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# West sees 'positive signs' as Russia says troops pull back

Putin 'of course' does not want war, 'ready to work further' on security

## Zain Saudi Arabia approves sale of its 8,069 tower infrastructure for SAR 3 billion to PIF

**RIYADH:** Zain Group announced that the board of directors of Zain Saudi Arabia (Zain KSA) has approved the binding offer submitted by Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund (PIF)-led consortium to acquire a 80 percent majority stake in Zain KSA's 8,069 passive tower infrastructure for a value of SAR 3.026 billion (\$807 million).

The consortium offer will see the PIF acquiring a 60 percent stake, Sultan Holding Company acquiring 10 percent, and Prince Saud bin Fahd bin Abdulaziz acquiring 10 percent. Zain KSA will own the remaining 20 percent stake, with the PIF having a call option to buy this remaining 20 percent for a specified amount. Zain KSA will sell its passive, physical towers infrastructure and retain all other wireless communication antennas, software, technology, and intellectual property with respect to managing its telecom network.

Bader Al-Kharafi, Zain Vice Chairman and Group CEO, and Zain KSA Vice-Chairman, commented: "This transaction creates enormous shareholder value and gives Zain KSA greater financial muscle to invest in cutting-edge technologies and



Bader Al-Kharafi, Zain Vice Chairman and Group CEO, and Zain KSA Vice-Chairman

innovation that enhance the customer mobile and data experience. We congratulate the kingdom's leadership, the PIF and regulatory authorities for their wisdom in creating an environment that raises the telecom sector to new heights in line with Saudi Vision 2030." (See Page 8)

**MOSCOW:** Western leaders said yesterday they were seeing positive signs that Russia was looking to ease tensions over Ukraine, after Moscow announced it was pulling back some of the troops deployed on its neighbor's borders. In the first announced withdrawal from among more than 100,000 troops Russia amassed on the Ukrainian border, the defense ministry in Moscow said some soldiers and hardware were returning to bases at the end of planned exercises.

Western leaders had accused Moscow of positioning the troops in advance of a possible invasion of pro-Western Ukraine, warning that any attack would be met with severe economic sanctions. After a meeting Tuesday with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz in Moscow, President Vladimir Putin said Russia "of course" did not want war, and was willing to look for solutions with the West. "We are ready to work further together. We are ready to go down the negotiations track," Putin told a joint press conference with Scholz, confirming a "partial pullback of troops".

The German leader joined others in the West in expressing hope that steps were being taken towards de-escalation in the crisis. "That we are now hearing that some troops are being withdrawn is in any case a good sign," Scholz said. "For Europeans it is clear that lasting security cannot be achieved against Russia but only with Russia."

Moscow released few details about the troop withdrawal and there was no immediate outside

confirmation. NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg said in Brussels there was not yet "any sign of de-escalation on the ground" but that there were "grounds for cautious optimism". A French government spokesman said it was a "positive signal" if Russian forces were indeed withdrawing, while Germany's Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock said "every real step of de-escalation would be a reason for hope".

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said there were "signs of a diplomatic opening" with Russia, but that intelligence on a possible invasion was "still not encouraging". The crisis - the worst between Russia and the West since the Cold War ended - reached a peak this week, with US officials warning that a full-scale invasion, including an assault on Kyiv, was possible within days.

Washington took the dramatic step on Monday of relocating its embassy in Kyiv to the western city of Lviv, after previously urging US citizens to leave Ukraine. The Russian defense ministry announced the partial withdrawal on Tuesday morning, saying some forces deployed near Ukraine had finished their exercises and were packing up to leave. "Units of the southern and western military districts, having completed their tasks, have already begun loading onto rail and road transport and today they will begin moving to their military garrisons," the ministry's chief spokesman, Igor Konashenkov, said in a statement.

Continued on Page 2

## Tencent-backed hit game Free Fire banned in India

**SINGAPORE:** Tech giant Sea, which is backed by China's Tencent, has apologized to users in India after its popular Free Fire game was reportedly among dozens of apps hit with a ban on national security concerns. It was the latest volley between New Delhi and Beijing, with tensions between the two running high after a deadly 2020 clash in a disputed Himalayan border area.

Free Fire, one of the most downloaded mobile games in India, was among 54 apps banned that authorities said were of Chinese origin, according to several local media outlets. Apps from Tencent and Baidu were also among those affected, the reports said. New Delhi has previously banned more than 260 Chinese apps citing national security concerns, including video-sharing platform TikTok and popular game PUBG, prompting fury from Beijing.

Garena, the gaming subsidiary of Singapore-based Sea, did not confirm a ban had been imposed but said in a statement that it was "aware that Free Fire is currently unavailable in the Google Play and iOS app stores in India and that the game is currently not operable for some users in the country". "We are working to address this situation, and we apologize to our users for any inconvenience."

Sea's shares dived 18.4 percent in New York on Monday following reports of the ban. Indian authorities were not immediately available for comment. But the IT ministry told the Hindustan Times newspaper the apps collected sensitive data, which was "transmitted to servers located in (a) hostile country" and could be used "for activities detrimental to national security".

Sea's founders are Chinese-born and became Singaporean citizens. Chinese tech behemoth Tencent has an 18.7 percent stake in the firm. Free Fire is an action adventure game that sees players parachute onto an island, and then search for weapons and equipment to kill other participants. — AFP

## Erdogan calls on UAE businesses to invest in Turkey

**DUBAI:** Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan called on business leaders in the wealthy United Arab Emirates yesterday to invest in his country, which is in the grips of an economic crisis. Erdogan arrived in the UAE capital Abu Dhabi on Monday for a two-day visit to revive relations that were long strained by regional disputes, marking his first trip to the oil-rich Gulf country in nearly a decade.

"As the leading representatives of the private sector in the United Arab Emirates, I am sure you fully compre-

hend the benefits of establishing commercial and investment partnerships with Turkey," he told investors at a business conference in Abu Dhabi. "It is you, the esteemed members of our business world, who will realize the two countries' potential, especially in trade and investments."

Erdogan's visit comes after Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, the UAE's de facto ruler, travelled to Ankara in November on the first high-level visit to Turkey

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## Zionist entity PM meets Bahrain king

**MANAMA:** Prime Minister of the Zionist entity Naftali Bennett met Bahrain's king on a landmark visit yesterday to the small, oil-rich Gulf country, 17 months after they ended

decades of tensions to normalize ties. It was the latest diplomatic breakthrough since several Arab states under the US-brokered 2020 Abraham Accords ended their isolation of the Zionist entity despite the fact the Zionist-Palestinian conflict remains unresolved.

The Zionist entity's new alliances reflect the fact that major Arab Gulf powers, the Zionist entity and their common ally the United States

Continued on Page 2

## Zionist forces kill another Palestinian teen

**NABI SALEH:** A Palestinian was killed by Zionist fire in the occupied West Bank yesterday, both sides said, during what witnesses described as a confrontation between protesters and Zionist troops. The Palestinian health ministry said only that a Palestinian

"citizen" was killed by Zionist fire in Nabi Saleh, northwest of Ramallah.

Residents identified the victim as Nehad Bargouthi, 19, who was shot as local youths hurled stones at Zionist forces. He "was assassinated in cold blood and in broad daylight," his brother Ihab Bargouthi said. People from Bargouthi's village of Kafr Ein, which is a short distance from Nabi Saleh, said he had been imprisoned in 2018 and was recently released.

According to his brother, he is "a former prisoner and wounded

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DUBAI: Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan delivers a speech at the Turkish pavilion of Expo 2020 yesterday. — AFP



MANAMA: Bahrain's King Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa meets Prime Minister of the Zionist entity Naftali Bennett yesterday. — AFP



RAMALLAH: Family members mourn in a morgue yesterday by the body of Nehad Bargouthi, who was shot by Zionist troops in Nabi Saleh yesterday. — AFP

## Local

# Crown Prince receives Foreign Minister, KDIPA members

## Sheikh Mishal receives KDIPA's report for 2020-2021



KUWAIT: His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah meets Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah and KDIPA members. — KUNA photos



His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah receives KDIPA's annual report for 2020-2021.



His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah meets Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah and KDIPA members



His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah receives KDIPA's annual report for 2020-2021.

KUWAIT: His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received Minister of Foreign Affairs, Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs and Chairman of the Board of Kuwait Direct Investment Promotion Authority (KDIPA) Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-

Mohammad Al-Sabah, KDIPA's Director General Sheikh Dr Mishal Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, deputy board chairman Wafa Al-Qatami and head of the authority's secretariat Hanadi Ismail in Bayan Palace yesterday, where they presented to His Highness the annual report for 2020-2021.

His Highness hailed KDIPA's efforts to provide investment opportunities to support development in Kuwait and boost economy. The meeting was attended by head of the office of His Highness the Crown Prince General (RTE) Jamal Al-Theyab. His Highness the Prime Minister

Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah also met Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad, Sheikh Dr Mishal Jaber Al-Ahmad, Qatami and Ismail, who delivered to His Highness the Prime Minister a copy of KDIPA's annual report for 2020-2021. — KUNA

## Assembly votes on no-confidence motion against FM today

KUWAIT: The National Assembly holds a special session today to vote on a no-confidence motion against Minister of Foreign Affairs and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah. Last week, after discussing the grilling motion filed by MP Shuaib Al-Muwaizri against the minister, the National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Ali Al-Ghanem announced that 10 MPs submitted a no-confidence motion against the concerned minister. According to Article 101 of the Kuwaiti constitution, "if the parliament decides to vote with the no-confidence motion against the minister, he is considered retired from duties immediately." The no-confidence motion requires the approval of the majority of the Parliament members, and the ministers are not included in the voting process. On Monday, the Cabinet renewed backing the foreign minister after reviewing the National Assembly affairs and developments related to the no-confidence motion. Speaker Ghanem had yesterday adjourned a sched-



KUWAIT: National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Ali Al-Ghanem adjourns yesterday's session. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

uled session due to lack of quorum after the Cabinet members failed to show up. The session was scheduled to take place today upon parliamentary request in order to look into amendments to the elections law. — KUNA

## Defense minister meets Turkish, Indian envoys

KUWAIT: Kuwaiti Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah yesterday received the Turkish and Indian ambassadors to Kuwait discussing bilateral relations and cooperation with these envoys' states. The Ministry of Defense said in a statement the defense minister, during the meeting with the Turkish Ambassador Ase Koytak, discussed means of boosting joint action between the two countries. He also hailed the depth of the close bilateral relations between Kuwait and Turkey. The ambassador for her part delivered a message from Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu to the Kuwaiti minister inviting him to the Antalya Diplomatic Forum due in March. Minister Sheikh Hamad expressed gratitude for the gracious invitation that depicted depth of the friendly relations and cooperation between the two states.

Separately, the defense minister received Indian Ambassador to Kuwait Sibi George addressing issues of common interest, means of enhancing cooperation, regional and international issues. The



KUWAIT: Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah meets Ambassador of India to Kuwait Sibi George. — KUNA

two meetings were attended by the Kuwaiti Army Chief of Staff Lieutenant General Khaled Saleh Al-Sabah, the acting defense ministry undersecretary Sheikh Fahad Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah and the assistant undersecretary Sheikh Shamayel Ahmad Al-Khaled Al-Sabah. Later in the day, the minister hosted the State of Kuwait Ambassador to Tunisia Ali Al-Shafiri talking about some topics. He hailed the Kuwaiti mission's role in bolstering cooperation between the two sisterly countries. — KUNA

## West sees 'positive signs' as Russia...

Continued from Page 1

It was not immediately clear how many units were involved and what impact the withdrawals would have on the overall number of troops surrounding Ukraine. Konashenkov said "large-scale" Russian military drills were continuing in many areas, including joint exercises in Belarus and naval exercises in the Black Sea and elsewhere. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters that the pullback was the "usual process" after military exercises and blamed the West for the crisis. "This is nothing but a totally unprecedented campaign to provoke tensions," he said, calling decisions to move embassies to western Ukraine "ostentatious hysteria".

Ukraine said deterrence efforts against Russia appeared to be working but that it would watch to see if any Russian withdrawal was real. "We have a

rule: don't believe what you hear, believe what you see. When we see a withdrawal, we will believe in a de-escalation," Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba told reporters. In a separate move likely to anger Kyiv, Russian lawmakers yesterday voted to urge Putin to recognise two breakaway regions in eastern Ukraine as "sovereign and independent states".

This would allow Russia to abandon the Minsk agreements peace plan for eastern Ukraine and potentially move in Russian troops - giving Putin a strong hand to play in any future negotiations with Kyiv. The European Union "strongly" condemned the move, saying it would violate the Minsk agreements that Moscow had signed up to.

Russia has repeatedly blamed the Ukraine crisis on the West, saying the United States and western Europe are ignoring Russia's legitimate security concerns. The Kremlin insists NATO must give assurances Ukraine will never be admitted as a member and roll back its presence in several eastern European and ex-Soviet countries. Russia already controls the Crimean Peninsula that it seized from Ukraine in 2014 and supports separatist forces who have taken control of parts of eastern Ukraine, in a conflict that has claimed more than 14,000 lives. — AFP

was killed by Zionist gunfire near the flashpoint West Bank town of Jenin.

Mohammed Abu Salah, 17, was shot during clashes that erupted as Zionist forces late Sunday were destroying the home of a Palestinian they accused of carrying out the December killing of a Zionist settler in the West Bank. In another case last week, special Zionist forces killed three Palestinians during a daytime raid, leaving a vehicle in the West Bank city of Nablus riddled with bullet holes.

The Zionist entity has occupied the West Bank since the 1967 Six-Day War. About 475,000 Zionist settlers now live in the territory. — AFP

## Erdogan calls on UAE businesses...

Continued from Page 1

since 2012. The Turkish president said yesterday that that trip "started a new era" with the UAE, adding there was a "strong collective will to develop trade relations and increase investments".

Erdogan and Sheikh Mohammed on Monday oversaw the signing of 13 cooperation agreements and memoranda of understanding, including a letter of intent on cooperation in the defense industries, according to the UAE's official WAM news agency. Other areas of cooperation included health, technology, climate action and crisis and disaster management, the news agency said.

Turkey-UAE trade topped 26.4 billion dirhams (\$7.2 billion) in the first half of 2021. The UAE hopes to double or triple trade volume with Turkey, which it sees as a route to new markets. About 400 Emirati companies operate in Turkey, the UAE's 11th largest trading partner, WAM said. Erdogan yesterday also

met with UAE Prime Minister and ruler of Dubai, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al-Maktoum, at the Expo 2020 world fair, where the two discussed ways to develop bilateral relations.

Turkey and the UAE have backed opposing sides in regional conflicts, including in Libya, and have sparred over issues such as gas exploration in the eastern Mediterranean. Turkey-UAE relations were particularly tense after Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain in 2017 cut all links with Qatar, a close Turkish ally. Those relations were restored in Jan 2021.

But Erdogan has since last year sought to improve ties with regional rivals in the face of increasing diplomatic isolation that has caused foreign investment to dry up, particularly from the West. Following Sheikh Mohammed's visit in November, the UAE announced a \$10 billion fund for investments in Turkey, where a currency crisis has slashed people's purchasing power and inflation last month surged to a near 20-year high.

Last month, Erdogan said he would visit Saudi Arabia in February, his first trip to Riyadh since relations soured over the 2018 murder of Saudi critic Jamal Khashoggi inside the kingdom's consulate in Istanbul. — AFP

## Zionist forces kill another...

Continued from Page 1

person... the occupation knows him well". Ihab Bargouthi added: "There were confrontations in the village of Al-Nabi Saleh. Nehad goes to participate in any confrontations he hears about." The killing comes less than two days after another teenager

## Zionist entity PM meets...

Continued from Page 1

share an animosity toward Iran and concerns about its nuclear program. "In these tumultuous times it's important that from this region we send a message of goodwill, of cooperation, of standing together against common challenges," Bennett said

before his departure Monday.

Yesterday he met King Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa and Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad Al-Khalifa, who is also prime minister of the island nation that is close to top regional power Saudi Arabia and which hosts the US Navy's Fifth Fleet. Bennett, the first Zionist head of government to visit Bahrain, discussed "deepening cooperation" in meetings with the defense and other ministers, his office said.

"We want to fill this relationship with substance in energy, in drive, in economy, in tourism and in the regional architecture," Bennett said. — AFP

Local

# Activists speak in defense of women's empowerment, freedoms in Kuwait

'Youth are considering leaving due to lack of freedoms'



KUWAIT: The speakers attend the symposium at the Women's Cultural and Social Society. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

By Nawara Fattahova

KUWAIT: The Women's Cultural and Social Society held a symposium on women's rights, focusing on different aspects including political rights, women's empowerment, freedoms and others.

Former minister Masouma Al-Mubarak said everyone rejects laws that restrict freedoms. "We reject any compromise on political and other women's rights. This attack on women's rights is not sudden or limited to joining the army or wearing the hijab: it has been continuing since many years. Women were deprived of their political rights from 1963 till 2005 without any logical or legal reason. Also, segregation in education was imposed after many years of mixed education and caused problems at the university," she pointed out.

Women started fighting for their rights in 1971. "The women's movement was most active in the 1980s till 2005, when Kuwaiti women gained their political rights. We held hundreds of lectures and wrote hundreds of articles demanding our political rights. Now the turn is of young generations to demand women's rights on social media. We need to modify the civil service law to allow women to occupy at least 30 percent of key positions," added Masouma.

Faria Al-Saqqaf, Chairperson of LOYAC Volunteer Center, noted that the issue of personal freedoms is not a local one anymore. "Two days back, a gathering was held at Irada Square to demand giving Indian women the right to wear the hijab. This signifies that we live in a small world, and what happens here may become an international issue. Even removing an animal from its ecological place is considered an infringement," she stated.

Regarding sports and other activities, Saqqaf believes practicing any of these hobbies comes under personal free-

dom. "Nobody can stop any person from practicing any kind of art. The general culture of our society does not respect arts. People need to practice arts and music, especially during the pandemic. Sending forces to a musical concert, which happened last weekend, is nonsense. Our youth are disappointed and many of them are considering leaving the country, which is the result of depriving their freedoms," stressed Saqqaf.

### Women's sports

Fatma Hayat, member of the board of Kuwait Football Federation, said women's sports have been absent for over 40 years, although they were very active in the 1970s. "Fortunately during the last few years, women's sports have developed. This happened after women reached decision-making positions with the support of honest men who believe in women's equality. In the past, GCC championships were separate for each gender, but soon we will see for the first time a Gulf sports league that includes both genders," she explained.

"Practicing sports is the right of everyone without discrimination. We should have a clear plan for developing sports, and not wait for a problem to happen and then go to protest at Irada Square. Kuwaiti sportswomen had great achievements in the recent Olympics and the entire community was supporting women swimmers. The same applies to other sports," Hayat added.

Lawyer Ghanima Al-Kandari said freedoms in Kuwait are equated to darkness. "They think women will commit sins in the dark. They see that the more freedoms a woman has, the greater her chance to sin. Women don't need the guardianship of anyone. Women have always been discriminated against and oppressed under the excuse of protecting them. This is in conflict with article 29 of the constitution that sets out gender equity in all fields," she said.

