



**3** Outgoing envoy says Kuwait 'very important strategic ally' to US



**6** 12 missing off Greece as ferry fire burns on



**13** Pakistanis defy ban to celebrate kite festival



**16** Liverpool survive Norwich scare, Chelsea strike late to down Palace



# Airport back to pre-pandemic level for vaccinated travelers

## DGCA backtracks on decision, allows unvaccinated expats to travel to Kuwait

By Ahmad Jabr

### PM attends heritage show at JACC



KUWAIT: HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah participates in an Ardah sword dance during the Dar Al-Jamayel heritage show at Jaber Al-Ahmad Cultural Centre (JACC) yesterday. Foreign Minister Sheikh Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah, Information Minister Hamad Rouh El-Din and several senior officials attended the show. (See Page 2)

KUWAIT: Kuwait's airport opens today for people who have not been vaccinated against COVID-19 for the first time in two years - albeit with restrictions, while fully vaccinated travelers can travel with almost no constraints, in another sign that the country is inching closer towards a return to normal life.

As of today, passengers of all nationalities traveling to and from Kuwait International Airport must follow a set of regulations depending on their vaccination status. For fully vaccinated passengers, no PCR test is required prior to or on arrival, and they are no longer required to quarantine after arrival. Partially vaccinated passengers are not required to take a PCR prior to arrival but must quarantine for seven days, which can be ended with a negative PCR test done upon arrival.

On the other hand, unvaccinated passengers must carry out a PCR test not more than 72 hours prior to arrival. They must also quarantine for seven days and carry out a PCR test on the seventh day and can leave quarantine only if the result comes back negative. These procedures do not apply to children aged under 16, the Directorate General of Civil Aviation said.

An earlier announcement by the DGCA had caused controversy when it indicated that a Cabinet decision last Monday to allow people who are not vaccinated against COVID-19 or are partially vac-

inated to travel to Kuwait applied only to Kuwaiti passengers. "All travel procedures and PCR exemptions are applicable to Kuwaitis and expatriates," it said in a new circular on Friday, backtracking on their early decision in which it had said that only Kuwaitis can travel to Kuwait if not fully vaccinated.

With the new regulations in place, Kuwait International Airport is now open freely to expatriates, including residents and visitors, for the first time since the pandemic forced airport closures around the world more than two years ago. Furthermore, fully vaccinated travelers are now exempt from PCR and quarantine requirements, which gives hope that aviation traffic in Kuwait can return to pre-pandemic levels sooner rather than later. The new rules also come before a weeklong national holiday; usually one of the busiest times of the year for travel.

The Cabinet had decided on Monday to ease COVID-19 restrictions, including allowing unvaccinated people to enter malls and cinemas provided they produce a negative PCR test result valid for 72 hours. The Cabinet also agreed to reinstate employee capacity at state departments to 100 percent from March 13 and allow public transportation to carry passengers at full capacity. Mosques are allowed to end physical distancing, while indoor conferences and meetings are also allowed to take place.

Continued on Page 2

### News in brief

#### Storm Eunice kills 13 in Europe

LONDON: Emergency crews yesterday battled to restore power to more than one million homes and businesses after Storm Eunice carved a deadly trail across Europe and left transport networks in disarray. At least 13 people were killed on Friday by falling trees, flying debris and high winds in Britain, Ireland, the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany and Poland, emergency services said. — AFP (See Page 6)

#### UAE, India sign 'milestone' pact

DUBAI: The UAE and India signed a "milestone" economic deal to boost trade and investment Friday, as the countries seek to bolster their economies after the coronavirus pandemic. Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan and India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi held a virtual summit to witness the signing of the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement, among other pacts. — AFP (See Page 7)

#### GERD to start generating power

ADDIS ABABA: Ethiopia will start generating power from its mega-dam on the Blue Nile today, government officials told AFP, a major milestone for the controversial project. The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), set to be the largest hydroelectric scheme in Africa, has been at the center of a regional dispute ever since Ethiopia broke ground there in 2011. — AFP (See Page 8)

#### US gunmaker unveils rifle for kids

WASHINGTON: A US gun manufacturer has unveiled a semi-automatic rifle for kids modeled on the AR-15, which has been used in a number of deadly mass shootings, sparking condemnation from gun safety groups. The gun dubbed the JR-15 is being marketed by maker WEEI Tactical as "the first in a line of shooting platforms that will safely help adults introduce children to the shooting sports". — AFP

## Ukraine calls to back 'shield' against Russia

KYIV: Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said yesterday that his country was a "shield" against Russia and deserved more support in the face of a feared Russian invasion, as Moscow test-fired nuclear-capable missiles in a defiant show of force.

In a speech at the Munich Security Conference, Zelensky condemned "a

policy of appeasement" towards Moscow. "For eight years, Ukraine has been a shield. For eight years, Ukraine has been holding back one of the greatest armies in the world," said Zelensky, who travelled to Munich despite shelling in his country's conflict-torn east that left two Ukrainian soldiers dead.

He demanded "clear, feasible time-frames" for Ukraine to join the US-led NATO military alliance - a prospect that Moscow has said would be a red line for its security. But he said he was willing to meet with Vladimir Putin, to find out "what the Russian president wants".

Continued on Page 2

## Pitt sues Jolie over sale of French vineyard

LOS ANGELES: Brad Pitt is suing Angelina Jolie for selling her share of the French vineyard where they got married. Superstars Pitt and Jolie, who were once Hollywood's highest profile couple, bought a controlling stake of Chateau Miraval in southern France in 2008, and tied the knot there six years later. But they filed to dissolve their marriage in 2016 and have remained locked in court battles

since, including over custody rights for their six children.

According to a lawsuit filed by Pitt in California on Thursday, the couple had "agreed they would never sell their respective interests in Miraval without the other's consent". But last October, Jolie sold her stake to a "Luxembourg-based spirits manufacturer controlled by Russian oligarch Yuri Sheffer", the legal document obtained by AFP says.

Pitt's filing alleges that Jolie broke the terms of their original agreement by not offering him first refusal for her share, and that she is seeking to "recover unearned windfall profits for herself while inflicting gratuitous harm on Pitt". "Jolie long ago stopped contributing to Miraval - while Pitt poured



This handout video grab released yesterday shows a Russian Iskander-K missile launching as part of the Grom-2022 Strategic Deterrence Force exercise at an undefined location in Russia. — AFP



LONDON: This file photo taken on June 13, 2014 shows Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt. — AFP

## Bullfighting tradition lives on in UAE

AL-QURAYYAH, United Arab Emirates: Far from Dubai's gleaming skyscrapers and renowned camel races, a bullfight is under way in the emirate of Fujairah, where the tradition continues unbeknown to most in

the United Arab Emirates. "Look at them fight!" a commentator shouts into a microphone as the first bovine battle of the day kicks off, sending up clouds of dust in the village of Al-Qurayyah.

Two bulls, each weighing in at hundreds of kilograms, charge at each other while assistants hold ropes attached to their necks or legs for safety. Sometimes the huge animals come dangerously close to the spectators, sending them fleeing from their chairs. — AFP (See Page 12)



FUJAIRAH: Bulls lock horns during a traditional bullfight on Feb 5, 2022. — AFP

## Local

# Kuwait Prime Minister attends Dar Al-Jamayel heritage live show at JACC

## Kuwait's national celebrations reflect leaders' interest: Info Minister



KUWAIT: His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah (center) attends the heritage live show. — KUNA photos



His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah and other officials perform the 'Ardah' traditional dance.



An 'Ardah' traditional dance performance.

KUWAIT: Kuwait's Prime Minister His Highness Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah attended yesterday under his patronage the first heritage live show 'Dar Al-Jamayel' at Sheikh Jaber Al-Ahmad Cultural Centre (JACC). On this occasion, His Highness the Prime Minister wished Kuwait and its people more progress

and prosperity, especially during Kuwait's 61st anniversary of independence and 31st anniversary of liberation. His Highness the Prime Minister expressed his pride in this show which depicts Kuwait's cultural and artistic image. Minister of Amiri Diwan Affairs Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah Al-Mubarak Al-Sabah, Minister of

Foreign Affairs, State Minister for Cabinet Affairs and Acting Minister of Defense Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah, Minister of Information and Culture Hamad Rouh El-Din and several senior officials attended the show. Rouh El-Din affirmed that the national celebrations this year have a special character

that reflects the interest of the political leadership and government. The celebrations are also being held under the auspices of the Minister of Information and Culture, who launched a unique image of representing the Kuwaiti heritage by involving many popular groups of various kinds in the national activities. — KUNA

## Speaker underscores necessity of regular Arab meetings

CAIRO: Speaker of the Kuwaiti National Assembly Marzouq Ali Al-Ghanem yesterday underscored necessity of pan-Arab meetings, namely at the parliamentary and grassroots levels for greater interaction among the nation's peoples. Addressing the fourth conference of Arab Inter-Parliamentary Union (AIPU), Ghanem called upon decision makers in Arab states to set priorities in order and unify rhetoric towards key issues. Such an objective can be attained with continuous consultations, dialogue and brain storming, he added.

Ghanem indicated that he sensed deep distress when he examined the conference draft document with topics headlined as the crises of Yemen, Libya, Somalia, Syria and Lebanon. "I am very much sad and deeply worried not because these crises are

many; we have been accustomed with this, but rather because we have regularly failed to establish stability in our states," he said, noting that these crises have overshadowed substantial issues, such as women and youth rights and democracy. "We do not have the luxury of addressing such key files in the shadow of instability and social insecurity in many of our states; such a very distressing paradox," he said. "We ought to set the priorities in order and act according to a high-level coordination mechanism; we ought to have single rhetoric as much as possible and this can only be achieved through continuous consultations and dialogue and brain storming," he stressed.

Ghanem had affirmed on Friday the necessity to tackle inter-Arab rifts and unify ranks of the nation's various peoples in the face of dangerous challenges. Ghanem said the convention's final statement affirmed the need to solidify the Arabs' ranks to face the very dangerous external challenges. The ideal avenue to attain these objectives is tackling the divisions among the Arabs and unifying the ranks "so we may become able to face the challenges." He indicated that the Kuwaiti delegation

during the convention called for unifying stances among the Arabs at international quarters and events. He also called for working out a common strategy to strengthen the nation.

Meanwhile, the Chairman of Arab Parliament Scouts Union and Chairman of Kuwaiti Scouts Society MP Abdullah Al-Turaiji affirmed firmness of the Kuwaiti position towards Arab issues, in regard to the Palestinian question, as well as expressing his pride of the Kuwaiti parliament's strong presence in various Arab and international parliamentary forums. Turaiji said that His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, the political leadership and the Kuwaiti parliament are in agreement on all Arab issues. The participation of the Kuwaiti Parliamentary Division reflects support and steadfastness in attitudes towards various Arab issues, he added. In addition, he praised the influential role played by Speaker Ghanem and the General Secretariat of the National Assembly. Turaiji valued the outcome of the conference, which he attended as an observer and representative of the General Assembly of the Arab Parliamentarian Scout Federation, indicating that the conference was successful. — KUNA



CAIRO: Speaker of the Kuwaiti National Assembly Marzouq Ali-Ghanem speaks during the conference. — KUNA

## Airport back to pre-pandemic...

Continued from Page 1

Social gatherings including weddings are also allowed indoors or outdoors provided health protocols are followed.

The Cabinet also announced that children under

16 who are unvaccinated against COVID-19 can enter schools without the need to bring a negative PCR test certificate, while only students who test positive or show symptoms must be isolated.

On Jan 10, the Cabinet had adopted restrictions to curb the spread of the Omicron coronavirus variant in Kuwait, including reducing staff at state departments to 50 percent and urging the private sector to reduce staff as well, applying physical distancing at mosques, canceling in-person conferences and meetings and cutting public transportation passenger capacity to 50 percent.

paid "approximately 25 million euros (\$28 million)," with Pitt contributing 60 percent and Jolie the remaining 40 percent. But Pitt went on to pay for renovations "in a manner far disproportionate to his relative ownership share" on the understanding Jolie would not pull out of the investment without his consent, the suit says.

Pitt brought in Marc Perrin, one of France's top winemakers, to help transform the business into a leading rose wine producer, but "Jolie had no involvement in these efforts," it continues. Revenues reportedly grew from approximately \$3 million in 2013 to more than \$50 million last year, with Miraval recently launching a new line of rose sparkling wine. — AFP

## Pitt sues Jolie over sale of...

Continued from Page 1

money and sweat equity into the wine business, building it into the ascendant company it is today," it states.

Pitt's lawsuit requests a trial by jury. It describes the vineyard as a "small, unprofitable wine business" that was "in need of renovation" prior to the couple's purchase in 2008. The pair

## Ukraine calls to back 'shield...

Continued from Page 1

Western officials in Munich continued to raise the alarm about Moscow's intentions towards Ukraine, after US President Joe Biden said Friday that he was "convinced" Putin planned to invade, including with an attack on the capital Kyiv, within days.

They again warned of enormous sanctions if Russia attacks, with US Vice President Kamala Harris saying this would only see NATO reinforce its "eastern flank" and British Prime Minister Boris Johnson urging the West to "stand strong together".

The increasingly fraught warnings of an invasion, intense clashes in Ukraine's east and the evacuation of civilians from Russian-backed rebel regions have brought fears of a major conflict in Europe to their highest after weeks of tensions. The Kremlin insists it has no plans to attack its neighbor, but Moscow has done little to reduce tensions, with state media accusing Kyiv of plotting an assault on rebel-held pro-Russia enclaves in eastern Ukraine.

Yesterday's exercises of strategic forces saw

Russia test-fire its latest hypersonic, cruise and nuclear-capable ballistic missiles. Russian television showed images of Putin and Belarusian leader Alexander Lukashenko sitting at a round table in the Kremlin situation room, in front of a bank of screens showing military commanders during the test. "All the missiles hit their targets, confirming their performance objectives," the Kremlin said, adding that the drills included ground launchers, Tu-95 bombers and submarines.

The United States insists that, with some 150,000 Russian troops on Ukraine's borders - as many as 190,000, when including the Russian-backed separatist forces in the east - Moscow has already made up its mind to invade. Some of the Russian forces, around 30,000 troops, are in Belarus for an exercise which is due to end today. Moscow has said that these forces will return to barracks, but US intelligence is concerned that they could take part in an invasion of Ukraine.

Russia has announced a series of withdrawals of its forces from near Ukraine in recent days, saying they were taking part in regular military exercises and accusing the West of "hysteria" with claims of an invasion plan. But Putin has also stepped up his rhetoric, reiterating demands for written guarantees that Ukraine will never be allowed to join NATO and that the alliance roll back deployments in eastern Europe to positions from decades ago. — AFP

Local

# Outgoing envoy says Kuwait 'very important strategic ally' to US

## Kuwaiti women very active in handling empowerment issues: Romanowski

By Ben Garcia

**KUWAIT:** US Ambassador to Kuwait Alina L. Romanowski will soon head to Baghdad after she was nominated as ambassador to Iraq by US President Joe Biden. "Kuwait is a very important strategic ally to us, but Iraq is not too far away. I was nominated by the president because I can bring a lot of experience from this region, with 40 years of experience in various government agencies at different capacities," she said.

"I bring with me a lot of experience in defense and security and in the world of foreign policy. I am clear and consistent in promoting American interests and building and expanding broader relationships in this region," she said. "It's an exciting opportunity and an honor, and I am looking forward to the new assignment," she said.

Romanowski assumed her post as US ambassador to Kuwait on Feb 11, 2020. A career member of the senior executive service, Romanowski was sworn in as the US Ambassador to Kuwait on Jan 6, 2020. Prior to her appointment, she served as the US Department of State's principal deputy coordinator for counterterrorism (2016-20). During almost 40 years of service across various US government agencies, Romanowski has become an expert on Middle East affairs. She began her US government career as an analyst at the Central Intelligence Agency (1980-90).

### Bilateral relations

In a roundtable discussion with the local press at the US Embassy on Thursday, Romanowski reminisced on bilateral relations with Kuwait. "It's remarkable when you look back over the last 31 years, when we are celebrating liberation and 60 years of diplomatic relations. We see how wide, broad and deep our ties really are. Our relationship started with healthcare, when our doctors came to Kuwait in the late 1700s. Kuwait has become a very

important strategic partner to us," she said.

Romanowski mentioned the fifth strategic dialogue which culminated on Jan 26, 2022 with a meeting between Foreign Minister of Kuwait Sheikh Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammed Al-Sabah and US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken. "We talk with Kuwait not just on bilateral issues. We talk and work together on the UN, GCC, Arab League, OIC and other global issues, healthcare and security situations across the world. We may not agree on all issues, but that is not the point. We talk about every issue, from human rights and women's rights to democracy issues and healthcare," she said.

"I just met with the new minister of health and we talked about how we can deepen our relationship. We also discussed a recent MoU that we signed. We also touched on the issue of Ukraine," Romanowski said. The envoy underlined how proud

her country is to host around 10,000 Kuwaiti students, who are now honing their skills, expertise and talents in almost all areas of discipline. Now that restrictions are easing, Romanowski expects more people-to-people connections, especially in business, trade, opportunities for

Kuwaitis to visit the US for investments, and likewise for Americans to come to Kuwait.

As a female ambassador from the US, Romanowski expects at least 50 percent of women in the world can participate in nation-building in various capacities. "Kuwaiti women have won in parliament and some were appointed in cabinets. Kuwaiti women have evolved: women got elected; they are being elected; but there are more women's rights empowerment issues being tackled and Kuwaiti women are very active in handling these issues," she said.

### Ukraine

On the issue of Ukraine, Romanowski said the US has worked very hard since it started to recognize the Russian movements of troops on the border

with Belarus. "We made it very clear that we do not want to see Russia invade Ukraine. President Biden has mobilized the EU and others, and engaged Russia to try to find a diplomatic solution and deescalate the situation. Finding a diplomatic solution is still our number one priority. The president is much more in favor of peace, but it's a very delicate situation now," she admitted.



US Ambassador to Kuwait Alina L. Romanowski

### Iran

Romanowski said one of the prime objectives in the US is for Iran to not acquire any nuclear weapons. "With the Biden administration, there have been discussions going on now in Vienna whether or not the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) will be a possibility. We are in a very delicate time now in this negotiation at the moment. I am not in a position to say a lot about it, but a very detailed conversation has been going on in this regard. Iran in our view is promoting very destabilizing activities in the region, which doesn't help the security of the region; the support they are giving to non-state actors is a real problem in terms of stability," Romanowski said. "We are consulting our partners and allies in the region, and also with the EU. We see that time is running out in terms of finding a solution and our ways to go back to the JCPOA. We have the Iranians as partners too, but at the end of the day, our objective is for us not to see Iran acquiring the capability to further destabilize the region," she pointed out.

With regards to Houthi attacks on the UAE and Saudi Arabia, the US envoy said her country has been trying to find a solution to the problem. "President Biden has appointed a special envoy for Yemen to try to work on a possible solution. The humanitarian situation in Yemen is getting worse. Our efforts are focused on assisting people in Yemen on humanitarian grounds, but at the same time in the UAE we are giving support on the defense side," she noted.

## Kuwait's new travel regulations explained

**KUWAIT:** The following are the new travel regulations that Kuwait will adopt on passengers of all nationalities starting from today:

### Fully vaccinated:

- No PCR prior to arrival.
- No PCR on arrival.
- No quarantine after arrival.

### Partially vaccinated:

- No PCR prior to arrival.
- Must quarantine for seven days that can be ended with a negative PCR test done upon arrival.

### Unvaccinated:

- Must carry out a PCR test not more than 72 hours prior to arrival.
- Must quarantine for seven days and carry out a PCR test on the seventh day and can leave quarantine if the result comes back negative.
- Children under 16 are exempt from the procedures.

### Note:

- Fully vaccinated people are those who have taken three doses of a COVID-19 vaccine approved by Kuwaiti authorities, or two doses as long as nine months haven't passed since the date of the second dose or have recovered from COVID-19 for not more than three months.
- Partially vaccinated people are those who have not taken a booster shot nine months after taking their second dose of a COVID-19 vaccine approved by Kuwaiti authorities.
- Unvaccinated people are those who have not received a COVID-19 vaccine approved by Kuwaiti authorities or have not completed their vaccination.

## UK Ambassador visits Dasman Diabetes Institute

**KUWAIT:** British Ambassador to Kuwait Belinda Lewis paid a visit to Dasman Diabetes Institute, which was established by Kuwait Foundation for the Advancement of Sciences. Ambassador Lewis was received by Dr Qais Saleh Al-Duwairi, Director-General, and Tarek Abdullah Aleryan, Director of Public Relations and Media at the Dasman Diabetes

Institute. The purpose of the Ambassador's visit to the Institute was to get to know more about the important scientific role that the institution plays in Kuwait, and to explore means of enhancing scientific cooperation.

