



NOTICE TO OUR READERS

Kuwait Times will not publish its print edition from 25th February till 4th March, but readers can stay informed with breaking news and information via KuwaitTimes.net and our digital media channels on Instagram, Twitter and Facebook: @KuwaitTimes.



Russia invades Ukraine; dozens killed; international airport hit

Ukraine military airbases, air defense systems 'neutralized' • Kuwaitis urged to contact embassy

Kuwait celebrates

KUWAIT: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah yesterday received a congratulatory cable marking the 61st National Day and 31st anniversary of Liberation Day from His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. In the cable, His Highness the Crown Prince congratulated His Highness the Amir and affirmed loyalty to the beloved homeland, praying to His Almighty Allah to protect and preserve Kuwait under the wise leadership, whom he wished and prayed for long lasting health.

In return, His Highness the Amir expressed his appreciation and sincere sentiments from his Highness the Crown Prince, wishing him more success and long-lasting health. Meanwhile, His Highness the Amir received cables of congratulations from GCC and Arab countries' leaders on the National Day and Liberation Day anniversaries.

His Highness the Amir sent cables of gratitude in return, expressing his appreciation, wishing continued health to the leaders, further prosperity and growth to the brotherly countries. — KUNA



KYIV: Emergencies personnel work at the crash site of a Ukrainian military plane south of Kyiv yesterday. A Ukrainian military plane with 14 people aboard crashed south of Kyiv yesterday. (Inset) An injured man stands by a vehicle of an Emergency unit to receive medical assistance after bombings on the eastern Ukraine town of Chuguiv. — AFP

Friendship, shared history between US and Kuwait

Op-ed



By Alina L. Romanowski
US Ambassador to Kuwait

On behalf of the US Embassy, I would like to congratulate His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and the Kuwaiti people on the occasion of Kuwait's 61st National Day and 31st Liberation Day. As we mark Kuwait's liberation 31 years after the Iraqi invasion, the Kuwaiti people know too well the consequences of an unprovoked and unjustified invasion to its people, sovereignty, and way of life.

Nearly 700,000 US troops took part in the war in 1991, and many lives were sacrificed in the fight for Kuwait's freedom, including those of nearly 300 American soldiers and over 900 Kuwaiti nationals. Today, we remember and honor those who fought side by side, and we recognize Kuwait as a proud and indispensable American ally. The liberation of Kuwait showed how the world came together to restore freedom and justice.

With the United States in the lead, the international community came together to build the largest coalition and military alliance since World War II. We were united in our support for Kuwait; we were united in our opposition to Saddam Hussein's aggression; and we were united in our resolve to defend our international system, the principles of the United Nations Charter, and our most fundamental principles of sovereignty, diplomacy, and territorial integrity.

Continued on Page 2

KYIV: Russian President Vladimir Putin launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine yesterday, killing dozens and forcing hundreds to flee for their lives in the pro-Western neighbor. Russian air strikes hit military facilities across the country and ground forces moved in from the north, south and east, triggering condemnation from Western leaders and warnings of massive sanctions.

Weeks of intense diplomacy failed to deter Putin,

who massed over 150,000 troops on Ukraine's borders in what the West said was the biggest military build-up in Europe since the Second World War. "I have decided to proceed with a special military operation," Putin said in a television announcement in the early hours of yesterday. Shortly afterwards, the first bombardments were heard in Ukraine's capital, Kyiv, and several other cities, according to AFP correspondents.

At least 68 people were killed, including both soldiers and civilians, according to an AFP tally from various Ukrainian official sources.

In the deadliest single strike reported by the authorities, 18 people were killed at a military base near Ukraine's Black Sea port city of Odessa. Ukraine's border guards said Russian forces had reached the region around the capital, Kyiv.

Continued on Page 2

Oil tops \$105, stocks slump

LONDON: Oil surged past \$105 per barrel and equities tumbled yesterday after key crude producer Russia sent forces into Ukraine, accelerating fears of a major war in eastern Europe. Asian and European stock markets nosedived—with Frankfurt and Paris shedding five percent—as investors fled risky equities, while haven investment, gold, rebounded close to \$2,000 per ounce.

After weeks of warnings from the United States and other powers, Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered a wide-ranging offensive into its neighbor, sparking fury from other world leaders and vows to ramp up sanctions on Moscow. In reaction, oil rocketed more than eight percent, with European benchmark Brent prices briefly cruising past \$105 per barrel for the first time since 2014, while aluminum and wheat surged to record peaks on fears over output from major exporter Russia.

"There is a sea of red across global markets," said Interactive Investor

analyst Victoria Scholar. "After Russia's invasion sparked an initial spike higher, oil prices have continued to travel north as markets assess the hit to energy supply that is likely to come as a result of the conflict." Asian equities plunged, with Hong Kong, Sydney, Mumbai, Singapore and Wellington down at least three percent, while there were steep losses in Tokyo and Shanghai. London shed 3.2 percent nearing midday, as fears grew of a broader conflict. "It's probably not hyperbole to say that Europe is now at its most dangerous juncture since World War Two," cautioned CMC Markets analyst Michael Hewson.

Companies with the biggest presence in Russia were among those whose share prices were getting hammered. Shares in Russian metal giants Polymetal and Evraz tanked by 35 percent and 27 percent respectively in London. "With tough incoming sanctions expected, their businesses are likely to take a major hit with little respite in sight given the seriousness of the situation," said Hargreaves Lansdown analyst Susannah Streeter. French carmaker Renault, which owns a majority stake in Russia's

Continued on Page 2

Russia's assault reverberates in energy-rich Gulf

DUBAI: Russia's assault on Ukraine is reverberating in the energy-rich Gulf, where top oil and gas producers face economic and political dilemmas in easing sky-high prices and alleviating shortages in Europe. As oil prices broke past \$100 per barrel and risks of supply disruptions grew, eyes in Europe were increasingly focusing on oil kingpin Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, one of the biggest natural gas exporters.

And the calculations in Riyadh and Doha are much more nuanced than maximizing financial gain from soaring prices, as market constraints and alliances with both the West and Russia are also paramount. Qatar and Saudi Arabia "are facing a reality in which their main exports are in high demand," Karen Young, director of the Program on Economics and Energy at the Middle East Institute in Washington, told AFP.

But she said the capacity to ramp

up oil production and transport new supplies of liquefied natural gas was "not so simple". "Investment conditions for either are not quick enough or at the ready to be a superhero in the advent of a collapse of Russian oil and gas to Europe or globally," Young added. Russian gas accounts for about 40 percent of the European market, leaving the latter highly exposed to supply disruptions resulting from the conflict.

A similar logic applies to the 2.3 million barrels of Russian crude that heads west each day through a network of pipelines. There were hopes in Europe and the United States that Qatar, one of the world's biggest LNG exporters, could temporarily redirect exports destined for Asian markets. Meanwhile, some major oil importers have called on the OPEC+ alliance of producing nations to pump faster and put pressure on the likes of Saudi Arabia to use some of their spare capacity.