## CBK-KBA launch Diraya campaign for second year

KUWAIT: In light of the Central Bank of Kuwait's mandate to increase the financial awareness of various segments of society and strengthen the role of the Kuwaiti banking sector in social responsibility, the Central Bank of Kuwait (CBK) and Kuwait Banking Association (KBA) announce the launch of Diraya (Be Aware) Campaign for the second year in a row. The campaign activities are geared to spread financial awareness to a wider segment of society and increase public awareness of the banking sector's role and how customers can use banks' diverse services advantageously. In a statement, Central Bank of Kuwait Governor Dr Mohammad Al-Hashel noted that the launch of "Diraya" awareness campaign for the second year came as a result of the positive feedback on the first campaign, launched in early 2021, overseen by the CBK and managed by the KBA with the participation of all Kuwaiti banks.



Dr Mohammad Al-Hashel



Adel Al-Majed

Such campaigns, he stressed, are a great means to educate customers of their rights and as dictated by the CBK through its instructions to the banking sector. He pointed out that this campaign in its second round covers a diversity of topics, including increasing awareness to avoid scams, fraud and cybercrimes targeting customers in different ways, whether via e-mails, text messages or phone calls, as these means are used to obtain confidential banking information, such as account numbers, passwords and OTP numbers. Also, the second campaign reiterates last year's themes in a new catching

way besides highlighting other trending topics. The Governor reiterated the CBK's continuous commitment to raising financial awareness given the fast-evolving banking and financial services and products, which benefited from the telecommunications and digitalization revolution, and expanded to meet the growing needs of customers. Undoubtedly, this poses challenges and risks that must be faced by involving customers in the process of protecting their data, maintaining confidentiality, and increasing their financial awareness.

The Chairman of the KBA Board of Directors, Vice-Chairman and Group Chief Executive Officer of Boubyan Bank Group, Adel Al-Majed, said that "Diraya" campaign crowns the close cooperation between the CBK and the KBA to raise banking and financial awareness among customers of the banking sector in the State of Kuwait through developing media content targeting all segments and nationalities.

Majed added that the KBA is keen to participate as part of social responsibility of all Kuwaiti banks, indicating that this campaign will be one of the sustainable means to communicate with the society. It is noteworthy that the campaign utilizes various communication channels including, awareness videos, press releases and introductory materials, especially online channels, e.g. CBK, KBA and Kuwait banks' social media accounts, and banks' branches and other points of contact with the public to ensure a wide spread of the campaign's messages.



## stc distributes gifts to children in hospitals

KUWAIT: Kuwait Telecommunications Company - stc, a world-class digital leader providing innovative services and platforms to customers enabling the digital transformation in Kuwait, has announced its collaboration with Teeela Toys and the Kuwait Association for the Care of Children in Hospital and Bayt Abdullah Children's Hospice (KACCH and BACCH). This collaboration aims to draw a smile on the children's faces through distributing gifts and toys to children's playrooms in hospitals in line with stc corporate social responsibility strategy.

The event attended by Dr Maytham Hussein - CEO and Medical Manager of KACCH and BACCH, is an initiative taken towards enhancing stc's relationships with such organization that focuses on supporting children in hospitals. During the event, the team at KACCH and BACCH with the support of stc's Corporate Communications team, distributed toys, in collaboration with TEEELA, distributed toys to the different playrooms at the hospital in an effort to draw a smile on the children's faces and entertain the children at the hospitals.

On the sideline of the event and in recognition of the collaborative efforts, Danah Al-Jasem - General Manager of Corporate Communications at stc honored the team at KACCH and BACCH as a token of appreciation for their hard work and efforts, while commemorating the humanitarian initiative. She also stressed on the importance of such initiative and the collaboration with KACCH and BACCH that would lead to many more initiatives with the sole objective of supporting the community and children.

On this occasion, Danah Al-Jasem, General Manager of Corporate Communications at stc said, The campaign that stc has launched in celebration of the national days will be filled with interactive and community driven activities during the month of February. She added, "The corporate communications team at stc aims through the extensive CSR agenda in place to spread joy and happiness amongst all the people in Kuwait while celebrating



the national days and instilling the spirit of positivity and offering support to those children".

She added, "This collaboration with Kuwait Association for the Care of Children in Hospital and Bayt Abdullah Children's Hospice (KACCH and BACCH) is the outcome of the beneficial and fruitful relationships stc has bridged with different organizations and entities yielding to numerous initiatives and activities that can add value to the community. We at stc, have always been committed to proactively giving back to the community, and believe that even the smallest gesture can make a difference.

Jasem expressed her happiness with the outcome of this initiative as all teams involved worked together to bring joy and happiness to the children's hearts as it falls under the true values behind the month of February and the celebrations of the national holidays. She also added that the collaboration with TEEELA toys in this initiative comes in line with stc's overall CSR strategy to encourage national projects led by Kuwaiti young entrepreneurs and supporting SMEs and the national economy. In her concluding statement, Jasem wished Kuwait's leadership, citizens, and all those residing in Kuwait on the country's National and Liberation Days on February 25th and the 26th, respectively.

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KUWAIT: His Highness the Premier Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah chairs the Cabinet's meeting. — KUNA

## Authorities assigned to maintain food price stability

KUWAIT: The Cabinet assigned the Ministry of Commerce and Industry to coordinate with relevant bodies to put forward several proposals and recommendations to maintain stability of the food prices on local markets. During its weekly meeting, the Cabinet mourned the recent death of late Kuwaiti astronomer and meteorologist Dr Saleh Al Ojairi. The ministers also reviewed the latest political developments in the Arab region and world. The Cabinet voiced Kuwait's strong condemnation of the cowardly terrorist Houthi attack on a commercial airport in the Saudi city of Abha. It warned that the continuity of such terrorist attacks on civilian areas in the Saudi Kingdom risks undermining security and stability of the Kingdom and the whole region. It affirmed that these blatant violations of international law necessitate swift and serious actions from the international community to stop these criminal acts and bring its perpetrators to accountability. The Cabinet also renewed Kuwait's full support to the Kingdom in all measures it takes to retain security and stability. It also wished speedy recovery to the injured people. — KUNA

## Five hurt in Salmiya building blaze

KUWAIT: Five people including an infant suffered from smoke inhalation in fire reported in a Salmiya building yesterday evening. Firemen from the Bidaa and Salmiya fire stations rushed to the scene in response to an emergency call, and they immediately evacuated the building before battling the blaze. The five injured people were treated onsite, Kuwait Fire Force said, noting that an investigation was opened to reveal the cause of the fire.



## Photo of the Day



KUWAIT: A photo taken yesterday shows a commercial airline passenger plane flying above Kuwait City with the waxing gibbous moon in the foreground.

— Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

# Kuwait confirms 2,166 new COVID cases, single fatality

## Daily infections continue to decline as Kuwait eases restrictions

KUWAIT: The Kuwaiti Health Ministry yesterday reported 2,166 new coronavirus (COVID-19) cases, pushing the country's tally of confirmed cases so far to 606,035. The number of recoveries also went up by 5,239 to 571,142, the ministry's Spokesman Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad said, adding that recovery-to-infection ratio hit 94.2 percent. The spokesman added that a single death case due to the virus was confirmed over the last 24 hours, taking the mortality rate to 2,522 since the outbreak of the viral illness. In addition, 96 patients were in intensive care units (ICUs) as of yesterday, as there were 32,371 active cases while COVID-19 wards were home to 396 patients, Dr Sanad noted. Medical teams conducted 25,013 swab tests in the last 24 hours, bringing the country's overall tests so far to 7,357,729, he added.

Yesterday's figures bring yet another positive indication to the recovery of the health situation in Kuwait, where the Cabinet had recently abolished the majority of coronavirus restrictions, signaling the start of a new era and approach in dealing with the pandemic. The move comes after Kuwait's success of weathering a recent wave of infections and amid a growing optimism about the health situation in the country thanks to a spike in the number of vaccinated people.

In its weekly meeting on Monday, the Cabinet, headed by His Highness the Premier Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah, had agreed on cancelling social distancing rules in mosques, public means of transport, cinemas, theaters, and banquet halls. It also ended the ban on in-person events such as conferences, training courses, weddings, funerals, etc, according to a statement read out by Foreign Minister and Minister of Cabinet Affairs Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah following the Cabinet meeting. It allowed unvaccinated people to travel abroad and enter

malls and shopping centers.

The Cabinet, moreover, cancelled the requirement of weekly PCR tests for unvaccinated under 16-years-old students wishing to attend classes in person. It also restricted quarantine requirement for students whose PCR test came positive or those who showed virus symptoms. The Cabinet scrapped pre-departure, post-arrival PCR test and home quarantine requirements for arrivals who got three shots of the Kuwaiti-authorized vaccines. Meanwhile, the double-jabbed arrivals will be



Recovery to infection ratio at 94.2%



exempted from the pre-departure PCR test only as they still need to quarantine for seven days after entering the country but they can end the quarantine at any time if they presented a negative PCR test. Unimmunized arrivals, however, have to submit a certificate of a negative PCR test conducted within 72 hours before the departure and must quarantine at home for seven days and conduct a PCR test after the end of the quarantine period affirming that they are not infected. Unvaccinated young arrivals, who are under 16 years old, are exempted from these tests and quarantine measures. The Cabinet encouraged arrivals to get rapid antigen tests after entering the country if they had symptoms. If the result was positive, they have

to conduct a PCR test, it stressed.

It has also divided vaccinated people into two groups: fully vaccinated and not-fully vaccinated people: fully vaccinated people are those who took three shots of one of vaccines authorized in Kuwait; those who took the second shot less than nine months ago; and those who recovered from an infection in the past three months. Not fully vaccinated people are those who got two jabs more than nine months ago. It also identified unvaccinated people as those who did not take two shots of the vaccines authorized in Kuwait. The Cabinet said that the loosening of these restrictions would be effective as of Sunday 20 February. Nevertheless, it decided the return of civil servants to work from offices with full capacity as of Sunday March 13. — KUNA

## Dasman Diabetes Institute launches DasmanSwitch App

KUWAIT: Dasman Diabetes Institute (DDI), a research Institute established by the Kuwait Foundation for the Advancement of Sciences (KFAS), launched the DasmanSwitch health App for Android and iOS mobile phones in Al-Rawda and Hawally Co-Op yesterday. The DasmanSwitch application helps consumers in Kuwait make better food choices when shopping for packaged items. By simply scanning the barcode, the App will suggest healthier alternatives for unhealthy choices.

The event was inaugurated by Dr Qais Al-Duwairi, Director-General of DDI, Jonathan Gilbert, the Ambassador of Australia, and Dr Nawal Al Hamad, Deputy Director-General for Community Nutrition Affairs at the Public Authority for Food and Nutrition (PAFN).

Khaled Al-Saddani, Al-Rawda and Hawally Co-Op President, also gave a welcoming speech to the attendees, expressing their support to projects that improve health outcomes in the Kuwaiti population, such as the DasmanSwitch app. Dr Nawal Al Hamad, discussed the importance of adopting technology to improve people's health, and emphasized that the DasmanSwitch project will assist in understanding healthy food purchasing behavior.

Dr Saad Al-Sharrah, Head of the GeoHealth Lab at DDI, said, "The motivation behind starting this initiative is to empower consumers in Kuwait to



make healthier food choices while providing a personalized experience for people with diabetes that fits their nutritional needs." He added, "People nowadays became highly dependent on consuming processed foods with high calories, sugars, saturated fats and salt as well. The application aims to increase the level of health among consumers and enable them to lead a healthier lifestyle."

DasmanSwitch provides two viewing modes, a Health Star Rating that rates the product healthiness out of 5 stars or Traffic Light Labels that color-codes items based on health, 'red', 'yellow', and 'green'. Users can further personalize their search using the filter, or Switches: FoodSwitch (overall health), EnergySwitch (calorie management), SugarSwitch (less total sugar), or the DiabetesSwitch, specifically designed to help people with diabetes so that healthier options are sug-

gested based on their nutritional needs. The delegates were welcomed into the Co-Op to test the DasmanSwitch app on food products and see the alternatives available first-hand.

Dr Qais Al-Duwairi concluded the event by stating that "This application is the result of hard work that lasted for a long time, and it comes within the efforts and keenness of the Institute for the health of citizens and residents, by providing a free and easy-to-use application to help them choose the optimal food products for their health." He expressed his thanks and gratitude to Dr Khaled Al-Fadhel, Director General of KFAS, Professor Hilal Al-Sayer, Chairmen of the Board of Trustees, the Australian Ambassador, Dr Nawal Al-Hamad, and Al-Rawda and Hawally Co-Op for their fruitful cooperation in the inauguration of the DasmanSwitch and making it a success.



HK leader rules out China-style lockdown as coronavirus spreads

## Navalny faces extra decade in jail as prison trial begins

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KABUL: A member of the Taliban Badri 313 military unit (L) stands guard as people hold placards during a protest against the recent remarks by US President Joe Biden to freeze Afghanistan's assets in Kabul yesterday. —AFP

# Taliban declare Soviet exit holiday

## Thousands march to protest against Biden's decision to seize country's overseas assets

**KABUL:** The Taliban yesterday declared February 15 a national holiday to mark the anniversary of the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan—six months after they stormed into Kabul to topple the US-backed government. After invading on Christmas Eve in 1979, the Red Army pulled out a decade later having lost nearly 15,000 troops fighting Western-backed Mujahideen forces, precipitating a civil war that gave rise to the Taliban and their first stint in power from 1996 to 2001. Forty years of conflict has left Afghanistan one of the world's most impoverished nations, and the Taliban's return on August 15 plunged the country deeper into a humanitarian crisis the United Nations says threatens more than half its 38 million population.

Thousands marched through Afghan cities yesterday to protest against President Joe Biden's decision last week to seize almost half the country's overseas assets—about \$3.5 billion—as compensation for victims of the September 11, 2001 attacks carried out by Al-Qaeda that prompted the US-led invasion later that year. "If someone wants compensation, it should be Afghans," said Mir Afghan Safi, the chairman of the country's forex traders association, as he marched in Kabul. "Their two towers have been destroyed, but all our districts and all of our country have been destroyed."

The Taliban, who said they wanted good relations with Washington after the US withdrawal in August, called the asset seizure "theft". Many

Afghans have agreed, including those in exile after fleeing the country to avoid the Taliban's hardline rule. Some in the crowd chanted "death to America", and "death to Joe Biden".

The Taliban warned late Monday they would be forced to reconsider their policy towards the United States unless Washington releases the assets. "The 9/11 attacks had nothing to do

“  
If someone wants compensation, it should be Afghans  
”

with Afghanistan," the group's deputy spokesman said in a statement.

### Rights eroded

It is not clear what action the Taliban could take, but they have previously said they would allow thousands of Afghans who worked for the United States and other Western powers to leave the country for promised sanctuary abroad. The Soviets introduced laws giving women rights in education,

work and marriage, benefiting mainly those in cities. The United States introduced similar measures over the last 20 years, but these have been drastically eroded since the hardline Islamists' return.

Women are effectively barred from most government employment, while schools for teenaged girls are shut across much of the country. The Taliban have also cracked down hard on protests against their rule, including detaining women activists, prompting strong protests from the United Nations and rights groups. "The Soviet withdrawal was not an achievement but only the start of crises," said exiled Afghan analyst Ahmad Saeedi.

"Afghanistan is again at the brink of failure with challenges only increasing," he told AFP. He said the Taliban had "lost a lot of time" in the six months since taking power. "Because of this situation they are also not able to form an inclusive government... and that is expected to increase pressure on them from within the country and outside."

While signs of the US-led occupation are still starkly apparent on the streets of Kabul—from the weapons the Taliban plundered as they swept to victory, to the concrete barriers erected to try to stop their 20-year insurgency—there is little evidence of the Soviet era. Still, veteran Hayatullah Ahmadzai, who fought with the Mujahideen against Moscow's might, says the Taliban are a direct consequence. After the Soviets left, the 74-year-old told AFP, the situation "ended up in disorder, giving birth to the Taliban". —AFP

## Fake news flooding troubled Sahel region

**BAMAKO:** Fake news is flooding Africa's conflict-ridden Sahel, according to experts, sowing discord and confusion in the increasingly volatile region. Doctored news bulletins and altered photos often spread like wildfire on social networks in the impoverished region, where access to traditional media is patchy.

Jihadists are waging a brutal insurgency across much of the vast region, having first emerged in Mali in 2012 before spreading to Burkina Faso and Niger. Thousands of people have died and around two million have been displaced by the conflict despite the presence of thousands of French troops.

Fake news has thrived on the turmoil, notably videos and photos that are altered with the aim of casting France or regional West African alliances in a poor light. Experts say the phenomenon is becoming even more frequent. "There was a lull in the production and circulation of fake news for a while, but it has picked up again," said Abdoulaye Guindo, coordinator of the Malian news website Bembere.

One recent fake video appeared to show rioters sacking Burkina Faso's embassy in Mali, which was portrayed as a reaction to Burkina Faso's support for sanctions on Mali from the West Africa bloc ECOWAS. In reality, the footage showed a protest in Angola.

Caroline Taix, the head of AFP's fact-checking service for Africa, said there has been a "sharp increase" in fake news in Mali since October. A similar jump has occurred in other Sahel countries beginning this year, she added. While it is unclear what is driving the surge, it comes at a time of heightened political tensions across the Sahel.

Mali's relations with its international partners—particularly France—began to deteriorate after the military seized power in 2020. Then the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) imposed a trade embargo and closed borders with Mali in January over delayed elections. Neighbouring Burkina Faso's military also seized power in a putsch last month, raising fears of Sahel-wide instability.

### 'At odds with reality'

It is almost impossible to quantify the reach of fake news in the Sahel, with much of the content forwarded on WhatsApp. Nor is it easy to identify its origins. Many of the videos circulating mimic news broadcasts, and they often feature a robotic voice criticising French troops or supporting the intervention of Russian soldiers.

In one recent example, a fake news broadcast claimed that France was bribing political parties to oppose Mali's military junta. Malian researcher Baba Dakono told AFP that the phenomenon allows opinions to be formed "on the basis of information that is at odds with reality". Such false information "could lead to regrettable situations where people are taken to task, lynched," he added. An official at Niger's presidency, who requested anonymity, said that recent months had also seen a rise in more slickly edited fake news packages, as opposed to more obviously doctored or falsely labelled versions of existing footage. One African diplomat stationed in Bamako, who also requested anonymity, told AFP the recent flood of fake news was part of an "information war". —AFP

## Sudanese protesters killed in crackdown on anti-coup rallies

**KHARTOUM:** Sudanese security forces shot dead two protesters on Monday in a crackdown on rallies against last year's military coup and the arrest of scores of pro-democracy activists, medics said. Regular mass protests have rocked the troubled northeast African nation since an October 25 military takeover led by army chief Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, and the deaths on Monday take the number killed in the unrest to at least 81.

The power grab derailed a fragile power-sharing agreement between the army and civilians negotiated after the 2019 ouster of longtime autocrat Omar al-Bashir. On Monday, thousands rallied in the capital Khartoum and its twin city of Omdurman, AFP reporters said, while protests also took place in the eastern city of Port Sudan and in the western Darfur region, according to witnesses.

In Khartoum, protests had begun with crowds waving national flags and carrying red balloons, as the rallies coincided with Valentine's Day. "Today is the nation's love day," one banner read. Some shouted slogans demanding the authorities release activists who had been arrested, while others carried pictures of protesters killed.

"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. But as crowds tried to approach the presidential palace, security forces fired volleys of tear gas canisters.

One protester was killed after he was shot in "the neck and chest by live rounds by coup forces" in Khartoum, the independent Central Committee of Sudan Doctors said. Another protester was later killed in Omdurman after being struck by "live bullets to the left shoulder which penetrated the chest", the committee said.