During the visit to the institute, the Ambassador learned more about the many scientific research topics that the institute focuses on and discussed issues of common interest between the two sides. Dr Duwairi briefed the Ambassador about the institute's scientific progress, its importance and its role in the service of scientific research in Kuwait and discussed ways to enhance joint research and scientific cooperation. In turn, Ambassador Lewis praised the institute's impressive developments and achievements.



**KUWAIT:** British Ambassador to Kuwait Belinda Lewis (left) during her visit to Dasman Diabetes Institute.

## VO launches MADE to nurture Kuwait's food industry

**KUWAIT:** MADE, an incubation ecosystem that aims to develop and promote the food industry in Kuwait, was launched on Friday by VO, Kuwait's integrated youth platform for incubating young talents. The sub-brand was launched during a two-day food festival bringing together more than 50 Kuwaiti dining brands and concepts to exhibit their products in open kitchen competitions, tasting experiences, and live cooking shows at Kuwait Motor Town, located in Ali Sabah Al-Salem.

Considered to be the first business incubator for dining concepts and culinary creativity, MADE was created for local retailers, food trucks, farmers, food entrepreneurs, dining concepts and restaurants to strengthen their market position in Kuwait's food industry and export their concepts, products, and brands to the region. The sub-brand was awarded the name MADE, as made by Kuwait with love, to boost local production and highlight Kuwait's culinary concepts and culture worldwide.

"Culinary tourism is increasing worldwide, and this is a great industry for Kuwait to capitalize on given our rich market of dining concepts and diverse culinary experiences. To diversify Kuwait's economy, we must start investing in sectors that are internationally growing such as culinary tourism, entertainment, media, sports, and innovation," stated

Riham Al-Ayyar, CEO of VO Kuwait.

A report was recently published by Berkshire Hathaway Company on the international industry of culinary tourism showing that the market reached a value of \$696.5 billion in 2021 and researchers expect the market to reach \$1,796.5 billion by 2027, exhibiting a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 17.4 percent during 2022-2027.

"The culinary market in Kuwait is huge and filled with young talents that can take this industry to the next level. VO founded MADE as a sub-brand to support aspiring chefs and amateur culinary concepts and businesses to develop and integrate markets beyond Kuwait. Food tourism can contribute to Kuwait's economic diversification, and we are therefore strategically investing in this field by providing an ecosystem that promotes transparency, creativity, and healthy competitions for our young talents to grow in the international food market," added Al-Ayyar.

Founded in July 2020, as a result of a fruitful collaboration between Sheikha Ohoud Al-Sabah and Riham Al-Ayyar aiming to empower local talents and position them in the global market, VO provides Kuwaiti youth with innovative avenues for developing and exhibiting their talents to the international community. The platform launched its all-inclusive studio and seamless, high-tech and efficient mobile application in 2021.



Riham Al-Ayyar

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## News in brief

Kuwait reports 1,019  
new COVID-19 cases

**KUWAIT:** Up to 1,019 people were diagnosed with the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) in Kuwait over the past 24 hours, bringing the tally of the cases to 611,820, the Ministry of Health said yesterday. The ministry spokesperson Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad said that medical authorities recorded 3,506 new recovery cases, with the whole count of those cured from the infection amounting to 588,084. He pointed out that proportion of the whole count of the healed from among the overall infections reached 96.1 percent. One death with the COVID-19 infection was registered, raising the death toll to 2,528, he said, adding that the number of the patients treated at intensive care units reached 85. The number of hospitalized cases amounted to 21,208, meanwhile 343 patients were reported in the COVID-19 wards, he added. The ministry further reported 20,111 fresh swab tests, putting the whole number of the examinations at 7,446,560, Dr Sanad concluded.

## Ministry checks citizenship claims

**KUWAIT:** The Kuwaiti Ministry of Interior Affairs said on Friday common committees involving personnel of the General Department of Nationality, Travel Documents and the Criminal Evidence division determine, with scientific methods, the Kuwaiti identity for persons born abroad. The commissions carry out the task in implementation of the law, for sake of protecting the Kuwaiti identity as well as for humanitarian causes. A press statement by the Interior Ministry indicated the committees are tasked with examining some births outside the State of Kuwait resulting from marriage to Kuwaiti citizens. These teams regularly visit the countries, where births purported to be from Kuwaiti parent (or parents), to take samples of the babies' DNA for examination in Kuwait for certain verification. The DNA verification allows the newly-born to enter Kuwait as a citizen and avert complications for the parents and their children. The committees' procedure of taking the DNA sample and matching it with the Kuwaiti father prevents manipulation or exploitation or resort to the embassy to request a document or entry visa.

## Youth Leadership project launched

**KUWAIT:** Kuwait's Youth Authority yesterday launched a project called 'Preparing Young Leaders' which aims to teach concepts of leadership, building and enhancing self-confidence, in addition to developing and improving job performance. The official spokesperson of the authority, Muhammad Al-Allush, said in a press statement that the project is a training program that begins on March 6 and will continue until the 23rd of the same month. Alloush called on young Kuwaitis of both sexes to register through the authority's website (www.youth.gov.kw), indicating that the age of the applicant should be from 22 to 34 years.

## Kuwait oil price at \$92.39 pb

**KUWAIT:** The price of Kuwaiti oil dropped by \$1.61 to reach \$92.39 per barrel on Friday, compared with \$94 pb the day before, said the Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) yesterday. At international markets, the price of the Brent crude went up by 57 cents to \$93.54 pb, and the West Texas Intermediate went down by 69 cents to \$91.07 pb.

Kuwait continues  
sending relief to  
people in need

**KUWAIT:** Kuwaiti charities continued extending a hand of mercy for stricken nations and communities throughout the globe. The delight inspired by marking Kuwait's national days is doubled with the relief efforts, bringing a measure of joy for the impoverished across the world. The Kuwaiti charities and relief associations have been heading guidelines by His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah to aid people in need wherever possible. Dhari Al-

## Photo of the Day



**KUWAIT:** A paraglider flies the Kuwaiti national flag at a beach in Kuwait City yesterday, ahead of the celebrations of the 61st Independence Day and 31st Liberation Day anniversaries. —Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

Experts say digital banks to help  
Kuwait keep pace with global trends

**KUWAIT:** The Central Bank of Kuwait's recent decision to open the door for the establishment of digital banks signaled a new milestone in the state's financial regulator's drive for digitization and keeping abreast with the latest trends in global financial services, Kuwaiti banking officials and experts have concurred. In separate interviews, they argued that the move was also driven by growing needs from a tech-savvy young generation who are searching for easy-to-access financial services.

Executive Director of the Supervision Sector at the Central Bank of Kuwait (CBK) Waleed Al-Awadhi said that the digital banks will have no branches and will offer all banking services through digital channels. This tech-based model saves cost and time, he clarified, adding that these banks do not have the paperwork complications of the traditional counterparts. Awadhi unveiled that the Central Bank of Kuwait had worked intensively in recent years, especially during the coronavirus pandemic to achieve digital transformation, boosting cybersecurity and encouraging innovation. He noted that most local banks have great capabilities in digital banking services. What is new about the new banking license which was recently announced by the Central Bank is that it allows the establishment of a standalone digital bank, which can provide all banking services through online only, he explained. Digital banks will be able to use the latest financial technologies to offer creative financial solutions at low costs, he envisaged.

Awadhi stated that the existing traditional banks also have the ability and the required infrastructures to provide digital services. The existing banks can also apply for a license to open digital units or a new digital bank in partnership with a shareholding company, he pointed out. Financial shareholding companies can also

apply to get a license for establishing a digital bank, he said. He stressed that the regulatory requirements, guidelines, instructions and controls applicable to traditional and digital banks are the same, indicating that the capital required to establish a digital bank in Kuwait would be KD 75 million (about \$247.5 million), the same amount required for a traditional bank. He indicated that the CBK receives applications for digital bank license until June 30, 2022. It will study all applications and give initial approvals before the end of the year. The CBK will also set a deadline for those who got licenses to complete procedures and start operation, he said.

## Three models

Manager of the Off-Site Supervision Department at Central Bank of Kuwait Dr Mohammed Al-Khamis said that the CBK's decision on February 2, 2022 started with collecting applications for digital bank license. He added that it was taken after the development of the digital banking framework and studying of relevant best practices of more than 25 central banks and experiences of 40 digital banks worldwide. Khamis added that the framework in Kuwait allows the provision of digital banking services according to three models: a unit within a traditional bank, or through a partnership between such bank and a digital institution or the establishment of a standalone digital bank.

Establishing Partner for the Newbury Economic Consultancy Issam Al-Tawari said meanwhile that granting licenses for digital banks in Kuwait has become a necessity due to the great development in this field in various countries and the growing international competition. Tawari cautioned that the opening of this large number of digital banks in the world could attract a large segment of Kuwaiti young investors to



banking markets that do not subject to the CBK supervision, especially as 65 percent of the Kuwaiti population is young, and the behavior of this category is completely linked to non-traditional digital services. He suggested that the prevailing global trend of the banking sector is the transition to digital banks, which offer a wide scope for innovation and entrepreneurship.

Tawari, however, ruled out the possibility of Kuwaiti youth applying for digital bank licenses taking into account the announced requirements and conditions. Unless they come up with innovative services and establish a shareholding company, they will not be able to apply for digital bank licenses, he pointed out. He said that other companies eligible to apply for digital bank licenses are companies that have a large customer base, as they can collaborate with other institutions to establish a digital bank and benefit from their customer base. On February 2, the CBK issued guidelines specifying requirements for establishing digital banks as tech-based business models and opened the door for receiving applications and the required documents until the end of June 2022. —KUNA

KIB releases new  
artwork to celebrate  
national holidays

**KUWAIT:** In celebration of the national holidays and as part of its community engagement program, Kuwait International Bank (KIB) recently filmed and released its latest ad, entitled 'No Country Like Kuwait,' featuring a patriotic song by renowned artist Abdul Aziz Lewis. The song expresses the bank's celebration of Kuwait's heritage and storied traditions in a contemporary framework that symbolizes KIB's viewpoint of the country's bright future under its Amir's vision, and the leadership of its ambitious and promising youth.

The February release is part of KIB's comprehensive community engagement program - to celebrate the national holidays with its community. The ad was broadcast across all media channels and digital platforms. Commenting on the latest artistic production, Othman Tawfeq, General Manager of KIB's Retail Banking Department said: "At KIB, we consider ourselves to be a leading banking and financial institution; and we aim to consolidate the



principles of national unity, solidarity, and cohesion amongst members of our community, through an artistic and cultural work that captivates Kuwait's new generation.

Also commenting on the latest production, Marwa Marafie, from the bank's Marketing and Corporate Communications Unit, highlighted the detailed

approach adopted; including the carefully chosen words aiming to clearly reflect KIB's pride in its Kuwaiti identity and belonging to the local community. She also noted that the bank continues to focus heavily on identifying what energizes Kuwait's youth and implementing modern ideas under the leadership of a seasoned and veteran strategy with over 40 years of experience. This comes in line with the state's vision, on which the national development plans are based, which in turn at its core seeks to invest in Kuwait's exceptional and capable youth, entrusting them with the country's future.

It serves to note that this artistic production is not an unprecedented initiative for KIB, as the bank has always sought to celebrate momentous national and cultural occasion with its local community; delivering initiatives and events that reflect KIB's commitment to communal participation and social engagement, under its 'Bank for Life' ethos; adopted to always be the ideal partner for the bank's community.



Marwa Marafie

Buajian, the director general of Al-Salam humanitarian society, said the association dispatched 400 truckloads of humanitarian supplies to the refugees and displaced from Syria and Yemen. In remarks to the press, on the sidelines of concluding the eighth edition of the humanitarian campaign "Kuwait's trucks 2022," he disclosed that total aid value provided by the society reached as high as KD 1,439,491 (approximately \$4,759,434). The campaign, organized in coordination with the ministries of foreign and social affairs, benefited thousands of refugees, many faced difficulties in coping with the winter conditions and ramifications of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). The Kuwaiti assistance supplies, Buajian added, reached, in the latest phase of the campaign that kicked off in 2016, up to 2,000 refugee camps.

Meanwhile, Dr Abdullah Al-Maatouq, Chairperson of the International Islamic Charity Organization (IICO) and Special

Advisor of the United Nations Secretary General, lauded Al-Salam society, noting that in its first efforts, it had dispatched 100 truckloads of relief supplies. And in the next year, it sent out 317 of such lorries abroad. "Today, they have dispatched 400 truckloads of supplies and there is a desire to increase the number of such convoys heading toward Syrian and Yemen," he added.

The IICO distributed food, dwelling items and clothes to 340 war-stricken families in Yemen's governorate of Taiz, as part of the seven-year-old campaign 'Kuwait by your side.' The Yemeni society, Al-Hekma, that carried out the project, said in a statement that the program 'the winter warmth,' covered distribution of food packages, blankets and various clothes, particularly for those living in very cold regions during the winter.

Abdulrahman Shamsan, in charge of the society branch in

Taiz, expressed deep gratitude for the Kuwaiti support for the Yemeni people. For its part, the Kuwaiti Sheikh Abdullah Nouri Charity (SANC) opened a school in the province of Hadramout in eastern Yemen, also as part of 'Kuwait by your side' campaign.

Meanwhile, the general director of Al-Mukalla local administration, Saleh Al-Omari, thanked Kuwait during the school inauguration for helping the young Yemenis attain education. Moreover, the Kuwaiti association established another school, for girls, in the same region. In Ramallah, the West Bank, the Kuwaiti charity, Insan, granted aid, namely supplies necessary for the winter season to families. Kuwait is celebrating the liberation and independence days later this month. The occasions have inspired joy among the people of the country, public places of which have decorated with national flags and figures depicting the occasions. —KUNA



12 missing off Greece as Italian ferry fire burns on

## Violence in Sudan's Darfur lays bare deepening crisis

Page 7

Page 6



MUNICH: Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba (third left) and Italian Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio (third right) hug as French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian (second right) reacts and British Foreign Secretary Liz Truss (first right), Japanese Foreign Minister Yoshimasa Hayashi (first left) and Canadian Foreign Minister Melanie Joly (second left) stand as they meet with the Foreign Ministers of the G7 Nations on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference (MSC) in Munich, southern Germany, yesterday. —AFP

# West voices fears of Russia-China axis

## Beijing backs Moscow over its showdown with NATO

MUNICH: Western leaders yesterday said Russia and China were seeking to “replace the existing international rules” with their own order, as Beijing backed Moscow over its showdown with NATO.

Russia has all but encircled Ukraine with its huge troop buildup and US President Joe Biden has warned that Vladimir Putin plans an invasion within days. Moscow is using the threat to invade Ukraine to demand a halt to NATO expansion and what it calls “Cold War” ideologies.

At a closely choreographed appearance in Beijing for the Winter Olympics, Putin and his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping had put up a united front against NATO expansion. “For the first time we now see Beijing joining Moscow in calling on NATO to stop admitting new members,” noted the alliance’s chief Jens Stoltenberg, speaking at the Munich Security Conference. “It is an attempt to control the fate of free nations, to rewrite the international rulebook and impose their own authoritarian models of governance,” he warned.

EU chief Ursula von der Leyen had stronger words, accusing Moscow of a “blatant attempt” to

rewrite the global order. Russia and China are seeking to “replace the existing international rules—they prefer the rule of the strongest to the rule of law, intimidation instead of self-determination,” she told the Munich conference.

Addressing the same forum via video-link a few hours later, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said Beijing’s commitment to respecting territorial sovereignty has been “consistent” and that anyone challenging it was “distorting” its position. But he also questioned whether an eastern expansion of NATO would guarantee lasting peace.

“We believe that the Cold War is long gone—NATO was a product of the Cold War era and now we need to look at the current situation and there needs to be an adaptation of NATO,” he said.

weeks of tensions between Russia and the West.

Conflict monitors have warned of a sharp escalation in ceasefire violations in fighting between Ukraine’s army and the separatists, a trend Sokela herself could attest to.

In her hometown of Shakhtarsk, she said, “we can hear everything perfectly clearly. There were explosions on Thursday. Some heavy stuff was coming down.” The US government earlier hit out at the orders, saying the move by Moscow-backed rebels was a “cynical” effort by Moscow to deflect from what the West fears is an imminent Russian invasion.

At the checkpoint Saturday there was a steady stream of elderly women and children, dressed in puffy coats on a crisp winter day and dragging wheelie bags. Sokela was bringing her 16-year-old son to stay with his grandmother in Russia “where it’s calm” but planned to return herself.

“Let’s stay for a week and come back. Or maybe the school will be closed. No one has said anything yet,” Sokela said. Separatist leaders have announced plans to get hundreds of thousands of people out of the territory and into Russia, but AFP journalists at the crossing yesterday witnessed no mass exodus. There was only a small row of cars on the separatist side waiting to cross into Russia, and 10 school bus-

es waiting to ferry arrivals stood empty. Fifteen tents set up by the emergencies ministry on the Russian side of the crossing had no one to house. —AFP

“If there is persistent eastern expansion, will that guarantee peace in Europe? That is a question that our friends in Europe need to consider seriously.” Wang also stressed that “all parties have the right to raise their concerns, while the reasonable concerns of Russia should also be respected and heeded.”

ended in the 1990s, and the pair has pursued a strategic partnership in recent years that has seen them work closely on trade, military and geopolitical issues.

The escalating tensions with the West have further bolstered ties between the world’s most populous nation and the world’s largest. Speaking in Munich yesterday, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz warned against viewing the world through Cold War lenses, as he assessed that nations are no longer divided into a communist and a capitalist half since the 1990s.

“There are now only capitalist countries on the globe, but North Korea. And if you see it like this, the difference between the states is about autocracy, about the way how we rule our countries, about democracy,” he said. “It is absolutely clear that we are going into a world that is multi-polar,” he said, adding that “you can be sure that other upcoming or already great nations of Asia will not accept” any attempts by China or Russia to build up their own spheres of domination or interest. “Not Korea, not Japan, not Vietnam, not Indonesia, not Malaysia,” he warned. —AFP



‘Blatant attempt’ to rewrite the global order

‘Multi-polar’

China has in recent years been in the crosshairs of the West over its human rights record, including its alleged abuse of Uyghurs, which has also sparked a US-led Western diplomatic boycott of the Winter Olympics. China enjoyed plentiful support from the Soviet Union—the precursor to the modern Russian state—after the establishment of Communist rule in 1949, but the two socialist powers later fell out over ideological differences. Relations got back on track as the Cold War

## Evacuees from Ukraine hope for quick return

AVILA USPENKA CHECKPOINT, Russia: The loud explosions and wailing sirens in rebel-held territory in eastern Ukraine were getting more frequent, so when the evacuation order came Elena Sokela decided it was time to get her son to safety. “We didn’t want to wait until it was too late. Better to get out now,” the 40-year-old told AFP yesterday at a border crossing between the rebel Donetsk region and Russia, a day after the order to evacuate came down. There was a steady flow of people acting on the order to leave, crossing between wire fencing topped with Russian flags on a bright morning at the Avila Uspenka checkpoint into Russia.

On Friday evening, leaders of two separatist republics in east Ukraine ordered women and children to flee and as soon as possible make their way to Russia. Their poor and industrial rebel-controlled territories in Ukraine have been at the centre of



DONETSK, Ukraine: People sign up for evacuation in Donetsk yesterday. Russian region bordering Ukraine declared a state of emergency yesterday, citing growing numbers of people arriving from separatist-held regions in Ukraine after they received evacuation orders. —AFP

## 10 killed in bombing in Somalia town on eve of vote

MOGADISHU: Ten people were killed yesterday in a suspected suicide bombing on a popular restaurant in the central Somali town of Beledweyne, on the eve of a round of voting there, police said.

The attack was claimed by the Al-Shabaab Islamist militant group, which has been waging an insurgency in the troubled Horn of Africa nation for years. Security had been tightened in Beledweyne ahead of a first round of voting for parliamentary seats in the constituency, which lies about 340 kilometers (210 miles) north of the capital Mogadishu.

Two deputy district commissioners were among the dead, while 16 civilians were also wounded, local police officer Mohamud Hassan told AFP by phone, saying a suicide bomber was believed to be behind the blast.

“This was the deadliest attack I can recall in this town,” he added. Somalia, particularly Mogadishu, has seen a spate of attacks in recent weeks as the country hobbles through long-delayed elections. Al-Shabaab said in a statement that one of its fighters carried out the attack.

Witnesses said the huge explosion tore through an open area of the Hassan Dhiif restaurant where people had gathered under trees to eat lunch and enjoy the breeze. “I saw dead bodies of several people and I could not count how many wounded that were rushed to hospital,” said one witness, Mahad Osman. “Some of these people were waiting for their ordered meals to come while enjoying the fresh weather when the blast occurred,” he said.

“I saw... shoes, sticks and hats strewn at the scene of the blast, there was also blood and severed parts of human flesh in the area.”