But these two ultra-wealthy Gulf nations, like other energy-producing neighbouring countries, are treading carefully. Qatar has made clear it has little to no extra LNG output capacity and there are limitations to how much

Continued on Page 2

Local

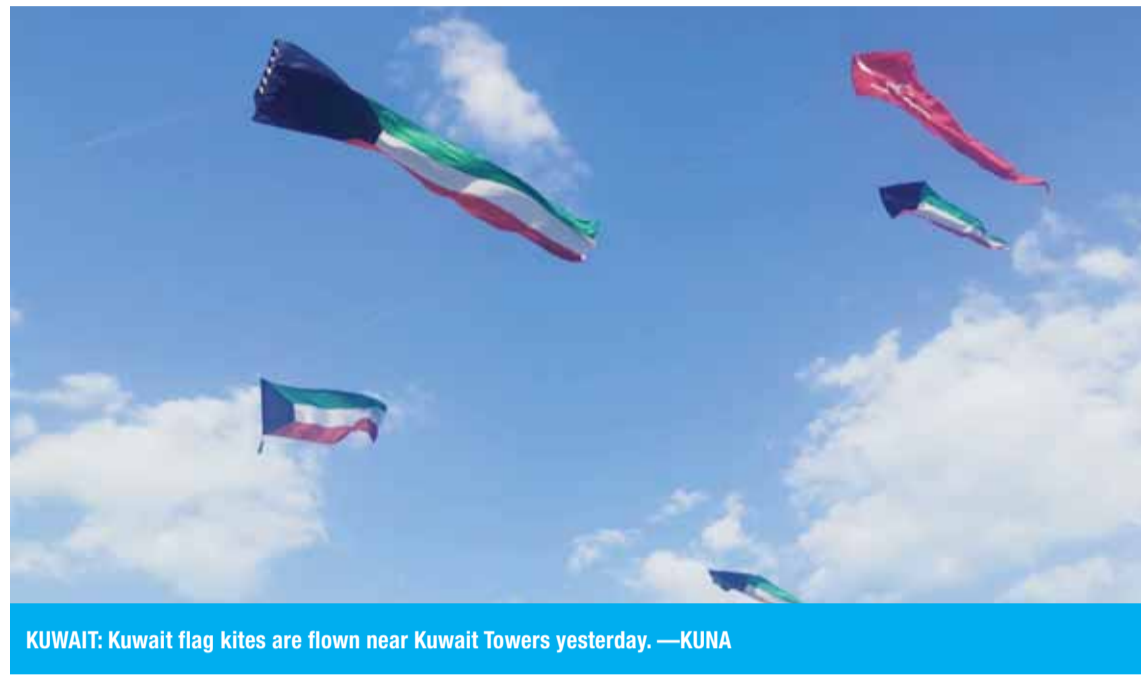
Kuwait marks 61st Independence anniversary, end of 1899 Anglo-Kuwaiti agreement

Kuwaiti foreign policy focused on balanced approach

KUWAIT: The State of Kuwait marks today the 61st anniversary of independence, which transformed the sheikhdom of Kuwait into a thriving modern country. On June 19, 1961, Kuwait gained independence, putting an end to the Anglo-Kuwaiti Agreement of 1899. This was followed by a decree on May 18, 1961 to conjoin the National Day and the ascension of the Amir celebration into one event commemorated every year on February 25th. Historically, then Amir Sheikh Abdullah Al-Salem Al-Sabah saw that the Anglo-Kuwaiti agreement — signed by late Amir Sheikh Mubarak Al-Sabah and the British — had ran its course in terms of protecting Kuwait from external threats considering recent international development at the time. Sheikh Abdullah Al-Salem, since ascending to power in 1950, had made calculated steps to ensure the independence of the country and usher a new era of a constitutional state leading to vast development in various domains. The very first celebration of independence was on June 19, 1962, a joyous event attended by all. Sheikh Abdullah Al-Salem delivered a speech in commemoration of the event, calling on the people of Kuwait to venture

forward into a future governed by justice, social equity and welfare for all.

As Kuwait continued on the road to further development as well as regional and international valuable contributions, Kuwaiti foreign policy marched on focusing on a balanced and just interaction with the global community to ensure the overall development of mankind. In the present day, His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah both took the tremendous task set by their predecessors to make sure that Kuwait and the world would continue to prosper for future generations to come. During the independence celebrations, Kuwaitis will also mark the 31st Liberation Anniversary of the country from the Iraqi invasion with many hoisting flags and the Kuwaiti leadership portraits on their homes and dwellings. The celebrations also coincided with easing restrictions on COVID-19 measures as national pandemic indicators pointed at an improvement in the health situation in Kuwait. — KUNA



KUWAIT: Kuwait flag kites are flown near Kuwait Towers yesterday. — KUNA

Former Filipino domestic helpers recall war experiences

By Ben Garcia

KUWAIT: Kuwait marks tomorrow the 31st anniversary of the country's liberation from the Iraqi invasion. Filipino expats Rosalinda Dagumboy and Emenda Bonilla are former domestic helpers who came to Kuwait in 1989 and witnessed the Iraqi invasion of the country a year later. Both are now in their early 60s. One received compensation, while the other didn't. In the early morning of Aug 2, 1990, Bonilla remembered the sound of bombs and guns which awakened the family she used to serve. "At that time we were in my boss' house in Jahra and were sleeping. We were suddenly awakened by a huge explosion. The sound of sporadic firing followed," she said.

"In the morning that day, we heard an oil depot

was bombed, so we went to Sulaibikhat, the family home of my boss. We were placed in the same compound with the rest of the family members. We were all scared. The situation outside our compound was frightening, as people were afraid of what was going on and what could be next," Bonilla reminisced.

"We were stuck in the house in Sulabikhat for days. Thank God, we had food delivered to us, but there was no electricity and water. We had a water tank inside the compound that sustained us for a few days. These are the things I remember until we left Kuwait on August 9 to head for safety in Saudi Arabia," she recalled.

On their way to Saudi Arabia by land, the family had to deal with many checkpoints. "When the family of my boss decided to leave for Saudi, they asked me if I was willing to join them. I told them I have nowhere to go, and I didn't want to stay at our embassy, so they took me along with them. There was no telephone and no means of communications available to contact my family back in the Philippines. We stayed in Saudi Arabia for eight months. We came back to Kuwait in April 1991

before Ramadan. Kuwait was still on fire, with smoke from oilwells still very visible. This is my unforgettable experience of the Iraqi invasion. It was a hard ordeal for my boss and the rest of us," Bonilla told Kuwait Times.