### Hunger strike

Sudanese police said in a statement that at least 102 police were "severely wounded" while one suffered "a gunshot to the foot." It also noted that protesters have "smashed the front" of the parliament building, set a fire near an adjacent gas station, and damaged several vehicles and a mosque in Omdurman.

Damage was also reported to several parts of the Ministry of Youth and Sports in the city, and items belonging to security guards were looted, it said, adding that police only "exercised the reasonable legitimate force" in response. While Sudanese forces have repeatedly denied opening fire on protesters, Human Rights Watch has quoted witnesses detailing how the security forces have used both "live ammunition" and fired tear gas canisters "directly" at crowds, a tactic that can be deadly at close quarters.

The authorities have also arrested scores of activists accused of belonging to the "resistance committees" that have been instrumental in organising protests. "The number of people detained arbitrarily and without criminal charges has exceeded 100," the



OMDURMAN, Sudan: Sudanese protesters chant slogans as they march during a demonstration calling for civilian rule and denouncing the military administration, in the capital Khartoum's twin city of Omdurman. —AFP

Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA) said Monday. In Khartoum's Soba prison, detainees launched a hunger strike to protest against prison conditions, the Central Committee of Sudan Doctors said. "Some have been detained without facing charges, and others still await investigations," the medics said in a statement.

On Sunday, authorities arrested Mohamed al-Fekki, a civilian former member of the ruling Sovereign Council, which led the country under the now stalled 2019 power-sharing agreement. Last week, authorities arrested ex-minister Khaled Omar Youssef and Wagdi Saleh, the spokesman of Sudan's main civilian bloc, the Forces for Freedom and Change (FFC).

Those arrests came just a day after

they joined an FFC delegation for talks with UN special representative Volker Perthes, as part of efforts to resolve Sudan's deepening crisis. The October military power grab, the latest coup in Sudan since its independence, has sparked widespread international condemnation and punitive measures — but authorities have shown little inclination to compromise.

On Monday, Burhan met the Emirati ambassador to Sudan, who handed him an official invitation from President Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al-Nahyan to visit the United Arab Emirates, according to an official statement by Sudan's Sovereign Council. The UAE has, along with the US and Britain, called for the restoration of the civilian-led transition in Sudan. —AFP

## International

# Navalny faces extra decade in jail as prison trial begins

## Navalny allies have called on Scholz to raise the fate of the politician

**POKROV, Russia:** President Vladimir Putin's main political opponent, Alexei Navalny, went on trial from inside prison yesterday, in a new fraud case that could see his jail time extended by more than a decade. A video link showed Navalny dressed in prison uniform at the makeshift court inside his penal colony, smiling and embracing his wife, Yuliya Navalnaya, while guards stood either side of them.

Rights groups have criticised authorities for holding the closed-door hearing inside the maximum-security prison in Pokrov, some 100 kilometres (60 miles) east of Moscow. Navalny said he was being tried in prison because Russian officials are "scared of what I will say."

"I have not yet been found guilty in this case, but they keep me in uniform so a grandmother watching on television will think 'well, he's in prison anyway'", he said. Navalny's allies decried the trial as a sham. He has already been behind bars for a year, after surviving a poison attack that he blames on the Kremlin.

He is currently serving a two-and-a-half year sentence, but the fresh fraud charges could see his time behind bars significantly extended. The new fraud case against Navalny was launched in December 2020, while the 45-year-old was recovering in Germany after narrowly surviving a nerve agent poisoning. Investigators accuse Navalny of stealing for person-

al use more than \$4.7 million in donations that were given to his political organisations. The charges carry a maximum penalty of 10 years in prison.

### Allies say timed with Ukraine crisis

The start of the trial comes during a week of intensive talks between Russia and the West over Ukraine, with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz the latest leader due in Moscow for talks with Putin. Navalny allies have called on Scholz to raise the fate of the politician in his talks with Putin yesterday. "Germany stands for peace and justice," his spokesperson Kira Yarmysh wrote on Twitter. "And now its stance on this is more important than ever."

Navalny was treated by doctors in Berlin and Germany blamed his near-fatal poisoning on the Kremlin. The country's former chancellor, Angela Merkel, used her final visit to Moscow last year to ask Putin to free Navalny.

Maria Pevchikh, another key Navalny ally, suggested that the trial was "purposefully scheduled to coincide with the most tense week of the Ukrainian crisis." "They are planning to extend his sentence for another 15 years while everyone's distracted with something bigger," she wrote on Twitter.

Amnesty International described the hearing as a "sham trial, attended by prison guards rather than the media." "It's obvious that the Russian authorities



POKROV, Vladimir Oblast: Journalists watch live broadcast of the court hearing from the press room of the penal colony N2, on the first day of the new trial of Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny, in the town of Pokrov yesterday. —AFP

intend to ensure that Navalny doesn't leave prison any time soon," it said on Monday.

Navalny also faces up to six months in prison if convicted of a contempt of court charge. Navalny's poisoning and arrest sparked widespread condem-

nation abroad as well as sanctions from Western capitals. After his arrest, Navalny's political organisations across the country were declared "extremist" and shuttered, while many key aides fled Russia fearing prosecution. —AFP

### News in brief

#### Interpol issues warrants

**BANGKOK:** Interpol has issued two "red notice" arrest warrants for a pair of Canadians over the suspected murder of an Indian gangster outside a luxury villa on Thailand's Phuket island. Jimi 'Slice' Sandhu—whose nickname comes from a distinctive scar on his face—was gunned down on February 5 after having flown in on a private jet from Malaysia last month, according to Thai police and local media reports. Following a Thai police investigation, Interpol issued non-binding arrest warrants or "red notices" for Canadian citizens Matthew Leandre Ovide Dupre and Gene Karl Lahrkamp, both 36, in connection with Sandhu's murder. "I think this case is unique," said Khemmarin Hassiri, commander of the foreign affairs division of the Royal Thai Police, confirming the Interpol notices issued late Monday. "This is not just a hit and run, they have masterminded it, they would have someone who supported them in Canada and Thailand," he told AFP, adding the investigation into the death of the 32-year-old was ongoing. —AFP

#### Turkey jails reporters

**ISTANBUL:** Two journalists convicted of violating Turkey's state secrets law said yesterday they were returning to prison after losing an appeal against their jail sentences. The 2020 trial concerned a news report alleging that a Turkish intelligence officer was killed in Libya after Ankara provided support to the UN-recognised government in Tripoli. The Istanbul court in September 2020 sentenced Aydin Keser, Ferhat Celik and Murat Agirel, who works for the Yenicag daily, to four years and eight months in jail each on charges of violating the Turkish Intelligence Agency (MIT) law. It sentenced then OdaTV editor-in-chief Baris Pehlivan and reporter Hulya Kilinc to three years and nine months each on the same charges. Agirel and Pehlivan tweeted yesterday that they were returning to jail. "A third time... We're here, we're going... Goodbye for now," Pehlivan tweeted, with a selfie in front of what appeared to be Istanbul's main Caglayan courthouse. "I am going to prison again because I called the sons who were martyred for the homeland martyrs," Agirel tweeted. "People who cannot deny anything I have written until now think they can silence me with injustice," he added. —AFP

#### Grisly killings stoke cartel fears

**DURAN, Ecuador:** The bodies of two men hung from a pedestrian bridge in southwestern Ecuador stunned the country Monday and raised the spectre of Mexican cartels there. The victims were killed, tied up and suspended by the same rope on a pedestrian bridge in Duran, a city near Guayaquil, Ecuador's biggest city, police said. As the South American country faces an upsurge in violence linked to drug trafficking, the national press has stressed the singularity of the incident. The two men had been missing since February 11, according to police, and an investigation was underway into their abduction. The crime could be linked to "the capture of seven tons of cocaine" Sunday in the port of Guayaquil, the commander of the zone, Marcelo Cortez, said. One of the victims has already been identified by the media as Carlos Alberto Escobar. He was 34 years old and was recognized by a tattoo. —AFP

## US asks Honduras to extradite ex-president

**TEGUCIGALPA:** The United States has asked Honduras to extradite former president Juan Orlando Hernandez who is suspected of drug trafficking, a Honduran official told AFP on Monday. Police special forces were seen encircling Hernandez's residence in the capital Tegucigalpa on Monday evening, while the official, who declined to be named, said the former president is currently in Honduras.

Hernandez, a former US ally who left office last month, has been linked to drug trafficking operations by New York prosecutors. Earlier, the Honduran foreign ministry had said on Twitter that an "official communication from the US Embassy" was sent to the Supreme Court formally asking for the provisional arrest of a "Honduran politician" for extradition.

The ministry did not name the politician. News channel CNN broadcast images of the document, which made a "formal request for provisional arrest for the purpose of extradition to the United States of America of Juan Orlando Hernandez Alvarado." AFP has learned that the Supreme Court will meet in an emergency session on Tuesday to appoint a judge to consider the request.

Speaking to a local TV channel, Hernandez's attorney Hermes Ramirez said the police deployment constituted an "attack" on the ex-president's rights as it they had prevented advisers from coming to the residence. Ramirez said no arrest warrant

had been served to Hernandez, who has repeatedly denied any involvement in drug trafficking.

During his eight years in office, Hernandez cultivated close ties with Washington, though his tenure was dogged by accusations of corruption, and of his relatives and alleged associates having links to the drug trade. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken revealed last month that Hernandez had been black-listed last year, with his name added to a register of people denied entry to the United States for corrupt or anti-democratic action in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras.

"The United States is advancing transparency and accountability in Central America by making public visa restrictions against Honduras' former president, Juan Orlando Hernandez, on account of corrupt actions," Blinken tweeted on February 7. "No one is above the law."

### Immunity?

Hernandez's lawyer said the former president has immunity, however, because he has joined the Guatemala-based Central American Parliament. The regional body, called Parlacen, offers its members immunity from prosecution.

Hernandez joined Parlacen hours after leaving office on January 27, when leftist Xiomara Castro was sworn in and vowed to transform the "bankrupt" country she intended to turn into a "socialist and democratic state." Even though Hernandez supported US anti-drug campaigns, traffickers caught in the United States claimed to have paid bribes to the president's inner circle.

Alleged associate Geovanny Fuentes Ramirez was sentenced by the United States this month to



TEGUCIGALPA: Members of the police special forces stand outside the home of former Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernandez in Tegucigalpa yesterday. The United States has asked Honduras to extradite its former president Juan Orlando Hernandez, who left office last month and is suspected of drug trafficking. —AFP

life in prison for drug trafficking. In March 2021, Hernandez's brother, former Honduran congressman Tony Hernandez, was also sentenced to life imprisonment in the United States for drug trafficking.

Blinken said in a statement last week that "according to multiple, credible media reports" Hernandez "has engaged in significant corruption by committing or facilitating acts of corruption and narco-trafficking and using the proceeds of illicit activity to facilitate political campaigns." Hernandez has denied all charges and claims the accusations are a part of a revenge plot from the same drug lords that his government captured or extradited to the United States. —AFP

## Malian refugees building 'future' in Niger

**OUALLAM, Niger:** The day breaks, and many of the thousands of Malian refugees in Ouallam are already up and about. Some have left for the market to sell animals and handicrafts, while others are getting to work in a local brickyard. Barefoot and bare-chested children line up in front of a couscous vendor while school children, bags on their backs, head off to class.

Their refugee camp, located about a hundred (60 miles) kilometres north of Niamey in southwestern Niger, is a haven for around 6,000 people. They are just a small number of the tens of thousands of Malians who have fled jihadist attacks to take shelter in their deeply impoverished neighbour.

But as time passes, many refugees see little or no hope of returning to their homes and want to integrate into local communities.

## Calls grow to free Nicaragua prisoners, Ortega opponent dies

**MANAGUA:** Calls mounted Monday for dozens of opposition figures jailed in Nicaragua to be freed after the death of a would-be presidential candidate fueled fears for the health and safety of others. Hugo Torres, a 73-year-old former guerrilla companion of now-President Daniel Ortega, died in detention Saturday after concerns were repeatedly expressed for his well-being.

"We have wandered enough and suffered enough—we are finally going to settle down here and give our children a future," said Hama Dawa.

Agaichatou, a baby on her back, paused for a moment from pounding millet for the evening meal. "Go back to Mali?" asked the young mother from Menala in Mali's northeast. "I've almost nothing there now—my children were born in Niger, one of them goes to school here. Their future is here."

### Safety

"Returning to Mali is not on the agenda," Mahamadou Seguid, a spokesperson for the refugees at Ouallam, told AFP. "For the moment we are building our future here. We are well assisted and it is safe."

More than 61,000 Malians are in Niger after fleeing northern Mali a decade ago when the region fell under the control of jihadist groups. The UN and the Nigerien authorities are postponing their return indefinitely because of persistent attacks by jihadist groups, including the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS).

Other inmates, too, are in dire straits, according to family members and rights defenders who say the prisoners are malnourished, losing weight, teeth and memory, and getting weaker by the day. "Many are facing a serious risk to health and life," former Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) president Antonia Urrejola said on Twitter.

The European Union, via external affairs spokesman Peter Stano, called for "the immediate and unconditional release of all political prisoners... subjected to inhumane detention conditions" in Nicaragua. And US State Department assistant secretary Brian Nichols said that "continuing to detain prisoners under these conditions, especially the elderly, is unacceptable. We



OUALLAM, Niger: Filippo Grandi, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees visits on February 2, 2022 a UN site where thousands of Malian refugees live in Ouallam. More than 61,000 Malians have been stuck in Niger since they fled northern Mali. —AFP

"We are following the developments in Mali with some concern," UN refugee chief Filippo Grandi, who visited Ouallam last week, told AFP. "We hope they will become more positive, because without peace there will be no return of refugees."

Laouan Magagi, Niger's minister for humanitarian work, agreed. "With the worsening of security in the three-border area (where the frontiers of Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso converge), the conditions for their return are obviously not there," he said. —AFP

urge their immediate release."

Costa Rican Foreign Minister Rodolfo Solano expressed "concern" about the health of the remaining detainees and in a statement urged Nicaragua to allow a visit by representatives of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.

The Organization of American States (OAS) said it "categorically condemns the persecution and arbitrary detention" of Nicaraguans and urged the immediate release of all political prisoners. "The General Secretariat of the OAS considers the fact of keeping political prisoners, with terminal illnesses and without necessary medical assistance, an abominable act, violating their fundamental rights," it said in a statement. —AFP

## International

# HK leader rules out China-style lockdown as coronavirus spreads

## 3,000 flats will be converted for quarantine use

**HONG KONG:** Hong Kong's leader yesterday said she would not impose a mainland China-style hard lockdown as the city faces its worst coronavirus wave to date, even as she vowed no switch to living with COVID-19.

The comments came as hospitals began to buckle under the strain of rising infections with at least two medical facilities placing patients in beds outside their entrances. No place in the world has managed to return to zero COVID cases after such an outbreak except mainland China, which has imposed citywide lockdowns and mass stay-at-home orders when even a handful of cases are detected.



### Long queues of people waiting to get tested

Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam ruled out that approach. "We have no plans whatsoever to impose a complete, wholesale lockdown," she told reporters. But she also rejected calls from some public health experts and business figures to switch to a mitigation strategy saying zero-Covid remained her administration's goal.

"We have to continue to fight this anti-epidemic battle. Surrendering to the virus is not an option," Lam said. Authorities will continue to use smaller-scale district lockdowns, with testing of all residents in housing blocks where cases are detected, she added.

For more than two years, Hong Kong has followed

China's strategy, pursuing zero virus cases with largely closed borders, lengthy quarantines, contact tracing and stringent social distancing laws.

But the new wave fuelled by the highly transmissible Omicron virus variant has battered the city's capacity for testing, quarantine and treatment, and is testing the policy like never before. More than 1,600 new daily infections were reported yesterday, and the figure hovered over 1,000 for much of last week. Local researchers have warned that new daily cases could exceed 28,000 a day by March.

### Supply crunch

Before this outbreak, Hong Kong treated all coronavirus patients in dedicated isolation wards, but beds at hospitals and a temporary mass treatment facility near the airport have quickly filled. Close contacts of virus cases were earlier sent to a government quarantine camp, but many are now being told to isolate at home. Lam said 3,000 flats in newly constructed public housing blocks will be converted for quarantine use and that officials are seeking 10,000 hotel rooms too.

Hong Kong's number two official John Lee said on Tuesday that he would self-isolate at home "for prudence's sake" after a domestic helper working at his home was found to be a preliminary positive case.

Pro-Beijing lawmaker and executive councillor Regina Ip also announced she would work from home after her driver tested preliminarily positive.

Last week saw long queues of people waiting to get tested, and many who tested positive reported being turned away from hospitals.

Hong Kong has sourced 100 million rapid test kits and will distribute a million of them a day to high-risk



**HONG KONG:** Police (R) wearing personal protective equipment (PPE) stand as people wait outside the Pok Oi hospital in Hong Kong yesterday, as the city faces its worst coronavirus wave to date. — AFP

individuals once they arrive, Lam said yesterday.

Scenes from the city in recent days resembled the early phase of the pandemic, as shoppers cleared out supermarket shelves to stock up on food and essentials.

Hong Kong imports most of its fresh food and pro-

duce from mainland China, and vegetable prices spiked last week due to a virus-related supply disruption. Lam yesterday said her administration was recruiting more cross-border drivers and will look into waterborne freight as an option. — AFP

## Halt imminent drug executions, UN tells Singapore

**GENEVA:** The United Nations yesterday urged Singapore to halt the imminent executions of two men held for drug offences—and furthermore end its use of the death penalty altogether. The UN rights office voiced alarm at the case of Pausi Jefridin and Roslan Bakar, who were both arrested in 2008 and convicted two years later on drug trafficking charges.

The men have been on death row for the past 12 years and were reportedly informed only last Wednesday that they would be executed one week later, on February 16. "The use of the death penalty for drug-related offences is incompatible with international human rights law," UN rights office spokeswoman Ravina Shamdasani told reporters in Geneva.

She stressed that capital punishment was only permitted under international law for the "most serious crimes, which is interpreted as crimes of extreme gravity involving intentional killing." Making matters worse in this case, Shamdasani said, were concerns that one or both men have intellectual disabilities. She said Jefridin, reportedly a Malaysian national, had been shown to have an IQ score of just 67. She also lamented that Jefridin's family, based in Malaysia, had struggled to visit him due to COVID-19 restrictions.

A last-minute appeal yesterday was rejected, she said, adding that if the executions go ahead as planned on Wednesday, they will be the first in the city-state since November 2019. Malaysian rights group Lawyers for Liberty said another legal challenge was lodged late yesterday in Singapore, and urged the city-state not to proceed with the executions until that appeal has been heard. Singapore, which has some of the world's toughest drugs laws, insists the death penalty is an effective deterrent against crime. Shamdasani however stressed that "globally, the death penalty has not been proven to be an effective deterrent."

At the same time, she warned, individuals on death row, as well as their families, have suffered a range of human rights violations. "We call on the government to commute their sentences, and to reform Singapore's legislation to bring an end to the imposition of the death penalty," Amnesty International's Singapore researcher Rachel Chhoa-Howard agreed, saying the planned executions this week were "appalling." —AFP

## Indonesia teacher gets life in prison for rape of 13 students

**BANDUNG, Indonesia:** An Indonesian court yesterday sentenced a teacher to life in prison for the rape of 13 students, in a case that has drawn national attention to sexual abuse in some of the country's religious boarding schools. Herry Wirawan, 36, was found guilty of raping 13 female students — all minors — and impregnating at least eight of them by Bandung district court in West Java. The revelations sparked national outrage, with a senior government official saying President Joko Widodo has paid special attention to the case.