Somalia is due to wrap up voting for the lower house of parliament by February 25 under the latest timetable for the elections, which are more than a year behind schedule. President President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed, better known by his nickname Farmajo, has been at loggerheads with Prime Minister Mohamed Hussein Roble over the election delays, an impasse that has Somalia’s international backers worried. —AFP

## Rescuers retrieve more bodies days after Brazil storm

PETROPOLIS, Brazil: Rescue workers pulled more bodies yesterday from the muddy wreckage left by devastating floods and landslides in the scenic Brazilian city of Petropolis, where the death toll stands at 136, including 26 children. In a dense fog, rescue workers dug with spades and shovels through the rubble and muck as the search entered its fifth day.

An AFP photographer saw rescue workers carrying out two recovered corpses in body bags in the hard-hit neighborhood of Alto da Serra, as relatives sobbed in the street.

In the heart of the disaster zone, rescue workers occasionally blew loud whistles to call for silence and listen for signs of life. But authorities

say there is little hope at this point of finding survivors from Tuesday’s torrential rains, which turned streets to gushing rivers in the picturesque city in the southeastern mountains and triggered landslides in poor hillside neighborhoods that wiped out virtually all in their path. Officials say 24 people have been rescued alive, but that was mostly in the early hours after the tragedy. Rio de Janeiro state police said 218 people remained missing as of late Friday.

Meanwhile, 91 of the 136 bodies recovered so far have been identified. Many of the missing may be among the unidentified bodies. But the numbers have been hazy, and it is difficult to know how high the death toll could go.



PETROPOLIS, Brazil: Rescue workers search for victims after a giant landslide in Petropolis, Brazil yesterday. —AFP

The dead include 26 minors so far, said the police. President Jair Bolsonaro, who flew over the disaster

zone Friday by helicopter, said the city was suffering from “enormous destruction, like scenes of war.” —AFP

## International

# 12 missing off Greece as Italian ferry fire burns on

## '250 people were screaming, shouting, some of them were jumping into the sea'

**CORFU, Greece:** At least 12 truck drivers remained missing yesterday from an Italian-flagged ferry still ablaze on the Ionian Sea off Corfu, Greece's coast-guard said. Patrol ships were combing the area off the holiday island hoping to locate survivors. The blaze on the Euroferry Olympia prevented rescuers from boarding yesterday morning, but a helicopter, a frigate, a fire-fighting vessel and six tug boats were operating in the area more than 50 kilometers (30 miles) from Corfu. According to ERT television, the wind had rekindled the fire by yesterday noon.

A thick cloud of black smoke was billowing into sky and the heat on board had reached 500 degrees Celsius. On Friday, 280 passengers were evacuated to Corfu after the blaze on the Olympia broke out en route from Greece to Italy. The cause of the fire remains unknown. Shipping minister Giannis Plakiotakis said a team from the Maritime Accident and Incident Investigation Service was in the area to launch an investigation.

ERT reported the vessel's captain and two engineers had yesterday been brought before a prosecutor. Plakiotakis added in an interview with Skai television that after the fire is extinguished the ferry was expected to be towed to safety in order to pump out fuel and water and avoid marine pollution. The coastguard said all of the missing are truck drivers—seven from Bulgaria, three from Greece, one

from Turkey and one from Lithuania.

### Over-crowded cabins

Truckers who were rescued from the vessel told Greece's public broadcaster some drivers preferred to sleep in their vehicles because the cabins were over-crowded. According to the Kathimerini newspaper, since June 2017 the Syndicate of Greek Professional Truck Drivers had warned about the conditions on the Olympia as well Euroferry Egnazia, both belonging to Italy's Grimaldi group ferry and container operator.

The 27-year-old ship's latest safety check was at Igoumenitsa on February 16, Grimaldi said.

According to the company, the ferry was officially carrying 239 passengers and 51 crew, as well as 153 trucks and trailers and 32 passenger vehicles. But, raising concern for how many unofficial passengers could still

be missing, the coastguard said two of the people rescued were not on the manifest. Both were Afghans, the coastguard told AFP.

### 'Jumping in the sea'

"Two Bulgarians were hospitalized, one had very low saturation (levels) and was intubated," deputy foreign minister Velislava Petrova told a briefing yesterday. Families of the missing started arriving in Corfu yesterday accompanied by a psychologist



**CORFU, Greece:** This handout picture released by the Greek Fire service shows a vessel approaching the burning Euroferry Olympia near the Greek island of Corfu on Friday. —AFP

provided by the Greek shipping ministry. Rescuers who boarded the burning vessel halted work Friday evening because of the intense heat, dense smoke and darkness, Athens News Agency said.

One was taken to hospital with respiratory problems but released yesterday, the fire brigade told AFP. "We were waiting for four hours before the rescue came, we were in the fire, in the night, we felt only the fire underneath our feet," Fahri Ozgen, a

rescued passenger, told AFP.

"250 people were screaming, shouting, some of them were jumping into the sea. Some of our friends are still missing, we don't know where they are." Some passengers lost everything in the fire. "We lost our money, we lost our passports, we lost all our administrative documents, I don't even have a shoe to wear on my foot. We can't make any phone call I can't phone Turkey," said trucker Ali Duran. —AFP



### Rescuers struggle as the wind rekindles fire

#### News in brief

##### Johnson submits his response

**LONDON:** British Prime Minister Boris Johnson has submitted his response to a police questionnaire relating to Downing Street parties that may have breached coronavirus regulations, his office said Friday. Police are investigating claims Johnson attended gatherings that may have violated Britain's strict distancing and virus prevention rules. Public outcry over the so-called "partygate" scandal has left Johnson fighting for political survival. Several MPs from his Conservative party have publicly called for his resignation, although he denies any wrongdoing. — AFP

##### Egyptian held over deaths

**ROME:** Italian police said yesterday they had arrested an Egyptian suspected of trafficking migrants across the Mediterranean during a trip that left seven people dead from hypothermia. The suspect is accused of organizing the dangerous crossing by a boat carrying 287 people from Libya. Most were suffering from the cold when they were rescued by the coast guard on January 25. Police in the Sicilian city of Agrigento said in a statement that the ordeal on the overcrowded, 16-metre boat ended "with the death, by hypothermia, of seven Bangladeshi citizens, due to the inhumane conditions of the voyage". The 38-year-old suspect, who was identified through witness testimony of survivors, had already been sentenced for a 2011 people smuggling crime in Sicily, police said, without providing further detail. Winter weather has not been a deterrent for migrants crossing the Mediterranean this year despite freezing temperatures and rough seas. — AFP

##### Croatia minister arrested

**ZAGREB:** One of Croatia's key ministers was arrested yesterday as part of a corruption probe, his lawyer said, in a serious blow to the conservative government. Prosecutors brought construction minister Darko Horvat in for questioning after a morning raid of his home, the lawyer told state-run television HRT. No further details were immediately released, but local media reported Horvat is suspected of handing out illegal subsidies while acting as economy minister in 2018. The investigation might have even larger political consequences, since it also targets deputy prime minister Boris Milosevic and several former and current officials, according to Hina news agency. — AFP

##### Epstein associate found dead

**PARIS:** A prominent French modeling agent who was a former close associate of disgraced American billionaire Jeffrey Epstein has been found dead in his Paris prison cell, prosecutors said yesterday. Epstein, who was arrested in New York in July 2019 on charges of trafficking underage girls for sex, was found hanged in his New York jail cell the following month while awaiting trial over abuses involving girls at his Palm Beach home and on his private island in the Caribbean. His former associate Jean-Luc Brunel, in his mid 70s, had been charged with the rape of minors and held in prison since December 2020. — AFP

## 13 die as Storm Eunice leaves thousands without power

**AMSTERDAM:** Emergency crews yesterday battled to restore power to hundreds of thousands of homes in Britain after Storm Eunice carved a deadly trail across Western Europe and left transport networks in disarray. At least 13 people were killed by falling trees, flying debris and high winds in Britain, Ireland, the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany and Poland, emergency services said.

Train operators in Britain urged people not to travel, with trees still blocking several lines after most of the network was shut down when Eunice on Friday brought the largest wind gust ever recorded in England — 122 miles (196 kilometers) per hour. The train network in the Netherlands was also paralyzed, with no Eurostar and Thalys international services running from Britain and France after damage to overhead power lines.

France was also grappling with rail disruption and about 37,000 households were without power, while some 8,000 remained cut off in Ireland and 194,000 in Poland.

The UK was worst hit by power cuts with nearly 400,000 homes cut off nationwide after one of the most powerful tempests since the "Great

Storm" hit Britain and northern France in 1987, sparking the first-ever "red" weather warning for London on Friday. The Met Office, Britain's meteorological service, issued a less-severe "yellow" wind warning for much of the south coast of England and South Wales on Saturday, which it said "could hamper recovery efforts from Storm Eunice".

Scientists said both the 1987 storm and Eunice packed a "sting jet", a rarely seen meteorological phenomenon borne out of an unusual confluence of pressure systems in the Atlantic that magnified the effects on Friday. Planes struggled to land in high winds, a section of roof on London's O2 Arena was shredded, and the spire of a church in the historic city of Wells, southwest England, crashed to the ground. The UK's total bill for damage could exceed £300 million (\$410 million, 360 million euros), according to the Association of British Insurers, based on repairs from previous storms.

### 'Explosive storms'

Hundreds of flights were cancelled or delayed at London's Heathrow and Gatwick airports and Schiphol in



**AMSTERDAM:** Municipal employees clean up a fallen tree on Reguliersgracht in Amsterdam yesterday as storm Eunice hit Northern Europe, killing at least 13 people. —AFP

Amsterdam. One easyJet flight from Bordeaux endured two aborted landings at Gatwick which saw wind gusts peak at 78 miles per hour before being forced to return to the French city.

Ferries across the Channel, the world's busiest shipping lane, were suspended, before the English port of Dover reopened Friday afternoon. London's rush-hour streets, where activity has been slowly returning to pre-pandemic levels, were virtually deserted Friday as many heeded government advice to stay at home. The

London Fire Brigade declared a "major incident" after taking 550 emergency calls in just over two hours—although it complained that several were "unhelpful", including one from a resident complaining about a neighbor's garden trampoline blowing around.

The RAC breakdown service said it had received unusually low numbers of call-outs on Britain's main roads, indicating that motorists were "taking the weather warnings seriously and not setting out". — AFP

## Canadian police clear last demonstrators in trucker-led protests

**OTTAWA:** Police in Canada moved Friday to dislodge the final truckers and protesters from downtown Ottawa, in a mostly peaceful operation aimed at bringing an end to three weeks of demonstrations over COVID-19 health rules. Late Friday night, Ottawa police, who pledged the operation would push ahead "until residents and citizens have their city back," were still working to clear the capital's streets.

Deployed by the hundreds, police said they made more than 100 arrests and towed about 20 vehicles. No one was seriously hurt, they added, with Ottawa interim police chief Steve Bell saying the operation was going as planned but would take time. Some truckers, who had led the protests that kicked off three weeks ago and choked Ottawa's streets with big rigs and demonstrators by the hundreds, chose to leave on their own, removing their 18-wheelers from the streets surrounding parliament.

Authorities continued to warn demonstrators to go. "You must leave. You must cease further unlawful activity and immediately remove your vehicle and/or property from all unlawful protest sites," Ottawa police tweeted repeatedly, warning of possible arrests.

Throughout the day, heavily armed officers—including on horseback-lined up against protesters who locked arms, advancing slowly and methodically to push back the spirited crowd.

An AFP journalist saw several demonstrators led away in handcuffs as police and tow trucks moved in, although most simply surrendered. A few demonstrators were wrestled to the ground, and at least one who refused to exit his truck had his windows smashed and was dragged out by police.

The so-called "Freedom Convoy", which inspired



**OTTAWA, Canada:** A police officer stands by as a truck leaves Parliament Hill during a trucker-led protest over pandemic health rules and the Trudeau government, in Ottawa on Friday. —AFP

copycat protests in other countries, began with truckers demonstrating against mandatory COVID-19 vaccines to cross the US border. Its demands grew to include an end to all pandemic rules and, for many, a wider anti-establishment agenda.

At its peak, the movement also included blockades of US-Canada border crossings, including a key trade route across a bridge between Ontario and Detroit, Michigan—all of which have been lifted after costing the economy billions of dollars, according to the government.

Most of the protest's leaders have been arrested. Far-right activist Pat King was taken into custody early Friday afternoon as he left town, live-streaming his own apprehension on Facebook. Two other leaders, Tamara Lich and Chris Barber, were arrested Thursday evening. Lich, 49, was heard telling truckers as she was being led away by police to "hold the line." The movement's Twitter account was still rallying supporters earlier on Friday: "If you disagree with unlawful and unprecedented government overreach, drop whatever you are doing, and make your voice heard," it said. — AFP

## 'Moment of truth' for Iran nuclear talks: Scholz

**MUNICH:** The chances of reviving the Iran nuclear accord are dwindling and the "moment of truth" has arrived for Tehran's leadership, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said yesterday. "We now have the chance to reach an agreement that will allow sanctions to be lifted. But if we do not succeed very quickly, the negotiations risk failing," Scholz told the Munich Security Conference.

"The Iranian leadership has a choice. Now is the moment of truth." The 2015 Iran nuclear agreement had offered Tehran sanctions relief in exchange for curbs on its nuclear program, but the US unilaterally withdrew in 2018 under then-president Donald Trump and reimposed heavy economic sanctions. This in turn prompted Iran to start ramping up its nuclear activities. The outline of a new deal appears to be on the table in talks which have been held in Vienna since late November between signatories Britain, China, France, Germany, Russia—and the United States indirectly.

A US State Department spokesperson told AFP on Thursday that "substantial progress has been made in the last week". "If Iran shows seriousness, we can and should reach an understanding on mutual return to full implementation of the JCPOA within days," the spokesperson said, using an acronym for the 2015 deal.

But "anything much beyond that would put the possibility of return to the deal at grave risk," the spokesperson added. Experts believe Iran is only a few weeks away from having enough fissile material to build a nuclear weapon—even if it would take several more complicated steps to create an actual bomb. President Joe Biden has said he is willing to return to the deal and ease some of the US sanctions, provided Tehran resumes its commitments under the agreement. The Iranian foreign minister is due to address the Munich Security Conference later. — AFP

## International

# Violence in Sudan's Darfur lays bare deepening crisis

## Darfur endures a surge in tribal clashes, lootings, rape, and anti-coup protests

**KHARTOUM:** Attacks on UN facilities, a surge in tribal clashes, lootings, rape, and anti-coup protests—Sudan's Darfur region is reeling from a widening security gap after last year's coup. Sudan is one of the world's poorest countries but the vast, arid Darfur region has for years suffered more than its share of the nation's challenges. When a coup took place in October hundreds of kilometers (miles) away in the capital Khartoum, Darfur was still reeling from the legacy of a conflict that broke out under former strongman Omar Al-Bashir in 2003, and which left hundreds of thousands dead. Though the main Darfur conflict subsided, the Darfur region bordering Chad is awash with guns and is home to most of Sudan's three million displaced people.



**Region home to Sudan's 3 million displaced people**

Clashes broke out last week between government forces guarding a former United Nations peacekeeping base in North Darfur and members of an armed group that signed a peace deal with the government in 2020. There were multiple deaths on both sides. The same facility, which had been a logistics base for the now-disbanded UN and African Union peacekeeping mission, UNAMID, had already been looted in December.

### 'Extremely dangerous'

Around the same time, the World Food Programme suspended operations following more than a day of looting at its warehouses in North Darfur, an act which "robbed nearly two million people of the food and

nutrition support they so desperately need," the agency said. Disputes over land, livestock, access to water and grazing have since October triggered a spike in conflict that has left around 250 people killed in fighting between herders and farmers.

At the same time Darfur-like Sudanese across the country-held demonstrations against the October military coup in Khartoum led by army chief Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan. "The security situation has become extremely dangerous over the past four months, with armed men often stopping and looting cars and people's belongings," Mohammed Eissa, a Darfur resident, told AFP.

Those living in camps since the 2003 Darfur conflict have again been gripped by fear. "Lootings and rape of women have also become rampant," said Abdallah Adam, a resident of Zamzam camp for displaced people near North Darfur's El-Fasher town.

Renewed violence since late last year has displaced thousands more people from their homes and forced others—already uprooted—to flee once more both within Darfur and over the border to Chad, the United Nations said. The unrest that began in 2003 pitted ethnic minority rebels, who complained of discrimination, against the Arab-dominated government of Bashir. Khartoum responded by unleashing the Janjaweed militia, blamed for atrocities including murder, rape, looting and burning villages.

Thousands of Janjaweed were later integrated into the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces led by Mohamed Hamdan Daglo, currently the number two in Sudan's post-coup ruling council. Bashir is wanted by the International Criminal Court on charges of genocide in Darfur. He was ousted by the military and detained in April 2019 after mass protests against his three-decade rule.

### 'No trust'

In a report early this month, UN experts said several of the main armed groups from Darfur "were receiving payments and logistical support" in return for



**NYALA, Sudan:** In this file photo taken on February 1, 2021, Displaced Sudanese women carry their children as they stand in queue as they wait for the arrival of the World Food Programme (WFP) trucks in the Otash internally displaced people's camp on the outskirts of Nyala town, the capital of South Darfur. — AFP

sending thousands of mercenaries to Libya.

Military officials now running Sudan have blamed the latest spike in Darfur violence on delayed crucial security arrangements stipulated in the 2020 peace deal with rebel groups, including those in Darfur. The deal was hoped to end long-running unrest that occurred in various parts of the country under Bashir. It provided for disarming and demobilization of armed factions, and their integration within the army. On Thursday, Sudanese authorities said that the worsening economic crisis will not make it possible for such arrangements to be implemented. "We need the international community to support us," said Abdelrahman Abdelhamid, the general in charge of overseeing disarmament, demobilization and reintegration. But in

response to the coup, the World Bank and United States froze aid. Washington has vowed to apply further pressure if security forces continue to respond violently to anti-coup protesters, dozens of whom have been killed.

Earlier this month, demonstrations broke out against a North Darfur visit by Burhan and his deputy, Daglo. "There is no trust at all in the coup authorities," said Adam Regal, spokesman for the General Coordination for Refugees and Displaced in Darfur, a local NGO. "The ones in charge now have committed crimes in Darfur under Bashir. How can they protect the people now?" Regal told AFP, urging a return to the "civilian-led transition" disrupted by the putsch. "Otherwise it will only get worse." — AFP



**CHARLESTON, United States:** This file undated booking photos courtesy of West Virginia Regional Jail and Correctional Facility Authority in Charleston, West Virginia, show Jonathan Toebbe and Diana Toebbe. — AFP

## Wife of US nuclear engineer pleads guilty in sub secrets plot

**CHARLESTON:** The wife of a US Navy nuclear engineer pleaded guilty Friday to taking part in a plot to sell submarine secrets to a foreign country, the Justice Department said. Diana Toebbe, 46, admitted taking part in her husband Jonathan Toebbe's plan to sell information on US nuclear submarines to an unidentified foreign buyer.

According to the charges, she acted as a lookout while her husband delivered highly classified information on nuclear submarine technology to the buyer in a series of surreptitious "dead drops" in the region around their Annapolis, Maryland home. A teacher at a private school, she initially pleaded innocent to the charge of conspiracy to communicate restricted data.

But last week Jonathan Toebbe, 43, pleaded guilty to the same charge, and in doing so admitted his wife took part in the plot. While the charge could bring up to life in prison, Diana Toebbe's plea agreement set the maximum at 36 months.

Her husband faces at least 12 and a half years in prison. Jonathan Toebbe was a nuclear engineer for the US Navy dealing with nuclear submarine propulsion systems when the two were arrested on October 9, 2021 after he hid a small SD card carrying US secrets at a dead drop location in West Virginia. Court documents described a tantalizing, spy-novel like plot in which they traveled hundreds of miles to secretly hand over information, took payments in cryptocurrencies, and followed signals made from an embassy building in Washington.

In one message to the "buyers" Toebbe indicated that he had been considering his actions for several years and was happy to work with "a reliable professional partner." He also wrote that he had divided all the data he had collected into 51 "packages" of information, and sought \$100,000 for each.

But the FBI was following the plot, after having been alerted to it by the target country in December 2020 — though that was nearly nine months after the Toebbes first mailed their offer to the country's military intelligence. The country, which cooperated in the FBI investigation, has not been identified.

One of the Toebbes' communications indicated that English might not be the country's native tongue, and others suggest that the country's navy is familiar with nuclear propulsion technology. Russia, China, Britain, France and India operate nuclear-powered naval vessels, and Australia is planning to buy one or more from the United States. — AFP

## UAE, India sign 'milestone' pact to boost economies

**DUBAI:** The United Arab Emirates and India signed a "milestone" economic deal to boost trade and investment Friday, as the countries seek to bolster their economies after the coronavirus pandemic.

Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, the UAE's de facto ruler, and India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi held a virtual summit to witness the signing of the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement, among other pacts.