Bonilla continued working with her boss until she got a release from household work in early 1993. She then started a new job at a bakery, where she works until this day. "After about 6 or 7 years, I got my war compensation, which helped me buy my own piece of land in the Philippines and a house. The total compensation I got was 200,000 pesos (around KD 1,200)," she said.

Dagumboy was a domestic helper in Sabah Al-Salem during the Iraqi invasion of 1990. Her experience was different compared to Bonilla, as she stayed in Kuwait throughout the war and during Operation Desert Storm by Allied forces. "I was here the whole time, but in the middle of the occupation in December 1990, my sponsors decided to send me to the Philippine Embassy. At the embassy, the plan was to go by land to Jordan in order to be sent back to the Philippines," she said.

"I found it hard to go back to Manila, so I left the embassy and went to my friend's house in Salimiya. I remember for more than a month, we had no electricity and water. It was hard because intermittently, Iraqi soldiers would knock and check our apartment to look for Kuwaitis. Some Filipinas were taken by the Iraqis, but they were returned in a day. The good thing was that we were never without food," recalled Dagumboy.

After the war, Dagumboy said it was easy to get a job. "I stayed in Kuwait without a boss for about a year before I got a job with Al-Yasra. I stayed with Al-Yasra for five years before I got a job at Al-Shaya in 2000, until I retired in 2020. I was supposed to go home after retiring, but I couldn't leave Kuwait easily. I look after my grandchildren too, so I haven't left Kuwait till now," she told Kuwait Times.

Asked if she got compensation like Bonilla, she replied in the negative. "No, I did not get any. They told me to bring all my documents, which I provided, but I didn't get a file," Dagumboy said.



KUWAIT: An undated picture shows a view of the Al-Zour oil and gas installations, in the south of Kuwait. Russia's assault on Ukraine is reverberating in the energy-rich Gulf, where top oil and gas producers face economic and political dilemmas in easing sky-high prices and alleviating shortages in Europe. — AFP

Russia's assault reverberates in...

Continued from Page 1

supply can be diverted from existing contracts, even accounting for willingness on the part of original buyers. At a gas exporters' summit in Doha overshadowed by the worsening crisis over Ukraine this week, major suppliers, among them Russia, said they could not guarantee prices or supplies.

And Saudi Arabia has shown no interest in ramping up oil production when it is a key player, alongside Russia, in the OPEC+ alliance that has strictly controlled output to buoy prices in recent years. "OPEC+ so far has indicated its intentions to stick to the deal," said Amena Bakr, deputy bureau chief at Energy Intelligence, referring to current production quotas for member nations. "The group's spare capacity is quickly eroding," she told AFP. Qatar and Saudi Arabia are allies of both the US and Russia. While they host American

troops, their economic and political relations with Russia have grown over the years.

"Saudi Arabia sees great value in keeping Russia as a partner in OPEC," said Ben Cahill, senior fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. "If things get bad and there's pressure to punish Russia, I suspect they'll emphasize that OPEC+ is a technocratic organization that's focused on market fundamentals." Away from the production dilemma, the crisis gives Gulf oil and gas producing countries the opportunity to highlight the importance of their resources, even as they are under pressure to quickly transform into green economies.

During the Doha gas summit, Qatar insisted the record prices in Europe had their roots in a lack of investment before the Ukraine crisis. It has been demanding long-term supply contracts of up to 25 years, but Europe has balked at being locked into such commitments. Major producers "are facing declining value in the energy transition", particularly with regard to oil, but also LNG, said Young. "So this may be a moment in which they have leverage to argue their importance in the global economy." — AFP

on humanitarian issues.

When Hurricane Katrina devastated parts of America in 2005, Kuwait pledged \$500 million in aid to US relief efforts, the single largest donation of its kind at the time. Americans appreciated Kuwait's generosity during our time of crisis. More recently, when it came time to end the war in Afghanistan, Kuwait stood with the United States, helping us evacuate thousands of people - American citizens, foreign nationals, Afghans - providing flights, medical care, clothing, and even toys for children. Because of Kuwait's generosity, thousands of people were safely transported out of Afghanistan and Afghan families have been able to start new lives around the world.

I'm proud of the milestones our two countries have achieved together in our over 60-year partnership. The longstanding history between America and Kuwait is the foundation of the lasting friendship we enjoy today and for many years to come.

Oil tops \$105, stocks...

Continued from Page 1

AvtoVoz, the maker of the Lada, saw its shares skid 9.5 percent. Also in Paris trading, Societe Generale dived 11.4 percent on concerns over its Russian retail banking subsidiary Rosbank. "There will be pressure on (European) banking stocks, particularly banks in France and Austria as they have the largest exposure to Russian loans," added Streeter. Germany's Deutsche Bank shed 8.8 percent.

Other haven assets profited, with the Japanese yen piling higher against the dollar and the Swiss franc hitting a five-year peak versus the euro. The dollar was up 2.1 percent against the ruble, while the Moscow Stock Exchange plunged almost 14 percent after suspending trading earlier in the day.

"It is hard to find any reasons for the selloff to reverse now that it appears the tanks are rolling," said OANDA's Jeffrey Halley. "Stronger sanctions are to come on Russia and energy prices will inevitably head higher in the short term."

Gas prices spike

European natural gas prices vaulted higher on disruption worries, particularly after Germany this week halted the approval of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline from Russia. Europe's reference Dutch TTF gas price earlier jumped a third to hit 125.00 euros per megawatt hour. Domestic energy prices had already rocketed in Europe during recent months, fuelling decades-high inflation that has caused central banks to raise interest rates, which could in turn slow the economic recovery.

"They want blood," commented opposition figure Alexei Navalny, currently jailed in a prison camp, calling Putin the "head of the (Soviet-era) politburo of the 21st century." In any case, Naryshkin's ordeal remained in the final cut. — AFP

Russia invades Ukraine; dozens...

Continued from Page 1

An AFP reporter in the northern part of the city saw several low-flying helicopters overhead amid reports that an airfield was under attack. Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said a "full-scale invasion" was underway. President Volodymyr Zelensky declared martial law and said Russia was attacking his country's "military infrastructure" but urged citizens not to panic and vowed victory.

He accused Russia of acting like "Nazi Germany", saying it had attacked in a "cowardly and suicidal way". Ukrainian forces said they had killed "around 50 Russian occupiers" while repelling an attack on a town on the frontline with Moscow-backed rebels, a toll that could not be immediately confirmed by AFP.

'Sounds of bombing'

Kyiv's main international airport was hit in the first bombing of the city since World War II and air raid sirens sounded over the capital at the break of dawn. "I woke up because of the sounds of bombing. I packed a bag and tried to escape," Maria Kashkoska told AFP, as she sheltered inside the Kyiv metro station.