The pattern of abuse came to light when the family of a female student reported Wirawan to the police for raping and impregnating their teenage daughter last year.

During the trial, it was revealed he had raped the children — many from poor families attending the school on scholarships — over five years.

Prosecutors requested chemical castration and the death penalty for the accused, who asked the judge for leniency to allow him to raise his children. Wirawan arrived in court in handcuffs and kept his head down as judge Yohannes Purnomo Suryo Adi sentenced him to life in prison. The court said restitution for the victims will be paid by the government. The chairman of

Indonesia's Child Protection Commission said yesterday's verdict meant "justice for the victims has been served".

### 'There will be more'

But a family member of one of the victims told AFP he was "very disappointed" that Wirawan did not receive a harsher sentence and warned that leniency would embolden other abusers. "This wound will never be healed as long as we live, maybe until we die. The pain we are feeling is indescribable. We don't feel heard," said Lidmat Dijaya, an uncle of one of the 13 victims.

"If the sentence is lenient like this, there will be more Islamic teachers who will abuse children," he added. "We will let God as the highest judge punish him. We can only pray because those judges failed to represent our hurt and pain." More than 25,000 Islamic boarding schools — known as "pesantren" — are dotted across Indonesia, with nearly five million students living and studying in the dorms.

Teaching is often regimented — students attend regular classes during the day and continue Koranic studies and Islamic teachings into the evening. The Bandung rape case has shone a spotlight on the problem of sexual abuse in some of the schools, with 14 out of the 18 cases reported to the Child Protection Commission last year taking place in pesantren. Last year two teachers at a boarding school in South Sumatra were arrested for sexually abusing 26 male students over the course of a year.

And in 2020, a boarding school teacher in East Java was sentenced to 15 years in prison for sexually assaulting 15 female students. —AFP



**BANDUNG, Indonesia:** Indonesian teacher Herry Wirawan (C) is escorted prior to his trial at a court in Bandung, West Java yesterday, where he was later sentenced to life in prison for the rape of 13 students, all minors. — AFP

## China-born billionaire denies Australian election interference

**SYDNEY:** A Chinese-Australian billionaire yesterday denied being the unidentified "puppeteer" accused by Australia's top spy of trying to buy off election candidates on behalf of a foreign power. Property developer Chau Chak Wing said allegations that he was the unnamed person that funnelled hundreds of thousands of dollars to potential candidates to try to influence an election were "baseless and reckless".

Mike Burgess, director-general of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation, recently set off a firestorm of speculation when he sketched the rough outlines of a foreign interference plot led by one shad-

owy individual. "I'll call this person 'the puppeteer'," he said during an annual threat assessment speech, without offering a name or saying which election was being influenced.

Opposition senator Kimberley Kitching on Monday used parliamentary privilege to declare the "puppeteer" was Chau — who has repeatedly and successfully used Australia's harsh defamation laws to sue local media over similar claims.

"I am a businessman and philanthropist. I have never had any involvement or interest in interfering with the democratic election process in Australia," Chau said in a statement issued through his lawyers.

Chau has been accused multiple times by parliamentarians and local media of covertly working for China's ruling Communist Party, a charge he has repeatedly denied.

One case related to former UN president of the General Assembly, John Ashe, who was accused of accepting bribes from Chinese businesspeople seeking to influence the world body.

"It is always unfortunate when elected representatives use the shield of parliamentary privilege as a

platform to vilify and attack Australian citizens without producing a shred of evidence," Chau said.

Chau invited Kitching to provide evidence and repeat the claims "outside the parliament" where she would not be protected from defamation claims.

Australia's moves to deter foreign interference, with a raft of tough new laws, and more vocal public pronouncements by spy agencies have angered Beijing and fuelled a breakdown in relations between the two countries.

The issue of foreign interference has become a hot-button issue ahead of Australia's elections expected in May. The conservative government has been accused of weaponising intelligence by leaking allegations that prospective Labor opposition candidates were targeted by the "puppeteer".

Prime Minister Scott Morrison — whose party trails heavily in the polls — has repeatedly claimed, without evidence, that Labor leader Anthony Albanese is Beijing's preferred choice in the election. "They want to appease when it comes to China," Morrison has claimed. "When it just comes to these issues and keeping Australians safe, they're just soft." —AFP



Chau Chak Wing

# Business

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 16, 2022

## Zain Saudi Arabia approves sale of its 8,069 tower infrastructure for SAR 3 billion to PIF

**Bader Al-Kharafi: The transaction, a first-of-its kind in KSA, creates enormous shareholder value and gives Zain KSA greater financial muscle to invest in cutting-edge technologies, innovation and customer experience**

**RIYADH:** Zain Group announces that the Board of Directors of Zain Saudi Arabia (Zain KSA) has approved the binding offer submitted by the Kingdom's Public Investment Fund (PIF)-led consortium to acquire a 80 percent majority stake in Zain KSA's 8,069 passive tower infrastructure for a value of SAR 3.026 billion (\$807 million).

The consortium offer will see the PIF acquiring a 60 percent stake, Sultan Holding Company acquiring 10 percent, and Prince Saud bin Fahd bin Abdulaziz acquiring 10 percent. Zain KSA will own the remaining 20 percent stake, with the PIF having a call option to buy this remaining 20 percent for a specified amount.

Zain KSA will sell its passive, physical towers infrastructure and retain all other wireless communication antennas, software, technology, and intellectual property with respect to managing its telecom network.

This transaction follows an in-depth evaluation to complete due diligence and ensure compliance with the Kingdom's regulatory requirements and obtain the necessary approvals, and is in line with the strategy to develop the local Information and Communication Technology (ICT) sector and localize the related technologies in the Kingdom.

This step will enhance the efforts of both Zain KSA and PIF to upgrade the



Bader Al-Kharafi, Zain Vice Chairman and Group CEO, and Zain KSA Vice-Chairman



**"The unlocking of capital to focus on higher yielding digital investments and optimization of infrastructure that creates internal efficiencies is a core element of Zain's transformational '4Sight' strategy, empowering Zain to enhance the meaningful connectivity we provide the communities, businesses and governments we serve," Bader Al-Kharafi**

- The Kingdom's Public Investment Fund (PIF) lead consortium acquires 80 percent of Zain KSA's fixed tower infrastructure
- The proceeds of this sale will enhance the company's financial liquidity and profitability
- The consortium offer will see the PIF acquiring a 60% stake, Sultan Holding Company acquiring 10%, and Prince Saud bin Fahd bin Abdulaziz acquiring 10%.
- KSA will own the remaining 20% stake, with the PIF having a call option to buy this remaining 20% for a specified amount.

Kingdom's ICT ecosystem, by maximizing the efficiency of the tower infrastructure through the combined expertise of Zain KSA and the PIF to enhance the sector's efficiency and financial feasibility.

Bader Al-Kharafi, Zain Vice Chairman and Group CEO, and Zain KSA Vice-Chairman, commented, "This transaction creates enormous shareholder value and gives Zain KSA greater financial muscle to invest in cutting-edge technologies and innovation that enhance the customer mobile and data experience. We congratulate the Kingdom's leadership, the PIF and regulatory authorities for their wisdom in creating an environment that raises the telecom sector to new heights in line with Saudi Vision 2030."

Al-Kharafi added, "The unlocking of capital to focus on higher yielding digital

investments and optimization of infrastructure that creates internal efficiencies is a core element of Zain's transformational '4Sight' strategy, empowering Zain to enhance the meaningful connectivity we provide the communities, businesses and governments we serve. I also wish to recognize the concerted and joint efforts of the Zain KSA board of directors and the Zain Group and Zain KSA teams in finalizing this first-of-its-kind transaction in KSA with the visionary PIF-led consortium."

Al-Kharafi concluded, "The proceeds of this sale will enhance the company's financial liquidity and profitability." The completion of this transaction in Saudi Arabia, follows similar pioneering tower deals Zain has completed in its operations in Kuwait and Jordan.

## Boursa Kuwait achieves net profits of KD 15.9m for 2021

### BoD recommends distribution of cash dividends of 65 fils per share

**KUWAIT:** In a meeting of its Board of Directors yesterday, Boursa Kuwait announced net profits (attributable to equity holders of Boursa Kuwait) of almost KD 15.9 million for the financial year ended 31 December 2021, an increase of approximately 26.3 percent from 2020 net profits of KD 12.6 million, adjusted for the one-time gain on business combination of KD 13.2 million, which came as a result of the re-measurement of Boursa Kuwait's previous shareholdings in Kuwait Clearing Company (KCC) during the third quarter of 2020 upon the conversion of the investment in KCC from an associate to a subsidiary.

The company also announced that its total operating revenue came in at KD 31 million for 2021, an increase of approximately 39.7 percent compared to the same period in 2020, when the total operating revenue was approximately KD 22.2 million. Net operating profit also increased by 56.5 percent, from KD 11.8 million to KD 18.5 million.

Meanwhile, Boursa Kuwait's total assets stood at approximately KD 110.4 million as of 31 December 2021, which is a 6 percent increase versus the 2020 total of KD 104.2 million. Boursa Kuwait's shareholder equity increased 14.8 percent from KD 52.8 million on 31 December 2020 to KD 60.6 million as of 31 December 2021.

In line with the successful performance and commitment to deliver superior returns to shareholders, Boursa Kuwait's Board of Directors has recommended the distribution of cash dividends of 65 fils per share for the financial year ended 31 December 2021 (subject to approval of the General Assembly and other regulatory entities).

Boursa Kuwait Chairman Hamad Meshari Al-Humaidhi commented: "We are pleased to have recorded profits of approximately KD 15.9 million for 2021, with a marked improvement in key performance indicators, exhibiting Boursa Kuwait's financial strength, its flexible operational model, as well as its innovative and adaptable strategy. The company continues to support the national economy and remains committed to contributing to the New Kuwait 2035 Vision and solidify its position as a leading stock exchange in the region, and Kuwait as a world-renowned investment destination."

Al-Humaidhi added: "Boursa Kuwait also remains committed to the implementation of environmental, social and governance policies and principles as part of its Corporate Sustainability strategy, which is in line with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). I would like to thank

- Total operating revenue came in at KD 31 million, an increase of 39.7%
- Net operating profit totaled KD 18.5 million, an increase of 56.5%
- Total assets stood at KD 110.4 million as of 31 December 2021



Hamad Meshari Al-Humaidhi



Mohammed Saud Al-Osaimi

my fellow Board members, the Executive Management team, and all Boursa Kuwait employees for their invaluable efforts to enhance the company and the capital market."

The Kuwaiti capital market's market capitalization in 2021 was around KD 41.4 billion, an increase of around 28.5 percent from 2020. Trading volume increased by more than 57.9 percent from 53.6 billion to around 84.6 billion transactions, while traded value saw an increase of around 26.6 percent, from around KD 10.8 billion to about KD 13.6 billion.

The Premier Market's capitalization came in at KD 31.1 billion, with almost 21.7 billion shares traded at a value of KD 8 billion as a result of over 1.1 million transactions, while the Main Market's capitalization came in at KD 10.3 billion, with over 62.9 billion shares traded at a value of over KD 5.6 billion as a result of over 1.9 million transactions.

Mohammed Saud Al-Osaimi, Boursa Kuwait's Chief Executive Officer also commented on the company's financials for 2021, saying, "Boursa Kuwait has seen a marked increase in trading value and volume, due to increased activity in the 'Main Market' which was complemented by the listing of three new companies in it, which is undoubtedly a reflection of the increasing confidence of investors from all over the world. The company also increased its product line in 2021 with the introduction of

Tradable Rights Issues and collaborated with the Capital Markets Authority to introduce Margin Lending and Trading, in an effort to diversify its financing tools and offer more opportunities for investors to turn a profit."

Al-Osaimi added, "Boursa Kuwait continues to promote the Kuwaiti capital market, highlighting its unique value proposition and the investment opportunities it has to offer. In 2021, we held several virtual corporate days, which attracted over 20 listed Kuwaiti companies, to provide insights and access to the institutional investor community through facilitated sessions and one-on-one meetings. We continue to develop and upgrade our infrastructure and business environment and remain steadfast in the development of a strong financial market with high liquidity and credibility, enhancing the position of the exchange regionally and globally, and playing a vital role in the transformation of Kuwait into an international investment destination."

The company continues to implement many steps in accordance with international practices and standards by focusing on creating an attractive issuer base and broadening its investor base, increasing the depth and breadth of its products, as well as upgrading its infrastructure and business environment. Recently, the results of Boursa Kuwait's annual market segmentation review went into effect, with the promotion of one company into the "Premier" Market and the placement of nine companies on its "Premier Market" Watchlist after the companies willingly complied with the stringent eligibility criteria and requirements to join the flagship market.

Since its inception, Boursa Kuwait has worked diligently to create a credible exchange built on efficiency and transparency, creating a liquid capital market, a progressive exchange platform and developing a comprehensive set of reforms and enhancements that allow it to compete on an international level. Over the past several years, the company has rolled out numerous market reforms and new initiatives as part of its comprehensive multi-phase market development (MD) plans.

Since it was established by the Capital Markets

Authority to take over the responsibilities of the Kuwait Stock Exchange in 2014, Boursa Kuwait has worked diligently to build a progressive exchange platform based on efficiency and transparency, with a view to creating long-term value for the company's stakeholders in the economic, social and environmental dimensions.

Guided by a mission-driven strategy that focuses on developing the market in line with international standards, Boursa Kuwait has successfully introduced innovative investment tools, reinforced transparency, and restructured the market to increase its competitiveness and liquidity. The company's market developments and enhancements have contributed to the reclassification of the Kuwaiti capital market to "Emerging Market" status in the world's top three indices, strengthening Kuwait's position as a leading financial center in the region. A self-listed exchange, Boursa Kuwait is the first government entity in the country to successfully undergo privatization.

2021   FINANCIAL RESULTS			
	31/12/2021	31/12/2020	%
<b>TOTAL OPERATING REVENUE</b> "KD million"	31	22.2	39.7
<b>NET OPERATING PROFIT</b> "KD million"	18.5	11.8	56.5
<b>To Shareholders</b>			
Cash Dividends "Fils"	65	40	
Total Operating Revenue	31	22.2	39.7
Net Operating Profit	18.5	11.8	56.5
Net Profit Attributable to Parent Company "KD million"	15.9	25.8	(38.4)
Total Assets	110.4	104.2	6
Equity Attributable to Parent Company "KD million"	60.6	52.8	14.8
Earnings Per Share "Fils"	79.2	128.5	(38.4)
Net Profit Attributable to Parent Company "KD million"	15.9	25.8	
Net Gain on Business Combination	-	(13.2)	
Adjusted Comparable Net Profit Attributable to Parent Company "KD million"	15.9	12.6	
Increase in Adjusted Comparable Net Profit Attributable to Parent Company			26.3%



# Volvo Cars Kuwait launches new, pure electric Volvo XC40 and C40 Recharge

**Bader Al-Kharafi: The launch of fully electric XC40 and C40 Recharge signals the change we've been anticipating for a greener Kuwait**



Bader Nasser Al-Kharafi with the BNK Automotive team



Mohammed Al-Gharaballi and Achraf Tamim



C40 Recharge

- C40 Recharge and XC40, the first of a family of fully electric Volvos
- BNK Automotive's vision is to turn all its cars into electric by 2030
- The company's transition is part of its ambitious climate plan
- Volvo Cars aims for 50% of its global sales volume to consist of fully electric cars by 2025

By Ben Garcia

**KUWAIT:** The future of Volvo Cars is electric, and the new Volvo XC40 Recharge and C40 Recharge are the latest manifestations of its commitment to a zero emission future. The company's transition towards becoming a fully electric carmaker is part of its ambitious climate plan, which seeks to consistently reduce the life cycle carbon footprint per car through concrete action.

The XC40 Recharge, based on the multi-award-winning and best-selling XC40 small SUV, is the first of a family of fully electric Volvos. It represents a true milestone for Volvo Cars: the company's first electric car and the first Volvo with a brand new infotainment system powered by Google's Android operating system.

In addition, The C40 Recharge, based on the CMA vehicle platform, has all the benefits of an SUV but with a lower and sleeker design, and is the first Volvo model in history designed as pure electric only.

Already by 2025, Volvo Cars aims for 50 per cent of its global sales volume to consist of fully electric cars, with the rest hybrids. By 2030, it plans for every car it sells to be pure electric.

"We have said this several times before: for Volvo Cars, the future is electric," said Hakan Samuelsson, chief executive. "Today we take a major new step in that direction with the launch of our fully electric XC40 [and C40] and the Recharge car line."

Like the XC40 Recharge, the C40 Recharge comes with one of the best infotainment systems on the market, jointly developed with Google and based on the Android operating system. It provides consumers with Google apps and services built-in, such as Google Maps, Google Assistant and the Google Play Store.

The propulsion consists of twin elec-

tric motors, one on the front and one on the rear axle, powered by a 78kWh battery that can be fast-charged to 80 per cent in about 40 minutes. It offers an anticipated range of around 420 km, which is expected to improve over time via over-the-air software updates.

"As advocates of the electrification of the automotive industry, the launch of the fully-electric XC40 and C40 Recharge signals the change we've been anticipating for a greener Kuwait" said Bader Nasser Al-Kharafi.

"We're proud of the success we've been able to achieve within the past year, with growth of 15 percent in sales in 2021, and overall growth of 300 percent for Volvo Cars Kuwait under BNK Automotive. We look forward to an electric-future and staying committed to our clients, keeping them at the forefront of the latest technology" said Achraf Tamim, General Manager at BNK Automotive.

Mohammad Al-Gharabally, BNK Automotive said: "This is just the beginning of fully electric car models by Volvo available in the market: our vision is to turn all our cars we have into electric by 2030. The problems of car owners are

normally charging stations - we resolved this issue and we continue to put more stations where they can charge their electric cars. If you purchase an electric car, we will install a charging station at your home; not only that, we also have charging points in major areas like Al-Hamra Mall, The Avenues, Shaheed Park and others," he said.

Asked about maintenance and mechanical issues compared to engine-powered cars, Gharabally said there were fewer troubles. "That is why it's more expensive than engine-powered cars. But price issues can be addressed as demand increases," he said.

He admitted realizing the dream will be slow, but will definitely come sooner. "It's our job to spread awareness and realize our dreams. People are traditionally afraid of change, but when you give people more choices and incentives, they will shift to electric cars. You will soon reap the benefits. There will be lesser pollution, it will greatly benefit the environment and the cost will be lower, because the more electric cars you produce, the more it will become cheaper," he added.



C40 Recharge



Volvo XC40 Recharge



C40 Recharge



The XC40 Recharge, based on the multi-award-winning and best-selling XC40 small SUV, is the first of a family of fully electric Volvos. It represents a true milestone for Volvo Cars: The company's first electric car and the first Volvo with a brand new infotainment system powered by Google's Android operating system.

## Business

# 'Life-changing' or scam? Axie Infinity helps the poor earn in Philippines

## Creators say it is a revolutionary step towards the future

**TAGUIG, Philippines:** Dominic Lumabi sits on the computer in his Manila bedroom pitting his puffer fish-like cartoon NFT characters against others. But this is not just a game—he is earning cryptocurrency to support his family during the pandemic. The source of his income is Axie Infinity, a blockchain-based play-to-earn game that exploded in popularity in developing nations such as the Philippines as COVID-19 destroyed jobs and forced many to stay home.