The deal's signing "is a milestone event in our bilateral relations", the official Emirati news agency WAM quoted Indian Foreign Minister S Jaishankar as saying. "It will open new opportunities in both trade in goods and services, and will lead to enhanced investments."

WAM said the pact is "expected to usher in a new

era of economic cooperation and unlock greater avenues for trade and investment". India-UAE trade is valued at \$59 billion, making the oil-rich Gulf country India's third largest trading partner for the year 2019-20, after China and the United States, according to the Indian foreign ministry. The UAE is India's third largest export destination with nearly \$16 billion clocked in 2020-21, it added.

Major exports include petroleum products, precious metals, stones, gems and jewelry, minerals, food items and textiles. The UAE hopes that non-oil trade with India will rise from pre-pandemic levels of \$40 billion to more than \$100 billion within five years, WAM said. The two countries have had close and friendly ties for decades, establishing diplomatic relations in the early 1970s—shortly after the Gulf country's founding.

Indians in the UAE make up the largest expatriate community, approximately 35 percent of its 10-million strong population. Remittances sent back to India from its citizens in the Emirates reached more than \$17.06 billion in 2019, according to the Indian foreign ministry. Earlier this week, the UAE signed a similar package of deals with Turkey. — AFP



**Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan and India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi in this file photo.**

## Women live in fear and despair in S African hostel

**ALEXANDRIA:** In one of South Africa's roughest townships, an overcrowded and dilapidated housing complex has maintained one rule for decades: No men allowed. Sitting in a concrete hallway, Brenda fumes. The electricity went off the night before, with no sign of when it might return. She had nothing for supper. Breakfast was water and bread.

"There's nothing good here," said the 62-year-old, who declined to give her last name. "No electricity, no water. Nothing is good here." A nearby puddle gives off a nauseating smell, overflow from the communal toilets. She first stepped into this complex, which South Africans call a hostel, more than 40 years ago when she moved from her village to the Johannesburg township of Alexandra, hoping to find a better life.

Since then, democracy arrived. Her hair turned grey, she gained some weight. Her dreams for life in Johannesburg disappeared. Sparkling high-rises rose up across the highway in Sandton, the city's financial hub known as the richest square mile in Africa.

But she's spent all those decades living at the hostel: Eight blocks of flats, five floors each, designed like a prison. Laundry hangs in the hallways. Litter covers the yard. Her neighbors in this hostel are 8,000 other

women, plus 3,000 children. Many were born here. On this morning, many were playing outside, during school hours.

### 'Hostel wars'

Each flats comprises a single room, with a single mattress, but lots of inhabitants. The rent is cheap, about 100 rand (\$6) a month, but it's rarely paid. Originally these hostels were built by the white supremacist apartheid government to house black men on the edge of South Africa's cities.



**ALEXANDRIA, South Africa:** A census field officer speaks with a woman who lives at the Helen Joseph Women's Hostel in Alexandra Township. — AFP

## Philippines arrests doctor alleged to be top rebel

**MANILA:** Philippine police have arrested a doctor in the capital Manila, accusing her of being a leader of a Maoist rebel group that has waged a decades-long insurgency against the government.

Maria Natividad Castro, 53, is being held without bail and will be tried on charges of kidnapping, for which a lower court had ordered her arrest in 2020, according to a police statement issued Friday night. But her former employer, human rights monitor Karapatan, said Castro was facing "trumped up" charges after she investigated alleged human rights violations in the volatile Mindanao region while also setting up community health centers there.

She was arrested at her home on Friday, and accused of being part of the Communist Party of the Philippines' central committee. "Karapatan denounces the arrest of human rights and health worker Dr. Natividad Castro as yet another form of attack against human rights defenders," the group said, referring to Castro by her nickname. Critics say allegations of communism—known locally as "red-tagging"—have been used to discredit and detain activists, journalists, lawyers and dissidents.

While the practice is not new in the Philippines, it has intensified under President Rodrigo Duterte, according to rights groups. At the start of his term in 2016, Duterte, a self-described socialist, had sought a peace deal with the rebels. But after talks collapsed in 2017, he branded the Communist Party and its armed wing "terrorist organizations" and ordered soldiers to shoot female insurgents in the genitals.

On Facebook, Castro's brother insisted she was just a health worker who had served indigenous communities. "My sister is accused of multiple charges of kidnapping and illegal detention, all related to her human rights advocacy. ALL UNTRUE," he wrote.—AFP

The men often worked in the mines. Women weren't allowed, so their families had to stay behind. After apartheid, the hostels became popular with Zulus who came to seek their fortunes in the country's economic heart. The hostels are glaring reminders of both South Africa's dark past and its current troubles. They are so synonymous with crime that police will not always go in.

Successive governments have promised to overhaul the hostels, but there's no sign of the promised money. And unemployment in South Africa is at record highs, hitting black women the hardest.

The overall rate is 34.9 percent, but it is 41.5 percent for black women. For white women, the rate is 9.9 percent. In the early 1990s, South Africa suffered through the "hostel wars", when the residences became the scene of deadly clashes. Supporters of Nelson Mandela's African National Congress battled the Inkatha Freedom Party, which was secretly backed by white security forces. Hundreds of people died.

In the stairs of the Helen Joseph Women's Hostel, an ANC poster still clings to a wall. Built in 1972, the hostel has survived decades of change. But the threat of violence remains terrifyingly real. A few years ago, a woman was raped and stabbed to death down the corridor from what is now Nomvelo Nqubuko's room. No one was ever arrested, the 28-year-old said.

"We live in fear but I don't have a choice," she said. "I have to stay here." In a country where a rape is reported to police every 12 minutes, women here have created their own warning system, said Patronella Brown. At 32, she's lived here for five years. If there's an attack, residents can blow a whistle and their neighbors will arrive in force to dispense vigilante justice.—AFP

# Business

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 20, 2022

## Tunisians fear more economic pain as crucial IMF talks loom

### Surging prices and job losses have hurt families amid pandemic

**TUNIS:** Every day at the family grocery stall in a Tunis market, Bilel Jani sees the reality of a biting economic crisis, which for many has overshadowed Tunisia's latest political turmoil. "People here are poor," he said, handing a meager bag of olives to a customer. "Most of our customers are living day-to-day. Monthly salaries these days don't even cover a week."

The small North African country, roiled by years of political turmoil that deepened with President Kais Saied's power grab last July, is also mired in a deep recession. Surging prices and job losses have hurt families that were already struggling before the coronavirus pandemic.

This week, Tunisia started preliminary talks with the International Monetary Fund over a bailout package. Such a deal would likely mean cuts to subsidies and public sector wages, which many fear would spell more suffering for the most vulnerable.

That could fuel the same kind of grievances that sparked a revolution a decade ago and brought down autocrat Zine El Abidine Ben Ali after 23 years in power.

The economic crisis since then has pushed tens of thousands of Tunisians to seek better lives overseas.

#### Arab Spring's birthplace

At the Halfaouine market in a winding street near central Tunis, Jani's customers are already feeling the pain. "People used to buy by the kilogram," he said. "Now they just buy the absolute necessities."

His customer Dalila Dridi said life was a struggle on her salary from the education ministry. "I earn 1,000 dinars (\$348, 305 euros) a month and I used to have 100 or 60 dinars left over at the end," she said. "Now I have to borrow to get to the end of the month." Asked when things had started to deteriorate, she said "since Zine left". Ben Ali had ruled with an iron fist. But in late 2010, in the neglected town of Sidi Bouzid, veg-

etable salesman Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire in desperate protest against police harassment.

That sparked a revolt which forced Ben Ali into exile and sparked the Arab Spring uprisings around the region. But rather than addressing corruption and structural economic problems, the dysfunctional democracy that followed was torn by an ideological showdown between Islamists and secularists.

Successive governments staged hiring sprees to tamp down social unrest, inadvertently tripling the wage cost of Tunisia's public sector, one of the world's most bloated.

#### Battling inflation

Little was done to help poorer regions in a country with vast wealth disparities, said Romdhane Ben Amor of the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights. Then, in 2020, the pandemic hit and Tunisia's economy shrank by more than nine percent while public debt spiraled.

The International Crisis Group think-tank warned last month that the debt-burdened treasury "can barely cover the salaries owed to public-sector workers or honor commitments to repay external loans". With both the government and private banks reluctant to lend to the private sector, about 80,000 small and medium-sized companies have either declared bankruptcy or left the country since early 2020.

"The economy is in a deep recession, debt is at unprecedented levels and unemployment is at 18 percent," and much higher among the youth, said economist Ezzedine Saidane.

Inflation has remained stubbornly high, in December hitting 6.6 percent on an annualized basis.

Those rising costs have spelled misery for people relying on stagnant salaries, pushing many of Tunisia's once large middle class towards poverty. "I've stopped buying lots of things because my salary doesn't cover it," said Dridi.



**TUNIS:** Tunisians shop at Halfaouine market near central Tunis. The small North African country, roiled by years of political turmoil that deepened with President Kais Saied's power grab last July, is also mired in a deep recession. —AFP

#### 'Waiting for a spark'

All this poses a looming challenge for President Saied, who last year sacked the government and seized wide-ranging powers, vowing to "cleanse" state institutions and rewrite the constitution.

Ben Amor worries that Saied, an austere constitutional law professor, "doesn't have an economic or social program". He doesn't meet any economic experts. He meets legal experts. But our problem is not legal," he said. "There's a crisis, but it's an economic and social one."

Ben Amor said that going to the IMF, with the austerity that would likely follow, should be Tunisia's last option after domestic solu-

tions were exhausted.

For example, the country's large informal sector and companies that benefited from the pandemic all represent untapped sources of tax revenue, he said. "The IMF looks at citizens and their needs as numbers: the public wage bill, interest rates, debt rates etc," he said. "It doesn't look at them as people who have needs-to eat, have health care, travel."

Ben Amor believes that the economic crisis could easily spark major social unrest. "This seems like the calm before the storm," he said. "Society is waiting for a spark. Just as happened in 2010." —AFP

## Ukraine showdown casts shadow over Qatar gas summit

**DOAH:** Leading gas producers meet in Qatar from today to discuss how to answer frantic world demand, but Russian President Vladimir Putin is expected to stay away as Ukraine tensions soar, diplomats said. The 11-member Gas Exporting Countries Forum holds its summit as the Ukraine showdown sends prices ever higher while Europe fears for its supplies from Russia.

The group that includes Russia, Qatar, Iran, Libya, Algeria and Nigeria-accounting for more than 70 percent of proven gas reserves-has faced mounting pressure as Europe has sought alternative suppliers to Russia. But most say they are already at or near maximum production and can only send short term relief supplies to Europe if existing customers agree.

Diplomats who took part in preparatory meetings said the group-which excludes key producers Australia and the United States-will discuss ways to increase production in the medium term. "But their hands are tied, there is next to no spare gas," said one, speaking on condition of anonymity.

After two days of ministerial meetings, Iran's President Ebrahim Raisi, who has rarely left his country since taking office, is to join Qatar's emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, for the main summit on Tuesday. President Abdelmadjid Tebboune of Algeria will also be present with other government leaders. Putin is not expected to take up his invitation despite his country's importance, diplomats said.

Thierry Bros, a professor at the Institute of Political Studies in Paris who specialises in the gas industry, said Russia has a dominant role in the industry as its Gazprom giant is the only enterprise with spare capacity. "So it is Putin who decides, and he decides at the Kremlin."

#### Contract demands

Bros said the forum would probably reaffirm its message to Europe that it needs to sign long term contracts to secure a guaranteed supply. All producing countries will have to make massive investments to increase their output, but the European Union has long resisted contracts of 10, 15 or 20 years. Now, however, it has vowed to transition to clean energies and also faces the Ukraine crisis.

"The meeting is interesting because there are the Russians, with whom we no longer like to speak, and the Qataris, who are big friends with the European Commission, again to try to get liquefied gas. "For Russia and Qatar, the aim is to maximize revenues and guarantee a long term market for their gas commodity," he said. —AFP

## Markaz ended 2021 on a strong note with KD 14.99m net profit

**KUWAIT:** Kuwait Financial Centre "Markaz" reported its financial results for 2021 with total revenues of KD 30.64 million, as compared to KD 13.16 million in 2020. Markaz delivered a net profit attributable to shareholders of KD 14.99 million, as compared to a loss of KD 1.72 million in 2020, and Earnings Per Share of 31 fils as of 31 December 2021.

Diraar Yusuf Alghanim, Chairman stated: "In 2021, we saw a quicker than expected recovery around the world and it was much needed after the pandemic induced a financial crisis in 2020. The broad-based recovery was visible across GCC countries, most industries and various asset classes. However, in last quarter of 2021, growth decelerated with the risk arising from the new COVID-19 variant Omicron. During the year, Markaz has not only successfully navigated through the pandemic effects, but has emerged stronger than before. Overall, I am proud of all my colleagues at Markaz, who have shown great determination in delivering high quality asset management and investment banking services to clients and remaining the partner of choice in wealth creation. In recognition of these efforts, Markaz team has been awarded five

prestigious industry awards during the year 2021 and it gives me honor to note this external recognition of how Markaz is meeting the client objectives and responding to an ever-evolving competitive landscape."

Ali H. Khalil, Chief Executive Officer, stated: "Our performance was underpinned by a worldwide economic recovery and buoyant global equity markets, which delivered strong returns to investors. In these market conditions, Markaz remained focused on offering innovative investment solutions and diligently monitoring risk positions, to deliver consistent returns to its clients."

During 2021, Markaz Asset Management fees reached to KD 8.79 million, growth of 17 percent year-on-year, due to the growth in our Assets Under Management, which reached KD 1,041 million in 2021, compared to KD 979 million in 2020, and by the successful exit gains from US and Europe Real Estate projects. Investment Banking fees increased to KD 1.02 million, up by 67 percent as compared to last year with the execution of high-profile Capital Markets and Advisory Mandates. Total Revenues also include gains from investments of KD 15.50 million as compared to a loss of KD 2.08 million in 2020.

Our MENA Equity team actively managed our Markaz equity funds to maximize the risk-adjusted returns, and to benefit from the special market conditions marked by high liquidity and the participation of foreign investors. As a result, Markaz flagship funds recorded solid returns in 2021. Markaz also launched its Market Making services covering five clients. In



Diraar Yusuf Alghanim



Ali H Khalil

## Ethiopia to start generating power from Nile dam today

**ADDIS ABABA:** Ethiopia will start generating power from its controversial mega-dam on the Blue Nile today, government officials told AFP. The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), set to be the largest hydroelectric project in Africa, has been at the centre of a regional dispute ever since Ethiopia broke ground in 2011.

"Tomorrow will be the first energy generation of the dam," an Ethiopian government official said yesterday. A second official confirmed the information. Both spoke on condition of anonymity because the milestone has not been officially announced. Ethiopia's downstream neighbors Egypt and Sudan view the dam as a threat because of their dependence on Nile waters, while Addis Ababa deems it essential for its electrification and development.

The \$4.2-billion (3.7 billion euro) project is ultimately expected to produce more than 5,000 megawatts of electricity, more than doubling Ethiopia's electricity output. Ethiopia had initially planned output of around 6,500 megawatts but later reduced its target. "The newly generated

electricity from the GERD could help revive an economy that has been devastated by the combined forces of a deadly war, rising fuel prices and the COVID-19 pandemic," said Addisu Lashitew of the Brookings Institution in Washington. The dam lies on Blue Nile River in the Benishangul-Gumuz region in western Ethiopia, not far from the border with Sudan.

#### No breakthrough in talks

Talks held under the auspices of the African Union (AU) have failed to yield a three-way agreement on the dam's filling and operations, and Cairo and Khartoum have demanded Addis Ababa cease filling the massive reservoir until such a deal is reached. But Ethiopian officials have argued that filling is a natural part of the dam's construction process and cannot be stopped.

The UN Security Council met last July to discuss the project, although Ethiopia later slammed the session as an "unhelpful" distraction from the AU-led process.

In September the Security Council adopted a statement encouraging Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan to resume negotiations under AU auspices. Egypt claims a historic right to the Nile dating from a 1929 treaty that gave it veto power over construction projects along the river.

A 1959 treaty boosted Egypt's allocation to around 66 percent of the river's flow, with 22 per-

cent for Sudan. Yet Ethiopia was not party to those treaties and does not see them as valid.

The process of filling the GERD's vast reservoir began in 2020, with Ethiopia announcing in July of that year it had hit its target of 4.9 billion cubic meters. The reservoir's total capacity is 74 billion cubic meters, and the target for 2021 was to add 13.5 billion.

Last July Ethiopia said it had hit that target, meaning there was enough water to begin producing energy, although some experts had cast doubt on the claims. —AFP



**GUBA, Ethiopia:** In this file photo, a general view of the Blue Nile river as it passes through the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), is seen near Guba in Ethiopia. —AFP



## Business

## NBK Economic Report

## Kuwait's real estate sales reach 7-year high in 2021

## Residential activity to be driven by strong demand and limited supply

KUWAIT: Real estate sales eased to KD 816 million in 4Q21 (-25 percent q/q; 3 percent y/y) mostly on a marked decline in residential sector transactions amid a prolonged rise in home and land prices. Looking back at the full year, 2021 saw KD 3.7 billion in sales - the highest since 2014 and the second highest on record, driven mostly by the residential sector despite the dip in Q4. However, there are also tentative signs of a recovery in the investment (ie apartment) sector, with prices and rents beginning to rise after several years of decline, possibly encouraged by improving business activity and low-

new units - although a further moderation in sales could be seen from the super-strong levels of most of last year. Economic growth is returning and business activity is gradually recovering, which should be positive for both the commercial and investment sectors, though the latter continues to be challenged by long standing issues including oversupply and utility tariff inequality. Residential sector sales fall on lower volumes in Q4. Residential sector sales fell 31 percent q/q and 1.1 percent y/y to KD 557 million in 4Q21, the lowest since 3Q20. The lower sales were driven by a steep decline in transactions, likely affected by the multi-year rise in residential home and land prices, currently at record highs. Home and land price increases were especially strong in 2021, up 17 percent and 21 percent y/y respectively in December, though on a quarterly basis, upwards price pressure has notably eased. In addition to the solid fundamentals (strong local demand base, limited supply) and resilience during COVID uncertainty, the residential sector was likely helped by its strength relative to the apartment sector (which has weaker fundamentals including oversupply and expat-dependent demand), providing a compelling alternative to investors. Furthermore, policy-related factors have indirectly favored the residential sector.

These include the exemption from higher utility tariffs since 2017, which has led to lower operating costs and relatively high rental returns, thereby promoting speculative and profit-seeking activity in the residential sector, in addition to growing end-use demand and the absence of measures such as a second home tax or fees on long-standing vacant lots. Looking ahead, absent reforms and an increase in the supply of units, residential prices should remain elevated.

Moreover, given the improving political backdrop, legislation for the mortgage law could come as early as 2023, with the potential to further boost residential market activity and prices, but should be accompanied by measures to prevent excessive price gains.

Affordability remains an issue, as the rise in home prices becomes increasingly disproportionate relative to the income of the average citizen. House price pressures could be partly mitigated over the medium term by the

Table 1: Real estate sales

	Quarterly Average		Quarterly Sales/ Transactions				Change in 4Q21, %	
	2020	2021	1Q21	2Q21	3Q21	4Q21	q/q	y/y
<b>Sales (KD million)</b>	<b>560</b>	<b>921</b>	<b>840.2</b>	<b>946.8</b>	<b>1081.2</b>	<b>816.2</b>	<b>-24.5</b>	<b>2.6</b>
Residential	340	692	644.1	758.4	809.8	557.2	-31.2	-1.1
Investment	117	188	151.3	160.3	235.1	206.6	-12.1	98.0
Commercial	103	40	44.7	28.1	36.3	52.4	44.3	-58.9
<b>Number of Transactions</b>	<b>1320</b>	<b>2415</b>	<b>2304</b>	<b>3123</b>	<b>2547</b>	<b>1684</b>	<b>-33.9</b>	<b>-16.2</b>
Residential	1118	2124	2025	2834	2259	1378	-39.0	-19.6
Investment	170	271	260	271	270	284	5.2	20.3
Commercial	32	19	19	18	18	22	22.2	-37.1
<b>Average Transaction Value (KD '000)</b>	<b>372</b>	<b>394</b>	<b>364.7</b>	<b>303.2</b>	<b>424.5</b>	<b>484.7</b>	<b>14.2</b>	<b>21.0</b>
Residential property	304	326	318.1	267.6	358.5	404.4	12.8	23.0
Investment	688	694	582.1	591.5	870.8	727.3	-16.5	64.5
Commercial	3264	2098	2354.6	1560.7	2016.6	2381.4	18.1	-34.7

Source: Ministry of Justice

increase in housing projects by and government land allocations to the Public Authority for Housing Welfare. However, the backlog of housing applications, estimated to be around 94,000 as of 2021 is sizeable while new supply also needs to accommodate future demand. Therefore, the housing shortage will likely remain a challenge and require further initiatives in order to be resolved.