In the eastern Ukrainian town of Chuhuiv, a son wept over the body of his father among the wreckage of a missile strike in a residential district. "I told him to leave," the man sobbed repeatedly, next to the twisted ruins of a car. Kuleba said the worst-case scenario was playing out. "This is a war of aggression. Ukraine will defend itself and will win. The world can and must stop Putin. The time to act is now," he said. Within a few hours of Putin's speech, Russia's defense ministry said it had neutralized Ukrainian military airbases and its air defense systems.

Ukraine said Russian tanks and heavy equipment crossed the border in several northern regions, in the east as well as from the Kremlin-annexed peninsula of Crimea in the south. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said the operation would last as long as necessary, saying there were "goals that need to be achieved". "Ideally, Ukraine needs to be liberated and cleansed of Nazis," he told reporters, repeating

unfounded claims made by the Kremlin.

The fighting roiled global financial markets, with stocks plunging and oil prices soaring past \$100. European wheat prices also hit a record high on expectations of lower supplies as Ukraine and Russia are two of the world's biggest producers. In his televised address, Putin justified the assault by claiming the government was overseeing a "genocide" in the east of the country.

The Kremlin earlier said the leaders of two separatist territories in eastern Ukraine had asked Moscow for military help against Kyiv after Putin recognized their independence on Monday. A conflict between the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Lugansk republics and government forces has dragged on since 2014, killing more than 14,000 people. US President Joe Biden spoke with Zelensky after the Russian assault began to vow US "support" and "assistance".

He condemned the "unprovoked and unjustified attack by Russian military forces," and vowed Russia would be held accountable. Biden was due to join a virtual meeting of G7 leaders-Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan and the United States-yesterday, likely to result in more sanctions against Russia. In Brussels, EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said Russia faced "unprecedented isolation" and would be hit with the "harsh sanctions" the European Union has ever imposed.

NATO said it would also hold a virtual summit and activate "defense plans" for allied countries. But NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg said: "We don't have any plans to send NATO troops into Ukraine". The Russian invasion also rattled eastern NATO members once dominated by Moscow during the Cold War. Poland called for urgent NATO consultations and said it was preparing for a large influx of refugees, while Lithuania imposed a national state of emergency.

Ukraine has around 200,000 military personnel, and could boost that with up to 250,000 reservists. Moscow's total forces are much larger-around a million active-duty personnel-and have been modernized and re-armed in recent years. But Ukraine has received advanced anti-tank weapons and some drones from NATO members. More have been promised as the allies try to deter a Russian attack or at least make it costly. Russia has long demanded that Ukraine be forbidden from ever joining the NATO alliance and that US troops pull out from Eastern Europe.— AFP

Friendship, shared history between...

Continued from Page 1

In the 31 years since liberation, the relationship between the United States and Kuwait has become about much more than security and defense matters. Kuwait has re-emerged as an important force for stability in the Middle East. During the 5th US-Kuwait Strategic Dialogue last month, Secretary Blinken highlighted the full force of Kuwait's statesmanship and how its mediation efforts have supported conflict resolution in Yemen and Lebanon, reduced the threat of ISIS, and helped heal the Gulf rift. The partnership between the United States and Kuwait also grew into robust trade, investment, education and cultural exchanges, and collaboration

Local

Kuwait's infrastructure projects: Ready to take off after a pause

\$65 billion for infrastructure, health, environment, power projects in 2021-2022

By Sajeev K Peter

KUWAIT: Kuwait has set its development goal in right earnest to develop and modernize its infrastructure to improve the quality of life of its citizens and residents. Infrastructure, one of the key themes of its 'New Kuwait' 2035 vision, has now begun to pick up momentum after a pandemic-induced lull of over two years. Rising oil prices have also added much-needed impetus to the country's drive to put infrastructure projects back on track.

The country, currently seeking to secure a position in the top 35 countries in the world by 2035 in all development indicators, has resumed work on key infrastructure projects. According to official estimates, the country has approved around \$65 billion for infrastructure, health, environment and power projects for the 2021-2022 financial year, with 5 percent of them based on private public partnerships (PPPs).

According to recent reports, these projects include 14 major public projects with a total value of approximately \$59 billion and four partnership projects worth nearly \$3.2 billion. The projects comprise mainly the airport expansion, Silk City, island development, trans-Kuwait rail network and rail link with nearby Gulf countries, Mutlaa city, and the Clean Fuel Project.

It may be recalled that the central tenders committee was effectively shut during the lockdown and no new public tenders were released or submitted during the period. Now, the country has announced a plan to issue tenders for a \$10-billion petrochemical project in 2022, according to recent reports. The project near Al-Zour oil refinery in south Kuwait has been split into three contracts and seven consortia have already been pre-qualified to bid.

Kuwait is currently the fourth largest

projects market in the GCC after the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar. According to a MEED report, about \$200 billion worth of projects are currently underway in Kuwait. Although there has been a spike in project investments in Kuwait over the last few years, one has to acknowledge the fact that the country's share is relatively small in comparison to the project investments of other GCC countries. The combined value of construction projects in Kuwait makes up around 10 percent of all construction project values in the Gulf.

However, the pace of project awards is expected to pick up in the coming quarters. Historically, the local market has underperformed its potential. This has meant that despite its vast oil wealth and healthy fiscal position, the state rarely exceeds \$15 billion in contract awards each year. As a result, with the exception of 2020, the country's projects market has declined every year since 2015, in terms of the value of project contract awards.



ogy (ICT), transportation, logistics, trade and power generation and transmission sectors.

Kuwait had set an ambitious goal of modernizing its infrastructure as part of its development plan years ago, although implementation of many such key projects began only recently. Having come out of years of inertia and moving past the traumatic COVID era, Kuwait is now on track to accomplish the vision to transform Kuwait into an international trade and financial hub and to achieve its 2035 'New Kuwait' vision.

Aviation sector

The mega aviation project, intended to overhaul and modernize Kuwait's ageing airport infrastructure, is probably the most ambitious project the country has undertaken in recent times. According to official estimates, the airport project could attract investments worth \$12 billion and is expected to generate 15,000 jobs. With the opening of Terminal 4 at Kuwait International

Airport as part of the first phase, Kuwait's aviation industry has marked a milestone in its history. Kuwait Airways' decision to restructure its \$6 billion deal with Airbus to procure 31 planes is also an indication that Kuwait's aviation sector is in for a big leap.

Today, in the post-COVID era, Kuwait has the top priority to speed up its 'New Kuwait' development projects, focusing on diversification and structural reforms. The recovery in oil prices has eased the burden on the country's finances significantly and created a conducive atmosphere for the authorities to implement infrastructure projects, thus attracting new private investment and new industries to create jobs for the people.

However, much more needs to be done if Kuwait wants to realize its projects market potential. The state needs to find a way of getting greater private sector participation in the market and attract greater foreign investment. Without these, it is difficult to see how the projects market can reach its full potential.