Its fans, financial backers and creators—Vietnam-based Sky Mavis—say it is a revolutionary step towards the future of the internet. Detractors warn the game is a “house of cards”, some likening it to a fraud scheme driven by hype and speculation. “At first, I was skeptical because I thought it was a Ponzi scam,” said Lumabi, 26, who began playing last June after losing his job at an advertising firm and making a failed foray into online selling. About 35 percent of Axie Infinity traffic—and the biggest share of its 2.5 million daily active users—comes from the Philippines, where high proficiency in English, strong gaming culture and widespread smartphone usage have fuelled its popularity, Sky Mavis said.

In Axie Infinity, players participate in battles using colorful blob-like Axies, and are mainly rewarded “Smooth Love Potion” (SLPs) that can be exchanged for cryptocurrency or cash—or invested back into the game’s virtual world Lunacia. Lumabi plays for two hours a day in the tiny house he shares with his parents and four sisters, earning 8,000 to 10,000 pesos (\$155 to \$195) per month—nearly half of what he makes at his current job as a content moderator working nine-hour graveyard shifts.

He has used Axie Infinity earnings for his sister’s university fees, groceries and bills—expenses his father’s struggling electrical repair business cannot cover. The pandemic was the perfect environment for this game to attract players from all walks of life, said Leah Callon-Butler, a blockchain consultant based in the Philippines. “They could sit at home, protected from the virus, and play a cute game and earn money from it.”

### Rent-an-Axie

But there is a catch. To play the game, players first have to purchase at least three Axies. An Axie is an

NFT—a unique, non-fungible token, with a particular set of abilities and characteristics. Like NFT pieces of art, they are stored on the blockchain—a digital ledger that cannot be changed. Axies can be bought, sold or rented to other players. Owners can also breed them to create new Axies that provide more value. At the peak of the game’s growth last year, a starter team of Axies could cost hundreds of dollars, far beyond the reach of aspiring players in poorer countries.

When AFP accessed the game’s marketplace on February 9, the cheapest Axies cost \$37 each, putting the cost of a basic team at \$111. However, players who spend more get better Axies, giving them a better chance of winning battles to earn SLPs and—some activities—the game’s other crypto token AXS. Those with the capital to assemble more lucrative Axie teams have set up guilds and “scholarships”—profit-sharing systems where players are charged a percentage of their earnings.

The owners’ take can reportedly go as high as 30 percent. “We provide the players with the assets that they need to generate income for themselves,” said Luis Buenaventura, who runs Yield Guild Games in the Philippines, one of the many companies offering scholarships. “In exchange for that, we ask for 10 percent of their earnings.”

YGG alone has 8,000 scholars and a queue of around 60,000 people waiting to join its program that offers training and mentoring to a limited number of players at a time. Buenaventura said many of his players were in their early 20s and from households making less than \$400 a month. He described their monthly Axie winnings—around \$200 — as “life-changing”.

### 'House of cards'

As the number of daily active players skyrocketed in 2021, the price of Axies and SLPs also soared, raising questions about the game’s sustainability. Sky Mavis earns revenue from the game mainly through breeding and marketplace fees, and Axie Infinity has generated more than \$1.2 billion in revenue. It has also attracted deep-pocketed backers, including US billionaire Mark Cuban. But some gaming industry analysts say its business model is unsustainable, pointing to the need for



**TAGUIG, Philippines:** This photo taken on December 10, 2021 shows siblings Eugene (left) and Ginger Arboleda giving a demonstration on how to play Axie Infinity, an NFT game where players earn tokens that can be exchanged for cryptocurrency or cash, during an interview with AFP in Taguig, suburban Manila.—AFP

new players to keep money coming in. Jonathan Teplitsky of blockchain firm Horizon Labs warned most play-to-earn games were a “house of cards”, fuelled by “hype and price speculation”.

“This entire system works well while the Axie company is flush with cash and willing to fuel a massive marketing machine,” he said. “If Axie wants to survive the next market crash, they will need to build some real-world utility into their game that does not depend on the mood of the markets.”

Sky Mavis co-founder and chief executive Trung Nguyen told AFP Axie Infinity, which is partly owned by players, was “not a zero sum game”. “There are a lot of things other than monetary value

that people can get from the game.”

### Unfazed by volatility

It had been clear for months, however, that the game was facing an issue with its economy, and the SLP and the AXS have experienced the kind of volatility seen in many other crypto assets. Last year, as the game upgraded to allow easier and cheaper trading, the value of SLP rocketed from 3.5 cents on April 26 to 36.5 cents on May 2 — more than 900 percent in less than a week—according to crypto data provider CoinGecko. But by the end of January this year, it had plunged to just a cent—a huge impact on how much fiat currency players could earn.—AFP



**KUWAIT:** Mohammed Al-Othman speaks during the Tamakan training program

## NBK sponsors panel discussion hosted by Tamakan program

**KUWAIT:** Tamakan training program, held with strategic sponsorship from National Bank of Kuwait (NBK), hosted a panel discussion in which Mohammed Al-Othman, GM-Consumer Banking Group at National Bank of Kuwait lectured the participants and answered a number of their questions. The session witnessed remarkable interaction with the audience through an open discussion in which Al-Othman transferred his extensive banking experience, shared ideas and visions with the participants, and discussed issues that preoccupy the youth at this post-graduation stage of their career.

### Set your priorities

Al-Othman told the audience that the post-graduation stage often involves instability, which is normal, but this should be accompanied with setting priorities and working hard to set achievable professional goals. “Your ambition should be sky-high, but you should define your short-term goals that you can work on achieving in a way that ultimately helps to reach that ambition,” he said.

Al-Othman explained: “The career path is long and often changing; therefore every individual should “always remain passionate, explore the surrounding variables, and be keen on developing and enhancing his skills so as to be able to achieve his goals and be ready for all challenges.”

### Join the private sector

Al-Othman indicated that he was keen to work in the private sector after graduating from university, specifically in the banking sector, and told the participants: “The easy way will not eventually lead you to a position that satisfies your ambitions.”

“Working in the private sector makes you face challenges that stimulate your potential, help you learn more about your capabilities, and support you in developing them as long as you have the desire and eagerness to work hard and with dedication,” he added.

On the mechanism of selecting candidates to join the team, Al-Othman said: “At NBK, the team members are carefully selected, as they will be part of the NBK family,” adding that the newly hired employees selected from the candidates are those who have well-defined goals and ambitions and who show dedication and commitment to their work and future.”

### Inspiring experience

In response to many questions about Weyay Bank, Al-Othman mentioned: “We are proud of Weyay Bank, not only as the first digital bank, but also as an inspiring model and

experience that proves the ability of the Kuwaiti youth to think outside the box, challenge the odds, and prepare themselves for the future.”

“At NBK, we plan for years ahead by setting clear strategies and goals, leaving nothing to chance. We started working on Weyay years ago when we selected the team that worked day and night under the extremely tough circumstances of business closure and curfew imposed to contain the pandemic,” he elaborated.

“Thankfully, we are seeing a remarkable interest in Weyay that exceeded our expectations, and many customers want it to be their first and only bank,” he added.

Al-Othman pointed out that Weyay offerings primarily target customers from the youth segment after we studied their preferences very carefully based on specialized research and data analysis that lasted for months. However, it is only the beginning of a series of top-notch updates and banking products and services that will be launched successively.

### Youthful energies

On the reason for NBK’s sponsorship of programs like Tamakan, Al-Othman replied that NBK firmly believes that it is the duty of national institutions to invest in promising youthful energies and qualify them to lead the future. Therefore, that the Bank saves no effort in supporting the youth and providing everything necessary to empower and train them to contribute to the development and progress of Kuwait.

He stressed that NBK’s aim behind that is not to make any gains, it rather spends a lot on these efforts, believing in the necessity of investing in the youth cadres in line with its sustainability strategy, and its conviction that sustainable growth in the future is unattainable without institutions’ commitment to deliver on their responsibilities in community development.

“At NBK, we are committed to support the youth through many educational and training activities that help them meet future post-graduation requirements in preparation for navigating their way into the labor market. By this, we ensure the future of society and is considered a national duty and an investment in the future,” he added.

### Emerging strong from the crisis

Answering a question from one of the participants about the negative impacts suffered by institutions and the business sector due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Al-Othman said, “The pandemic made it difficult for everyone, but those lacking vision were most impacted by it.”

“Institutions like NBK, which have a clear roadmap, know well how far they have gone and what they need to achieve future goals. Therefore, we are always ready to deal with and overcome the crises, and the COVID-19 pandemic was a practical example of that.” Al-Othman called on the participants to learn the lesson well from the crisis by always being ready for the challenges and not to stop looking forward to the future and preparing themselves for it through continuous development and hard work in order to achieve their goals and seize the opportunities.—AFP

## Ooredoo Group reports revenue of QAR 30bn for FY 2021

**DOHA:** Ooredoo Q.P.S.C. (“Ooredoo”) yesterday announced its financial results for the year ended 31 December 2021.

Revenue for the full year ended 31 December 2021 stood at QAR 30 billion, an increase of 4 percent compared to the same period last year, mainly driven by growth in the home market Qatar, Indonesia, and Tunisia. Excluding FX impact, revenue increased 7 percent.

Group EBITDA for the period was QAR 13 billion with a corresponding EBITDA margin of 44 percent, driven by growth in Indonesia, improving macroeconomic conditions in Kuwait and increased customer confidence in Algeria. The EBITDA growth rate stood at 8 percent and at 11 percent excluding FX impact.

Free Cash Flow increased by 30 percent to reach QAR 8.2 billion. Group net profit attributable to shareholders stood at QAR 47 million. The 96 percent reduction was mainly due to FX losses and the impairments in Myanmar. The negative impact was partly offset by profit from the sale and leaseback of Indosat Ooredoo’s tower assets (QAR 1,000 million). Excluding these one-offs and FX impact, net profit had growth of 61 percent. Consolidated customer base at year end exceeded 121 million due to strong performances in Indonesia, Oman, Algeria, and Iraq.

The board recommends the distribution of a cash dividend of QAR 0.30 per share. This recommendation is based on healthy balance sheet, adequate liquidity, and overall solid operational performance.

### Operational highlights

On December 28, Ooredoo Group and CK Hutchison announced the approval of the \$6.0 billion merger between the two businesses following an EGM. Vikram Sinha will serve as Chief Executive Officer of the merged entity – Indosat Ooredoo Hutchison. The transaction was closed post quarter on January 4, 2022.

On May 11, 2021, regulators approved Indosat Ooredoo’s sale and leaseback agreement with Edge Point Indonesia for more than 4,200 telecommunications towers. The transaction was valued at \$750 million, making it one of the largest deals of its kind in Asia.

On November 23, Indosat Ooredoo and Google Cloud launched a strategic partnership to accelerate digitalization across consumer and enterprise segments in Indonesia.

Post period, Asiacell was named ‘Fastest Mobile Network’ and ‘Best Mobile Coverage’ in Iraq by a leading independent technology research company. On September 30, Ooredoo Group announced title sponsorship of Qatar’s first-ever Formula 1 race, officially named the ‘Formula 1 Ooredoo Qatar Grand Prix’. On November 8, Ooredoo Qatar was named as the official Middle East & Africa telecommunications operator of the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 and FIFA Arab Cup Qatar 2021.

Commenting on the results, Sheikh Faisal Bin Thani Al-Thani, Chairman of Ooredoo, said: “Ooredoo Group ended 2021 demonstrating further resilience, as we reported solid results for the end of the year, driven by the ongoing implementation of our digital transformation and cost optimization programs in our core markets. Revenues increased to QAR 30 billion, and our EBITDA margin improved to 44 percent, up from 42 percent for FY2020. We are proud to report an improvement in our free cash flow by 30 percent.

During 2021, we maintained our position as a digital enabler through rolling out innovative products to our



Sheikh Faisal Bin Thani Al-Thani

Aziz Aluthman Fakhroo

customers and providing reliable connectivity across all the markets in which we operate, which subsequently resulted in increased customer confidence in our business.

We are excited about our new partnership in Indonesia, where Indosat Ooredoo Hutchison will become a stronger No 2 player, a compelling value creation in a new world-class digital telecoms and internet company for Indonesia.

Finally, I am pleased to announce that the Board will recommend the distribution of a cash dividend of QAR 0.30 per share at the annual general meeting, taking place on 8 March 2022.”

Also commenting on the results, Aziz Aluthman Fakhroo, Managing Director of Ooredoo said: “We are pleased to announce a very strong business performance with revenue growth of 4 percent and even stronger EBITDA growth of 8 percent. Our successful transformation process resulted in an impressive free cash flow of QAR 8.2 bill, an increase of 30 percent.

Our net profit increased by 61 percent excluding the FX impact and a one-off negative impairment in Myanmar that was partially offset by a gain from the Indonesian tower sale and leaseback transaction.

Qatar, our home market, continues to deliver strong results with growth in revenue of 6 percent to QAR 7.5 billion and a strong EBITDA margin of 52 percent. Further roll out of the 5G network combined with innovative new product offers had a positive impact on Ooredoo Kuwait’s performance with a slight increase in revenue to QAR 2.5 billion. Ooredoo Algeria and Ooredoo Tunisia both reported top line growth in local currency terms in 2021, of 8 percent and 6 percent respectively. Ooredoo Oman’s customers increased by 2 percent.

Asiacell was recognized as best mobile network operator in Iraq due to its rating as the fastest mobile network and the best mobile coverage by an independent third-party research company. Finally, Indosat Ooredoo had a stellar year, with double digit growth in revenue and EBITDA. The Company reported an increase in revenue to QAR 8.0 billion and an improved EBITDA margin of 49 percent, driven by cost optimization initiatives. We look forward to reporting the further growth of the business in due course.”

### Ooredoo Oman

Ooredoo Oman’s performance was further impacted by increasing competition and the entrant of the third operator in the market which led to a pronounced decline in revenue, with the prepaid segment being affected the most. The government-imposed lockdowns and the effects of the Tropical Cyclone ‘Shaheen’ resulted in a decline in revenue of 7 percent to QAR 2.3 billion in 2021.

### Ooredoo Kuwait

The gradual lift on COVID restrictions during the quarter as well as the further stabilization of oil prices, positively impacted the Kuwaiti economy and Ooredoo Kuwait’s revenue and margins for the year. Furthermore, the company enhanced its 5G reach significantly by the end of 2021.

## Business

# Zain Kuwait offers free Shahid VIP subscriptions to Wiyana customers

## The best Arabic originals, exclusive series & programs and Live TV

KUWAIT: Zain, the leading digital service provider in Kuwait, announced its latest promotional offering for Wiyana postpaid customers, providing them with a free subscription in Shahid VIP, the world's leading Arabic streaming platform. With Shahid VIP, Wiyana postpaid customers can enjoy the best Arabic originals, exclusive series and movie premieres, Live TV, and more on smart devices anywhere and anytime.

At a time where the world is witnessing a boom in digital entertainment services, Zain was keen on offering its customers with a range of entertainment options in partnership with the region's top content creators and service providers, including Shahid that is considered the biggest of its kind in the Arab world, giving them the chance to enjoy their favorite pro-

grams wherever they are as an added value with their Wiyana postpaid plans.

Zain now offers a free Shahid VIP subscription to all current and new postpaid customers (terms and conditions apply). Customers who are subscribed to 5G Internet plans and Wiyana postpaid plans of KD 25 and above will receive a free subscription in Shahid VIP for 6 months.

Customers who are subscribed in Internet plans of KD 10 or less and Wiyana postpaid plans of KD 25 or less will receive a free subscription in Shahid VIP for two months. Noting that the service will auto renew for its usual price of KD 2.49 monthly once any of the two free plans expire.

Shahid is the world's leading Arabic streaming platform, where subscribers can enjoy the latest Arabic

and western movies and largest productions before or right after they premiere in cinemas. The service also features a wide range of the biggest Shahid originals, exclusive series and programs, live TV, and more. Shahid VIP offers many unique features like Live TV in Full HD, downloading and watching content offline, an ad-free experience, watching on 5 different devices, safe content for children and families, and more. The service is available on many of the latest smart devices, including iOS and Android devices, Apple TV, Android TV, Chromecast, smart TVs, Fire tv, Airplay, and more.

Zain is committed to offer the most flexible and innovative offerings in the market for both postpaid and prepaid customers, reinforcing its leadership position and its pledge in offering the best services and offers to the largest family of subscribers in Kuwait.



## World Bank economist warns of dangers of ignoring growing debt

WASHINGTON: Delays in dealing with the growing debt burden in poor countries seems unlikely to be resolved by the G20, a top World Bank official warned.

As interest rates are starting to rise around the world, putting more pressure on borrowers, the Group of 20 finance ministers are due to meet in Indonesia this week. But World Bank chief economist Carmen Reinhart is skeptical there will be a resolution soon to help address unsustainable debts.

"The stalling is really, really problematic," she told AFP in an interview. She warned that the average length of a government debt crisis is nine years, which would create a "lost decade" for already vulnerable countries. During the COVID-19 pandemic the G20 put in place a debt service suspension initiative to help countries as they ramped up borrowing to deal with the twin health and economic crises, but that program ended in December.

And the so-called common framework meant to offer a way to restructure large debt loads, remains subject to uncertainty, and only three countries — Chad, Ethiopia and Zambia—have requested a negotiation. The problem, Reinhart said, is "These little countries are not systemic. They not going to make or break the global outlook."

"So unfortunately, it means they can easily slip into



World Bank chief economist Carmen Reinhart

backburner territory and remain on the backburner." Advanced economies offered debt forbearance to help countries that already had high poverty and low per capita income, deal with the pandemic, but she said "the damage is still ongoing."

Asked if she expected another push to deal with the debt issue at the G20 this week, the official said, "I hope that they do. But I am not optimistic."

In its World Development Report released yesterday, the global lender again flagged the issue of hidden debt vulnerabilities, due to rising private sector debt during the pandemic as well as lack of transparency around lending, especially by China. "It's not the things that you see that get you, it's what you don't see," Reinhart said, noting the lack of information on "hidden non performing loans."

The World Bank report urges policymakers in debtor countries to deal with the pressing economic risks, dealing with bad loans quickly to shore up their financial systems, as well as addressing high government debt. That is more urgent since rising prices globally have prompted major central banks to begin raising interest rates. And the US Federal Reserve is expected to do so next month. — AFP

## Al-Dousari: Gulf Bank's financial positions remain strong

KUWAIT: Deputy General Manager of Investor Relations at Gulf Bank, Dalal Al-Dousari, said that all of the bank's profitability indicators witnessed an improvement in 2021, as the bank achieved a net profit of KD 42 million, an increase of 46 percent over last year.

In an interview with CNBC Arabia, Al-Dousari indicated that the bank achieved an increase in net interest income by 6 percent in 2021, while non-interest income (fees, commissions, and profits from foreign currency transactions) increased by 13 percent, while total provisions decreased by 26 percent.

She also stated that the non-performing loans ratio decreased to 0.9 percent in 2021, compared to 1.1 percent last year, which is one of the lowest ratios of non-performing loans in the banking sector. In contrast, the bank's total credit provisions reached KD 300 million whereas IFRS 9 accounting requirements (i.e., ECL or expected credit losses) were KD 189 million, which means the Bank has very healthy excess provisioning level of KD 112 million, above and beyond what is required by the IFRS9 accounting requirements. Gulf Bank continues to have a significant non-performing loans coverage ratio of 615 percent including total provisions and collaterals.

