was reported for advertising cakes shaped like the rotund panda, and lacked "relevant authorization", local officials said Friday. "A six-inch cake in the shape of Bing Dwen Dwen was found at the scene... the parties made three such cakes, worth 600 yuan (\$94)," said the market supervision administration in Nantong city.

State media said authorities had received a "tip-off" about the alleged crime. A dessert store in the eastern Shantou city was also stopped from selling sweet treats shaped like the mascot and bearing the Olympic rings, another official notice said. "Intellectual property rights such as patents and copyrights of Bing Dwen Dwen are owned by the Beijing Winter Olympics Organizing Committee," the notice stressed.

Offending bakeries were also reported in other parts of the country, said state media. With the Lunar New Year coinciding with the start of the Olympics and affecting production of toys in the shape of the mascot, a supply shortage in recent weeks has seen scalpers selling the product for 10 times its original price of 200 yuan (\$30), according to reports.

Spectators are largely banned from the Games due to COVID-19 restrictions, and owning the mascot may be the closest most people get to the Beijing Winter Olympics. Officials said Monday that a person had been jailed for a year and fined 40,000 yuan (\$6,300) for making and selling pirated dolls of Bing Dwen Dwen, in what they said was China's "first criminal case" for infringing the copyright of the Beijing Winter Olympics mascot. — AFP



This photo shows employees working on stuffed toys of 2022 Beijing Winter Olympic Games mascot Bing Dwen Dwen at a factory in Jinjiang in China's eastern Fujian province. — AFP photos



US rapper Dr Dre (left) and US rapper Snoop Dogg perform during the halftime show of Super Bowl LVI between the Los Angeles Rams and the Cincinnati Bengals at SoFi Stadium in Inglewood, California.

California Love: Dre, Snoop lead Super Bowl set that sees Eminem take knee

For the first time hip-hop headlined the Super Bowl halftime show, starring Dr Dre and proteges Snoop Dogg, Mary J. Blige and Eminem, who invoked a racial justice protest by taking a knee on music's biggest stage. Buzz had been building for weeks over the '90s lovefest that also included Kendrick Lamar and 50 Cent onstage midway through Sunday's game, which had the Los Angeles Rams taking on the Cincinnati Bengals. The show saw the field transformed into a giant map of Los Angeles, which is hosting the National Football League championship for the first time in nearly three decades.

Dre and Snoop opened the ode to gangsta rap with their hit "The Next Episode," before paying tribute to Tupac Shakur with "California Love." East Coast made a cameo as 50 Cent dropped down from the ceiling while launching into the early 2000s favorite "In Da Club," before Blige kicked the show up a notch with her superhit "Family Affair." Donning all white and sequins, R&B star Blige then sang "No More Drama," ahead of Lamar's performance of "Alright" in front of the stage, surrounded by men donning all black complete with "Dre Day" sashes.

Detroit rapper Eminem emerged with his Grammy and Oscar-winning smash "Lose Yourself"-before taking a knee, a move that invoked the social justice protest by former NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick and set social media alight. Kaepernick began kneeling during national anthems in 2016 to protest police bru-

ality and racial injustice, triggering controversy for years. Eminem, wearing a black hoodie, held his head in his hand and knelt, in a move that appeared to reference Kaepernick after performing his smash during music's most visible gig.

Legendary music mogul Dre then sat at the piano to drop the iconic opening notes of his hit "Still D.R.E.," before all of the performers joined together to close the rap spectacular. Anderson .Paak also notably made a cameo on drums. It was the third straight Super Bowl performance produced by Jay-Z's Roc Nation, which was enlisted by the NFL to "amplify the league's social justice efforts."

The first show Roc Nation produced was a celebrated performance from Jennifer Lopez and Shakira, with the Weeknd putting on an impressive pandemic-era show last year. The 2022 edition comes three years after the NFL faced sharp criticism for choosing pop-rock band Maroon 5 to lead the coveted gig-whose audience usually tops 100 million in Atlanta, long seen as America's hip-hop capital.

Prior to Sunday's kickoff, country star Mickey Guyton, donning a sleek royal blue gown and backed by a gospel choir, delivered a stirring rendition of the US national anthem. The pre-game show also featured a performance from Jhene Aiko, who sang "America the Beautiful" accompanied by a harpist. — AFP

Kanye West documentary-maker 'disappointed' by Netflix editing row

The director of Netflix's new Kanye West documentary was left disappointed-though not surprised-by the controversial rapper's last-minute demand to recut a movie decades in the making, he told AFP. Clarence "Coodie" Simmons started following his friend West with a camera in 2001, curious to see how far the ambitious young music producer from Chicago could go, and eventually amassed 320 hours of behind-the-scenes footage of his journey to international stardom.

The first part of seven-hour movie "jeen-yuhs: A Kanye Trilogy" will be released by Netflix on Wednesday, but the famously perfectionist West last month took to Instagram demanding "final edit and approval" on the project, in order to "be in charge of my own image." "I told Kanye he had to have 100 percent trust in this film ... he said he trusted," said Simmons.