Investment sector prices rose modestly amid higher volume. Investment sector sales amounted to KD 207 million in 4Q21 (-12 percent q/q; +98 percent y/y). This compares to a pre-pandemic quarterly average of KD 279 million in 2019, reflecting a partial recovery. The higher y/y sales were driven by a pick-up in volume, likely encouraged by lower prices (building prices were down 5 percent y/y) as the market adjusted to weaker demand and a decline in the expat population due to the pandemic. Still, there are early signs that apartment prices may be turning the corner. On a quarterly basis, transaction volumes rose 5 percent q/q in Q4 in tandem with 4 percent and 1 percent q/q price gains for buildings and apartments respectively. Prices in these sectors have been in trend decline since 2015, but may now be bene-

fitting from a wider valuation gap versus the residential sector.

Nevertheless, a full recovery could be hindered by various headwinds including ongoing oversupply, dependence on relatively unstable expat demand, and tariff disparities versus the residential sector. Policy reforms aimed at promoting demand for apartments would provide some support to the investment sector, including for instance addressing the prior mentioned inter-sectoral tariff disparity, discouraging renting in residential areas or raising the cost of multiple home or plot ownership through taxes and fees, in effect incentivizing apartment over house ownership. Commercial sector sales rise in 4Q21 but remain muted. Commercial sector sales surged by 44 percent q/q in 4Q21 but remained relatively muted at KD 52 million, still down 59 percent y/y and well below prepandemic levels.

Moreover, it is plausible that commercial activity has been curbed by a lack of new commercial space on the market, which normally boosts trading in this sector. As the economy and the business environment continues to recover supported by an improving pandemic backdrop, a gradual recovery is expected for the sector.



Source: Ministry of Justice/ NBK

er valuations. Commercial sector sales remained well below pre-pandemic levels though have also picked up as of late. Meanwhile, the improvement in government-parliament relations of late raises the chance of passing key laws such as the mortgage law - which could be transformative for the residential sector. A further promising sign is parliament's recent approval of a KD 300 million capital increase for Kuwait Credit Bank to help ease its liquidity constraints and accelerate the distribution of housing loans.

Looking ahead, residential activity should continue to be driven by strong demand and a still-limited supply of

## US existing home sales shot up 6.7% in January: Report

WASHINGTON: Existing homes have become harder to find than ever, but Americans kept buying in January, pushing the pace of sales up much more than expected, according to industry data released Friday. Existing homes sales jumped 6.7 percent last month to a seasonally-adjusted annual rate of 6.5 million, even as the inventory of homes for sale hit a new all-time low, the National Association of Realtors (NAR) said.

The real estate market has boomed during the COVID-19 pandemic thanks in part to the Federal Reserve's easy money policies, causing property prices to climb and inventory to grow scarce.

With the Fed next month set to hike interest rates for the first time since the crisis began to fight runaway inflation, of which home sales are a part, NAR Chief Economist Lawrence Yun said shoppers scrambled to get deals. "Buyers were likely anticipating further rate increases and locking-in at the low rates, and investors added to overall demand with all-cash offers," Yun said.—AFP



## NY Fed president sees no need for 'big' rate hike in March

WASHINGTON: With high inflation hitting the US economy, it is time for the central bank to raise the benchmark borrowing rate, but there is no reason for a "big" early move, a top Federal Reserve official said Friday. Instead, policymakers can "move steadily" to get the key lending rate off zero and back to more normal levels over the next year or more, New York Federal Reserve Bank President John Williams told reporters. His comment downplayed expectations among many economists and investors that the Fed could move aggressively to raise interest rates by a half point in March to combat inflation, rather than its usual quarter-point increase.

"There's no need to do something extra at the beginning of the process of liftoff," Williams said in response to a question from AFP. "I don't see any compelling argument to take a big step" to start the process. US inflation has hit the highest rate in four decades, battering President Joe Biden's popularity and striking households and businesses in the world's largest economy. Williams acknowledged prices rose higher and lingered longer than he was expecting, and left the door open to more aggressive action if the situation demands it. "What I'm trying to convey is that we'll be moving in a series of steps" to get the policy rate up from zero to "more normal levels" of 2-2.5 percent. The official, who serves as vice chair of the policy-setting Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC), said the central bank could "either slow down or move faster. But I don't see the need to do that at the beginning."

His stance runs counter to others, like St. Louis Fed President James Bullard, who has called for the central bank to "front-load" its rate increases, and would be open to hiking outside the regularly scheduled meetings.

## March hike 'appropriate'

However, Bullard appears to be an outlier. Meanwhile, Fed governor Lael Brainard, Biden's nominee to become the central bank's vice chair under chief Jerome Powell, echoed Williams in saying it will be "appropriate" to make the first of a series of moves at the March 15-16 FOMC meeting.

And that would be followed by steps to begin to offload the massive stockpile of bonds built up as part of the Fed's pandemic stimulus efforts, she said. "Given that we have some quite strong data, I do anticipate that it will

be appropriate at our next meeting... to initiate a series of rate increases," Brainard said in response to questions following a speech at a conference hosted by The University of Chicago Booth School of Business.

And like Williams, she said the combination of steps "will bring inflation down over time while sustaining a recovery that includes everyone." Like other central bankers and officials in the Biden administration, Williams attributed much of the inflation increase to pandemic-related issues, including supply and transportation snags and labor shortages. While the rapid improvement in US employment is "great news," Williams said, "we have seen inflation rise to a level that's far too high." "I am confident we will achieve a sustained, strong economy and inflation at our two percent longer-run goal," he said.

He now expects the Fed's preferred inflation measure will "drop back to around three percent" at the end of 2022 "before falling further next year as supply issues continue to recede."

## Investment rules

Top officials at the US Federal Reserve will be banned from holding individual stocks, bonds, cryptocurrencies and certain other investments under new rules adopted Friday, after controversial trading activity led to high-profile resignations last year. Under the regulations adopted unanimously by the policy setting Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC), central bank leaders including the Fed chair and vice chair as well as the heads of the regional banks will also not be allowed to hold foreign currency or engage in short selling and margin trading. In a statement, the FOMC said the rules "aim to support public confidence in the impartiality and integrity of the committee's work by guarding against even the appearance of any conflict of interest."

The new rules also specify top officials will be banned from trading "during periods of heightened financial market stress." Two regional Fed bank presidents resigned last year following disclosures that they had traded individual stocks in 2020, when the Fed was working to shore up the pandemic-hit economy.

Last month, Richard Clarida resigned before the end of his term as Fed vice chair, after media reports questioned his trading activity in February 2020, just before markets plunged on news of Covid-19 spreading across the United States. The Fed is in the midst of a leadership shift, with Chair Jerome Powell awaiting Senate confirmation for a second term, alongside Lael Brainard as his vice chair and three new additions to the Board of Governors. The Republican opposition earlier this week boycotted a vote to advance the candidates' nominations from the Senate Banking Committee, criticizing the views of two of the governor candidates, who were nominated by Democratic President Joe Biden.—AFP

## News in brief

## Chinese food delivery giant slumps

BEIJING: Shares of Chinese food delivery giant Meituan slumped Friday as Beijing released new guidelines instructing internet platforms to lower fees for struggling eateries. The guidelines, published by China's top economic planner, aim to support a service sector hit especially hard by restrictions to curb the spread of COVID-19. Shares in Meituan, which has hundreds of millions of users in China, plunged almost 15 percent in Hong Kong when markets closed Friday. Earlier this week, a State Council meeting pledged to scale up support for sectors such as catering, retail and tourism, including temporary tax breaks, the official Xinhua news agency reported.—AFP

## Italy's Eni bounces back

MILAN: Italian energy giant Eni on Friday returned to net profit in 2021, boosted by soaring oil prices that brought better-than-expected fourth-quarter results. Annual profit of 6.1 billion euros (nearly \$7 billion) contrasted with a heavy loss of 8.6 billion euros in 2020, when all the energy majors suffered due to coronavirus lockdowns that brought the global economy to a halt. After briefly sinking into negative territory in 2020, oil prices surged last year. The main international and US contracts rose to seven-year highs in January and now sit above \$90 a barrel. In the fourth quarter of 2021, Eni recorded a net profit of 3.8 billion euros, far surpassing analysts' expectations of close to two billion euros.—AFP

## French unemployment drops

PARIS: French unemployment dropped below its pre-COVID level at the end of last year as the economy enjoyed a spectacular rebound from the pandemic gloom, official data showed Friday. The jobless rate fell to 7.4 percent in the fourth quarter of 2021, down 0.6 percentage points from the previous three months, according to statistics bureau Insee. The figure comes two months ahead of a presidential election in which President Emmanuel Macron is expected to seek a second term. The rate is the lowest since 2008 except for the spring of 2020, when many people stopped looking for work as coronavirus restrictions weighed on the economy. Last month, Insee reported France's strongest annual economic growth in more than half a decade, at seven percent for 2021 after a 7.9 percent plunge in 2020.—AFP

## Japan prices rose just 0.2%

TOKYO: Japan's core consumer prices edged up just 0.2 percent in January, slightly less than expected, though the increase was the fifth monthly rise, government data showed Friday. The core consumer price index, which excludes volatile fresh food prices but includes fuel costs, was up 0.2 percent in January year-on-year, following similar rises from September to December. The advance follows 18 months of declines or stagnation during the depths of the pandemic, but fell slightly short of economist expectations for a 0.3 percent rise. The increase was also much weaker than the 0.5 percent registered in December, and when both food and energy prices are excluded, prices fell 1.1 percent.—AFP



SAVENAY, France: This file photograph taken on July 8, 2019, shows the logo of French automobile maker Renault at Savenay, western France.

## Renault returns to profit but chip shortage hits output

PARIS: Renault returned to profit last year but the global shortage of semiconductors will crimp production again in 2022, the French automaker said Friday. The company posted a better-than-expected net profit of 967 million euros (\$1.1 billion) after a record eight-billion-euro loss in 2020, when the onset of the pandemic pummeled the global economy.

Renault sold fewer cars last year but the company has cut costs, raised prices and shifted to a strategy of focusing on its more profitable brands instead of volumes. Revenue rose 6.3 percent to 46.2 billion euros as the company exceeded its financial targets despite the shortage of semiconductors and the higher cost of raw materials. "Renault is back," chief executive Luca de Meo said at a news conference. "The difficulties are behind us. We have shown that we can overcome adversity," he said. Chief financial officer Clotilde Delbos attributed the performance to Renault's strategy of "promoting value over volumes, and its strict financial discipline." —AFP

## Business

## Gulf Bank holds 2021 year-end earnings call

## Bank's net profit grew by 46% to reach KD 42m in 2021

KUWAIT: Gulf Bank held its investors webcast to review and discuss the Bank's financial performance for the year-end 2021 on February 16, 2022. The conference call was organized by EFG Hermes and presented by Tony Daher, Chief Executive Officer of Gulf Bank, and David Challinor, Chief Financial Officer of Gulf Bank. The discussion was moderated by Dalal Al-Dousari, Head of Investor Relations at Gulf Bank.

Tony Daher commenced the webcast with key updates regarding Gulf Bank's operating environment for the year-end 2021. Daher commented, "During the year 2021, we have seen a gradual improvement in the overall economic environment. We started last year with a surge in COVID-19 cases and restrictions on travel and overall business environment, however, almost all restrictions were lifted towards the end of the year as the government vaccination efforts increased reaching about 80 percent of the population. This in turn allowed things to steadily go back to normal, which in turn, improved confidence, boosted consumer spending and growth prospects here in Kuwait."

**Stable strategy**

Daher stated: "We continue to accomplish significant progress against our 2025 strategy of being the leading Kuwaiti bank of the future. We aim to provide customers with simple and innovative services to enable a sustainable growth for the bank."

**Digital transformation**

Daher commented "Gulf Bank have successfully launched its new MX.3 system in partnership with Murex for the development and automation of the Bank's capital markets and treasury platforms. The platform implementation is a transformative step towards developing and automating our treasury and capital markets systems. In addition, this will help us unlock opportunities, navigate capital markets and better serve our customers."

**Sustainability issuance**

Daher also touched on the bank's first sustainability report, commenting: "We are proud of publishing our first official sustainability report for the year 2020. As a responsible Bank, we are committed towards our stakeholders, community, and the overall economy. We will continue to integrate ESG principles across the business strategies and the way we operate the Bank."

**Sound financial performance**

Daher summarized Gulf Bank's year-end 2021 results with six key messages:

1. Net profit grew by 46 percent for the year 2021, to reach KD 42 million in comparison to KD 29 million reported in 2020.
2. Earnings per share is up 40 percent to 14 fils and the Board of Directors is recommending a distribution of cash dividend of 7 fils per share, representing a 50 percent cash payout ratio, in addition to 5 percent bonus shares, for shareholders' approval at the annual general meeting to be held in March 2022.



Tony Daher

David Challinor

Dalal Al-Dousari

3. Gross customer loans reached another all-time high reaching KD 4.8 billion, an increase of KD 454 million or 10 percent compared to the end of 2020. This growth in 2021 came from both our corporate and consumer segments.

4. Asset quality remained resilient, as our non-performing loan ratio in 2021 stood at 0.9 percent, an improvement when compared to last year of 1.1 percent. Additionally, we have taken ample provisions and now have a coverage ratio of 615 percent.

5. Relaxed capital regulatory minimums that were introduced in 2020 remain in place until 31 December 2021, allowing the Bank to have additional buffers over the minimums. Our Tier 1 ratio has a buffer of 496 basis points and our capital adequacy ratio has a buffer of 522 basis points. These comfortable buffers have allowed the Bank to grow its businesses in line with its strategy.

6. Gulf Bank remains an 'A' rated bank by three major credit rating agencies. Our current position stands as follows:

- Moody's Investors Service maintained the Long-Term Deposits Rating of "A3" with a "Stable" outlook.
- Capital Intelligence affirmed the Bank's Long-term Foreign Currency Rating of "A+" with a "Stable" outlook.
- Recently, Fitch Ratings has changed the Bank's Long-term Issuer Default Rating to "A" from "A+" and revised the "Negative" outlook to Stable in February 2022.
- In addition, S&P Global Ratings has changed the Bank Issuer Credit Rating to "BBB+" from "A-" and revised the "Negative outlook to "Stable" during 2021.

Both credit ratings downgrades of S&P Global Ratings and Fitch Ratings followed the downgrade of

Kuwait Sovereign ratings by these credit rating agencies and is not related to Gulf Bank's Viability position or credit quality.

**Increasing profitability**

Gulf Bank's CFO, David Challinor, discussed Gulf Bank's year-end 2021 results in more detail. He noted three positive factors: "First, net interest income is up KD 7.5 million as a result of loan growth and decline in cost of funds. Second, as economic activity regained momentum so did the Bank's fees and foreign exchange income which improved by 4.9 million, and third, the Bank's total provisions reduced by 16.5 however, these positive drivers were partially offset by a 14.3 million increase in operating expenses."

Challinor highlighted that the Return on Equity improved by nearly 2 percentage points over the same period. On Operating income, Challinor commented: "Operating income grew by 7 percent to 170.1 compared to 158.3 in 2020, this was due to the outpace decline in interest expense in comparison to interest income and also, an improvement in the fees and foreign exchange income of 4.9 or 16 percent driven by the resumption of economic activities." He also added: "Operating expenses have increased by 14.3 or 22 percent year-on-year, however, they increased by 1 percent when compared to the third quarter. The year-on-year increase is predominantly driven by the continued investment in our digital transformation strategy and low operating expense base reported in 2020 due to the reduced economic activity and receiving of government subsidy."

Challinor also pointed out that credit costs declined from 59 in 2020 to 43.9 in 2021, resulting in a year-to-date Cost of Risk of 95 basis points.

**Tony Daher: We aim to provide customers with simple and innovative services to enable a sustainable growth for the Bank.**

**David Challinor: This is the fourth consecutive year end since IFRS 9 was introduced where the Bank's excess credit provisions exceeded KD 100 million.**

**Dalal Al-Dousari: We expect a short-term downside in our margins, until interest rate hike materializes, then Margins will expand.**

**Gulf Bank's financial position**

Challinor also presented Gulf Bank's financial position. He also presented the Bank's mix of assets and highlighted its changes over the last 12 months by saying: "Over the last 12 months, Gulf Bank's total assets increased by 443 or 7 percent to reach 6.6 billion compared to 6.1 billion the year before. This was largely driven by a 528 or 12 percent increase in net loans. While, compared to third quarter, Net Loans grew 168 or 4 percent and total assets grew by 226, reflecting a pick-up in overall economic activity."

**Prudent financial management**

Challinor also indicated that as of 31 December 2021, Gulf Bank's Bank has 112 of excess provisions, representing 37 percent over and above total provisions. This is the fourth consecutive year end since IFRS 9 was introduced where the Bank's excess credit provisions exceeded KD 100 million.

In addition, Gulf Bank's Stage 1 loans are above 90 percent for both years, while Stage 2 and Stage 3 remained around similar levels in both periods, with Stage 2 reaching 6.2 percent for 2021, while for Stage 3 it was 1.0 percent.

**Q&A**

Following the management presentation of Gulf Bank's performance for the year 2021, the call was open for participants questions. Dalal Al-Dousari, head of Investor Relations at Gulf Bank, moderated the Q&A session.

**Loan growth**

When asked about loan growth and expectations in 2022, Challinor commented: "loan growth was very strong in 2021 particularly in Q4 which was the highest growth quarter in the year. I was guiding high single digits earlier in the year and we came in at 10.4 percent. When you look at the split of growth between corporate and consumer it was fairly balanced but obviously corporate is a larger part of our book so in percentage terms, we saw consumer grow faster, just over 12 percent, which almost mirrored the market growth for the sector. In total, the market grew 6.6 percent and we grew 10.4 percent."

Al-Dousari concluded the conference by thanking the participants and presented a guidance slide that summarizes some of the points that have been covered during the Q&A session:

1. For loan growth, our strategy is to grow faster than the market.
2. For our Margins, we expect a short-term downside, until interest rate hike materializes. Then Margins will expand.
3. Our cost to income ratio is expected to improve.
4. The cost of risk will likely be under the normalized level of 100 basis points.
5. And finally, non-performing loans ratio is expected to remain under 2 percent.

Al-Dousari also invited analysts to visit the Investor Relations page of Gulf Bank's website for any further inquiries.

## Ooredoo customers to enjoy superior call experience with VoWiFi

KUWAIT: In its continuous endeavor to enrich the digital experience of individuals, Ooredoo Telecom, the first to introduce innovative digital services in Kuwait, announced the launch of Voice over Wi-Fi (VoWiFi), a free service for all Ooredoo Kuwait individual customers with pre-paid and postpaid voice plans, enabling them to make calls over a Wi-Fi connection and send short text messages.

This comes as part of the company's commitment to develop its network, enhance voice services and provide a better voice communication experience for mobile users across the State of Kuwait.

VoWiFi will help in solving weak smartphone signals and dropped calls in areas with poor coverage, such as high-rise residential buildings, basements, offices and remote branches. Once the smartphone picks up a reliable and secure Wi-Fi network, the call will be transferred between the phone network and the Wi-Fi network automatically and smoothly without

any interruption of the call. In short, customers can use VoWiFi to make voice and video calls in any location that has a Wi-Fi network, even when there is no mobile network reception.

The service is available without any additional fees, while voice and internet calls will be charged according to the package, and without the need to download any application.

The new Voice over Wi-Fi service will deliver faster call setup and superior high-quality (HD) voice calls. The service is currently applicable to iPhone 6 or later models with customers required to update their phone to the latest iOS software to enjoy the service. Owners of Apple Cellular Watches of all series can also enjoy the service, hence, the watch must be on watchOS 8.3 or later. Further, the service is applicable to Huawei P and Mate series 30 and above, OnePlus 10 and later, as well as Honor 50 series. However, the service will be soon available on other devices including Samsung and Xiaomi.

## Tunisia meets the IMF: What's at stake?

TUNIS: Tunisia and the International Monetary Fund are in preliminary talks, with an eye on a potential multi-billion-dollar rescue deal for an economy plagued by recession, public debt, inflation and unemployment. The North African nation on Monday started talks with the Washington-based crisis lender, which has called for "deep reforms" and public spending cuts.

But many Tunisians, already struggling to make ends meet, fear a deal that involves painful reforms could leave them much worse off.

**Why is Tunisia seeking a new loan?**

Tunisians have endured a decade of economic stagnation since the revolt that overthrew dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in early 2011. Two previous IMF loan deals, for \$1.7 billion in 2013 and a further \$2.8 billion in 2016, have done little to fix the country's public finances.

The coronavirus pandemic put the economy on life support, with a deep recession that sent 80,000 small and medium-sized firms into bankruptcy or out of the country since early 2020, according to official data. Over the same period, unemployment has surged from 15.1 to 18.4 percent and inflation has eaten away at

people's buying power.