### Loan book

When asked about the loan book growth, Al-Dousari said that the Bank's loan book witnessed a significant improvement in 2021, as the loans and advances provided to customers increased to KD 4.8 billion, a growth of 10.4 percent compared to 2020. Both the retail and corporate loan portfolios has contributed to this growth, which is much higher than the credit growth rate in the banking sector, which amounted to 6.6 percent.

### Capital position

On the other hand, Al-Dousari indicated that Gulf Bank has a solid capital, as the capital adequacy ratio reached 16.7 percent, above the regulatory minimum of 11.5 percent while the Tier 1 ratio reached 14.5 percent, which is above the regulatory minimum of 9.5 percent.

### Digital bank

Regarding whether Gulf Bank intends to obtain a digital bank license, Al-Dousari said that Gulf Bank offers everything that the digital bank would, noting that the Bank's five-year strategy 2025 is mainly based

on the digital transformation of all the Bank's services, and strengthening the position of "Gulf Bank" as a bank for the future.

She indicated that the Bank launched the MX.3 digital platform to develop and digitize its treasury platform, in partnership with the international company "Murex", with the aim of developing and automating the Bank's capital markets and treasury business. She also noted the Bank's success in developing its services with a new feature introduced in the mobile application and online banking, enabling Gulf Bank's customers to open a bank account in just under one minute., making it the fastest account opening process in Kuwait.

### Semi-annual dividends

Regarding the Bank's intention to distribute semi-annual dividends, post the Central Bank of Kuwait announcement in this regard, Al-Dousari said that Gulf Bank intends to implement this policy as part of its dividends distribution strategy. She indicated that such a decision is a function of several procedures and requirements, including obtaining the necessary approvals of the extraordinary general assembly to amend the bank's articles of association and the approval of the general assembly on the dividend distribution, as well as the approval of the Central Bank of Kuwait after reviewing the financial and technical requirements. Al-Dousari also appreciated the keenness of the Central Bank of Kuwait in taking decisions and adopting policies that are in the best interest of stakeholders in the banking sector and the Kuwaiti market in general.

### Enhance customer experience

Gulf Bank's vision is to be the leading Kuwaiti Bank of the Future. The bank is constantly engaging and empowering its employees as part of an inclusive and diversified workplace in recognition of every employee's role in delivering customer excellence and serving the community at large. With its extensive network of branches and innovative digital services, Gulf Bank is able to give its customers the choice of how and where to conduct their banking transactions, all while ensuring a simple and seamless banking experience.

### Sustainability

Gulf Bank is committed to maintaining a robust sustainability program at the community, economic, and environmental levels through sustainability initiatives that are strategically selected to benefit both the country and the Bank. Gulf Bank supports Kuwait Vision 2035 "New Kuwait" and works with the different relevant parties to achieve it.



BERLIN: This file photo taken on January 22, 2019 shows a technician passing by a logo of US internet search giant Google during the opening day of a new Berlin office of Google in Berlin. — AFP

## 'Don't be Google': The rise of privacy focused startups

PARIS: Google once used the slogan "don't be evil" to distinguish itself from its competitors, but now a growing number of pro-privacy startups are rallying to the mantra "don't be Google".

They are taking on Google Analytics, a product used by more than half of the world's websites to understand people's browsing habits. "Google made a lot of good tools for a lot of people," says Marko Saric, a Dane living in Belgium who set up Plausible Analytics in Estonia in 2019.

"But over the years they changed their approach without really thinking what is right, what is wrong, what is evil, what is not," Saric and many others are benefitting from GDPR, a European privacy regulation introduced in 2018 to control who can access personal data. Last week, France followed Austria in declaring Google's practice of transferring personal data from the EU to its US servers was illegal under GDPR because the country does not have adequate protections. Google disagrees, saying the data is anonymized and the scenarios envisaged in Europe are hypothetical. Nevertheless, startups see an opening in a true David vs Goliath battle.

"The week that Google Analytics was ruled illegal by the Austrian DPA (data protection authority) was a good week for us," says Paul Jarvis, who runs Fathom Analytics from his home in Vancouver Island, Canada. He says new subscriptions tripled over that week, though he does not give exact numbers.

Google dominates the analytics market with 57 percent of all websites using its service, according to survey group W3Techs. The best-established privacy-focused tool, Matomo, accounts for one percent of websites. The smaller players know they are not going to overturn Google's domination, rather their aim is to inject a bit of fairness and choice into the market.

### 'Behemoth' application

The supercharging moment for pro-privacy software developers came in 2013 when former CIA contractor Edward Snowden revealed how US security agencies were engaged in mass surveillance. "We

already knew some of it," says Matomo founder Matthieu Aubry. "But when he came out, we had proof that we weren't just paranoid or making stuff up."

Snowden showed how the US National Security Agency, aided by a system of secret courts, was able to gather personal data from users of websites including Google, Facebook and Microsoft. Snowden's revelations helped to solidify support across Europe for its new privacy regulation and inspired software developers to make privacy central to their products. The first thing the startups have taken aim at is the sheer complexity of Google Analytics.

"You have 1,000 different dashboards and all this data, but it doesn't help you if you don't understand it," says Michael Neuhäuser, who launched Fair Analytics last month. Jarvis, who had previously trained people to use Google Analytics, describes it as a "behemoth". Unlike Google, the privacy-focused products do not use cookies to track users around the web and offer a much simpler array of data, helping them to keep within the boundaries of GDPR. And they all make this a key selling point on their websites.

### 'An alternative internet'

But making a living from these tools is no mean feat. Saric of Plausible and Jarvis of Fathom both sank time and money into their projects before they could pay themselves a wage. Both firms still operate with a startup mentality—tiny teams working remotely across countries having direct contact with clients.

Aubry, who founded Matomo in 2007 when he was in his early 20s, remembers being in a similar position. "For a long time, we didn't even have a business around the project, it was pure community," says the Frenchman from his home in Wellington, New Zealand.

But he says his firm now has global reach and he wants to help create "an alternative internet" not dominated by big tech. His peers are at a much earlier stage but they certainly agree with the sentiment. Jarvis reckons anyone switching from a big tech product is "a win for privacy" and helps to create a fairer system. But a huge barrier remains: Google can afford to offer its tools for free, whereas the smaller firms need clients to pay, even if just a few dollars a month. The privacy-focused firms say it is time to overhaul our understanding of these transactions.

"All of these free products that we use and love, we're not paying for them with money, we're paying for them with data and privacy," says Jarvis. "We charge money for our product because it's just a more honest business model." — AFP

## Nord Stream 2 'in all our interests': France's Engie

PARIS: French energy giant Engie warned yesterday that a conflict between Russia and Ukraine would be "bad news" for Europe's gas supplies and defended the controversial Nord Stream 2 pipeline as being "in all our interests". Engie is one of five European partners in the massive Russian pipeline running under the Baltic Sea from Russia to Germany.

The pipeline, which has been completed but is still awaiting regulatory approval in Germany, has become a key bargaining chip in the West's bid to stop Russia from invading Ukraine.

US President Joe Biden has threatened to shut it down if Russia attacks its neighbor but Germany has maintained a more ambiguous stance, saying only there would be "consequences" for Nord Stream 2.

At a press conference after Engie released its annual earnings the group's CEO Catherine MacGregor stressed the importance of Russian gas for Europe. "Russian gas is a major component in the European gas mix. Therefore we view a potential conflict between Russia and Ukraine as really bad news," she said. MacGregor said that France's gas stocks meant it could face "very short-term" shortages. But, she said, "in the medium- or long-term we need Russian gas" to build up gas stocks again. She said the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, which circumvents Ukraine and is set to double Russian gas supplies to Germany, was "an important project for Europe's gas supplies." — AFP

## French stores bring back chitchat at the checkout

NANTES: Every day at 9:00 am sharp, 72-year-old Gisele shows up at her local hypermarket in western France to "cheat loneliness". She always picks the same checkout counter, the one where patrons are encouraged to linger and shoot the breeze as they settle up.

Here at the "Hyper U" store in Nantes, western France, they have an official name for the designated checkout: "Bla Bla Caisse" ("Chitchat checkout"). A blue sign saying "here we take our time" encourages those with time on their hands to linger and talk, and nudging those who don't to pay at a different counter.

"I talk about everything and nothing, for example about my grandkids coming over for the holidays," said Gisele, dressed in an elegant blue jacket with a fur collar and clutching a red bag, a baguette tucked under her arm. Except for school breaks when she has company, Gisele's daily Hyper U trips are the only chance to see people, she said, so "dressing up" for the occasion makes sense.

"I used to play bridge at a club, but because of COVID I don't really feel like going anymore," she said. Behind the checkout counter Rozenn Charpentier, 52, scans groceries while listening to a customer in her 60s complaining that she was given a ticket although she "wasn't parked that illegally". A client in his 60s is in a better mood, having just won 150 euros (\$170) in a scratch card game. Two teenagers, meanwhile, buy pellet toy guns. "Be careful with those," Charpentier warns them. "At the 'bla bla' counter I feel free to start a conversation, people are usually happy to talk," she said.

The store's cashiers take turns at the chitchat counter, on a voluntary basis. The supermarket opened the slow checkout two years ago to "revive human contact" with customers after the store's six self-service counters went into service, said Regis Defontaine, head of communication and events at the supermarket. — AFP

## Lifestyle | Features



This combination of pictures shows Regina Hall, Amy Schumer and Wanda Sykes. — AFP

## Wanda Sykes, Amy Schumer and Regina Hall confirmed as Oscars hosts

Next month's Oscars will be hosted by three doyennes of comedy, Wanda Sykes, Amy Schumer and Regina Hall, it was confirmed yesterday, as organizers amp up efforts to lure viewers back to the ceremony. It is the first time since 2018 that the Oscars will have a host, the first time since 1987 that it has had three, and the first time ever that all three will be women. The comedians' names were announced on ABC's Good Morning America (GMA). ABC will broadcast the 94th Academy Awards on March 27.

"I'm not sure who thought this was a good idea, but I'm hosting the Oscars, along with my good friend Wanda Sykes and Regina Hall. I'd better go watch some movies," Schumer said in a video selfie aired on GMA. Television ratings for the Oscars have dramatically declined in recent years. Late night comedian Jimmy Kimmel was the last person to host the show, in 2018. The following year's host-less format drew praise and was even emulated by other awards shows such as the Emmys, but subsequent Oscar ceremonies have been criticized for lacking focus and humor.

Last year's edition, which honored mainly smaller, arthouse movies such as best picture winner "Nomadland," was watched by just over 10 million viewers—a 56 percent decline from 2020, which was already a record low. As Oscars voters have drifted away from more mainstream fare, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences has toyed with reforms to boost the ceremony's popularity.

This year there will be a new "fan favorite" prize for the most popular film as voted for by Twitter users. The new category was announced after several crowd-pleasing blockbusters including "Spider-Man: No Way Home" and "No Time to Die" failed to earn Oscar nominations in major categories, including best picture. In 2018, organizers proposed a "popular film" Oscar to honor blockbuster movies such as the Star War films or Marvel superhero pictures that rake in millions at the box office.

But it swiftly shelved those plans after critics ridiculed the move, and the new "fan favorite" award will not be a formal Oscar category. Next month's Oscars will return to the ceremony's traditional Dolby Theatre venue in Hollywood, after the pandemic-affected 2021 Academy Awards were held at a Los Angeles train station. They are being held later than usual, reportedly to avoid clashing with February's Winter Olympics and Sunday's Super Bowl in Los Angeles. —AFP

## AFRICAN FILMS MAKE WAVES AT BERLINALE FESTIVAL

African films are enjoying a high profile at this year's Berlinale festival, with debuts from South Sudan and the Central African Republic (CAR) turning heads along with a new take on "Nollywood". While there are no African films in the main competition at Europe's first major film festival of the year, several documentaries and features from the continent are running in the event's sidebar sections. In the documentary "No Simple Way Home", director Akuol de Mabior holds a deeply personal lens to the recent history of South Sudan and the legacy of her father, John Garang de Mabior, a revolutionary leader who was killed in 2005.

De Mabior, who was born and raised in exile, turns the camera on her mother and sister as they strive to find meaning and hope in a country weighed down by years of political and personal trauma. The film aims to "generate conversations about what it means in an African context to feel at home in your own country", De Mabior told AFP. "Initially I wanted to make a film about my mother, because I had this feeling that history's tendency to forget women's contributions. I had this feeling that my father would be remembered and I worried that she wouldn't be," she said.

### Narratives on migration

But the film evolved to become more political as her mother was elected as one of five vice-presidents in South Sudan's new government. "It started making more sense to think more widely about the impact that she might have on the country, on whether or not this leadership that was part of this liberation struggle are the right people to take things forward," De Mabior said. "No Simple Way Home" is one of two films showing at the Berlinale made under Generation Africa, a project to fund documentaries offering a new narrative on migration.

The other is "No U-Turn" from Nigerian director Ike Nnaebue, known for his "Nollywood" classics such as "A Long Night" and "Dr Mekam". In this new documentary, Nnaebue retraces the route he took as a young man from Nigeria via Benin, Mali and Mauritania to Morocco, hoping to get to Europe. He speaks to young people at various stages of the journey that he himself eventually abandoned, turning back and instead studying film making in Nigeria.

Meanwhile, in the festival's Encounters section, "Father's Day" from Kivu Ruhorahoza tells three intersecting family stories in present-day Rwanda. The characters are a mother trying to cope with the loss of her son, a small-

time criminal aspiring to pass on wisdom to his son, and a young woman taking care of the ailing father she never truly loved.

### 'Tell our story'

In the short film section, Somali director Mo Harawe's "Will My Parents Come to See Me" charts the final day of a prisoner facing the death penalty. And in documentary "We, Students!", young director Rafiki Fariala offers an insight into the chaotic lives of a group of economics students at the CAR's Bangui University. Fariala turns three of his friends—Nestor, Aaron and Benjamin—into stars as he documents their chaotic romantic lives, academic struggles and run-ins with the law.

The film "is not there to change the world, to change things, but it is to tell our story, to show who we are," Fariala told AFP. "Maybe through the film, people will discover our history as young people in a different way," said Fariala, who was born in Congo but grew up in the CAR after his parents fled there during the Congo War. Many people associate African countries with war and corruption, but "we also have another history", he said. "We also have talent. We have another way of seeing things." —AFP



## Young labels make sustainable fashion headway at NY Fashion Week

Two years after losing her job in fashion due to the pandemic, Emma Gage founded her own brand, Melke, that debuted at this season's New York Fashion Week with an emphasis on sustainability. The 26-year-old from Minnesota is not the first to bet on this trend, at a moment when the fashion industry has faced criticism for its environmental impact. Another designer, 23-year-old Olivia Cheng, told AFP that "everybody now wants to be part of this conversation." Her brand, Dauphinette—known for its jewelry and outfits crafted from real flowers—was featured on New York fashion week's official calendar for the first time, showing over the weekend at a Chinatown restaurant.

Gage cited the use of hemp, organic cotton and recycled fabrics as materials that are less environmentally harmful, and also voiced her mission to purchase materials from companies committed to respecting human rights. "I would never want to come out and say like, yeah, everything's 100%, sustainable, everything's perfect," Gage said. "Because that's a lie." Speaking from her studio in Brooklyn's Bushwick neighborhood, a trendy area for New York creatives, Gage said she's "focusing on making pieces that will last."

### Zero plastic? Still elusive

She said "zero plastic" remains an elu-



'Dauphinette' fashion brand founder Olivia Cheng poses for a photo at her studio in New York. — AFP photos

sive goal at the moment, because synthetic materials often slip into recycled fabrics. Thus the focus on durability, and making use of every piece of fabric on hand: Gage creates "scrap bags" made out of small bits of material, for example. Far from voluminous or elegant evening gowns, one of Gage's favorite items is the humble sweater, which she makes a play on every collection with embroidered motifs—flowers, fish and now sheep have graced her pieces.

But keeping it simple doesn't translate to less creativity. The designer's second collection—inspired by the Anne Carson

book "Autobiography of Red"—emphasizes this strong color, often incorporating dark tones and using fringe reminiscent of lava flows. For her fall/winter 2022 collection, set for presentation Tuesday, Gage wanted to evoke memories of a trip to an Irish medieval castle and her discovery of falconry: "The symbiotic relationship of two predators working together—you have human and a bird trying to work together for the same common goal."

### Ginkgo nuts and beetle wings

Cheng's presentation Sunday bet on old clothes and floral materials, preserved

thanks to a resin she said is non-toxic. She also ventured into experimentation, offering one outfit made of ginkgo nuts and a dress studded with beetle wings—which she specified died of natural causes and not for her project. Both designers said they favor local suppliers but aren't against sourcing from elsewhere.

Gage said that only sourcing stateside "completely eliminates all of the beautiful craftsmanship that exists around the world." She does face a dilemma of keeping her brand—which makes pieces to order—affordable. "I can't be the only one making things more affordable, if they're sustainable," she said. "I need other people to also be buying what I'm buying so that the price can go down."

But that kind of popularity could create its own problem of overproduction and waste. Gage has tried to approach the problem by creating a product line with varying price points, the least expensive being a t-shirt for \$75. Cheng—the daughter of Chinese immigrants who has two dresses on show in the Metropolitan Museum's current fashion exhibition—is able to keep prices lower for her fruit and flower jewelry, with some pieces going for less than \$50. "It's most central to me to remember why we started our mission and how we can kind of further that story," she said. "And to not get caught up in kind of the illusions of grandeur." —AFP

## Filmmakers face retrial over Estonia ferry wreck filming

Two documentary filmmakers acquitted of violating the sanctity of the wreck of the Estonia ferry will face a retrial after a Swedish appeals court yesterday threw out a lower court's ruling. The Estonia ferry sank in the Baltic Sea in 1994, killing 852 people in one of the 20th century's worst maritime disasters. After deciding not to salvage the wreck, Sweden, Estonia and Finland agreed in 1995 to designate it a final resting place and make it illegal to disturb the site.

In 2019, a film crew sent a remote-operated submersible to the ship while filming a documentary that aired the following year, revealing a massive hole in the ship's hull and casting doubt on the findings of an official investigation into the sinking. The Gothenburg district court found in February 2021 that the documentary's director Henrik Evertsson and deep-sea analyst Linus Andersson—both Swedes—had committed actions punishable under the so-called "Estonia Law".

However, it ruled they could not be held accountable since they were on a German-flagged ship in international waters at the time. While several countries have signed on to the 1995 accord, Germany has not. But the Gota Court of Appeal yesterday sent the case back to the lower court for a retrial. It argued that "the Estonia Law does apply" because the filmmakers are Swedish, even though the dives were conducted from a German boat. The two face a fine or up to two years in prison.

The original inquiry into the disaster concluded that it was caused by the bow door of the ship being wrenched open in heavy seas, allowing water to gush into the car deck. Experts however told the filmmakers that only a massive external force would be strong enough to cause the rupture, raising questions about what really happened. Survivors and relatives of those killed have fought for over two decades for a fuller investigation, though the countries involved have been reluctant to re-examine the issue. Following the documentary, the laws banning dives were amended in order to allow a re-examination of the wreck. In July 2021, Sweden and Estonia opened a fresh investigation. — AFP



'Dauphinette' fashion brand founder Olivia Cheng displays a garment featuring beetles, at her studio.