"So when I seen that Instagram, I was a bit disappointed." As recently as last week, West-now known as Ye-continued to issue demands, such as having fellow rap superstar Drake take over the narration. Ironically, Simmons had gone to significant lengths to ensure West was happy, scrapping plans to first release the footage back in 2005 because West "said he wasn't ready for the world to see the real him."

The pair later grew apart and Simmons had little access to West for the next decade or so. But in a seeming reconciliation, West showed up at a Hollywood screening of the documentary Friday, hugging Simmons and telling the audience that "people try to cancel us and we all run away from each other and scatter or we be not talking to each other, not communicating."

'Put the camera down'

The documentary touches on West's mental health issues, including a bi-polar disorder, which led to him being hospitalized in 2016 and came under renewed spotlight during his bizarre run for the US presidency in 2020. Filming a meeting two years ago in which West ranted to real estate investors that he had taken bi-polar medication to "have a normal conversation and turn alien into English," Simmons felt concerned enough by his friend and subject's behavior to turn off the camera.

"It was my first time ever capturing Kanye in that light," Simmons, a former comedian and television host, said. "I just felt like I had to put the camera down so I could listen and be there for him as a brother and not as a director, so that's the reason I put it down." "It happened a couple other times where I'm like, 'Okay, let me pay attention.'"

At Friday's screening, West said he had made "what y'all might think are mistakes in public" to show the world that limits imposed on Black people are "just a smokescreen." "We on labels we don't own, play for basketball teams we don't own. The time is now," he said.

'Carefree' Kanye

The controversy surrounding West's demands for creative control over "jeen-yuhs" has undoubtedly drawn more publicity to the documentary. But Simmons and co-director Chike Ozah hope that showing West's more vulnerable and sometimes embarrassing moments during his rise to greatness will help the world reassess a figure known for frequent arrogant and egocentric outbursts.

For instance, Ozah highlights an early scene at diner chain Denny's, where West is celebrating the removal of wires from his jaw following a serious car crash. "He's only been taking liquid foods so he's dropped some considerable amounts of weight, he's got a little six pack," recalled Ozah. "It's a moment you share with Kanye, where he even takes the camera from Coodie and starts filming Coodie, and he just seems so care-free and so happy." — AFP

Sports

Marseille grab late win as French race for heats up

Strasbourg beat Angers, boost Champions League ambitions

News in brief



Al-Arabi win Super Cup

KUWAIT: Sulaiman Abdulhafour saved two spot kicks and scored another as Al-Arabi SC clinched the Super Cup for the third time in a 4-3 penalty shootout win over Kuwait SC after a 1-1 draw on Sunday. Kuwait Premier League champions Al-Arabi controlled much of the proceedings in the first half as Ali Khalaf slotted in the opener 14 minutes into the match, postponed due to COVID cases declared within the ranks of both sides. Kuwait, who became contenders for the title after winning the Amir's Cup, leveled five minutes into the second half through Moroccan midfielder Mehdi Berrahma's spot kick, which took the game to a penalty shootout. The most successful sides in the single-match cup competition, which began in 2008, are Qadsia (six titles), followed by Kuwait (five titles) and Al-Arabi (three titles). —KUNA

NFL rusher Peterson arrested

LOS ANGELES: National Football League running back Adrian Peterson was arrested at Los Angeles International Airport on Sunday in connection with an alleged domestic incident that led to a departing flight having to return to the boarding gate. Police said Peterson, the 2012 NFL Most Valuable Player, was arrested and charged with corporal injury of a spouse. Bail was set at \$50,000. Police were called after a man and woman on board the departing plane got into an altercation on a flight headed for Houston, Texas. Airport officials said there was a "verbal and physical altercation between a male suspect and a female victim" which led to police taking the male into custody. The flight was able to return to the gate and the woman and the other passengers later departed for Texas. Peterson split the 2021 season, his 15th NFL campaign, with the Tennessee Titans and Seattle Seahawks, playing in four games and totaling 98 yards and two touchdowns. —AFP

Fox wins Ras Al Khaimah Classic

RAS AL-KHAIMAH: New Zealand's Ryan Fox claimed his second European Tour victory on Sunday, winning the Ras Al Khaimah Classic by five shots, and then turned his attentions to some dad time with his infant daughter. Fox's wire-to-wire victory, thanks to a 22-under total of 266, follows his maiden title at the 2019 World Super 6 Perth. England's Ross Fisher finished in second on Sunday, a shot clear of Spaniard Pablo Larrazabal, South Africa's Zander Lombard and Hurlly Long of Germany. Fox's daughter Isabel was born in December 2020 and the 35-year-old could not wait to get home and see her - after spending ten days in hotel quarantine due to the COVID-19 pandemic. "I was definitely thinking about the family coming down the last couple of holes, it's pretty big for them," Fox told the European Tour site. "They've got to come over to Europe every year and it's a little bit harder with a little one now and this win makes it a little bit easier for them to do that." —AFP