Since the revolution, per capita GDP has dropped by a fifth and the dinar has fallen by 40 percent against other currencies. But economist Ezzedine Saidane said Tunisia's biggest challenge is its burgeoning public debt. "Public debt is at an unprecedented level, over 100 percent of gross domestic product," he told AFP.

A western diplomat in Tunis told AFP on condition of anonymity that Tunisia was borrowing to pay public sector salaries. That has weighed on Tunisia's credibility as a borrower internationally, Saidane said. Moody's ratings agency in October downgraded Tunisia debt to Caal from B3, warning the country could slide towards default. "Tunisia will inevitably have to go through the IMF to rebuild some of its credibility in order to mobilise resources from overseas," Saidane added.

**What is the IMF likely to demand?**

The IMF has publicly voiced concern over Tunisia's budget deficits and in particular its public sector wage bill. "It's an economy that needs very deep, structural reforms, especially to improve the business environment," the lender's outgoing Tunisia envoy Jerome Vacher told AFP last month.

The IMF, which has a record of demanding painful cuts to public spending, is likely to condition a loan on slashing the state's wage bill, which Vacher said is one of the highest in the world relative to the size of the economy. More than half of public spending goes on paying the salaries of around 650,000 public servants in the country of 12 million. — AFP



## NatWest back in black as economy recovers from COVID

LONDON: Britain's NatWest bank said Friday that it surged back into annual profit last year as the economy recovered from COVID, and forecast it stands to gain from rising interest rates.

The lender, which is majority-owned by the government, said in a statement that net profit hit £2.95 billion (\$4 billion, 3.5 billion euros) in 2021. That contrasted sharply with a loss of £753 million the prior year, when it set aside £3.2 billion in provisions to cover potential fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic.

As the UK economy bounced back on easing COVID restrictions, the bank said Friday it was able to release almost £1.3 billion from those provisions. NatWest is the first of Britain's major banks to publish annual results.

**'Strong performance'**

"NatWest Group delivered a strong performance in 2021," said chief executive Alison Rose. The decision to release some of the provisions reflected "an improvement in the economic outlook and a low level of defaults". NatWest last year also cut costs by £256 million, while £3.8 billion was redistributed to shareholders via dividends and buybacks.

Some £1.7 million of that cash was handed to UK taxpayers, who own just over 50 percent of the lender. Amid heightened anxiety among Britons over the soaring cost of living as inflation surges, NatWest increased its total payout in annual staff

bonuses by around 50 percent to £298 million, slightly below its pre-pandemic level.

Rose acknowledged that Britain's banks stood to gain from rising UK borrowing costs this year. The Bank of England this month lifted its main interest rate for the second time in a row in a bid to bring down inflation, which is rising faster than workers' wages. UK inflation surged to a 30-year high of 5.5 percent in January, official data showed this week, adding pressure to the cost of living and on the BoE to keep raising rates.

Rising interest rates benefit savers and boost banks' bottom lines. However, they also push up loan repayments, dealing a major problem in particular for governments that borrowed vast sums to prop up economies during the pandemic. "We do benefit from higher interest rates," Rose told Bloomberg television.

**'Hot-button issue'**

Despite the return to profit, NatWest's share price sank 2.4 percent to 234.60 pence in Friday afternoon trading on the London stock exchange, while the rest of the market was flat. "Today's numbers are more good news for the taxpayer-funded bank, which after years of patchy performance is now a net contributor to the public purse," noted CMC Markets UK Michael Hewson. "The payment of bonuses is likely to be a hot-button issue for the bank, given the challenges being faced by the UK economy," he warned.

Formerly known as Royal Bank of Scotland, NatWest remains majority owned by the UK government after its rescue at the height of the global financial crisis in 2008. Fellow UK heavyweight banks Barclays, HSBC and Lloyds will publish their annual results next week. — AFP

Lifestyle | Fashion



**Fashion at figure skating: Best looks of Beijing 2022**

There aren't many Olympic sports that involve sequins, leather and spandex. But figure skating is the notable exception, with the rink a kaleidoscopic disco of glitter and glamour. Here's AFP's pick of some of the most interesting costumes from the Beijing Olympics:

**Two very different Eltons**

There were two Elton John programs at the Beijing Games-but with very different sartorial interpretations. Canada's Paul Poirier and Piper Gilles turned up to the ice dance in matching fluorescent orange unitards, a homage to John's own notoriously flamboyant style. "You walk out and people are like, 'You guys are like a sunset,'" Gilles told the Washington Post. Asked by the Post what the best thing anyone had said about their costumes was, she answered: that "we have great butts".

At the other end of the spectrum was gold medalist Nathan Chen's "Rocket Man" costume. There wasn't a sequin in sight on the American's orange galaxy-printed shirt, which looked more like a running top than a traditional figure skating costume. Chen said it was designed by celebrity fashion designer Vera Wang and was "modern chic aesthetic". "You don't really argue with Vera Wang," he chuckled. "Whatever she gives you-'Ah, cool, I'll take it.'"

**Mum knows best**

In contrast, his teammate Karen Chen's costumes are all made by her mother. She told The New York Times she had stayed awake for 20 hours, four days in a row making the latest one. "I barely slept at all, but I wanted to make something really special," she said. "I know in the future I won't have this chance because she will have a different life, and I will miss this." "I love it so much," Chen told AFP. "She does like 98 percent of the work, I just put in like two percent and by two percent just like 'Oh that looks good.'"

Latvia's Deniss Vasiljevs doesn't always get as much fashion support from his parents. Asked what he thought they would be thinking after his free skate, he said: "My dad is probably complaining about my hair." Vasiljevs' ponytail, the only one in the men's event, stayed resolutely intact despite its owner's dizzying spins and jumps. "I started my season with my hair like a rooster," he said. "I was just trying different things and somehow it's holding and I'm happy."

**National pride**

Some at the Games have used their clothes to showcase their countries' culture. Donovan Carrillo, Mexico's first figure skater in 30 years, performed his short program in a dazzling gold and black shirt custom-made for him by a Mexican designer-"I love it!" he told journalists afterwards joyously. He followed that up by emerging from his free skate in a jacket adorned with Mexican "lucha libre" wrestling face masks. "I'm super happy because since I was a kid I always liked to watch it with my dad," Carrillo said.

He said one of the people involved in the team jacket's design was Hubertus von Hohenlohe, Mexico's only athlete at the 2014 Sochi Games, best remembered for his own idiosyncratic mariachi ski suit. In pairs, China's Peng Cheng and Jin Yang's outfits are inspired by Chinese ink painting and hand-stitched using traditional embroidery techniques from Suzhou, a city close to Shanghai. "It is very delicate," said Peng. "They were specially made for the Olympic Games."

**Aliens and villains**

Costumes can be used for dramatic effect-like Madison Chock and Evan Bates of the United States, whose looks helped tell the tale of an "alien and astronaut" falling for each other. Chock, who designs their costumes, said the story was one of "universal love". Germany's Tim Dieck and Katharina Mueller went the other way and dressed as Batman villains for their rhythm dance. "Once I made this hairstyle (two pigtailed) and thought it was kind of funny, and somehow we came to Harley Quinn and Joker, and we loved it straight away," said Mueller. The judges preferred the love story-Chock and Bates finished fourth in ice dancing, while the Germans failed to qualify for the free dance.—AFP

# Street styles, neon kick off London Fashion Week

Fashionistas braved gale-force winds in London on Friday to attend the first Fashion Week shows, with a schedule dominated by up-and-coming young designers. Gusts ripped through the streets of the British capital as crowds, wrapped up in coats and hats, flocked to the week's first live shows with attendees, which make up about half of the five-day event's timetable.

It kicked off with sustainable label SOHUMAN, created by Spaniard Javier Aparici, who promises "radical transparency" on the factories used to make his garments. He showed an ultra-feminine collection of cocktail dresses in red and black featuring applique flowers, sheer panels and giant bows.

Young British designers then came

freezing building due for demolition.

Models in tube dresses and leggings wrapped up in fake fur coats and puffer jackets. There was even a ski suit, accessorised with bright pink high heeled sandals. Fans took pictures on their phones and whistled in approval.

**Brands missing**

S.S. Daley, a brand based in Liverpool in northwest England recently founded by Steven Stokeley Daley, went for classic unisex tailoring, featuring wide baggy trousers and Sherlock Holmes-style checked overcoats. Meanwhile Matty Bovan, another northern designer from the city of York, showed an Americana-themed collection with models wearing eccentric assem-



house, has not shown a collection in London for 12 years.

As sustainability and upcycling become industry buzzwords, Britain's Bethany Williams and Ireland's Richard Malone will present shows on Tuesday focusing on reused materials. Williams' materials include abandoned festival tents for garments and book waste for bags while Malone's creations feature fragments of materials including scrap leather.

Following in the footsteps of designer brands such as Gucci and Dolce & Gabbana, meanwhile, Serbian designer Roksanda Ilincic has announced she will sell non-fungible tokens (NFTs), offering digital ownership of a 3D image of a dress from her label.

**Future stars**

The event, which showcases autumn/winter 2022 collections, was held entirely virtually a year ago as it coincided with a national lockdown. Live catwalk shows resumed last September. This time there are nearly 40 such shows including Simone Rocha, Molly Goddard, Roksanda, Erdem and Rejina Pyo.

Other designers are sticking to digital formats, such as punk icon Westwood, who will present her latest creations in a video. After being hit hard by the pandemic, the British fashion sector, which employed about 890,000 people in 2019, is seeking a route to recovery.

Caroline Rush, the chief executive of the British Fashion Council, which organises the fashion week, told AFP that the

industry has had "a very challenging couple of years", exacerbated by Brexit-related changes that entered full force on January 31, 2020. London's five-day showcase is followed by fashion weeks in Milan and Paris later this month. — AFP



under the spotlight, with Saul Nash showcasing a relaxed but luxurious streetwear collection of merino wool tracksuits, hoodies, puffer coats and scarves, many emblazoned with his Saul logo. With a background in dance and performance, Nash graduated from the Royal College of Art in menswear in 2018.

Another British brand, Poster Girl, known for ultra-revealing cutaway shapewear-style dresses worn by celebrities such as Kylie Jenner and Dua Lipa, held its first catwalk show with an apres-ski theme. Poster Girl designers Francesca Capper and Natasha Somerville, who studied at the prestigious Central Saint Martins fashion college, showed their neon-hued creations in a

blages melding baseball jackets, gingham, denim and colourful crochet.

Missing from this week's events are several of the best-known brands in British fashion, including Burberry, Mulberry and Victoria Beckham. Burberry has announced that it will hold a separate live show in London in March, while Beckham has not participated in London Fashion Week, even digitally, for a year. She has complained of the high cost of catwalk shows.

Another major name in British fashion, Oswald Boateng, announced at the last minute that he will hold a comeback show on Monday. The former creative director for Givenchy menswear, who was the first black head designer at a luxury fashion



Models present creations from British designer Mark Fast during the catwalk show for the Autumn/Winter 2022 collection on the first full day of London Fashion Week in London. — AFP photos



Bulls lock horns during a traditional bullfight in the Gulf emirate of Fujairah. Far from Dubai's gleaming skyscrapers and renowned camel races, a bullfight is underway in the emirate of Fujairah, where the tradition continues unbeknownst to most in the United Arab Emirates. — AFP photos



## LITTLE-KNOWN BULLFIGHTING TRADITION LIVES ON IN UAE VILLAGE

Far from Dubai's gleaming skyscrapers and renowned camel races, a bullfight is under way in the emirate of Fujairah, where the tradition continues unbeknownst to most in the United Arab Emirates. "Look at them fight!" a commentator shouts into a microphone as the first bovine battle of the day kicks off, sending up clouds of dust in the village of Al-Qurayyah.

Two bulls, each weighing in at hundreds of kilograms (pounds), charge at each other while assistants hold ropes attached to their necks or legs for safety. Sometimes the huge animals come dangerously close to the spectators, sending them fleeing from their chairs.

About 200 men, women and children are gathered in a large field to watch, with children perched on the roofs of 4X4 vehicles and pick-ups. Trucks carrying bulls have converged from all over the region on the arena, a dirt field wedged between rocky mountains and the Gulf of Oman.

About 50 of the beasts are scattered around, and their bellowing echoes across the area. "There are no rules," explained Issa, 34, whose family owns a nearby farm and has been involved in bullfighting for decades.

"The winner is the one that shows the most courage and doesn't run away," added the man whose nephews stream the bouts on TikTok and Instagram. In the better-known emirates of Abu Dhabi and Dubai, camel beauty contests and races are popular, but "here it is the bullfights", said Majid, 36, whose animal scored a draw in the fight.



Emirati men pull a bull before the start of a traditional bullfight.

### Cruel and abusive?

Unlike the bullfights popular in Spain and Mexico, where the animals are typically slain by matadors, in Fujairah two beasts go head-to-head with far less fatal consequences. The competition typically ends after about an hour, with each fight lasting just one or two minutes. Animal welfare groups have however denounced the sport as cruel and abusive.

Elsayed Mohamed, the regional director of the International Fund for Animal Welfare, argued that just because something has been part of a society for so long does not make it right. "Every culture has many bad traditions, but because it's a tradition, we have to follow?" he asked, noting that animal fights are prohibited

under UAE law. Those who promote the fights, he said, argue that "it is 'not a bloody' competition... comparing these fights to the ones in Spain that end with the killing of the animal. "Even if they are taking precautions to prevent any harm, wounds will happen," said Mohamed.

Standing in the audience at the recent bullfight event was a German tourist couple who had learnt about it in an "alternative tourist guide book". "We thought it would be interesting to see that-it's unusual for us," said Gunter Beelitz, who works in theatre. "This is a bit like the fights in Spain except that here it is just one bull against one bull and not a man," he said. "And the bull doesn't die. We don't like the Spanish bullfights."



Emirati men prepare a bull before the start of a traditional bullfight.

### Family tradition

The bulls were once imported from South Asia for agricultural work, but the emergence of new technologies has rendered them obsolete to farming. Issa's family breed the animals or buy them for between 5,000 and 40,000 dirhams (about \$1,360 to \$10,900).

With help from a number of farm employees he reared about 17 beasts to fight every Friday after prayers. He said he has been preparing bulls for battle since he was "just a child". "We go to the animals, we check if they are okay... we take their temperatures and we feed them," he said. He rolled up his sleeves and dipped his arm into a large pot of bovine powerfood—a boiled mixture of

wheat, dates, herbs and fish.

"This is what gives the bulls their strength," said Issa, clad in a traditional Emirati "kandoura", an ankle-length shirt. Issa and his family said they have no intention of ending the pastime that has been passed down from generation to generation.

"People did not have much to do, and they would get the animals and get them to fight, a form of entertainment," said Issa. "It would bring people together," he continued, adding that he plans to pass the practice down to his six children. — AFP

## Mysteries and music: Listening in to underwater life

When marine researchers started recording sounds in the seagrass meadows of the Mediterranean Sea they picked up a mysterious sound, like the croak of a frog, that resounded within the dense foliage and nowhere else. "We recorded over 30 seagrasses and it was always there and no-one knew the species that was producing this kwa! kwa! kwa!" said Lucia Di Iorio, a researcher in ecoacoustics at France's CEFREM.

"It took us three years to find out the species that was producing that sound." The melodious songs of whales might be familiar music of the world's underwater habitats but few people will have heard the hoarse growl of a streaked gurnard or the rhythmical drumbeat of a red piranha.

Scientists are now calling for those sounds and many thousands more to become more widely accessible. They say a global database of the booms,

whistles and chatter of the sea will help to monitor diversity in aquatic life and help put a name to mystery sounds like the one Di Iorio and her colleagues investigated.

Experts from nine countries are working to create what they have dubbed the Global Library of Underwater Biological Sounds or "GLUBS". This would gather together recordings held all over the world and open them up to artificial intelligence learning and mobile phone apps used by citizen scientists.

While experts have been listening to life underwater for decades, the team behind GLUBS say that audio collections tend to be narrowly focused on a specific species or geographical area. Their initiative is part of burgeoning work on marine "soundscapes"—collecting all the sounds in a particular area to discern information about species types, behaviour and overall biological diversity.



Scientists say these soundscapes are a non-invasive way to "spy on" life underwater. In a paper published recently in the journal *Frontiers in Ecology and Evolution*, the GLUBS team said many fish and aquatic invertebrates are mainly nocturnal or hard to find, so acoustic monitoring could help conservation efforts.

"With biodiversity in decline worldwide and humans relentlessly altering underwater soundscapes, there is a need to document, quantify and understand the sources of underwater animal sounds before they potentially disappear," said lead author Miles Parsons of the Australian Institute of Marine Science.

### Sonic 'barcode'

Scientists believe that all 126 marine mammal species emit sounds, as do at least 100 aquatic invertebrates and some 1,000 fish species. The sounds can convey a wide range of messages—acting as a defence mechanism, to warn others of danger, as part of mating and reproduction—or just be the passive noise of an animal munching a meal.

Di Iorio, a co-author on the GLUBS

paper, said while marine mammals, like humans, learn their language of communication, the sounds made by invertebrates and fish are "just their anatomy". Many fish produce a distinctive drumming sound using a muscle that contracts around their swim bladder.

"This dum-dum-dum-dum-dum, the frequency, the rhythm and the number of pulses vary from one species to another. It's very specific," Di Iorio told AFP. "It's like a barcode."

Scientists can recognise families of fish just from these sounds, so with a global library they might be able to compare, for example, the thrumming calls of different grouper fish in the Mediterranean to those off the coast of Florida. But another key use for the library, they say, could be to help identify the many unknown sounds in the world's seas and freshwater habitats.

### Mystery music

After many months investigating the strange seagrass croaker, Di Iorio and her colleagues were able to point the finger of suspicion at the scorpionfish. But they struggled to explain how it was mak-

ing such an unusual noise—and it refused to perform for them.

They tried catching the fish and recording it in a carrier. They sunk sound equipment onto the seabed next to the fish. They even listened in to aquariums that contained scorpionfish. "Nothing," she said. Eventually colleagues from Belgium took a camera that could record at low light and staked out some seagrass in Corsica.

They were able to capture the kwa! kwa! sound as well as video of the fish making a shimmying motion. Back in the lab, they dissected a scorpionfish and found that they have tendons strung along their bodies.

Their hypothesis is that the fish contracts these muscles to produce the sound. "It's a guitar, an underwater guitar," said Di Iorio. But there are many more mysteries where that came from.

Di Iorio said in the Mediterranean, up to 90 percent of noises in a given recording might be unknown. "Every time we put a hydrophone in the water we're discovering new sounds," she added. — AFP



## Lifestyle | Features

## Istanbul skyline row over new build near iconic mosque

The soaring minarets of the 16th-century Suleymaniye mosque paint the postcard image of Istanbul, but that is now blighted by rickety wooden scaffolding at a nearby construction site, sparking fury on social media. The latest row over Istanbul's skyline has seen opponents of the new building attack botched restoration work and calls for historical edifices to be protected. "The disrespect, there is no recognition of any proportion or any limit," Esin Koymen, head of the Istanbul Chamber of Architects, told AFP. "There's this talk that the new buildings betray Istanbul's silhouette but it's quite upsetting to see the continuing recklessness on a landmark historical compound," she said. "This needs to stop."

The mosque was built from 1550-57 by the celebrated Ottoman architect Sinan and dominates the peninsula that also houses the Grand Bazaar. A UNESCO World Heritage site, the mosque which has survived fires and an earthquake, represents the golden age of the Ottoman Empire under Suleyman the Magnificent. With its minarets and giant dome, the complex offers an unparalleled view of the Golden Horn and the Bosphorus. It is not

the first time Istanbul's skyline has been threatened by concrete and high-rise towers. Three huge skyscrapers in the Zeytinburnu neighborhood triggered public uproar but they remain standing despite a court verdict and the urging in 2013 of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, then prime minister, for the owners to reduce their height.

## 'We will protect it'

The latest controversy turned political after the Istanbul municipality, run by the opposition CHP, sealed the under-construction multi-storey building last week, citing the city's zoning plan. "We will make no concessions on preserving Istanbul's historical and spiritual values," Istanbul mayor Ekrem Imamoglu tweeted.

The Foundation for the Expansion of Knowledge, owner of the building and whose board of trustees' chairman is Erdogan's son Bilal, insisted the construction of a student dormitory was "not illegal". However the foundation was forced to take a step back after the rising block drew rebuke even from conservative quarters. "We will not be involved in any action that goes against Suleymaniye's soul," the



A picture taken on Feb 16, 2022 in Istanbul shows the Suleymaniye Mosque's domes and a building under construction (back) stopped by the Istanbul metropolitan municipality. — AFP

foundation's acting chairman Nurettin Alan told journalists in the mosque's courtyard last week.

"Suleymaniye is our soul, we'll protect it." Moreover, Alan accused the Istanbul municipality of "politicizing" the issue by locking up the building despite their decision to stop construction, which had

reached nearly 16 m. "What a pity. Our sacred values are being exploited for profit," Twitter handle @1974asude commented. Yusuf Kaplan, a columnist for pro-government Yeni Safak daily, took up the call for Suleymaniye's "soul" to be protected. "We are the only nation in the world which destroys its cities," he said, adding the

mosque's surroundings should be "cleaned up".