A glove featuring beetles' wings is displayed at the studio of fashion brand 'Dauphinette', in New York.



'Dauphinette' fashion brand founder Olivia Cheng looks at garments at her studio in New York.



A staff member sews garments at the studio of fashion brand 'Dauphinette'.



A cup of espresso coffee at the historic Gran Caffè Gambrinus.



A waiter serves an espresso coffee at the historic Gran Caffè Gambrinus in Naples, Italy. — AFP photos

# ITALY WOOS UNESCO WITH 'MAGICAL' ESPRESSO COFFEE RITE

A shot of dark, velvety coffee is more than just a quick caffeine hit: Italy's espresso is a prized social and cultural ritual the country considers a national heritage worthy of UNESCO status. Italians knock back some 30 million espressos a day, from Venice to Sicily, in porcelain cups or little glasses, with or without a splash of milk and see each one as a gesture of friendship. "The espresso is an excuse to tell a friend you care," says Massimiliano Rosati, owner of the Gambrinus cafe in Naples, which

**'Flowers, fruits, chocolate'**  
To be the real deal, the espresso has to have a "round, substantial and velvety" taste and "hazel-brown to dark-brown foam, characterized by tawny reflexes", according to the Italian Espresso Institute. It must have a long-lasting aroma which has "notes of flowers, fruits, toasted bread and chocolate", says the institute, set up in 1998 to safeguard espresso. The bid for heritage status has been sent by the agricultural ministry to Italy's national UNESCO commission, which must submit it to the UN body's

Plebiscito square near the seafront in Naples.  
Some like cream puffs, little pizzas or fried dough balls with their espressos, chatting between bites. "When I go abroad, I see people queuing up for their coffees, standing in a line one behind the other, maybe on their iPhones, sitting in a corner with a book. That's not what it's like here," owner Rosati said. "There's a custom still alive today in some parts of Naples where, when you visit someone, you don't take a cake or flowers, you bring sugar and coffee."



A waiter prepares coffees at the historic Gran Caffè Gambrinus.

helped prepare the bid for a place on the UN's list of the world's intangible heritage.  
"They are drunk every day, at any hour. It's a shared moment, a magical moment," he told AFP. The gleaming machine behind the marble counter clanks and hisses as the barista tamps the ground coffee into the portafilter, clicks it into place and flicks a switch to shoot near-boiling water through it.

headquarters in Paris by March 31.  
Italy already boasts a series of living traditions and customs on the list, from truffle hunting to the art of the Neapolitan pizza maker, the Mediterranean diet and traditional violin craftsmanship in Cremona, the birthplace of Antonio Stradivari. Drinking an espresso "is a rite, it's a bit sacred", said retired teacher Annamaria Conte, 70, as she walked into Gambrinus from the vast Piazza del

**Memories**  
It was Angelo Moriondo from Turin who in 1884 patented the first steam machine for espresso, but it was Desiderio Pavoni in Milan who had the funds to develop and mass produce the large industrial machines. They would become ubiquitous across Italy, with each of the country's 20 regions making espressos slightly differently—shorter, longer, more or less intense, possibly with sparkling water on the side. "I've a lot of memories growing up of coming here, drinking the coffee, and it's really good," said tourist Yael Lesin-Davis, 28, as she tucked into a "Moretto" espresso, with frothed milk and cocoa powder.  
Raimondo Ricci, owner of the Sant'Eustachio cafe in Rome's historic centre, says the humble espresso has the power to keep loneliness at bay, even when drunk alone, far from the cafe. "Sometimes at home we make a coffee and we're kept company by this machine which fills a room, fills a house," he said. The aroma, he said, sparks "memories of happy times". — AFP



A waiter prepares an espresso coffee at the historic Gran Caffè Gambrinus.



Arturo Sergio, co-owner of the historic Gran Caffè Gambrinus, poses with a box of coffee at the Gambrinus.



A waiter serves coffees at the historic Gran Caffè Gambrinus.



Arturo Sergio, co-owner of the historic Gran Caffè Gambrinus, poses next to signatures collected to support the 'UNESCO heritage status for espresso coffee'.



Couples are seen during a collective wedding celebration at the esplanade of the Municipal Palace of Nezahualcoyotl in Nezahualcoyotl, Mexico. — AFP photos

## Hundreds wed at Valentine's Day ceremony in Mexico

With tears in their eyes and smiles beneath their face masks, more than 660 couples tied the knot Monday at a Valentine's Day mass wedding in Mexico. The newlyweds included Francisco Calvo, 74, and Rosalba Silva, 67 — two widowers who met five years ago. "I didn't think I would have another chance, but love arrived because love arrived," Silva said, smiling next to her new husband at the ceremony in a sub-



A couple is seen during a collective wedding celebration at the esplanade of the Municipal Palace of Nezahualcoyotl in Nezahualcoyotl, Mexico.

urb of Mexico City. For Jonathan Garcia, a mass wedding is almost a family custom.  
"Two of my sisters in my family have already been married this way and we saw they were happy so we said 'let's continue the tradition,'" the 40-year-old said. What the mass wedding lacks in intimacy it makes up for with perks such as free marriage certificates, said

Maria Darinka Rendon, a council official in Ciudad Nezahualcoyotl. "Gathering 661 families in one place was quite a challenge," she admitted. But it is worth it for what is "a very emotional event, for the spouses, for the families and for us who are going to witness it," she added. — AFP

## Sports

# Djokovic 'not anti-vax' but prepared to miss out on Grand Slam history

## 'I rather skip Grand Slams than be forced to get COVID jab'

LONDON: World number one Novak Djokovic has claimed he is not anti-vaccination but would rather skip Grand Slams than be forced to get a COVID jab. The Serb was deported in extraordinary circumstances on the eve of last month's Australian Open where Rafael Nadal won a record 21st Grand Slam trophy to move ahead of Djokovic and Roger Federer on the all-time men's list.

Djokovic was asked in an interview with the BBC, published yesterday, if he would sacrifice taking part in Wimbledon and the French Open over his stance on the vaccine even if it meant he missed out on his chance to move ahead of his rivals and make history. "Yes, that is the price that I'm willing to pay," Djokovic said. "I am part of a very global sport that is played in a different location every single week, I understand the consequences of my decision. "I was prepared not to go to Australia. I understand not being vaccinated today, I am unable to travel to most of the tournaments at the moment."

However, his road to defending his Wimbledon title seems clear because as of a few days ago the unvaccinated are no longer required to quarantine in Britain—they just need to take a test before and after arrival. The French Open

in May, which he also won last year, could also be a possibility. French Health Minister Olivier Veran said this month that unless there is another wave, the vaccination passport—which is required for entry to sports venues among other public spaces—will no longer be obligatory "well before July."

The most problematic tournament for Djokovic at the moment is the US Open, where a vaccination certificate is required. There are also two high-profile tournaments coming up in the US-Indian Wells from March 7 to 20 and the Miami Open, played from March 21 to April 3. But Djokovic says his health comes above making history.

"Because the principles of decision making on my body are more important than any title or anything else," he said. "I am trying to be in tune with my body as much as I possibly can." Djokovic said he did not want to be associated with the anti-vax movement, but supported an individual's right to choose. "I was never against vaccination," he said, adding he had received vaccines as a child. "But I've always supported the freedom to choose what you put in your body."

**'Sad and disappointed'**  
Djokovic claims he did not say he

was 'anti-vax' when in Australia 'because no one asked me for my stance and opinion on vaccination'. The Serb has not given his opinion on the matter through his social media accounts either—he has over 10 million followers on Instagram and nine million on Twitter. Djokovic arrived in Melbourne in January for the first Grand Slam of the year claiming he had obtained a medical exemption to enter the country without being vaccinated as he had recently recovered from COVID-19. But Australian border officials said he did not meet requirements to be exempted from strict vaccination rules, his visa was cancelled and a protracted legal appeal failed.

In his first interview since leaving Melbourne, Djokovic told the BBC he hoped vaccination requirements would change and that he could "play for many more years". Djokovic said he was keeping an open mind about being vaccinated in the future "because we are all trying to find collectively, a best possible solution to end COVID. "I was never against vaccination. I understand that globally, everyone is trying to put a big effort into handling this virus and seeing, hopefully, an end soon to this virus."

Djokovic said he was "sad" with how



Serbia's Novak Djokovic

events played out in Australia, where he spent days in detention at a notorious immigration hotel. "I was really sad and disappointed with the way it all ended for me in Australia," he said. "It wasn't easy. "The reason why I was deported

from Australia was because the minister for immigration used his discretion to cancel my visa based on his perception that I might create some anti-vax sentiment in the country or in the city, which I completely disagree with."—AFP

## FIA alters F1 rain rules and refuses to increase sprints

PARIS: The International Automobile Federation (FIA) said on Monday it had changed a wet-weather rule that helped Max Verstappen snatch last season's Formula One title and had dialled back plans for six 'sprint' qualifiers. The FIA made its announcement after a meeting of its commission and its newly-elected FIA President Mohammed Ben Sulayem with Formula One teams in London.

The FIA said in a statement that there had been "detailed discussions" of a second controversy, at the final race of the season in Abu Dhabi. Lewis Hamilton was poised to capture a record-breaking eighth world title in December before a controversial safety car restart allowed Verstappen to pass on the last lap. "Feedback from the commission on matters raised will be incorporated into the president's analysis and he will publicly present news of structural changes and action plan in the coming days," said the FIA.

The FIA did address an earlier controversy at the Belgian Grand Prix in August. Verstappen was declared the winner and awarded half the points for a victory, even though the race was cancelled because of heavy rain. The FIA said it had approved changes to rules for weather-affected races. "No points will be awarded unless a minimum of two laps have been completed by the leader without a Safety Car and/or Virtual Safety Car intervention," said the statement. It has introduced a progressive points system based on the percentage of the planned distance covered.

If the cars have raced less than 25 per cent of the distance, the winner will get six points and the next four cars will collect four, three, two and one points. If the race was between 25 per cent and 50 per cent complete, "the winner will get 13 points (then 10, 8, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 for the following). "Between 50 per cent and 75 per cent, it will be 19 points (then 14, 12, 9, 8, 6, 5, 3, 2, 1)." Sprints were introduced at three races last season and the teams favored an increase this season. Formula One and its sporting director Ross Brawn had talked about an agreement in principle for six.

The FIA capped the number at three: Emilia-Romagna (April 24), Austria (July 10) and Brazil (November 13). The FIA statement said there was "a recognition by all that the format created positive benefits for the sport." But, it added, that teams were facing a challenging year because of car redesigns and three was accepted "as a sensible number in light of the pressures already on the teams for this season with the introduction of major changes to the regulations." —AFP

## Move aside Gu, here comes Su - teenager wins 'insane' gold

BEIJING: Step aside Eileen Gu. Hosts China have a new teenage hero at the Beijing Olympics after 17-year-old Su Yiming yesterday added an emphatic snowboard Big Air gold to his controversial silver. Su scorched to the Big Air title with a runaway score of 182.50 to win his second medal at the Games, having been unlucky to only come away with silver in last week's slopestyle. The former child actor was so good that he had the title firmly in the bag even before his third and final run.

Su's latest remarkable success went viral on China's Twitter-like Weibo, where a hashtag about it clocked up about 750 million views in just a few hours. He took a dominant gold ahead of Norway's Mons Røisland, on 171.75, with Canada's Max

## US bobsleigh rivals join forces to fight for equality

YANQING: They have battled each other as Olympic bobsleigh medalists at four straight Winter Games, but off the ice, Elana Meyers Taylor and Kaillie Humphries are united in their fight for equality in their sport. Canadian-born Humphries, 36, stormed to gold for her adopted Team USA, with her new teammate Meyers Taylor taking silver for the Americans, as the women's monobob made its Olympic debut.

Monobob was added to the Beijing Games programme so that for the first time, there are two bobsleigh events for both men and women at a Winter Olympics. "It's absolutely huge," said Meyers Taylor, 37, who has won bobsleigh medals at the last three Winter Games. "To be able to have two opportunities to medal now, that's a game changer. Now we're more on par with the men." The US bobsledders will lock horns again in Friday's two-woman heats while the men race in two and four-man events at these Winter Games.

**'I'll keep fighting'**

Humphries and Meyers Taylor are both teammates but fierce rivals too - "we wished each other luck, but that's pretty much it," said the latter. Yet both are passionate advocates for four-woman bobsleigh being added to the Olympic program for the 2026 Games. "This is a huge step forward. By no means do I think we're done," said Humphries following her monobob victory at the Yanqing National Sliding Centre. "I really want to see a four-woman event and I would love to see men do

## No Williamson, Taylor as New Zealand aim to break S Africa drought

CHRISTCHURCH: New Zealand enter unfamiliar territory when the first Test against South Africa begins in Christchurch tomorrow, without batting greats Ross Taylor and Kane Williamson. It has been 14 years since the hosts started a Test without either Taylor or Williamson—their top two all-time Test run scorers respectively—and they have the extra burden of trying to win a series against South Africa for the first time. Taylor retired last month and Williamson is injured, leaving the Black Caps without the pair's steadying influence

Parrot—the slopestyle winner-taking bronze with 170.25. Su has competed in just six World Cup events and last week already became the first men's snowboarding Olympic medallist in China's history.

"This feels insane, it's something I've never experienced before... I can't believe I got this gold," said Su, for whom this was an early birthday present—he turns 18 on Friday. "I trained every day for the past four years. Every night I was dreaming about this moment." When he was eight, Su appeared in the epic action movie "The Taking of Tiger Mountain", before deciding to fully dedicate himself to snowboarding. With hair that tumbles down below his ears, he still has something of the film star about him.

**'All about love'**

Su's silver in the slopestyle had been contentious, with many experts saying that he should have been awarded gold ahead of Parrot. Iztok Sumatic, the head judge in Beijing, subsequently told the snowboarding magazine Whitelines that they made a mistake in the scoring of Parrot. Su put all that



YANQING: Switzerland's Michael Vogt and Sandro Michel compete in the 2-man bobsleigh event at the Yanqing National Sliding Centre during the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympic Games yesterday. —AFP

monobob as well. Three events for all genders."

Humphries revealed she has already faced opposition to the idea of four-woman bobsleigh races at the Olympics. "What I hate to hear is that women aren't skilled enough or fast enough or strong enough to do it," she said. "That has literally been told to my face. I'll keep fighting for that to happen, but it's not solely up to me. "I know Elana Meyer Taylor would also absolutely love to see it, but the other women have to want it too." They both had to fight to compete in Beijing for different reasons.

Humphries has won two Olympic golds and a bronze for Canada in two-woman bobsleigh between 2010 and 2018, but switched to the United States amid allegations she was verbally harassed by staff in the Canadian team. She was sworn in as a US citizen only last December.

against a dynamic Proteas pace attack.

South Africa arrived on a high after completing a double of Test and one-day series wins at home against India. New Zealand coach Gary Stead admitted his team face a tough challenge in the two-Test series. "They're obviously a quality side, capable of beating India in South Africa," he said. "They've got classy players throughout and while they lack some experience you certainly can't underestimate them."

New Zealand are also without pace spearhead Trent Boult, who is awaiting the birth of a child, with Matt Henry coming in as a replacement. Batsman Devon Conway and fast bowler Neil Wagner were both born and raised in South Africa and Stead said they would relish playing the Proteas. "From our perspective they're true-blue Kiwis now, even though they might have slight accents at times," he said. "They're working hard for the 'Silver Fern' but I guess playing against South Africa will be exciting for them as well."

behind him yesterday and said he had been motivated by competing on home snow and by his passion for the sport. "I wanted to try my best for this," he said. "The most important thing though is all about love. Snowboarding is not just about competition."

In a touching moment, Su pointed at his parents when he was standing on the podium. "I haven't seen my parents for the past seven months because I went to Europe for training and to many places for competitions," he said, attending a press conference with the Chinese flag proudly wrapped around his shoulders. "This moment is so special for me and also my family." Su even managed—for a time at least—to upstage Californian-born Gu, his Chinese team-mate and the unofficial face of the Games.

The 18-year-old Gu, who represented the United States before switching to the country of her mother's birth in 2019, also now has one gold and one silver after she came second in the women's freestyle skiing slopestyle earlier in the day. The home nation, who have little in the way of tradition when it comes to winter sports, have now won six golds in Beijing.



ZHANGJIAKOU: China's Gu Ailing Eileen Su is waiting to see her score as she competes in the freestyle skiing women's freestyle slopestyle final run yesterday. —AFP

Four years ago at the Pyeongchang Games, before Gu and Su came on the scene, they took home only one gold. —AFP

## Sports

# Promotion-chasing Blackburn held by rival West Bromwich

## Bruce's first home match as manager ends in a goalless

LONDON: Steve Bruce's first home match as manager of West Bromwich Albion ended in a goalless draw with promotion-chasing rivals Blackburn Rovers at The Hawthorns on Monday. The 61-year-old Bruce, hoping to guide the Baggies to the Premier League after being sacked as manager of top-flight Newcastle following the arrival of the club's new Saudi-led owners in October, saw his current side have the better of the chances.

Former England striker Andy Carroll, making his Albion home debut, was denied by Rovers goalkeeper Thomas Kaminski, while it needed a desperate clearance from Tyrhys Dolan to prevent Adam Reach breaking the deadlock late on in a result that meant both sides have now gone four games without a win.

The stalemate left Blackburn third in England's second-tier Championship, four points off the two automatic promotion places, with West Brom now

in eighth position and three points shy of a play-off spot. "There's lots to be pleased about in terms of the effort, but we must improve in the final third," said Bruce. "We must find a bit of creativity from somewhere in the team."

"Obviously, you need to score a goal to win a match and we haven't managed to do that in the last two games... We have to find that bit of quality." Both sides had goals disallowed for offside before Ben Brereton Diaz, Blackburn's leading scorer this season with 20 goals, went off in the 70th minute with a foot injury following an attempted shot. "Ben Brereton Diaz is a very robust footballer," Rovers manager Tony Mowbray told the BBC.

"He never misses a day's training, always wants to do extra training. Fingers crossed that it was just a kick," Mowbray added: "We have to accept the point and move on but I felt we were the team who



Steve Bruce

were going to score. It's just frustrating that we couldn't nick a goal from an improved second-half performance. "I'm still proud of keeping a clean sheet, but with the talent we have, we should be scoring a goal."—AFP

## Dzeko, Salah face off; Liverpool lay in wait for Inter

MILAN: Edin Dzeko will take to the San Siro pitch with old friend Mohamed Salah when Inter Milan take on Liverpool in the Champions League last 16 today, a reminder of the havoc the pair used to cause together at Roma. After an anonymous time at Chelsea and signs of promise at Fiorentina, Salah's career really started to take off after arriving in the Italian capital in 2015. Once firmly established as strike partners under Luciano Spalletti, Dzeko and Salah hit it off in a big way, scoring 58 goals in all competitions in 2016-17 and helping Roma to second in Serie A as an ageing Francesco Totti was shunted aside.

Salah's inconsistent but at times unstoppable performances earned him a move to Merseyside, where under Jurgen Klopp he quickly became one of the world's best, for what now looks a paltry 50 million euros (at the time £43 million). "I must say, in some little way, I helped Momo become what he is now," Dzeko said in an interview published by the Daily Mail last week. "We had a great time together in Rome... I'm so happy for him, a great guy who deserves everything he has achieved."