Opelka captures Dallas Open title

WASHINGTON: Reilly Opelka captured his third career ATP title on Sunday, defeating fellow American Jenson Brooksby 7-6 (7/5), 7-6 (7/3) to win the Dallas Open final. World number 23 Opelka blasted 16 aces past Brooksby in taking the crown. Opelka's prior ATP titles came at the 2019 New York Open and 2020 Delray Beach Open. He lost his only other final last August at the Canadian Open. Brooksby, a 21-year-old Californian ranked a career high 54th, lost his only prior career ATP final last July on Newport grass. Opelka, 24, faced only one break point in the tournament. Brooksby saved three set points in the first tiebreaker but then sent a cross-court backhand wide to surrender the opening set after 52 minutes. In the second set, Brooksby overcame three double faults and four break points to hold in the 11th game for a 6-5 lead, denying breaks on three service winners and a forehand winner. —AFP

Scheffler wins Phoenix Open

LOS ANGELES: Scottie Scheffler drained a 26-foot birdie putt at the third playoff hole to win his first US PGA Tour title at the Phoenix Open on Sunday ahead of world No. 4 Patrick Cantlay. Scheffler had looked to be in trouble when he found a fairway bunker off the tee at the final playoff hole, while Cantlay was in the fairway. But he blasted out to the green and rolled in his putt, watching as Cantlay was unable to get his own birdie effort to drop. "I've had a few putts on this green now. I started to have it figured out pretty good," Scheffler said. "It's kind of a tricky hole location. This one we got a good read on it and it chased down nicely." Scheffler had birdied four of the last six holes at TPC Scottsdale to roar into contention with a four-under par 67. —AFP

PARIS: Arkadiusz Milik came off the bench to score the winner as Marseille edged Metz 2-1 to consolidate their second place in Ligue 1 on Sunday. Paris Saint-Germain remain runaway leaders on 59 points after their 1-0 win over Rennes on Friday. Marseille have 46 points and their south coast rivals Nice are third on 42 after a 2-0 defeat at Lyon on Saturday.

With 14 games still to play in Ligue 1 Marseille have just a four-point cushion over Nice in the race for the second automatic Champions League spot. Marseille opened the scoring at northern side Metz through Congolese forward Cedric Bakumba on 26 minutes before Cameroon's Habib Maiga equalized on 52. But when Milik replaced Bakumba it took the Poland striker just six minutes to bang home a rebound and clinch three valuable points.

Milik scored a hat-trick in a 5-2 win at Angers last weekend, but started from the bench Sunday. "We are happy with the four points lead on Nice, but there's a long way to go," warned Milik. "I enjoyed scoring, but the win was what counted." Earlier Sunday, Kevin Gameiro scored the only goal as Strasbourg beat Angers 1-0 to boost their Champions League ambitions while Monaco missed another chance to keep touch with the leaders after a goalless draw at home against lowly Lorient.

Victory at Angers propelled Julien Stephan's Strasbourg just one point behind third-placed Nice. Gameiro's superb volley after 11 minutes was enough to seal the three points giving the former Paris Saint-Germain, Sevilla and Valencia striker his fifth goal in four league matches. Monaco stalled at their Louis-II Stadium, a week after losing 2-0 to Lyon, with this latest setback keeping Philippe Clement's team in sixth, sandwiched between Rennes and Lyon, on the same number of points.

The Principality side could have moved up to fifth with a win against Lorient who arrived on a run of seven consecutive away defeats in the league. "We lacked efficiency in front of the goal," said Clement. "It's always difficult to play against Lorient, who have proven themselves against Lens and PSG in recent weeks. "The standings? It's always the same! We have to stay

Cricket 'fairy tale': Philippines amateurs chase W Cup berth

MANILA: The Philippines is better known for boxers than batsmen and its cricket team has not played for three years, but the side of amateurs hope to make their mark in T20 World Cup qualifiers. As the lowest-ranked side in the eight-team qualifying tournament taking place this month in Oman featuring the likes of Nepal, Ireland and United Arab Emirates, few are more surprised than the Philippines to be pulling on the pads at global level. "It's like a fairy tale," said skipper Jonathan Hill, a high-school teacher in Jervis Bay in Australia's New South Wales, where he plays club cricket.

The Philippines team is made up of mainly Indian expats in Manila and Filipino-Australians based in Australia who take time off from their day jobs to train and play. Preparations for the biggest fixtures of their lives have been "far from ideal", Hill said. The last time the Philippines played a match was three years ago - a victorious, rain-soaked five overs against Vanuatu in a regional qualifying tournament in Port Moresby which unexpectedly secured their berth in Oman.

After the COVID pandemic hit and competitions were cancelled, players were left mostly to train alone as lockdowns and border closures made it impossible to gather in one place. When the 14-strong squad assembles in Oman this week for Friday's opening clash against Canada, it will be the first time some of

How IPL teams stack up after auction

NEW DELHI: Ten Indian Premier League teams went all out to secure foreign and home players in this weekend's auction to reset their squads for the 15th edition of the big-bucks Twenty20 tournament. AFP Sport looks at the teams including two new additions in Lucknow Super Giants and Gujarat Titans ahead of the start of the world's richest cricket league in late March.

Mumbai Indians

Mumbai, led by India white-ball captain Rohit Sharma, went big to buy back wicketkeeper-batsman Ishan Kishan (\$2 million) and added England's Tymal Mills to their pace attack led by Jasprit Bumrah. They also picked up Jofra Archer for \$1.06 million but the England fast bowler is unlikely to play this season due to his elbow injury. However, the team's director of cricket operations Zaheer Khan said the prospect of watching Archer and Bumrah bowl in tandem "will be worth the wait".