Cuban Embassy celebrates Kuwait's national holidays

KUWAIT: The Cuban Embassy in Kuwait issued the following message to congratulate Kuwait on its national holidays.

"This year the friendly Republic of Kuwait celebrates the 61st Anniversary of its National Day and 31st commemoration of its National Liberation Day. The occasion is propitious for me to extend to the Kuwaiti people, and especially to His Highness the Amir of the State of Kuwait Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, His Highness Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, His Highness the Prime Minister and the government, my heartfelt congratulations and best wishes.

"The humanity faced very hard times due to the COVID-19 pandemic, from which it is just emerging now. In those difficult moments, we recognize the human and worthy position of the Kuwaiti authorities, led by His Highness the Amir, to ensure the health and well-being of his people and those of us who live under the sky of this beautiful country.

"At the time we celebrate with the Kuwaiti brothers for their national celebrations, we make vote for the well-being and health of the Amir of Kuwait His Highness Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and his family, and for the progress and strengthening of the excellent relationships between the people and government of Kuwait and Cuba."



Over 700 active projects valued at \$230 billion

Active projects

The country has currently over 700 active projects with a combined value of \$230 billion. Once completed, these mega projects - 20 percent of them are near completion - will catapult the country into a modern city-state, bringing about a radical transformation to its information and communication technol-



KUWAIT: Zain's team at the company's booth.

Zain served needs of SMEs at FoodBuzz

KUWAIT: Zain, the leading digital service provider in Kuwait, concluded its strategic partnership with FoodBuzz, the community event that offered a unique social environment for visitors to socialize, connect, and enjoy the spring and winter seasons. The event, which ran for two days every month from November 2021 to February 2022, was held this time at Al-Hamra Tower in the heart of Kuwait City and featured many distinguished food and beverage brands owned by Kuwaiti entrepreneurs.

By partnering with FoodBuzz, Zain continued its ongoing efforts of empowering local entrepreneurs as part of its solid Corporate Sustainability and Social Responsibility strategy. The company continuously works towards identifying initiatives like FoodBuzz that carry a clear objective of empowering the next generation of Kuwaiti businesses that are well-capable of contributing to national economy.

For the third consecutive month, Zain was present at FoodBuzz via its dedicated booth, where this time the company offered 'Zain Business' special and exclusive offers to serve the needs of SMEs and startups. The company was keen on sharing the wonderful positive atmosphere that the Kuwaiti community enjoys nowadays as normal life gradually returns after the pandemic.

FoodBuzz, established in 2016, introduced a new concept that is all about networking, connecting, and exploring Kuwait's food and beverage community at its best. The event served huge numbers of visitors who were primarily employees from nearby businesses, given that it is located at the heart of Kuwait's business community, allowing them to engage and socialize in a professional environment while enjoying a variety of food and beverage vendors during winter and spring seasons.

Zain is always keen on supporting events that uplift local talents to higher levels, by encouraging outstanding projects and ideas like FoodBuzz, which served over 6,000 visitors last season. Zain's support is aimed at investing in the creative abilities of Kuwaiti entrepreneurs, preparing them to engage in the business world by encouraging them and nurturing their creativity and innovation.

On the occasion of the



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KUWAIT: Ambassador of the European Union to Kuwait Christian Tudor invited Ambassadors of the G7 in Kuwait to visit the Ukrainian Embassy and meet the Ambassador to show solidarity with Ukraine against Russia's invasion.

News in brief

Kuwait reports 866
new COVID cases

KUWAIT: The Kuwaiti Ministry of Health announced yesterday listing 866 new infection cases with the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) over the past 24 hours, raising the tally of the contaminations to 617,275. The ministry's spokesperson Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad said that 1,805 new recovery cases were recorded, increasing the whole count of the cured to 601,386. He also reported a single new death, with the death toll climbing to 2,534, adding that there were 72 cases at intensive care units, while total active cases amounted to 13,355. Meanwhile, the number of the cases at COVID wards settled at 239. Dr Sanad also reported that the number of the new PCRs reached 25,186 with the total number of these examinations settling at 7,553,030.

Austria opens for
Kuwait tourists

KUWAIT: Travelers from Kuwait and Bahrain can enter Austria from February 22 onward having a valid visa and can present a medical certificate that they are fully vaccinated or they can prove that they have recovered from a COVID-infection not more than 180 days ago or they have a valid negative test result for SARS-COV-2 that is not older than 72 hours. Austria accepts vaccination certificates with QR Code that have been issued by the Ministries of Health of the State of Kuwait and the Kingdom of Bahrain. If travelers cannot meet these requirements, they have to register electronically online at <https://entry.ptc.gv.at/en.html> and go into a ten-day post-entry quarantine which may be terminated no earlier than the fifth day after entry by a negative molecular biological test (e.g. PCR test). Children up to the age of 12 do not need to carry a proof of a low epidemiological threat such as a vaccination certificate, proof of recovery or a test.

Kuwait oil price down
to \$95.42 pb: KPC

KUWAIT: Kuwaiti oil price went down by \$2.62 to reach \$95.42 per barrel (pb) on Wednesday compared with \$98.04 pb Tuesday, Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) said yesterday. In the world market, the Brent crude settled at \$96.84 pb, and West Texas Intermediate moved up by 19 cents to settle at \$92.10 pb.

Foreign Minister phones
Hungarian counterpart

KUWAIT: Foreign Minister and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs and Acting Defense Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah phoned on Wednesday Hungarian Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade Peter Szijjarto. The two ministers discussed bilateral relations and ways to bolster them in various fields, including delving into the latest development in the region and international arena.

Most airlines set PCR requirement depending on country of destination

PCR test not required by most countries for vaccinated passengers

By Nawara Fattahova

KUWAIT: Most countries including Kuwait have cancelled the request of PCR tests for vaccinated passengers when arriving to the country. Few countries including Mexico do not require the PCR test from any passenger even if not vaccinated.

Usually, the airline demands the PCR test according to the requirement of the destination. Yet, some travelers reported that although they were vaccinated and the destination country did not require a PCR test, the airline they used demanded a PCR test prior to boarding, explaining that the measure was to protect the crew.

Kuwait Times contacted several airlines to verify this information. Several airlines including Qatar Airways, Emirates, Turkish Airlines, British Airways, and Kuwait Airways assured that they stick to the requirements of the destination country. They all agreed that if the country of destination does not require a PCR test, then the carrier won't require this test from the passengers. On the other hand, some airlines may still request a PCR test even if the destination country does not request it, or if the passenger does not enter the transit country such as Saudi Airlines.

Most countries require either a certificate of being fully vaccinated, or a PCR test for the non-vaccinated, which is also the case in Kuwait. Yet some countries still do require both such as



KUWAIT: A crowd of passengers line up at the counter at Kuwait International Airport yesterday.

— Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

Jordan, who had announced that they will lift this request at the end of this month. It is always recommended that passengers call the airline on which they are flying and ask about the require-

ments before the flight's date. Furthermore, passengers are always advised to read all information included in the ticket, especially those related to COVID-19 procedures.

Weddings cautiously and gradually returning to pre-pandemic levels

By Nawara Fattahova

KUWAIT: For almost two years, no wedding parties were allowed in public places due to the pandemic, so people in Kuwait got used to holding small family parties instead. Now, after the government announced a return to normal life again, large gatherings are allowed to be held indoors. Earlier this week, the Ministry of Social Affairs announced over 150 public halls are ready to host events. But many wedding agencies that survived the pandemic haven't received any bookings yet for wedding parties.

Waleed from Wedding & Co explained that their losses during the pandemic were heavy, and that their agency only survived thanks to activities

such as catering and others. "Before the pandemic, our agency was organizing weddings with around 4,000 attendees. Such weddings cost between KD 10,000 and KD 25,000. I don't expect such large weddings will return. Until now our agency hasn't received any bookings for weddings, and I think it will take some time. We currently work on parties at farmhouses and jakhours for around 40 people or so," he told Kuwait Times.

Ahmad from Al Bait Al Nabawi said they survived as most of their staff worked in places such as restaurants and other companies during the time when the agency was not operating. "Still, the business of organizing weddings is not yet active. Also, now it's not the season for weddings as people are busy with the national celebrations. We have many bookings for organizing private events in the desert, including in Salmi and Abdaly. But I'm optimistic and believe people will soon start planning weddings, as mostly people like to compete with one another and organize better or bigger weddings than their relatives or neighbors," Ahmad said.

Abu Omar from Dhiyafat Al Sa'ada agency noted that wedding bookings are not as they were before the pandemic. "We have only one booking

for now, but I hope that soon the business will improve, though maybe not as before. I think people have got used to holding private weddings limited to family members and relatives," he pointed out.

Abu Mohammed from the Al Noubi Dhiyafa also complained of not having any bookings for weddings presently. "I feel that people have forgotten big weddings and have got used to small weddings held at home. Regarding the cost of organizing a wedding, it's still the same as it was before the pandemic. We haven't noticed any increase," he said.

Abdulrahman from Top Event agency said prices of most materials have increased, especially foodstuff. "Till now I don't have any bookings. I think after Eid Al-Fitr, some bookings will be made. Only 40 days remain till the holy month of Ramadan, and nobody gets married in Ramadan," he noted. "People are complaining they don't have money. Some clients tell us if they are unable to organize a wedding for KD 2,000, they will just cancel it. So, we at the agency must make some adjustments to manage - I save in one wedding to compensate for another," stressed Abdulrahman.

Types of marriages in Kuwait

By Nawara Fattahova and Ben Garcia

KUWAIT: A recent decision in the UAE to allow civil marriage has reignited debate on this topic in Kuwait and other countries in the region. The government in Abu Dhabi issued its first civil marriage license to a non-Muslim couple recently. Civil marriage in the Middle East, the birthplace of Islam, Christianity and Judaism, is uncommon. Marriages are usually conducted under a religious authority of one of the three monotheistic beliefs. On the other hand, some countries like Tunisia and Algeria have allowed civil marriages in recent years. While some countries in the region allow civil unions based on certain conditions, some only recognize civil marriages conducted abroad and others not at all.

"In Kuwait, civil marriage is not legal and can't be certified for Muslims. Here the marriage is according to sharia, while in the UAE it's considered a contract. After approving civil marriages, they allowed non-residents and tourists to get married there," attorney Ali Al-Ali told Kuwait Times.

In Kuwait, official marriage is either for Muslims or non-Muslims. There are slight differences in some issues in Islamic marriage (sharia marriage) for Sunnis and Shiites.

Citizens and expatriates can conduct Islamic marriages according to sharia provisions, which apply in the following cases regardless of nationality: Where both the groom and the bride are Muslims, and where the groom is Muslim and the bride is Christian or Jewish (People of the Book).

While the law permits a Muslim man to marry a non-Muslim woman, it does not allow a Muslim woman to marry a non-Muslim man without proof of his conversion to Islam. Polygamy is allowed as per Kuwaiti law. A Muslim male may have four wives, provided he offers equal sustenance and equal treatment to all.

The key legal requirements for Muslim marriages are as follows: Attendance of the couple is required at the court, and if the marriage takes place at home by the 'mathoun', he should hear the approval of the bride for this marriage. Attendance of the bride's father or his proxy and two male Muslim witnesses are required.

"For a woman to get married, she needs the consent of her guardian. In case of her father's death, the presence of the next closest male guardian, such as elder brother, is required. Divorced and widowed women must produce proof of their sta-

tus," said Ali.

A Christian wedding is normally officiated inside a church in the presence of family members, friends and invited guests. After that, the marriage must be attested at the Ministry of Justice. However, the Ministry of Justice in Kuwait will not recognize a marriage if no marriage certificate is provided from the church.

Churches recognized in Kuwait include the Catholic Church, Anglican Church, Middle East and Eastern Orthodox churches and the Evangelical and Baptist churches. After obtaining a marriage certificate from one of these churches, the couple can have a marriage event at the Ministry of Justice. At the ministry, the attendance of two male witnesses who are of legal age is required, in addition to the couple who are ready to contract the marriage.

Some embassies provide wedding officiating services to their nationals. For example, the Philippines' embassy consular official is authorized by the Philippine government to solemnize marriages, provided these are between two Filipino citizens, one male and one female, and take place within the premises of the Philippine Embassy. Filipinos who want to marry people of other nationalities can only be registered at the embassy, but no ceremony can be held for couples of different nationalities.

NBK shares National Days celebration with passengers at T4



Asmaa Bin Hussain



KUWAIT: National Bank of Kuwait (NBK) family shared the passengers at T4 terminal their joyful celebrations of the National Days by launching the "Enjoy Your Trip and Come Back Safe!" campaign to distribute giveaways (travel kits). This initiative comes in line with the bank's CSR commitment and within its solid partnership with Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) and Incheon Korea for Airports Services (IKAS), and Kuwait Airways.

On this occasion, Asmaa Bin Hussain, Public Relations Officer at National Bank of Kuwait,

said, "NBK family is always keen to actively engage in various social events and to promote human communication and giving with all members of society."

"We are always closer to our customers including the occasions of travel; this time by distributing a travel kit including useful electronic devices and celebrating National Days, underscoring a key social commitment in the culture of NBK," she noted.

Bin Hussain extended thanks to Kuwait

Airways, IKAS, and CAA for collaboration with NBK and facilitating the procedures for its volunteers to carry out this social initiative and congratulate the travelers.

National Bank of Kuwait has been delivering CSR programs for over seven decades through social welfare and volunteering activities, as well as close communication with different social institutions and all groups of society. Through this, it established itself as a leading local private sector institution in terms of commitment to the princi-

ples of CSR and translating them into programs and initiatives with tangible social impact.