Dzeko looks a player reborn since making the move north from Roma in the summer, and has been such a hit with Inter fans that they have largely forgotten Romelu Lukaku, the key man behind last season's league triumph. Lukaku's now infamous interview with Sky Sport Italia was met with little more than shrugged shoulders from Inter fans. Less prolific than Lukaku, Dzeko has nonetheless scored 14 goals in all competitions and often pops up when it matters.

### Dzeko conquers Milan

His equaliser in Saturday's pulsating title clash at Napoli ensured that Inter, a point behind new leaders AC Milan but with game in hand, still hold the advantage in the race for the league crown despite almost being blown away in the first half



Liverpool's Egyptian midfielder Mohamed Salah

at the Stadio Diego Armando Maradona. It was his double against Shakhtar Donetsk which effectively secured Inter's place in the last 16 with a game to spare, taking Inter into the knockouts for the first time in a decade.

Dzeko said he didn't expect to move when Jose Mourinho took over at Roma, and it was a transfer which was greeted with some scepticism in Milan after a poor final season at Roma which also included a public spat with former coach Paulo Fonseca. However he has added a new dimension to Inter's play under Simone Inzaghi, who like Dzeko spent the summer with fans in open revolt at the sale of Lukaku and Achraf Hakimi but has improved on what Antonio Conte's Lukaku-centric iteration served up.

Inzaghi has a near full squad from which to pick his starting line up after Alessandro Bastoni recovered from an ankle injury, although Italy midfielder Nicolo Barella is suspended for both

legs after being sent off in Inter's final group game at Real Madrid. The only real question is whether Lautaro Martinez or Alexis Sanchez will start up front alongside Dzeko, who will be looking to beat Liverpool goalkeeper Alisson Becker, who was a key figure in Roma's run to the 2018 Champions League semi-finals where they were beaten by a Reds side led by Salah. Liverpool have already been to the San Siro once this season, strolling past AC Milan and knocking Inter's local rivals out of Europe. But Dzeko doesn't think the gap between Italy's top sides and Europe's best is as big as that match made it seem. "We played two even matches with Real Madrid, we should have won the first one but we weren't at the level we are right now," Dzeko recently told the Corriere Della Sera. "Liverpool are a good side, they're beatable but they can also hit five past you. We going to give it a go."—AFP

## Karim Adeyemi, the rising German star Bayern let get away

BERLIN: Bayern Munich will come up against Karim Adeyemi, the rising German star who the Bavarians let get away, when they play Red Bull Salzburg in an Alpine derby in the Champions League yesterday. With his speed and technique, Salzburg's centre forward has proved to be too much to handle for most defenses in the Austrian Bundesliga this season. His 14 goals in 18 league games have attracted plenty of attention. As Germany legend Lothar Matthaus wrote in his column for Bild, Adeyemi has the potential "to be priceless for most clubs in a few years. "A big plus is his speed—he has unbelievable pace."

Bayern's Bundesliga rivals Borussia Dortmund reportedly lead the race to sign Adeyemi and are said to be willing to pay around 30 million euros (\$34 million). Earlier this season Germany head coach Hansi Flick described Adeyemi as "ice cold" and Bayern must be kicking themselves that they let the forward get away. He was born in Munich to a Nigerian father and Romanian mother and spent two years in Bayern's youth academy before being released.

Adeyemi then made his way up through the age

grades at another Munich club, Unterhaching, before Salzburg fought off interest from Chelsea to sign him in 2018 when he was still just 16. After three seasons on loan at feeder club FC Liefering, he broke into Salzburg's first team in 2020 and has not looked back. Flick gave him his Germany debut last September when Adeyemi made an 18-minute cameo off the bench and scored late on in a 6-0 thrashing of Armenia in World Cup qualifying. He is the first post-war player based in Austria to play for Germany.

In the Champions League, his three goals in the group stage—including a brace in a 2-1 win against Lille—helped secured Salzburg's passage into the last 16. He can create goals as well as score them, floating in a cross which Noah Okafor slammed home to seal a 1-0 home win over Sevilla which sent Salzburg into the knockout stages. If he does end up moving to Dortmund, Adeyemi would replace Erling Haaland, the former Salzburg prospect who is expected to make a high-profile switch to one of the continent's biggest clubs.

Adeyemi is a different type of player, more inclined to dribble his way into the box and split the defence with a killer pass. Just like Bayern, Salzburg have completely dominated their domestic league in recent years and are steaming towards a ninth straight title, but their head coach Matthias Jaissle is resigned to losing his star forward. "I have had a few open chats with Karim, so any decision he makes shouldn't come as a surprise to me," Jaissle



Karim Adeyemi

told Sport Bild. "It's our way at Salzburg that the players can take the next step when they have developed well."—AFP

77% of players supported maintaining the status quo, against 63% from the Americas.

In Africa the figure dropped to 49%, with the remainder split between holding the competition every two or three years. "While a clear majority of players support the current frequency of the World Cup, a demand exists, particularly in smaller and medium-sized markets, to further develop and strengthen national team competitions," Fifpro said. When asked to pick their preferred competition 81% singled out their domestic league or the World Cup "in its current four-year cycle".

Fifpro general secretary Jonas Baer-Hoffmann said the survey showed "most footballers around the world have a clear preference to play the World Cup every four years". He said the results also underlined the importance of domestic league com-

petitions to players. "These leagues are the bedrock of our game and we have to do more to strengthen them both for the sake of players and the overall stability of professional football."

Another key finding he pointed out was that "only 21 percent of them believe that their voice is respected and that their well-being is adequately considered in the context of international football governance". "Therefore, this survey underlines the need for more collective bargaining frameworks in our industry, especially at the international level. The controversial switch to a two-year World Cup cycle championed by FIFA president Gianni Infantino is opposed by a block comprising the European and South American federations and major clubs, but backed by the Confederation of African Football."—AFP

## From Super-team to Super Bowl: LA Rams eye dynasty

LOS ANGELES: The Los Angeles Rams basked in their Super Bowl victory on Monday after their expensively-assembled roster powered to victory over the Cincinnati Bengals. Sunday's victory represented a spectacular jackpot for the Rams management, who recruited heavily over the past year with the goal of being able to bring an NFL title back to Los Angeles at their own SoFi Stadium. The question now is whether Sunday's Hollywood ending turns out to be the beginning of a dynasty. In an increasingly competitive era, no team has won back-to-back championships since the New England Patriots achieved the feat in 2004 and 2005.

The good news for the Rams is that several pillars of their championship-winning roster should be back next season. Quarterback Matthew Stafford, who helped transform the Rams offense this season following his blockbuster trade from Detroit, has another year on his contract and is reportedly due to sign an extension. Star receivers Cooper Kupp and Robert Woods are also under contract, along with defensive stalwarts Aaron Donald and Jalen Ramsey.

The dilemma will be determining whether free agents such as Odell Beckham Jr, who scored the opening touchdown on Sunday, and veteran linebacker Von Miller, will be brought back. There are also questions about whether Donald may walk away from the sport. One report on Sunday said Donald was contemplating retirement despite having a contract which runs through 2024. Donald sidestepped questions about his future after Sunday's win, saying only that he was "just going to be in the moment and enjoy this today, or for a couple of days."

### 'Addictive feeling'

Team-mate Miller was sceptical Donald would call it quits. "I don't know man. He's done everything you can possibly do," Miller said "But this feeling here, there's nothing like it. It's addictive. "Once you feel this - coming to the Super Bowl is one thing. But winning it is different." There have also been murmurings that Rams coach Sean McVay could consider his future. McVay became the youngest winning Super Bowl head coach in history on Sunday after taking the title at 36 years and 20 days.

McVay, who became the youngest head coach in the history of the NFL when he was appointed by the Rams in 2017, has already taken the team to two Super Bowl appearances during his reign. A weary McVay paid tribute to his team's "selflessness" and mental resilience on Monday at the traditional post Super Bowl press conference. "People wanted to win a championship, do something special, for the other people they cared about," McVay said.

"This was the most selfless group I've ever been a part of. They played for one another, they trusted one another and they picked each other up through good and bad. I felt that's what made us so special. "When you get great players and great coaches that are all committed and pulling that rope in the same direction, great things can happen. "The mental toughness, the resilience, the belief in each other. It was such a powerful thing."

McVay reserved special praise for wide receiver Cooper Kupp, who was named the Super Bowl's MVP after a performance which included the winning touchdown. Working in tandem with quarterback Stafford, Kupp put the Rams on his shoulders in the final game-winning drive, making catch after catch despite being relentlessly double-teamed. "Cooper epitomizes what's right about this team," McVay said. "The selflessness, the humility, the clutch production when we had to have it."

"I'm better as a coach and as a person for being around Cooper Kupp. He's made such an impact on me." Kupp meanwhile, who was planning a trip to Disneyland on Monday alongside Stafford and Donald, said victory owed everything to the total commitment of the Rams locker room. Kupp calculated he had spent around 500 hours of voluntary practice in addition to obligatory time throughout the season.

"So many guys that have just respected the game, have put in the work and the time," Kupp said. "And that was a huge thing going into this. We said 'We've got guys who deserve a Super Bowl'. "That's kind of what makes this team so special." Easing of COVID-19 restrictions meanwhile means that the Rams will be the first Los Angeles franchise to enjoy a traditional victory parade since the pandemic. The Los Angeles Dodgers and Los Angeles Lakers both won championships in 2020 but were unable to celebrate with a parade due to COVID-19. The Rams parade will be held today.—AFP



LOS ANGELES: Fans vandalize a bus while fireworks are seen in the sky in downtown Los Angeles after the Los Angeles Rams won the Super Bowl LVI against Cincinnati Bengals. —AFP

## Global players' survey gives thumbs-down to two-year World Cup

PARIS: Footballers around the world have given a resounding red card to FIFA's proposal to hold the World Cup every two years, according to a survey by players' global union Fifpro. The findings, released yesterday, showed 75% of more than 1,000 male players questioned over the global governing body's plans to shake-up the international calendar were in favour of retaining the tournament's current four-year cycle. In Europe and Asia



WASHINGTON: Kyle Kuzma #33 of the Washington Wizards drives to the basket during the game against the Detroit Pistons on February 14, 2022 at Capital One Arena. —AFP

## Wizards hand Pistons 8th straight loss

### DeRozan turns on jets in fourth quarter

LOS ANGELES: DeMar DeRozan caught fire in the final quarter, using a calculated game plan to score a team-high 40 points as the Chicago Bulls seized control late to beat the San Antonio Spurs 120-109 on Monday. The Bulls trailed by six points entering the fourth quarter but then DeRozan busted loose, scoring 11 of his team's next 13 points to give Chicago the lead.

DeRozan says he tried to remain calm throughout, especially in the third quarter when the Spurs outscored the Bulls 32-24. "Come the fourth quarter my main priority is to win at any cost," said DeRozan. "You have to understand the whole game. It is tough to go out there from the jump ball and just be aggressive and try to score. You got to dissect the game. I collect data throughout the game and come the fourth quarter I got it all figured out and the ball is going in the hoop."

DeRozan has scored 30 or more points in seven straight games and established a club

record with his sixth straight game of at least 35 points, surpassing Michael Jordan in the 1996-97 season. It comes as no surprise that DeRozan leads the league with 431 fourth-quarter points. "It's not only the scoring piece, which is absolutely incredible what he does, the other piece of it is just his basketball IQ, his experience, how savvy he is," Bulls coach Billy Donovan said.

Nikola Vucevic added 25 points and 16 rebounds while Coby White scored 24 and Ayo Dosunmu dropped 12 in the win. Chicago shot 52.3 percent from the floor and outrebounded the Spurs 58-41. Lonnie Walker led San Antonio with 21 points off the bench. Doug McDermott and Dejounte Murray added 19 each and Keldon Johnson and Jakob Poeltl scored 13 apiece for the Spurs in front of a crowd of 21,100 at the United Center.

The Bulls played without all-star Zach LaVine, who missed his second straight game

due to a sore left knee. Elsewhere, Kyle Kuzma finished with 23 points, including 17 in the third quarter, as the Washington Wizards rolled to a 103-94 point victory over the Detroit Pistons, who lost their eighth straight contest. Kentavious Caldwell-Pope added 16, and Deni Avdija had 12 points and a career-high 15 rebounds for Washington, who have won just two of their last 11.

Saddiq Bey scored a team-high 24 points and Jeremi Grant tallied 14 for the Pistons, who dropped to 12-45 on the season. The Pistons' Cade Cunningham was in foul trouble for much of the game and finished with 12 points. Cunningham leads all NBA rookies in scoring. The Pistons were held scoreless for more than four minutes late in the fourth quarter. They are now a dismal 4-25 on the road. Washington, who improved to 26-30 overall, took a 75-74 lead on Ish Smith's jumper with 2:47 left in the third.

Kuzma scored seven points in the final

80 seconds of the quarter as the Wizards took an 87-78 lead into the fourth. Wizards Rui Hachimura left the game in the second quarter after spraining his ankle in a collision with Detroit's Marvin Bagley, who was playing in his first game since the Pistons traded for him. In New York, Seth Curry scored 23 points in his debut for Brooklyn as the Nets snapped an 11-game losing streak with a 109-85 victory over the Sacramento Kings.

Curry helped Brooklyn get its first win since beating San Antonio on January 21. He made 10 of 18 shots, including three from long range and added seven rebounds and five assists. Also, CJ McCollum scored 23 points as the host New Orleans Pelicans dominated the Toronto Raptors with a 120-90 victory. In Los Angeles, Terance Mann scored a season-high 25 points as the Los Angeles Clippers defeated the Golden State Warriors 119-104. —AFP

### In search of medals, Shiffrin finetuning before combined

YANQING: Mikaela Shiffrin got a boost yesterday in her hunt for an elusive medal at the Beijing Olympics when she had an invaluable run-out in the downhill. The American will be hot favorite for the alpine combined event yesterday. Shiffrin came 18th in the downhill, 2.49sec behind Switzerland's gold medal winner Corinne Suter, in the ultimate test of speed that she admits she has not practiced for in two years.

But training runs on the same "Rock" course and the downhill proper, Shiffrin explained, had given her some invaluable time on the same slope that will also feature in the combined. After failing to finish in her favored events of the slalom and giant slalom, 26-year-old Shiffrin regained some pride with ninth place in the super-G before taking on the downhill, and confirmed she will also take part in the mixed team event on Saturday. First up, however, is the alpine combined, which incorporates a morning downhill followed by a slalom.

"I am able to learn a lot about the track but when the speeds get up - it's much faster today - and you feel that speed in some sections, that's when I start to fight the speed rather than going with it," Shiffrin said, describing the sensation as "like it is pushing you around everywhere". "It's just important to be able to compartmentalise the downhill run, be fully focused on the downhill run and then start the slalom portion of the run as if it's a new day. That's really hard to do - combined days are long and the events could not be more opposite; it's like doing two different sports in one day."

#### Nothing is guaranteed

Shiffrin's bid to finally add to her two previous Olympic gold medals, in the slalom in the 2014 Sochi Games and giant slalom four years ago in Pyeongchang, was boosted by the withdrawal of Petra Vlhova. After winning gold in the slalom, the Slovak racer complained of an ankle injury and returned home. "There are a few girls who have a really good shot at the combined, putting together a solid downhill run and a solid slalom run, and Petra was one of them," Shiffrin said.

The American, with a wry smile after her own experiences in China, warned that "nothing is guaranteed and that's the number one lesson many people learn at the Olympic Games". "There is no guarantee for anything, not for form, not for results." Her main competition in the combined will likely come from the Swiss pair of Michelle Gisin and Wendy Holdener, who have both won bronze medals at these Games, in the super-G and slalom respectively.

Czech cross-code star Ester Ledecka will also be in the running after failing to trouble the podium in either the super-G or downhill. "I hope I'll enjoy it," Ledecka said of the combined. "I didn't really train slalom as much, just once actually this year. I'll try my best and we'll see what happens," said the Czech, who will return home with at least one gold, having retained her snowboard parallel giant slalom title. —AFP

## Tearful Valieva skates again at Olympics amid doping scandal

BEIJING: Russian teenage figure skater Kamila Valieva put herself in pole position to win a second Beijing Olympic title as she controversially returned to action yesterday despite failing a drugs test. Having been cheered onto the ice wearing an off-shoulder purple dress, the 15-year-old burst into tears at the end of a composed performance which propelled her to the top of the standings of the short program in the women's singles competition. The title will be decided tomorrow after the free skate. Valieva learned during these Games she had tested positive in December for trimetazidine, which boosts endurance.

On Monday, the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) ruled that Valieva could carry on at the Olympics, but it does not mean that she has been cleared of doping and she could still face punishment at a later date. After her performance Valieva passed through the area where journalists wait to talk to the skaters without stopping. She was holding a teddy bear and sobbing. "These last few days have been very difficult for me," Valieva, the pre-Games favorite for gold, told Russian television on the eve of competition. "I am happy but at the same time tired emotionally."

The CAS ruling was celebrated in Russia but provoked fury elsewhere, with the United States Anti-Doping Agency accusing the country of "hijacking" the Beijing Olympics. It also put the spotlight once more on doping by Russian athletes, who are not allowed to take part at these Games under their flag because of a state-sponsored doping program that reached its peak at its home 2014 Sochi Olympics.

The International Olympic Committee says there will be no medal ceremony in Beijing if Valieva comes in the top three of the singles event-unprecedented in the history of the Games. Valieva led Russia to team gold last week, before a Stockholm laboratory reported that she had failed a drugs test from December 25. The medal ceremony for the team event will also not take place. In ruling that Valieva should not be suspended, CAS said that there were "exceptional circumstances", including her age and the fact it had taken six weeks for her failed test to be reported.

Senior IOC member Denis Oswald told reporters in Beijing that Valieva had told her doping hearing that she tested positive because of "contamination" from her grandfather's medicine. Russian media said Valieva allegedly drank from the same glass that her grandfather, who takes medication for a heart condition, had used. British skater Natasha McKay hit out at the decision to let Valieva return to action. "Obviously it is not a level playing field and at every sport it should be a level playing field, and we don't get that opportunity here," she said.

#### Whatever Gu can do

Nine gold medals were up for grabs in the Chinese capital yesterday. Corinne Suter won the women's downhill to confirm Switzerland's alpine skiing dominance. Her victory in the high-speed event followed Lara Gut-Behrami in the women's super-G, while Beat Feuz won the men's downhill at the start of the Games and Marco Odermatt took the men's giant slalom.

Two-time skiing gold medalist Mikaela Shiffrin, who is yet to win a medal in Beijing, came 18th as she warmed up for the alpine combined event tomorrow. Defending champion Sofia Goggia of Italy took silver, capping a remarkable return to form after she injured her knee in a crash last month. There was another Swiss winner earlier in the day in the form of Mathilde Gremaud in women's freestyle slopestyle. Gremaud triumphed ahead of Californian-born Chinese sensation Eileen Gu, the



BEIJING: Russia's Kamila Valieva competes in the women's single skating short program of the figure skating event during the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympic Games yesterday. —AFP

face of the Games and gold-medal winner last week. Gu, 18, had to settle for silver.

Her Chinese team-mate Su Yiming, who is 18 later this week, also now has one silver and one gold after he dominated the men's snowboard Big Air to take the title even before his third and final run. In a touching moment, Su pointed at his parents when he was standing on the podium. "I haven't seen my parents for the past seven months because I went to Europe for training and to many places for competitions," said Su, a film actor as a child. "This moment is so special for me and also my family." Austria's Anna Gasser won a dramatic snowboard women's Big Air gold to retain her title. —AFP