Chennai Super Kings

The defending champions, led by warhorse Mahendra Singh Dhoni, 40, got most of their old guard back including pace bowlers Dwayne Bravo and Deepak Chahar for \$1.85 million. But Chennai failed to buy South African Faf du Plessis although New Zealand batsman Devon Conway is seen as a worthy replacement at the top of the order. Kiwi quick Adam Milne comes in as a pace bowling replacement for Australia's Josh Hazlewood who went to Royal Challengers Bangalore.



METZ: Marseille's Brazilian midfielder Gerson (2nd right) challenges Metz's French midfielder Vincent Pajot during the French L1 football match between Metz and Olympique de Marseille on February 13, 2022. —AFP

focused on ourselves and do the maximum to win."

Lorient remain just above the relegation zone, equal on points with Saint-Etienne, who moved off the bottom of the table with a 2-1 win over fellow strugglers Clermont, being replaced by Bordeaux who lost 3-2 at Lens. "We bent, but we did not break," rejoiced Lorient coach Christophe Pelissier. Nantes pocketed a 1-0 victory over Reims, whose central defender and captain Yunis Abdelhamid was sent off in the first quarter of an hour for a nasty tackle on Fabio.

Moses Simon slotted in the resulting free kick,

the players have met. "We're definitely heavy underdogs," said Hill. "But at the end of the day cricket is still a game. "It's bat versus ball and the thing I love most about it is that it's not just skill level or fitness level or even intellect-so much of cricket is about heart and that's something we've always played with."

Fundraising appeal

The top two teams in Oman will book spots in the T20 World Cup in Australia later this year. "We will try our best," said 42-year-old off-spinner Vimal Kumar, who took a break from his lending and trading business in Manila recently to join a rare practice session in the Philippine capital. "It's an unpredictable game, you never know who is going to win." The players are paying a heavy price to get to Oman. While the global governing body, the International Cricket Council, covers the cost of flights and accommodation for the Philippines, other expenses are left to the players to shoulder.

A GoFundMe campaign recently launched by the Australia-based coach Henry Tyler seeks to raise AU\$7,500 (US\$5,300) for expenses including training balls, travel insurance and the hire of practice nets. "In order to represent the Philippines we must take unpaid leave from our work," Tyler wrote in the fundraising appeal, which as of Sunday had yet to reach its goal. Cricket has been played socially in the Philippines for more than a century but it never flourished in the former US colony where basketball and boxing have long been the most popular sports.

Huge step up

That started to change in 1999 when two expats in Manila started the Philippine Cricket Association. A

Delhi Capitals

India's Shardul Thakur (\$1.42 million) and Australian all-rounder Mitchell Marsh were Delhi's top buys in the auction, but could have done with another fast bowler to supplement Anrich Nortje. The Rishabh Pant-led side still looks threatening with their opening batting pair of Prithvi Shaw and David Warner, who returned to the franchise-coached by compatriot Ricky Ponting - after his previous 2009-2013 stint.

Lucknow Super Giants

The new team utilised every penny of their purse and stood out with their choice of picks including uncapped pace bowler Avesh Khan for \$1.32 million. With skipper KL Rahul and Quinton de Kock at the top of the batting order and England pace ace Mark Wood joining Avesh, the team looks good on paper and owner Sanjiv Goenka could not agree more. "The team looks balanced. We have a number of multi-dimensional players," he said.

Gujarat Titans

The IPL's other newcomer, led by Hardik Pandya, had already bought match-winners including Afghan spin supremo Rashid Khan and Shubman Gill before the auction. But despite getting a winning bid for England's Jason Roy, their batting looks inexperienced. New Zealand quick Lockie Ferguson leads the pace pack alongside India's Mohammed Shami, whose experience in invaluable but is not as effective in T20 cricket as other formats.

Punjab Kings

England power-hitter Liam Livingstone remained a prize pick at \$1.52 million for the team still searching for a title. New signee Shikhar Dhawan and Jonny Bairstow lead the batting charge that also boasts new sensation Shahrukh Khan. South African pace ace Kagiso Rabada leads the bowling charge.

leaving the Canaries ninth, a point behind eighth-placed Lens. Cedric Hountondji gave Clermont the lead against Saint-Etienne just before the break but Mahdi Camara equalised after 71 minutes and Timothee Kolodziejczak scored the winner eight minutes from time. Clermont are 15th, three points ahead of Troyes, who crashed 5-1 at mid-table Brest. Uruguayan striker Martin Satriano, on loan from Italian champions Inter Milan, scored a first half brace for the Bretons, with Franck Honorat grabbing two more after the break. —AFP



MANILA: Vimal Kumar (right) of the Philippines national cricket team bats during a team training session at the United Club pitch in Parangue City in suburban Manila. —AFP

few years later the Philippines joined the ICC as an associate member and they now have national men's and women's teams as well as domestic leagues. Since making their international debut in 2011, the men's side have scored some victories over other minnows in the region.