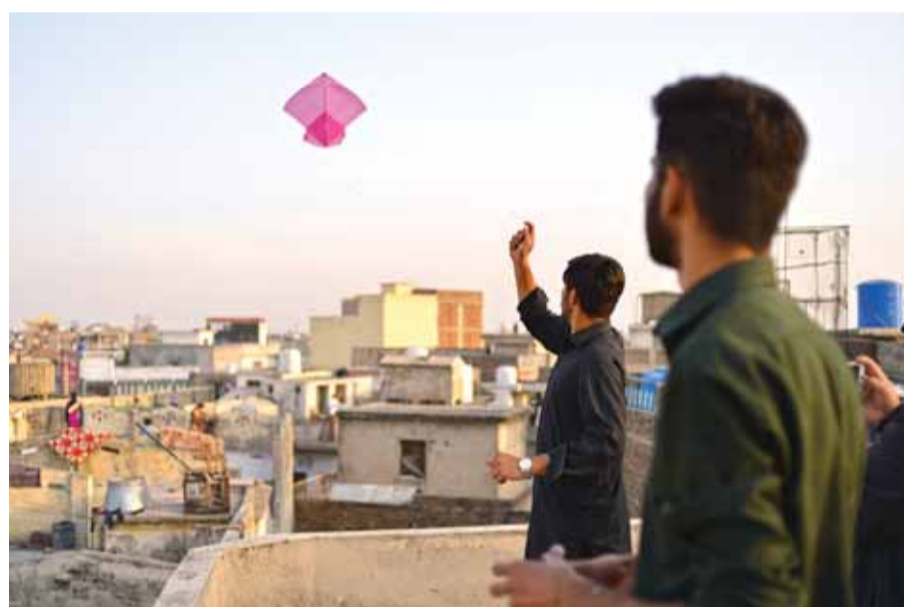
## Culture above politics

Mahir Polat, cultural heritage director for Istanbul's municipality, said the building was six meters higher than the approved project. "Compare the pictures from 2016 and 2022. Anyone who looks to the Bosphorus through the poetic domes of Suleymaniye knows (that building) was not there," Polat told AFP. Polat, who raised the alarm in 2020 over worrying restoration work at the Galata Tower, built in 500 AD as a watchtower and now a museum, defended locking up the new building. It had "nothing" to do with politics or ideology, he said.

"Read whoever wrote about Istanbul, be it travellers in the past or modern authors, they describe it as the city of domes. This silhouette is exactly the area whose frontage is closed off now," by recent construction. But Polat said the foundation's building was not the only risk to the historical site, referring to many others in the surrounding area, most of which were constructed in the 1970s and the 80s. —AFP



Youths fly kites on a rooftop during the Basant Kite Festival despite a ban imposed by authorities in 2007 following a spate of accidents, in Rawalpindi. — AFP photos



## Kanye West says new album won't be released on streaming platforms

Kanye West on Friday dropped the tracklist to his planned new album "Donda 2," just after saying it would not be available to stream but instead exclusively on his own "Stem Player" device. The mercurial artist said the device will allow listeners to play four different track elements-vocals, drum, bass and music-and costs \$200.

"Tech companies made music practically free so if you don't do merch sneakers and tours you don't eat," West wrote on Instagram, part of a series of posts on the topic. "I feel that same feeling like when I first moved to New York to make it in Music. I ain't know what was gonna happen but I knew had to move," the billionaire artist, 44, continued.



"No one can pay me to be disrespected. We set our own price for our art." It's not the first time West has pushed against streaming models or toyed with unconventional release methods. After dropping "The Life of Pablo" in 2016 — at first exclusively on the platform Tidal-West continued altering the record, adding vocals, new lyrics and remixes.

Last year he previewed "Donda" over a series of listening events-and when it was finally streaming, he said his label had dropped it without permission. His "Stem Player" announcement comes in the wake of public outcry over Spotify, a streaming giant accused of allowing misinformation to spread via its podcasts and especially its star host Joe Rogan.

That controversy also triggered long-simmering debate over streaming platforms' hegemony and their business models that pay musicians a small fraction. "Today artists get just 12% of the money the industry makes. It's time to free music from this oppressive system," West wrote. "It's time to take control and build our own."

The new album, set for release on February 22, comes as West has been posting prolifically about his personal life and angst over his divorce with Kim Kardashian and raising their four children.

"GOD PLEASE BRING OUR FAMILY BACK TOGETHER," he posted at one point. He has also used his massive platform to target Pete Davidson, the 28-year-old comedian and actor Kardashian has been dating. He has deleted a number of his posts including a screenshot from a thread with Kardashian, who texts the rapper that he is "creating a dangerous and scary environment."

The artist, who has spoken candidly about his struggles with bipolar disorder, has come under criticism for his antics on social media and what many have dubbed harassment of his ex. — AFP

## Hundreds defy ban to celebrate Pakistan kite festival

Hundreds of Pakistani youths flew kites from rooftops in the garrison city of Rawalpindi on Friday, celebrating an ancient colourful festival despite a ban imposed by authorities in 2007 following a spate of accidents. Enthusiasts have in the past used acid-soaked string and piano wire in kite-fighting battles, causing terrible injuries to people caught by tangles across roads-including slitting the throats of motorcyclists.

Victorious participants and their supporters firing into the air can also cause

death or injury when the rounds fall back to the ground. The ban did not stop Friday's celebration of Basant, a kite festival that marks the arrival of spring and the blustery winds it brings. "The festival isn't worth a human life, but Pakistani youths don't have too many options for entertainment," said Raja Rameez, a 21-year-old pharmacist who invited dozens of friends to watch from his rooftop.

Hundreds of youths played cat and mouse with more than 1,500 police officers, who used binoculars and drones to try to spot the locations of the kite flyers.

AFP saw officers baton charge groups of youngsters and bundle some into the back of packed paddy wagons. Police said at least 220 people were arrested; offenders can be fined up to 100,000 rupees (around \$570). "It is quite challenging for us as people's lives are at stake," said Waseem Riaz, a senior superintendent of police.

The eastern city of Lahore used to be the main centre for the Basant festival, drawing thousands of local and foreign tourists, with railways running special trains and hotels packed. Until the ban,

the event was generally a family affair, with girls traditionally wearing yellow to mark the occasion. Islamic fundamentalists also oppose Basant because of its Hindu or pagan origins. "This is not half of what it was used to be when we were young," said Murad Alam, watching proceedings from his rooftop with his children. "I feel for my children... they have no entertainment opportunities in this country." — AFP



## Mega-star Tarkan's hit strikes a chord in Turkey

A new song about an end to suffering from one of Turkey's best-known pop stars has gone viral in the economically battered country. Opposition parties quickly adopted the song as a rallying cry, using its lyrics on Twitter to imply the end of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's rule was near. The song "Gecek" ("It will pass") by superstar Tarkan went viral on social media shortly after its release on YouTube at 1800 GMT on Thursday. By 1030 GMT on Friday it had hit over four million YouTube views.

The lyrics have made an impact at a time of severe economic woes in Turkey, where inflation has reached nearly 50 percent and a lack of optimism particularly haunts young people. Polls suggest Erdogan, who has been in power since 2003, faces a major challenge in elections next year, as anger against his ruling party grows. "Everything has an end", the composer of 1997 earworm "Kiss Kiss" assures in his new hit. "This suffering will also be over."

Some observers saw the song as a political message, even though the lyrics make no mention of Erdogan. Politicians from the main opposition CHP swiftly took to Twitter to share its lyrics. "It will go as it came," party spokesman Faik Oztrak tweeted pointedly. Meral Aksener, leader of the right-wing opposition Iyi Party, said the song was a message to Erdogan's government that he only had a short time left as leader. Tarkan said the state of the world over the past year had brought him to despair, particularly environmental destruction and the COVID pandemic. —AFP

## A fisherman's life on the high seas: Harsh, risky and badly paid

"It's very tough, you make a lot of sacrifices and they don't pay you what they should," shrugs Jeronimo Martinez, a fisherman from Marin, home port of the shipwrecked Spanish trawler. The tragedy-Spain's worst fishing accident in nearly 40 years which claimed 21 lives and left only three survivors when their ship foundered in stormy waters off Newfoundland-has thrown into sharp relief the risks and harsh working conditions faced by fishermen.

The death toll has sent shock waves across the northwestern region of Galicia where fishing is hugely important and which accounts for some 10 percent of all of the European Union's fresh fish landings, regional figures show.

Often these deep-sea fishermen will spend months at sea, far from their families. "You're away for so long: you go out to sea when your child's just been born and when you come back, he's already doing his first communion," jokes Martinez as he takes a coffee at a bar popular with fishermen in Marin.

He used to spend six-month stints at sea fishing for cod off Newfoundland but is currently not working after having a hernia operation. "For most sailors, the head of the family is the mother, who is the one who's at home. The fathers are all away, working," said the 51-year-old, who is missing part of a finger due to an accident while working on a trawler.

## Long hours, low pay

"This is what happens when you're a fisherman: you get home and your child doesn't recognise you anymore," agrees Makhtar Diakhate, a retired trawler worker who has lived and worked in Marin since 2004. Originally from Dakar in Senegal, his job on the high seas means he's only



Spanish fisherman Jeronimo Martinez, poses for pictures with his dog in the port city of Marin, northwestern Spain. Months at sea for low pay: The deadly sinking of Spanish fishing trawler off Canada has thrown the spotlight on the tough working on board such vessels. — AFP

been able to get home to see his wife and kids once a year.

"I felt bad because sometimes stuff happened at home and I couldn't be there to help out," admits Diakhate, who is 64. In Marin, like at other Galician ports, there are other African and Latin American migrants working the fishing trawlers, most of them from Ghana and Peru.

Onboard the Villa Pitaxo which sank off Canada on Tuesday, there were 16 Spaniards, five Peruvians and three Ghanaians. "Working at sea is a bit dangerous but you have to do it," shrugs Ghanaian John Okutu, whose uncle Edeomon Okutu is one of the missing crew members.

Migrants form an important part of the workforce in a trade that has little appeal for youngsters in Galicia. Fran Sola, 49, who stopped working on trawlers more than 20 years ago and has since worked as a mechanic, said a crew member can earn around 1,500 euros (\$1,700) a month.

"That's why young people don't do it, they prefer to be bricklayers because they earn the same and by 9:00 pm, they're at home with their families," he said.

## Hard work and isolation

At sea "you have to work every day, 60 hours a week, there is no respect for

the workers, you have to do what the boss says," said Sola, who almost lost a finger in one of the trawlers heavy doors. Although fishermen earned a good salary in the past, that is no longer the case.

"Twenty years ago, you would go out to sea and five years later you could buy a house, a car," he said. Onboard the trawlers, living conditions are cramped with four to eight crew members sharing a room on some boats.

On most boats there is no television reception and Internet and mobile network coverage is patchy, meaning a stint on the high seas can be very lonely. But although conditions on board are hard, those who have worked on these deep-sea fishing boats say shipwrecks are rare, thanks to the modernisation of trawler fleets.

"You are never completely safe because the sea is the sea," said Martinez. He would rather not go back on the boats after recovering from his hernia operation. "I have no desire to return, although I will if I don't have a choice. But I'd rather not go back out to sea because it is very hard," said this father of two young children, aged four and three. — AFP

## Sports

# India clinch T20 series against West Indies with eight-run win

## Kohli, Pant hit attacking half-centuries

### News in brief

#### Lille, Metz in drab draw

**PARIS:** French champions Lille staggered to a toothless 0-0 draw at home to lowly Metz on Friday ahead of their midweek Champions League clash at Chelsea. Lille are a shadow of the side that romped past Paris Saint-Germain to win Ligue 1 last year, and now sit ninth with only nine wins in 25 games. On Friday, they were whistled off at half-time without a shot on target from strikers Jonathan David, Turkey international Burak Yilmaz or anyone else. Coach Jocelyn Gournec brought on new signing Hatem Ben Arfa and star player Renato Sanches, both of whom have Premier League experience, but to no avail. — AFP

#### Bayer Leverkusen stunned

**MAINZ:** Bayer Leverkusen's push for a Champions League place suffered a jolt when Mainz scored two late goals to snatch a 3-2 win in the Bundesliga on Friday. Leverkusen remain in third place in the table with 41 points, 11 behind leaders Bayern Munich and seven clear of Leipzig who currently occupy the final qualifying spot for next season's Champions League but have a game in hand. Leverkusen opened the scoring in the 35th minute through Czech striker Patrik Schick who now has 20 league goals for the season. Schick, however, was later forced off the pitch with an injury at the start of the second half. Aaron Martin leveled for Mainz shortly before the hour mark but Lucas Alario restored Leverkusen's advantage in the 74th minute after being set up by Moussa Diaby. Mainz refused to give up and leveled for the second time in the 84th minute through Dutchman Jean-Paul Boetius with Denmark's Marcus Ingvartsen hitting the shock winner with two minutes left. — AFP

#### Fans gather despite ban

**OMDURMAN:** Hundreds of Sudanese football fans gathered Friday outside Al-Hilal stadium to cheer on their team against Egypt's Al-Ahly following a ban on entry to the ground, an AFP correspondent said. The African Champions League match, which ended 0-0, was held in Al Gawhara Al Zarkaa stadium in Omdurman, the capital's twin city, with heavy security deployed outside. "We came to stand by the Al-Hilal team," supporter Abdelhady Abouduarah said. "We were surprised to find that fans were not allowed." On Wednesday, Al-Hilal said it had received "an official letter from the Confederation of African Football (CAF) banning fans entry to the match." CAF had earlier agreed to allow 15,000 fans into the stadium, according to Al-Hilal's official Facebook page. The Egyptian Football Association said on Thursday it had requested the ban "to protect the Al Ahly team." Egyptian and Sudanese fans violently clashed during previous matches. — AFP

#### Tsitsipas stunned in Marseille

**MARSEILLE:** World number four and top seed Stefanos Tsitsipas suffered an embarrassing straight sets defeat to 163rd-ranked Russian qualifier Roman Safiullin in the Marseille ATP quarter-finals on Friday. Safiullin, 24, clinched a memorable 6-4, 6-4 win over his Greek opponent who was runner-up at the French Open last year. "It's the greatest victory of my career," said the Russian, a former junior Australian Open champion. "It was my first time in a quarter-final and the first time I have beaten a top 10 player." Safiullin will meet world number nine and last weekend's Rotterdam champion Felix Auger-Aliassime of Canada in the last-four. Auger-Aliassime needed six match points to see off Ilya Ivashka of Belarus 6-3, 6-4. The other semi-final pits second seed Andrey Rublev of Russia against France's Benjamin Bonzi. — AFP

#### MLB cancels pre-season games

**NEW YORK:** Major League Baseball, caught in fruitless talks on a new deal with its players union for nearly three months, called off the first scheduled week of pre-season games on Friday. The league said in a statement that pre-season contests in Arizona and Florida, which were set to begin on February 26, won't now start before March 5. The move came two days after what should have been the start of pre-season training camps for clubs, but players remain locked out by club owners following the end of the prior collective bargaining agreement on December 1, 2021. "We regret that, without a collective bargaining agreement in place, we must postpone the start of spring training games until no earlier than Saturday, March 5," MLB said in a statement. "All 30 clubs are unified in their strong desire to bring players back to the field and fans back to the stands. "We are committed to reaching an agreement that is fair to each side." — AFP

**KOLKATA:** Virat Kohli and Rishabh Pant hit attacking half-centuries to set up India's eight-run series-clinching victory over West Indies in the second Twenty20 international on Friday. Chasing 187 for victory, West Indies finished on 178 for three despite a threatening century stand between Nicholas Pooran (62) and Rovman Powell (unbeaten 68 off 36 balls) in Kolkata.

India, who whitewashed the West Indies 3-0 in the preceding one-day matches, took an unassailable 2-0 lead in the three-match T20 series. Pooran, a left-handed wicketkeeper-batsman, smashed five fours and three sixes in his 41-ball knock before falling to pace bowler Bhuvneshwar Kumar in a four-run 19th over. With 25 needed off the final over, Powell attempted a final onslaught with two sixes off Harshal Patel but the bowler held his nerve.

"You are always a bit scared when you are playing against these guys," skipper Rohit Sharma said after India's 100th T20 victory including Super over and bowl-out wins. "But I am proud we executed our plans under pressure. It was very critical at that point when Bhuvneshwar bowled. That's where experience comes into play." Man of the match Pant said: "I think Powell was hitting bullets out there." "But at the back of the mind I was happy as well because he will be playing for (IPL side) Delhi Capitals."

Powell was bought by Delhi, led by Pant, for \$375,000 in the weekend auction of the cash-rich Indian Premier League Twenty20 tournament starting next month. Off-spinner Roston Chase took three wickets after West Indies elected to bowl in skipper Kieron Pollard's 100th T20I but Pant's unbeaten 52 steered India to 186 for five. The Indian batting wobbled after Kohli's 52 but Pant, who hit an unbeaten 52 off 28 balls, and Venkatesh Iyer put on 76 runs for the fifth wicket to boost the total.

#### Kohli hits form

Pace bowler Sheldon Cottrell got Ishan Kishan caught behind for two after the left-handed open-

## New Zealand crush South Africa to win the first Test

**CHRISTCHURCH:** New Zealand claimed a rare victory over South Africa yesterday, wrapping up the first Test by a comprehensive innings and 276 runs in just seven sessions in Christchurch. It is only the fifth time in 46 Tests since 1932 that New Zealand have beaten South Africa with their last victory coming in 2004. "It's a great day," an elated captain Tom Latham said.

South Africa, who were 387 behind on the first innings, resumed the day at 34 for three and showed little appetite to chase down the total, losing their final seven wickets before lunch to be all out for 111. Latham said winning the toss and putting South Africa in to bat was critical for New Zealand's success. The tourists crumbled in their first innings for 95 on a green wicket with Matt Henry bagging seven for 23. A century by Henry Nicholls and a string of 50-plus partnerships saw New Zealand amass 482 in reply and the writing was on the wall for South Africa.

## Rohit Sharma named India's Test captain

**MUMBAI:** Rohit Sharma was yesterday named India's Test captain, one of the highest-pressure jobs in world sport, completing his takeover of the leadership across cricket formats after Virat Kohli's exit. The 34-year-old will lead the side in the upcoming two Test series against Sri Lanka starting March 4, chairman of selectors Chetan Sharma told reporters.

"Rohit Sharma is the number one cricketer of our country," he said. "King Kohli" quit as India's Test captain in January having resigned from the T20 leadership last year and then being sacked as ODI skipper. Rohit, known as the "Hitman" for his big hundreds and six-hitting, this month led the team to a one-day series sweep over the West Indies. He has led IPL side Mumbai Indians to a record five titles, and had already taken over the white-ball captaincy following Kohli's surprise departure.

Always a frontrunner to take over the Test duties, Rohit has been a regular member of the Test team since opening the batting for India in October 2019, when he hit twin centuries. The swashbuckling batsman, a white-ball star, has scored 3,047 runs including eight centuries in 43 Tests since making his debut in 2013. His attacking batting and penchant for big scores—he scored 177 on his Test debut and has a top score of 212 — make him a favorite with the fans.

#### Stoppag skipper?

Critics though highlight Rohit's injury-prone career and the fact that he is 18 months older than Kohli, meaning he may prove to be a stopgap skipper before someone younger—such as Rishabh Pant—



**KOLKATA:** India's Virat Kohli (left) plays a shot during the second Twenty20 international cricket match between India and West Indies at the Eden Gardens on February 18, 2022. — AFP

er's struggle at the crease in a 10-ball stay. Rohit and Kohli rebuilt the innings in their partnership of 49 with the former captain coming in all guns blazing with a string of boundaries. Chase sent back Rohit for 19 and then caught and bowled Suryakumar Yadav for eight. Kohli, who had scores of eight, 18 and nought in India's 3-0 ODI sweep of West Indies and then 17 in the opening T20 win, overcame a brief lull in his glittering career to smash his 30th T20I fifty.

He raised his 50 with a six off Chase, who finished with figures of 3-25, but was bowled two balls later after his 41-ball knock. The left-handed batting pair of Pant and Iyer, who made 33 off 18 balls before being bowled by Romario Shepherd, then hit

back to take the attack to the opposition. The West Indies started cautiously in their chase and lost Kyle Mayers for nine, caught and bowled off leg-spinner Yuzvendra Chahal.