NBK is always an active participant in the various occasions and national days, reflecting its CSR commitments. The bank had launched many initiatives related to the National Days, such as "Watani Al-Kuwait" initiative, "Hatha Hwa lKuwaiti", "Habibity ya Kuwait" operetta, "Al-Sidra" and many other songs that are still engraved in the memory of all Kuwaitis for many years and successive generations.



Ukrainians in 'Moscow on the Med' look on in horror

Pakistani sentenced to death for beheading girlfriend

Page 6

Page 7



HONG KONG: People queue up for COVID-19 tests at a sports ground in Hong Kong as the city faces its worst coronavirus wave to date. —AFP

Virus-hit HK invokes emergency powers to allow in China medics

City might see 180,000 infections and 100 deaths daily by mid-March

HONG KONG: Hong Kong's government invoked emergency powers yesterday to allow doctors, nurses and other personnel from the Chinese mainland to help combat a spiralling coronavirus outbreak.

The densely populated metropolis is in the throes of its worst-ever COVID wave, registering thousands of cases every day, overwhelming hospitals and government efforts to isolate all infected people in dedicated units.

Hong Kong authorities have followed a zero-COVID strategy similar to mainland China that kept infections mostly at bay throughout the pandemic.

But they were caught flat-footed when the highly infectious Omicron variant broke through those defences, and have since increasingly called on the Chinese mainland for help.

"Hong Kong is now facing a very dire epidemic situation which continues to deteriorate rapidly," the government said in its statement announcing the use of emergency powers.

Chinese mainland medics are not currently allowed to operate in Hong Kong without passing local exams and meeting licensing regulations.

The emergency powers "exempt certain persons or projects from all relevant statutory requirements... so as to increase Hong Kong's epidemic control capacity for containing the fifth wave within a short period of time," the statement said.

The move came after Chinese President Xi Jinping last week ordered Hong Kong to take "all necessary measures" to bring the outbreak under control, signalling Hong Kong would not be allowed to move towards living with the virus like much of the rest of the world.

Allowing mainland medics to work in Hong Kong has been a source of debate for years.

Even before the pandemic, supporters argued it could alleviate shortages in the city's stretched health-care system.

Local medical practitioners in the past have objected, citing issues such as language and cultural barriers—though critics have dismissed such talk as protectionism.

Hong Kong was supposed to operate as a semi-autonomous region from China, after the territory returned from British colonial rule in 1997.



'Hong Kong facing epidemic situation'

But that autonomy was eroded in recent years as China crushed a democracy movement.

Manpower 'exhausted'

Hong Kong has recorded more than 62,000 COVID cases in the current wave, compared with just 12,000 during the two years before. Health experts fear the real number is far higher because of a testing backlog and people avoiding testing for fear of being forced

into isolation units if they are positive.

Over the last fortnight, stories have emerged of parents being separated from children and babies who test positive, as well as elderly patients lying on gurneys outside hospitals.

Around 1,200 healthcare workers have been infected as of Wednesday, according to the Hospital Authority. The authority's chairman Henry Fan told state media Monday he hoped the mainland government would send over doctors and nurses, because local manpower had been "exhausted".

Hong Kong has ordered all 7.4 million residents to go through three rounds of mandatory coronavirus testing next month. China is helping to build a series of isolation units and temporary hospital wards but it is unclear whether enough can be constructed in time.

Local modelling predicts the city might see as many as 180,000 infections and 100 deaths daily by mid-March. Local authorities have increasingly resorted to emergency orders in recent years.

During the 2019 protests, authorities used such powers to ban mask-wearing. The following year, emergency orders were used to make mask-wearing mandatory during the pandemic.

The city's disease prevention law has also been invoked to forbid public gatherings and a host of strict social distancing measures and business closure orders that have been in place on and off for two years.

City leader Carrie Lam has defended her approach, citing the intensity of the virus crisis.

"In an environment as urgent as this, we cannot let existing laws stop us from doing what we should do," she said Tuesday. "This is not the mentality for fighting a war." —AFP

Iran says decisions needed from West to seal nuclear deal

TEHRAN: Iran's chief negotiator called on Western governments yesterday to take the necessary decisions to seal a deal at talks in Vienna on reviving a landmark 2015 nuclear agreement. "No matter how close we are to the finish line, there is not necessarily a guarantee to cross it," Ali Bagheri tweeted after flying back to Tehran for consultations on the talks, which Iran says have reached a "critical" stage.

"To finish the job, there are certain decisions that Western parties must make," Bagheri said, without spelling out what they were. Bagheri's lightning visit home came as Russian forces attacked Ukraine, threatening to divert attention from the Iran nuclear talks and sap the momentum built up after 10 months of on-off negotiations.

As Bagheri left Vienna, Iranian media reported that Behrouz Kamalvandi, deputy head and spokesman of the Atomic Energy Organisation of Iran, arrived in the Austrian capital for "technical consultations" with the International Atomic Energy Agency.

The talks to restore the 2015 agreement known formally as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action involve Iran as well as Britain, China, France, Germany and Russia directly, and the United States indirectly. The deal gave Iran sanctions relief in exchange for curbs on its nuclear programme, but the US unilaterally withdrew from it in 2018 under then-president Donald Trump and reimposed heavy economic sanctions.

That prompted Iran to begin rolling back on its own commitments. The Vienna talks seek to return the US to the agreement, notably through the lifting of sanctions, and to restore Iran's compliance with its own commitments.

In recent days, almost all sides have reported progress in the negotiations. Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian said Wednesday that the talks had reached "a critical and important stage".

He said he hoped the remaining "sensitive and important issues" would be resolved in the coming days "with realism from the Western side". —AFP

US jury deciding fate of ex-cops involved in George Floyd murder

SAINT PAUL: A Minnesota jury on Wednesday began deliberating the fate of three former police officers charged with violating the civil rights of George Floyd, the African American man whose murder sparked nationwide protests.

Tou Thao, 36, J. Alexander Kueng, 28, and Thomas Lane, 38, are on trial in federal court in Saint Paul for their roles in Floyd's May 2020 death in the sister city of Minneapolis. "It's your duty to find the facts," Judge Paul Magnuson told the jury, "and then apply the law."

"Don't allow sympathy or prejudice to influence you." The jury of eight women and four men huddled for about seven hours on Wednesday without reaching a verdict and is to resume deliberations yesterday morning. Prosecutors and defense attorneys for the three men wrapped up their closing arguments on Tuesday after a one-month trial.

Former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin, who knelt on the neck of a handcuffed Floyd for nearly 10 minutes until he passed out and died, was convicted

of murder last year and is serving 22 years in prison.