But playing against top-20 ranked teams in World Cup qualifiers is a huge step up. Faisal Khan, co-founder of the cricket association and manager of the national squad, admitted the odds were stacked against them. But he said the experience of playing "one step below the World Cup" was more important than winning. "Let's get better and better," he said. "Who knows, maybe one day we will be playing in the World Cup." —AFP

Rajasthan Royals

The inaugural champions did their best to fill in the holes left by Ben Stokes, who is sitting out this year's tournament, and Archer. Their batting looks inexperienced with skipper Sanju Samson and Jos Buttler as the only two consistent performers. They have added firepower to their bowling by bringing in New Zealand quick Trent Boult, Indian paceman Prasad Krishna and ace spinner Ravichandran Ashwin.

Kolkata Knight Riders

The two-time champions seem to have aced the captain's pick by getting Shreyas Iyer in the auction but their batting still looks inexperienced despite the presence of Alex Hales. Buying back Australia's pace bowler Pat Cummins was a steal at nearly \$1 million and Sam Billings as their wicket-keeper batsman also a good late sweep. Last year's captain Eoin Morgan went unsold.

Sunrisers Hyderabad

Hyderabad have largely relied on Indian talent including pace bowler Bhuvneshwar Kumar and spinner Washington Sundar to repeat their 2016 success when Warner led them to their only title. The team will bank heavily on skipper Kane Williamson to deliver the batting goods in the middle overs despite getting West Indies players Nicholas Pooran and Romario Shepherd in the auction.

Royal Challengers Bangalore

Bangalore await a new captain after Virat Kohli stepped aside following the end of previous edition and they did well to strike a balance in the auction. Du Plessis remained a good get and will likely open with Kohli while Glenn Maxwell, a possible leadership choice, and Dinesh Karthik remain key to their middle-order success. Hazlewood and Harshal Patel join the pace pack with the already retained Mohammed Siraj. —AFP

Sports

Luuk de Jong salvages late draw for Barca at Espanyol

Real Sociedad climb to sixth, beat Granada 2-0

BARCELONA: Barcelona started and finished strongly on Sunday night but sagged in between and drew 2-2 at less fashionable neighbors Espanyol to cling on to fourth place in La Liga. "We didn't play brilliantly, but we played well enough to win. The bad news is that we didn't win," said Barcelona coach Xavi. Pedri gave Barcelona a second minute lead but Sergi Darder levelled after 40 minutes and set up Raul de Tomas for a counter-attack goal after 64 minutes.

With time running out, Luuk de Jong headed an equalizer that saved a point for Barcelona, but they still end the weekend 15 points behind leaders Real Madrid. They did edge past Atletico Madrid, who won on Saturday, on goal difference. "In the end we lost more ground," added Xavi. "We saved a point at the end, which is insufficient, but we are still in the

race for the Champions League."

Barcelona applied brisk pressure from the start and quickly gained a reward. Pedri leapt unmarked at the far post to meet a Jordi Alba cross and volley visiting Barca ahead. The early domination gradually ebbed. Darder leveled for the home team with a curling right-foot shot after Barcelona gave the ball away on 40 minutes. Barcelona became more desperate after Gavi's 56th minute strike was ruled out because a bemused Frenkie de Jong was offside as the ball caromed off him in the build up.

Eight minutes later, Espanyol hit their visitors with a beautifully executed counter attack. Darder's long pass caught the Barcelona defense too far forward. De Tomas controlled the ball on his chest, ran on unchecked and drilled a shot past Marc-Andre Ter Stegen. "The first goal was a pass that we didn't

need to risk, and the second one was a mistake of ours," said Xavi. "But football is a game of mistakes." "In the end they were more effective."

As well as Luuk de Jong, Xavi threw on winter signing Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang and, with 18 minutes left, gave Ousmane Dembele, who has refused to sign a contract extension, his first appearance since January 8. "He can help us," said Xavi. "He is one more for the cause and for the objectives of the season." Both teams started added time down to 10 after Barcelona's Gerard Pique and Espanyol's Nicolas Melamed tangled in the 90th minute and collected their second yellow cards.

In the sixth minute of added time, Luuk de Jong, a 62nd minute replacement, leapt to meet a cross from Adama Traore and smash a header down and into the net. Barcelona lost ground to third-place

Real Betis who won 4-2 at last-place Levante earlier on Sunday. Nabil Fekir, Edgar Gonzalez, William Carvalho put the visitors three up after 42 minutes. But Dani Gomez replied with his first two league goals of the season, either side of half time for Levante.

Fekir quelled the resistance with a 49th-minute free kick for the sixth goal in a frantic 39 minutes. Real Sociedad climbed to sixth as captain Mikel Oyarzabal converted a penalty and Rafael Alcantara added a second as they beat visiting Granada 2-0. On Saturday, leaders Real Madrid were held to a goalless draw at Villarreal. That meant Sevilla, who won 2-0 at home to Elche on Friday, cut the lead to four points. Atletico Madrid were involved in an uncharacteristic festival of goals as they beat Getafe 4-3. — AFP



A group photo before the beginning of the match.

stc sponsors the Super Cup 2022

KUWAIT: Kuwait Telecommunications Company - stc, a world-class digital leader providing innovative services and platforms to customers, enabling the digital transformation in Kuwait, announced its sponsorship of the Super Cup match between the Kuwait and Al-Arabi Sporting Clubs that was held at the Jaber Al-Ahmad International Stadium. The sponsorship falls in line with stc's strategic role in supporting the local sports scene in all aspects and the activities of the Kuwait Football Association in particular as part of stc's strategic partnership over the last 8 years.