Pooran took on the bowlers with a few boundaries but soon opener Brandon King fell to Ravi Bishnoi's leg spin. Pooran, who got a reprieve on 21 when Bishnoi dropped him at deep mid-wicket and went on to raise his second successive fifty with a six, put on 100 with Powell. "It was a pretty decent innings, did the hard yards in the early part and tried to carry it home but it won't go down as a special innings because we didn't win," Powell, an attacking middle-order batsman, told reporters. The final match is on Sunday at the same venue. — AFP



**CHRISTCHURCH:** New Zealand players celebrate the dismissal of South Africa's batsman Kyle Verreyne during day three of the first cricket Test match between New Zealand and South Africa at Hagley Oval in Christchurch yesterday. — AFP

leg before wicket by Neil Wagner. Verreyne fell in the following over for 30, caught in slips off Southee who then quickly snagged the wicket of Kagiso Rabada for zero.

The day started badly for South Africa with Bavuma's overnight partner, Rassie van der Dussen, out on the second ball when Henry got the delivery to nip back, finding a gap between bat and pad. Zubayr Hamza, who top-

scored with 25 when South Africa made a paltry 95 in their first innings, only managed six off 32 deliveries before he edged Kyle Jamieson to Daryl Mitchell at first slip. The remaining batsmen—Marco Jansen, Glenton Stuurman and Duanne Olivier—contributed 21 between them. Southee finished with five for 35 while man-of-the-match Henry and Wagner took two wickets each. — AFP

## Indian batsman hits first-ever triple ton on first class debut

**NEW DELHI:** India's Sakibul Gani became the first batsman in world cricket to hit a triple century on his first-class debut when he made 341 in the Ranji Trophy tournament. The 22-year-old walked out to the crease for Bihar against Mizoram in Kolkata on Friday, the second day of their four-day match in the country's premier red-ball competition. By the time he was out 405 balls later he had plundered 56 fours and two sixes.

The right-hand batsman surpassed fellow Indian Ajay Rohera's record of 267 not out for Madhya Pradesh in the 2018-19 Ranji Trophy season. Another Indian Amol Mazumdar stands third with his 260 for Bombay, now Mumbai, in 1994. Former India wicketkeeper Saba Karim—who comes from Bihar himself—lauded Gani's effort and tweeted: "Scoring a triple ton is always special. It becomes an extraordinary innings when someone gets it on debut."

Batting at number five, Gani put on a marathon stand of 538 with Babul Kumar, who made an unbeaten 229 — giving them a world record for the highest fifth-wicket partnership in first-class cricket. Bihar declared their innings on 686 for five. The first-class competition—named for Maharaja Ranjitsinhji, an Indian prince who played for England in the 1890s—had a delayed season start on Thursday due to the coronavirus pandemic. — AFP



**India's Rohit Sharma**

takes over. His ample physique also contrasts with lean fitness fanatic Kohli, but selection chairman Chetan dismissed concerns about the new captain. "Today's professional cricketers manage their body and Rohit has no problem at all and he is absolutely okay," he said. "And if such a big and experienced cricketer comes forward and becomes captain then the future captains to be groomed under Rohit would be a tremendous thing for us."

Pace bowler Jasprit Bumrah was named as Rohit's Test deputy, putting him in contention to become the next skipper. Rohit is seen as less combative than his predecessor, who had frequent run-ins with opposing teams and umpires. Under Kohli, one of the best batsmen of his generation, India rose up the international rankings and shed their reputation for performing poorly away, winning two series in Australia. The first Test against Sri Lanka at Mohali on March 4 is set to be his 100th game in the five-day format. — AFP

Sports

# Juventus and Torino in hard-fought 1-1 draw

## Belotti earns Torino deserved derby point

TURIN: Andrea Belotti was the derby star for Torino with the leveler in Friday's hard-fought 1-1 draw at Juventus which hands Atalanta the advantage in the Champions League race. Injury-plagued Belotti swept home Torino's equalizer in the 62nd minute of his first start since late November, earning Ivan Juric's side a fully-deserved point at the Allianz Stadium. "I'm happy my goal helped us draw but it's a shame we didn't win because we played really well today. Had we won I don't think it would have been undeserved," Belotti told DAZN after his first goal since the end of October.

"It's been a long time... But I've spent the time trying to be as close to my teammates as possible and watch them play so that I know what the manager asks of us. That's made it easier to come back." The Italy international's leveler came in what could well be his last Turin derby after nearly seven years at 10th-placed Torino. Italian media report that the 28-year-old has refused an extension worth 3.5 million euros a season to his current contract, which expires at the end of the season.

"If it is my last derby I'm proud of myself and my teammates because today we put in a great performance," said Belotti. The draw means that Juve, who took the lead in the 13th minute through Matthijs de Ligt, can lose their spot in the top four if Atalanta win at Fiorentina on Sunday afternoon. Atalanta are three points behind Massimiliano Allegri's fourth-placed side but have a better

head-to-head record and goal difference, as well as having a game in hand.

### Belotti bounces back

Allegri was without injured captain Giorgio Chiellini and Leonardo Bonucci and lost another defender in Daniele Rugani during the pre-match warm-up. He said he was "not worried" about Paulo Dybala's condition ahead of Juve's Champions League trip to Villarreal on Tuesday, despite the Argentina forward leaving the field 10 minutes before Belotti's goal with what reported as a left thigh injury. Juve were pushed back into their own area in the opening moments but were unlucky not to take the lead in the 11th minute when after a blistering counter-attack Adrien Rabiot fired an angled drive just wide.

The hosts had their tails up after that attack which swept the length of the pitch, and soon after De Ligt thumped home a powerful header from Juan Cuadrado's inswinging corner. Torino had won just one of their previous 31 derbies but were not cowed by going behind and continued to push forward, only to find De Ligt and goalkeeper Wojciech Szczesny in solid enough form to keep the final ball from being dangerous.

The roles were reversed at the start of the second half, with Juve on the front foot even after Dybala was replaced by Weston McKennie. However Belotti lashed home his third goal of the season with a true striker's finish from Josip



TURIN: Juventus' Italian forward Moise Kean (left) fights for the ball with Torino's Ivorian defender Koffi Djidji during the Italian Serie A football match Juventus vs Torino at Allianz stadium on February 18, 2022. —AFP

Brekalo's cross. Juve laid siege to the Torino goal but the away side, led by the impressive Bremer

who kept Dusan Vlahovic quiet, held firm and left with a point. —AFP

## Arabi wins Kuwait derby to reignite the title race

By Ahmad Jabr

KUWAIT: Al-Arabi added a significant boost to their repeat hopes after beating archrivals Qadsia on Friday and returning to the title picture following their early season struggles. Libyan international Mohammad Sola's goal in the 23rd minute in front of a large crowd at Jaber International Stadium sealed a much-needed victory for the titleholders who came to the match on the heels of their Super Cup win on Sunday that capped an impressive run for 'The Green Fortress' in their recent matches.

Arabi's 'Kuwait derby' victory did not come without controversy however, as the referee ruled out a goal for Qadsia in added time. Tunisian international Housem Souissi's header in the 97th minute capped Qadsia's comeback before a VAR review showed a foul committed by Jamaican

forward Romario Williams against Arabi's defense, forcing the referee to cancel the goal. After the match, security were seen escorting the referee out of the stadium as angry Qadsia fans threw debris out on the field in protest.

The win propels Al-Arabi to second place in the Kuwait Premier League standings, trailing first-place Kuwait on goal difference. Kuwait had secured the top spot with 23 points following a big 5-1 win against Tadhamon earlier on Friday. Former league leaders Kazma sank to third place with 22 points following an underwhelming draw against last-place Yarmouk. Meanwhile, Qadsia dropped to fourth place with 20 points, ahead of Salmiya - who lost to Shabab 0-1 on Wednesday - on goal difference.

The results have reignited a heated race to Kuwait Premier League's title



KUWAIT: Qadsia's captain Bader Al-Mutawaa (center) vies for the ball through Al-Arabi's defense in the two teams' Kuwait Premier League match on Friday. —KUNA

as only three points separate the top five teams who still hold a realistic chance to win the trophy entering this week's matches. Al-Arabi look to continue their strong performance when they visit Salmiya after the national

holiday break on March 3rd. Meanwhile, Kuwait visit Qadsia a day earlier as both teams look for victory to keep their title hopes alive, while Kazma look to bounce back when they host sixth place Al-Nasr.

for honours in the 1960s. Even one of English football's greatest families was divided as Bobby Charlton led Manchester United to win the European Cup in 1968, two years after winning the World Cup alongside his brother and Leeds great Jack.

Leeds' golden era came under Don Revie in the late 1960s and 1970s, winning two league titles, an FA Cup and reaching the European Cup final. However, even then they did not have the riches of the Red Devils. When Scottish internationals Joe Jordan and Gordon McQueen crossed the Pennines in 1978, a painful trend was set for Leeds of losing their best players to Old Trafford.

History repeated itself after Leeds' only other league title in 1991/92. A charismatic young Frenchman Eric Cantona played a key role in the run-in to beat United to the title, but manager Howard Wilkinson quickly wrote him off as a disruptive influence in the dressing room. United swooped with a fee of £1 million (\$1.4 million) for a transfer that transformed English football history as Cantona became the catalyst for success under Alex Ferguson. Just as Leeds rose again

in the early 2000s, Ferguson picked off Rio Ferdinand and Alan Smith.

Yorkshire born and bred, Smith said he "would never play for Manchester United", but did so after a financial collapse that saw Leeds enter administration and relegated in 2004. They did not make it back to the top-flight until 2020, but coronavirus restrictions meant last year's forgettable 0-0 draw at Elland Road was played behind closed doors. "Because we were all away during COVID and out of the top division for so long, everyone will be straining at the leash today," said Dan Moylan of Leeds fanzine The Square Ball.

Both sides are under pressure to perform, but as is customary Leeds' struggles put United's problems into perspective. Failure to finish in the top four and qualify for the Champions League would be deemed disastrous for a squad bolstered by the signings of Cristiano Ronaldo, Jadon Sancho and Raphael Varane with the aim of challenging for the title this season. However, Leeds are in a battle at the bottom just to make sure they do not undo all the good work of Marcelo Bielsa's reign by being relegated. —AFP

## Global talent powers LeBron v Durant at NBA All-Star Game

WASHINGTON: Two-time NBA Most Valuable Player Giannis Antetokounmpo and NBA scoring leader Joel Embiid lead a record-tying four international starters in Sunday's 71st NBA All-Star Game. Greek star Antetokounmpo, last year's NBA Finals MVP after leading the Milwaukee Bucks to their first title in 50 years, will spark Team LeBron James in the elite talent showdown at James's home area of Cleveland, Ohio. Antetokounmpo averages 29.4 points a game, second in the NBA, just ahead of Los Angeles Lakers superstar James at 29.1 per contest.

James called Antetokounmpo "the hardest playing player in All-Star history" upon taking him in a player draft and the "Greek Freak" has the Bucks contending for another crown. "I just try to play as hard as I can, play for the team and always play to win," Antetokounmpo said. "We're happy we won the championship last year, but we're not satisfied. We're trying to put ourselves in a position that we can be one of those teams that play down the stretch in June."

Embiid, the Cameroonian forward who leads NBA with 29.6 points a game for Philadelphia, will ignite Team Kevin Durant, whose namesake captain is injured and will not play. The Sixers star could be the first center to win the scoring title since Shaquille O'Neal in 2000. "You have to do whatever it takes to win," Embiid said. "I know my role and it's to go out there and dominate. I'm going to get the ball a lot and I'm going to make things happen. "It's all about making the right plays, finding my teammates, looking to score and just being aggressive."

Serbian center Nikola Jokic, the 2021 NBA MVP, will also start for Team LeBron while Canadian forward Andrew Wiggins of the Golden State Warriors is also in the opening lineup for Durant's squad in his first All-Star appearance. Memphis standout guard Ja Morant, averaging 26.4 points a game, makes his first All-Star Game appearance as a starter for Team Durant, which also features Boston swingman Jayson Tatum in Durant's place and Atlanta guard Trae Young, who ranks fifth in the NBA with 27.8 points a game and fourth in the league with 9.3 assists a contest. —AFP

## Leeds cauldron awaits United; old hostilities return to EPL

MANCHESTER: Leeds' 18-year wait to welcome Manchester United in front of an intimidating full house in the Premier League (EPL) comes to an end in the latest chapter of a rivalry that dates back 500 years. The Wars of the Roses between 1455 and 1487 between the House of Lancaster and the House of York was fought for control of the English throne, but set in motion a battle for superiority that has existed ever since between the counties of Lancashire and Yorkshire.

Initially inflamed by the Industrial Revolution and the formation of county cricket, the two Uniteds of Leeds and Manchester have become the truest outlet for that enmity on the football field since first clashing

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Chest Hospital	24849400	Shamiya	24848913
Farwaniya Hospital	24892010	Shuwaikh	24814507
Adan Hospital	23940620	Abdullah Salem	22549134
Ibn Sina Hospital	24840300	Nuzha	22526804
Al-Razi Hospital	24846000	Industrial Shuwaikh	24814764
Physiotherapy Hospital	24874330/9	Qadsiya	22515088
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## Liverpool survive Norwich scare

Chelsea down Palace; Arsenal move into pole position



LIVERPOOL: Liverpool's Senegalese striker Sadio Mane scores their first goal with this acrobatic shot during the English Premier League football match between Liverpool and Norwich City yesterday. — AFP

**MANCHESTER:** Mohamed Salah's 150th Liverpool goal and Luis Diaz's first kept the Reds in the hunt for the Premier League title as they came from behind to beat Norwich 3-1, while Chelsea snatched a late win at Crystal Palace yesterday. Liverpool boss Jurgen Klopp made seven changes from the side that won 2-0 at Inter Milan in the Champions League in midweek and nearly paid a heavy price when the Canaries took a shock lead at Anfield.

Milot Rashica's shot deflected in off Joel Matip three minutes into the second half. But Liverpool's deadly duo of Sadio Mane and Salah turned the game around with two goals in the space of three minutes. Mane produced a stunning acrobatic finish to meet Kostas Tsimikas' looping header. Salah then raced onto goalkeeper Alisson Becker's brilliant long ball, rounded Angus Gunn and left two Norwich

defenders on the floor to become the second quickest player to 150 Liverpool goals behind Roger Hunt.

Diaz then produced a deft finish either of his two strike partners would be proud of to lift the ball over Gunn from Jordan Henderson's defence splitting pass. Victory takes Klopp's men to within six points of Manchester City, who hosted Tottenham later on. Chelsea's 1-0 victory at Selhurst Park may have come too late to kickstart a title challenge as they are still 13 points off the top. However, they solidified their place in the top four as Hakim Ziyech slotted home Marcos Alonso's cross a minute from time.

### Arsenal's young Guns strike

Arsenal moved into pole position for the fourth and final Champions League place as Emile Smith Rowe and Bukayo Saka struck to see off Brentford

2-1. The Gunners' need for a goalscorer was shown up again as Mikel Arteta's men penned the Bees back from the first whistle but had to wait until Smith Rowe fired into the far corner two minutes into the second half to break the deadlock. Saka then rifled in a brilliant effort in off the post 11 minutes from time before Christian Norgaard registered a consolation deep into stoppage time. Arsenal remain sixth but move to within one point of Manchester United in fourth with two games in hand.

West Ham's bid for the top four took another hit as they were held 1-1 at home by Newcastle. Hammers boss David Moyes again selected Kurt Zouma despite the controversy over the Frenchman physically abusing his cat. Craig Dawson headed Moyes' men in front, but Joe

Willcock secured another vital point in Newcastle's battle to avoid relegation. Norwich slip to the bottom of the table as Burnley secured just a second win of the season and in some style with a 3-0 win at Brighton.

January signing Wout Weghorst netted his first goal for the Claret before he then teed up Josh Brownhill to make it 2-0 before half-time. Jay Rodriguez added a third after the break to move Burnley to within five points of safety with two games in hand on Newcastle. Watford also secured a badly-needed win and a first under Roy Hodgson as Emmanuel Dennis scored the only goal in a 1-0 victory at Aston Villa. Everton are nervously looking over their shoulders as they were well beaten 2-0 at Southampton with Stuart Armstrong and Shane Long on target for the Saints. — AFP

## Hoffenheim move 4th in Bundesliga

**BERLIN:** Croatian striker Andrej Kramaric scored a late winner as Hoffenheim battled from behind to win 2-1 away at Wolfsburg yesterday and go fourth in the Bundesliga overnight.

Hoffenheim's win keeps the heat on RB Leipzig, who played Hertha Berlin today, in a rollercoaster race for the Champions League spots. Danish striker Jonas Wind curled in a superb finish on 36 minutes to score his first Bundesliga goal since joining Wolfsburg from FC Copenhagen in January.

But the strike was not enough to hand his struggling side a much-needed third successive win in their bid to pull away from the relegation fight. Fellow Dane Jacob Bruun Larsen equalized for Hoffenheim with quarter of an hour to play, picking out the bottom corner with a delightful overhead kick. Kramaric completed the comeback a few minutes later, bundling a David Raum cross over the line to give Hoffenheim a second win in a row. Sebastian Hoernes' side remain level on points with fifth-placed Freiburg, who won 2-1 away at Augsburg.

The visitors took an early lead through a Nils Petersen header. Nico Schlottterbeck sealed the win after Michael Gregoritsch had briefly brought Augsburg level. Union Berlin lost further ground in the race for Europe as they succumbed 1-0 away to Arminia Bielefeld. Japanese midfielder Masaya Okugawa's second-half goal was enough to lift Bielefeld three points above the relegation zone and condemn high-flying Union to a third successive loss.

The capital club have not scored in any of their last three, as they struggle to adapt after losing star striker Max Kruse to Wolfsburg in the January transfer window. At the other end of the table, a late penalty from Eduard Loewen saved a 1-1 draw for Bochum in Stuttgart, denying the hosts their first win in eight games. After a second-half own goal from Arnel Bella Kotchap, Stuttgart looked on course to claim a much-needed win which would have lifted pressure on embattled American coach Pellegrino Matarazzo. — AFP

## US skaters fail in an 11th-hour court bid to get silver medals

**BEIJING:** American figure skaters failed yesterday in an 11th-hour court bid to receive their Beijing Olympics team event silver medals after they were held back because of the Kamila Valieva doping scandal. The skaters challenged the International Olympic Committee's decision that the medals cannot be awarded until the 15-year-old Russian's case has been investigated.

But the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) said in a statement that it had "decided to dismiss the application" after a hastily-arranged hearing 24 hours before Sunday's closing ceremony. "Consequently, the decision of the IOC Executive Board... not to hold the medal ceremony for the figure skating team event during the Olympic Winter Games Beijing 2022 stands," the statement added. It will be the first time in Olympic history that medals for an event will not be awarded.

The US team members include Nathan Chen, who was also the individual gold medalist. Valieva played a starring role in helping the Russian Olympic Committee win the team title early in the Beijing Games. The Americans came second, with Japan third and Canada fourth. The Russian was informed the day after the conclusion of the team event that she had tested positive in December for a banned substance but CAS ruled she could still take part in the Olympic singles event.

It did not clear her of doping and she faces further investigation. The IOC said it could not award the team event medals until that process has run its course. Valieva has returned home to Russia to a hero's welcome after finishing fourth in the individual event. She had been expected to win the singles title but the controversy surrounding her appeared to take its toll as she fell several times during her routine.

She tested positive for trimetazidine, a drug used



ZHANGJIAKOU, China: Sweden's Jens Burman competes in the men's 50km mass start free event, which was shortened to 30km due to high winds, yesterday. — AFP

to treat angina but which is banned for athletes because it can boost endurance. Valieva's predicament has focused attention once more on Russian athletes at Olympic Games and the IOC's decision to allow Russians supposedly clean of doping to participate. They are taking part in Beijing under the banner of the Russian Olympic Committee because Russia as a country is serving a two-year ban as punishment for a state-sponsored doping programme.

### China's ninth gold

Separately, Chinese pair Sui Wenjing and Han Cong sent the home crowd wild by taking gold in the figure skating pairs event, setting a new world record points score. They beat Russian pair Evgenia Tarasova and Vladimir Morozov by just 0.63 points, with another Russian duo, Anastasia Mishina and Aleksandr Galliamov, in the bronze medal position. The host nation's ninth gold medal of the Games takes them ahead of the United States, the Netherlands and Sweden and into third in the

medals table. Norway are top with 15 golds with Germany second on 11. High winds forced the postponement of the last alpine skiing event at the Games and made for treacherous conditions on a bone-chilling penultimate day of action. US ski star Mikaela Shiffrin's hopes of ending her disappointing Olympics on a high were blown off course with the mixed team parallel forced back to Sunday.

But more wind is forecast for Yanqing, north of Beijing, on the final day and if the race ends up being cancelled it would be only the second time in Winter Olympics history that an event could not take place during the Games. The last was the 10,000 metres speed skating event at the 1928 St Moritz Games. The team parallel is the last opportunity for Shiffrin, who won slalom gold in 2014 and 2018, to leave China with a medal. The strong winds also forced the cross-country skiing men's 50-kilometre mass start to be shortened to 30km. Added to the mix were temperatures of minus 17 degrees Celsius (1.5 Fahrenheit) in the mountains. — AFP