Prior to the match and in line with stc's continuous role to support sports and younger generations, Engineer Meziad Al-Harbi, CEO of stc, along with Director General of the Public Authority for Sports, Hamoud Flaiteh Al-Shamari, honored the retired players of the national football team, Bashar Abdullah and Jasem Al Huwaidi for their outstanding football achievements. The honoring came following the announcement of the rankings of the top 10 goal scorers in Arab teams. Based on the list, Bashar came in third place with 75 goals, whereas Jasem Al Huwaidi came in sixth place with 62 goals.

The match ended in favor of Al-Arabi Club who won the Super Cup for the 3rd time in history. President of the Kuwait Football Association, Sheikh Ahmed Youssef Al-Sabah, stated "we praise the role of Director General of the Public Authority of Sports, Hamoud Flaiteh Al-Shamari, and stc for sponsoring the Super Cup. Al-Sabah also thanked stc for its continuous support and sponsorship of the Kuwait Football Association and its initiatives throughout the past years."

On this occasion, Engineer Meziad Al-Harbi, CEO of stc, stated that he is pleased with the strategic partnership with the Kuwait Football Association that has been strengthened over the last 8 years while praising the diligent efforts made by the KFA president, Sheikh Ahmed Youssef Al-Sabah, and the members of the association, in organizing yet another successful season.

Al-Harbi pointed that stc's sponsorship of the Kuwait Football Association activities stems from the core values the Company draws on, which include promoting fair and positive competition, good sportsman-



Meziad bin Naser Al-Harbi honoring the players

ship, ethical principles, and integrity and values that apply to all aspects of life.

Al-Harbi said, "We are proud of the role we are playing in driving and supporting the local sports community since the inception of stc and the launch of its commercial activities in Kuwait, which is also reflected through our strategic partnership with the Kuwait Football Association over the years due to its popularity and considering it is a widely followed sport not only in Kuwait, but worldwide.

stc will continue to support various sporting initiatives that promote healthy competition and good sportsmanship. We firmly believe that participating in competitive sports and fitness activities aids in building character, developing morals, and promoting a healthier lifestyle through frequent exercise, which we also encourage amongst our work teams to yield positive impact and higher productivity levels."

stc through its influential and supporting role in the local sports scene aims to be actively engaged in activities that encourage individuals of all ages and nationalities to adopt a healthier lifestyle. This dynamic runs parallel to the Company's social responsibility pillars that focus on promoting health awareness, educating and empowering the younger Kuwaiti generation, and practicing environmentally conscious behaviors.

It is also worth noting that the first edition of the Super Cup tournament began in 2008. The tournament brings together the champions of the Premier League and the Amir Cup for a chance to win the Super Cup title. Throughout the tournament's history, Qadsia SC managed to win the title 6 times, followed by Kuwait SC 5 times, and finally Al-Arabi winning the Super Cup title twice.

Kuwait to host Gulf Games May 15-31

By Abdellatif Sharaa

KUWAIT: Board member of Kuwait Olympic committee, Head of woman sports committee Fatima Hayat lauds the decision of heads of Gulf Olympic committees to include Women's Sports in the upcoming third Gulf Games to be held in Kuwait from 15th until 31st May, with all GCC countries participating.

"Including women's sport in the upcoming Gulf Games is in line with the world's practice in the continental and international events. We are happy with this step, which is in appreciation of the women's sacrifices over the years," Hayat said. Hayat thanked the president of KOC Sheikh Fahad Al-Nasser and Secretary General Hussein Al-Musallam for having women sport



Fatima Hayat

on top of their priorities and their continuous support.

She also lauded the efforts of the Head of the Organizational committee for the GCC Women Sport Sheikh Hayat Al Khalifa for her many contributions. The third Gulf Games will include: Football, handball, volleyball, basketball, swimming,

athletics, karate, judo, fencing, shooting, tennis, cycling, ice hockey, table tennis, electronic games. It's worth mentioning that women will participate in six games - Futsal, cycling, table tennis, basketball (3x3), electronic games and athletics.

Reus strikes twice as Dortmund trim Bayern's lead

BERLIN: Marco Reus defied the boos of the home crowd with two goals against Union Berlin on Sunday, as Borussia Dortmund cruised to a 3-0 win to narrow the gap at the top of the Bundesliga to six points. Reus, who won a controversial penalty when the two teams met last season, was given a hostile welcome in the capital.

He silenced the home end with two first-half goals as Dortmund bounced back from last week's loss to Leverkusen to claim their first ever away win at Union. "Last week was really bad and we wanted to show a reaction today. It's difficult to come here because Union are a really good team," Reus told DAZN. He batted away questions about the title race. "We don't need to keep answering those questions, so please stop asking it," he said.

Leao seals 'perfect week' by snatching top spot for Milan

MILAN: Rafael Leao fired AC Milan top of Serie A on Sunday with the only goal in a 1-0 win over Sampdoria which allowed his side to overtake champions Inter. With seven minutes gone Leao collected a huge kick from goalkeeper Mike Maignan and breezed past Bartosz Bereszynski before slotting home his seventh of the season. Stefano Pioli's side were four points behind Inter, who drew 1-1 in an enthralling match with fellow title rivals Napoli in Naples on Saturday, before last weekend's Milan derby win but have taken the sum-

mit after a dominant display at the San Siro. Team mate Mats Hummels was equally unwilling to talk about his side's chances of catching runaway leaders Bayern, pointing instead to the fact that Dortmund now have a 12-point cushion in the race for the Champions League. "I am just happy that we've opened up a huge lead on fifth place," he said. After leaders Bayern slumped to a shock loss at minnows Bochum on Saturday, the clash in the capital was a must-win for second-placed Dortmund.

Dortmund made a nervy start, but took the lead on 18 minutes, Reus drilling a low shot home from close range amid a flurry of legs in the box. Reus doubled the lead on the counter-attack shortly afterwards after Dan-Axel Zagadou caught the Union defense napping apart with a devastating diagonal ball upfield. Union's valiant second-half resistance was ended on 71 minutes when Raphael Guerreiro toe-poked in a third goal from close range. Temps flared in the final 15 minutes as the home side had a goal ruled out by VAR for a foul on Manuel Akanji. But Dortmund held on to keep their first clean sheet in seven games. Marco Rose's side now turn their attention to Thursday's Europa League clash with Scottish champions Rangers. — AFP

They also set up another two derbies with Inter in the Italian Cup semi-finals after smashing Lazio 4-0 on Wednesday. "This is a perfect week, it's not easy to do much better than this," midfielder Sandro Tonali told Sky Sport Italia. "We are proud, but getting satisfied with ourselves after the last three matches would be the stupidest thing we could do."

Just two points separate Italy's top three as third-placed Napoli are themselves one behind Inter who have a game in hand in a title race which could go down to the wire. Milan met very little resistance from Samp, who are sliding towards the relegation zone after their fifth defeat in six matches. Marco Giampolo's side are just two points from the bottom three. Olivier Giroud, who came into Sunday's match having scored four goals since last weekend for Milan, was twice denied in the second half by superb saves from Wladimiro Falcone. — AFP

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Amiri Hospital	22450005	Adaliya	22517144
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Chest Hospital	24849400	Shamiya	24848913
Farwaniya Hospital	24892010	Shuwaikh	24814507
Adan Hospital	23940620	Abdullah Salem	22549134
Ibn Sina Hospital	24840300	Nuzha	22526804
Al-Razi Hospital	24846000	Industrial Shuwaikh	24814764
Physiotherapy Hospital	24874330/9	Qadsiya	22515088
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INGLEWOOD: Los Angeles Rams players celebrate with the Vince Lombardi Trophy after winning Super Bowl LVI at SoFi Stadium on February 13, 2022 in Inglewood, California. The Los Angeles Rams defeated the Cincinnati Bengals 23-20. —AFP

Rams win Super Bowl thriller

Kupp, Donald star as Rams down Bengals

LOS ANGELES: Cooper Kupp scored two touchdowns and Aaron Donald spearheaded a fearsome defensive display as the Los Angeles Rams defeated the Cincinnati Bengals 23-20 to win the Super Bowl on Sunday. Kupp scored a decisive touchdown with 1min 25sec remaining to give the Rams the lead at SoFi Stadium before Donald grabbed the Rams' record-equaling seventh sack of Bengals quarterback Joe Burrow to seal a blockbuster victory.

Donald's sack of Burrow was the dramatic final act of a gripping contest between the star-studded Rams and the Bengals, whose bid to win a first-ever Vince Lombardi Trophy fell agonizingly short. "I'm just so happy," said Rams defensive star Donald. "I wanted this so bad. I dreamed this." "One play and we're world champs," Donald added of his crucial late sack of Burrow. "Any way to get to him. We made it."

Wide receiver Kupp was named the Super Bowl Most Valuable Player three years after missing the Rams' prior appearance in a Super Bowl through injury. "It is unbelievable," Kupp said. "To be able to experience this with my family. It has been such a fun ride. Up and down but fun." Rams quarterback Matthew Stafford, meanwhile, paid tribute to his team's never-say-die approach. "I'm so proud of this team," Stafford said. "There are so many guys on our team that deserve this, so many guys who gave their heart and soul to this team."

"That game today is the story of our season. It's up and down it's tough. We're a tough team. We

showed up late and got it done." The Bengals had stormed into a 20-13 lead early in the second half after a controversial Tee Higgins touchdown and an Evan McPherson field goal. Higgins raced for a 75-yard score but replays showed he grabbed Rams' safety Jalen Ramsey's facemask before breaking clear an infringement that should have led to a penalty.

'Stars came to life'

But the Rams, who had struggled to build momentum on offense after a game-ending injury to Odell Beckham Jr. in the first half, clawed their way back into the game thanks to their rampant defense led by Donald. Burrow was sacked repeatedly at key moments to prevent the Bengals from extending their lead. Matt Gay's field goal pulled the Rams back to 20-16 heading into the fourth quarter.

Stafford then led a 15-play, 79-yard drive that benefited from three crucial Bengals penalties near the goal line before Kupp plucked a one-yard pass in the end zone for the go-ahead touchdown. "Stafford and Kupp came to life," said Rams head coach Sean McVay—who becomes the youngest ever head coach to win the Super Bowl at the age of 36. "Our best players shined the brightest when they had to and that's why we got it done." Kupp and Beckham had both scored early touchdowns to give the Rams a 13-3 lead in the second quarter before the Bengals battled back into the contest.

The defeat was brutal on Bengals quarterback

Burrow, the 25-year-old rising star who has helped transform Cincinnati's fortunes this season. Burrow finished with 263 passing yards and one touchdown but was buffeted all night and sacked seven times, equalling the record for the most sacks in a Super Bowl. "It stings, but we had a great year," Burrow said. "I was disappointed in my performance. I thought I could have given us a chance to win. You live and learn."

Bengals coach Taylor admitted having victory prised from his team's grasp had been hard to take. "It's tough," Taylor said. "To fight and get this far and not finish it off. "Really proud of the way our team played. They gave us tremendous effort and put us in a position to win. We just needed one more stop, one more score there at the end to be champions." Stafford, meanwhile, finished with 283 yards and two touchdowns with two interceptions.

It was the Rams second franchise Super Bowl victory and their first since returning to Los Angeles from St. Louis in 2016. Their previous win came in 2000. It was the third Super Bowl defeat in as many appearances for the Bengals, who also dropped the title contest in 1982 and 1989. Sunday's showstopping finale was a fitting end to one of the most gripping NFL post-seasons in years. With Los Angeles basking in a February heatwave, a 70,000-capacity crowd packed with Hollywood celebrities were given a show-stopping halftime show led by icons Snoop Dogg, Dr.Dre, Eminem and Mary J Blige. — AFP



BEIJING: Russia's Kamila Valieva attends a training session yesterday prior the figure skating event at the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympic Games. — AFP

Russian teenager Valieva cleared at Beijing Olympics

BEIJING: Russian teenage figure skater Kamila Valieva can compete again at the Beijing Olympics after sport's top court said yesterday that she should not be suspended for failing a drugs test. In a case that has rocked the Games, the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) ruled that the 15-year-old could take part in the women's singles event that begins today.

The young Russian will be favorite to win but she has not been cleared of doping and could still face punishment at a later date. The International Olympic Committee said that if Valieva finished in the top three, it will not hold a medal ceremony until the doping issue was resolved. CAS said it had rejected appeals by the IOC, the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) and the International Skating Union to have Valieva's suspension reinstated after it was lifted by Russian anti-doping authorities.

The court cited "exceptional circumstances", including Valieva's age. Matthieu Reeb, CAS director general, said that preventing Valieva from competing would have caused her "irreparable harm". CAS also emphasized that "there were serious issues of untimely notification" of the test result. Valieva gave a sample on December 25 but the result was only produced last week, after she led Russia to team gold.

"Such late notification was not her fault, in the middle of the Olympic Winter Games," the ruling said. The Russian Olympic Committee hailed the decision, saying: "Tomorrow the whole country will support her." The US Olympic and Paralympic Committee though said it was "disappointed by the message this decision sends". "This appears to be another chapter in the systemic and pervasive disregard for clean sport by Russia," it said. — AFP

Celtics beat Hawks to stretch NBA win streak to 8 games

WASHINGTON: Jayson Tatum scored 38 points and grabbed 10 rebounds as the Boston Celtics stretched their NBA win streak to eight games on Sunday by defeating the Atlanta Hawks 105-95. The Celtics improved to 33-25, sixth in the Eastern Conference, with their 20th home victory in 30 games while Atlanta fell to 26-30, 10th in the East. "We've just been healthy," Tatum said of the reason for the streak. "That bothered us in the beginning of the season. "There's goods and bads for us in the season but we can't lose sight of the goals we're trying to accomplish. "We hope we can keep it going. We're trying to keep it up."

Trailing 55-45 at halftime, the Celtics out-scored Atlanta 42-23 in the third quarter to pull away. "We just played with a little more pace," Tatum said. "We started attacking more." Jaylen Brown added 17 points for the Celtics while Robert Williams contributed 10 points and 14 rebounds and Derrick White had 14 points off the Boston bench. Trae Young led Atlanta with 30 points and 10 assists while Clint Capela grabbed a game-high 17 rebounds for the Hawks and Serbian guard Bogdan



BOSTON: Jayson Tatum #0 of the Boston Celtics drives to the basket during the game against the Atlanta Hawks on February 13, 2022 at the TD Garden in Boston, Massachusetts. — AFP

Bogdanovic scored 26 points off the bench in a losing cause.

In the only other NBA contest on the Sunday of the NFL's Super Bowl championship spectacle, Anthony Edwards scored a game-high 37 points to power the Minnesota Timberwolves to a 129-120 victory at Indiana. D'Angelo Russell added 23

points while Karl-Anthony Towns had 15 points and 13 rebounds for the T-Wolves, who rose to 30-27, seventh in the Western Conference. Oshae Brissett had 22 points and 13 rebounds while Tyrese Haliburton had 22 points and 16 assists for Indiana, which lost a sixth straight game and slid to 19-39, 13th in the East. — AFP