Thao, Kueng and Lane were the other officers involved in the arrest of the 46-year-old Floyd for allegedly using a fake \$20 bill to buy a pack of cigarettes. While Chauvin knelt on Floyd's neck, Kueng was on his back and Lane held his legs. Thao kept back bystanders who were pleading with Chauvin to get off the visibly distressed Floyd.

Floyd's death, which was filmed by a bystander, sparked months of protests against racial injustice and police brutality. Thao, who is Hmong American, Kueng, who is Black, and Lane, who is white, are charged with showing "deliberate indifference" to Floyd's medical needs. Thao and Kueng are also accused of failing to intervene to stop Chauvin's use of "unreasonable force" against Floyd. Lane does not face the second charge. Video of the arrest shows that on two occasions, Lane suggested that Floyd be rolled over on his side.

'Make no mistake, this is a crime'

In her closing argument, prosecutor Manda Sertich said all three officers failed to provide medical assistance to Floyd. "The officers knew that George Floyd couldn't breathe, didn't have a pulse and was dying," she said. "Make no mistake, this is a crime."

LeeAnn Bell, another prosecutor, said "this happened because Thao and Kueng did not intervene, and all three failed to provide medical aid." "They didn't do



MINNEAPOLIS, United States: Amir Locke's picture is seen during a heavy snowstorm at George Floyd Square in Minneapolis, Minnesota. —AFP

the right but difficult thing," Bell said.

Lawyers for Kueng and Lane stressed that the two officers had only been on the job for only a few days and deferred to Chauvin, a nearly 20-year veteran and the senior officer on the scene.

Earl Gray, the lawyer for Lane, said his client did show concern for Floyd when asking Chauvin whether Floyd should be placed on his side. "Chauvin doesn't say anything, he ignores this person over here, he's just a rookie," Gray said of his client. The defense attorney also noted that Lane asked Kueng to check Floyd's pulse and administered CPR after an ambulance arrived. —AFP

Moroccan journalist jailed for five years on appeal

CASABLANCA, Morocco: Moroccan journalist Soulaïmane Raïssouni was jailed Wednesday for

five years after appealing his sentence for indecent assault, despite prosecutors seeking a 10-year custodial term, according to an AFP correspondent.

The 49-year-old former editor of the now-defunct Akhbar Al Yaoum was originally sentenced to five years in prison in the case and is one of several journalists critical of Morocco's government to have been jailed for sex crimes. Raïssouni was arrested in May 2020 after a young LGBTQ activist pressed charges against him.

He has always maintained his innocence and says he was prosecuted "because of his opinions".

After he was detained, he held a 122-day hunger strike, missing much of his initial trial. The plaintiff had asked for the original five-year jail term to stand and for damages of up to 500,000 dinars (\$53,000).

Raïssouni's defence had reaffirmed his innocence and called for his conviction to be quashed. Media watchdog Reporters Without Borders (RSF)

said his original trial was "tainted by irregularities". Moroccan authorities insist his trial was fair and that the charges have nothing to do with his journalism. Since 2019, two other Moroccan journalists, Omar Radi and Taoufik Bouachrine, have been sentenced to prison terms for sexual assaults, accusations they have denied. Radi was also convicted of espionage. Morocco stands at 136 out of 180 in RSF's world press freedom ranking of countries. —AFP

International

Mexico rejects US 'interfering' over journalist murders

One of the world's most dangerous countries for reporters

MEXICO CITY: Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador on Wednesday accused US Secretary of State Antony Blinken of "interfering" after he called for greater accountability over a string of journalist murders. The rare public spat with US President Joe Biden's administration follows the killing of at least five media workers already in 2022 in one of the world's most dangerous countries for reporters.

"The high number of journalists killed in Mexico this year and the ongoing threats they face are concerning," Blinken tweeted late Tuesday. "I join those calling for greater accountability and protections for Mexican journalists. My heart goes out to the loved ones of those who gave their lives for the truth," he added.

In response, Lopez Obrador urged Blinken "to inform yourself and not to act in an interfering manner because Mexico is not a colony of the United States, nor is it a protectorate." He told reporters he thought Blinken was "misinformed because otherwise he would be acting in bad faith," and insisted that the Mexican government was dealing with crimes against journalists.

"In all cases, action is being taken. There is no impunity," Lopez Obrador said, adding that he had asked his foreign minister to send Blinken details of

all the cases and the government's actions. The country's foreign minister then shared a letter on Twitter addressed to his US counterpart in which he detailed the investigations into these crimes, while stressing his government could only hold accountable "Mexican citizens and Mexican institutions."

He then raised the problem of arms trafficking from the United States, which, the document argued, "are used in most of the homicides committed in Mexico and that, presumably, were also used against journalists."

Mexico has maintained cordial relations with Biden's administration, although there has been friction on certain issues such as Lopez Obrador's planned energy sector reforms. The Latin American nation is on course for one of its deadliest years yet for the press, prompting calls from media rights groups for authorities to end a culture of impunity.

Around 150 journalists have been murdered in Mexico since 2000, and only a fraction of the crimes have resulted in convictions, according to watchdog Reporters Without Borders (RSF).

RSF said Wednesday that it was looking into whether the suspected murder of a television presenter whose body was found in a rural area of Mexico City was linked to her journalism. Mexican media named her as Michell Perez Tadeo,



Blinken was "misinformed"

Pakistani sentenced to death for beheading girlfriend

ISLAMABAD: A Pakistani court sentenced the scion of a wealthy industrialist family to death yesterday, for raping and beheading his girlfriend in a murder that sparked an outcry over the brutalising of women in the deeply patriarchal nation.

Pakistani-American Zahir Jaffer, 30, attacked Noor Mukadam at his Islamabad home in July last year after she refused his marriage proposal-torturing her with a knuckleduster and using a "sharp-edged weapon" to behead her. Mukadam, the 27-year-old daughter of a former ambassador, had made repeated attempts to escape the sprawling mansion but was blocked by two members of staff.

"The main accused has been awarded the death sentence," said judge Atta Rabbani at the Islamabad district court. Jaffer's parents, Zakir Jaffer and Asmat Adamjee, were found not guilty of attempting to cover up the crime. The two staff members were sentenced to 10 years in prison for abetting murder.

"I am happy that justice has been served," said Shukat Mukadam, Noor's father, while pledging to challenge the acquittal of Jaffer's parents. The case prompted an explosive reaction from women's rights campaigners reckoning with the pervasion of violence against women.

The shocking nature of the murder, involving a couple from the privileged elite of Pakistani society, led to pressure for the trial to conclude swiftly in a country where the justice system is notoriously sluggish and cases typically drag on for years.

According to the Asma Jahangir Legal Aid Cell, a group providing legal assistance to vulnerable women, the conviction rate for cases of violence against women is lower than three percent. Victims of sexual and domestic abuse are often too afraid to speak out, and criminal complaints are frequently not investigated seriously. —AFP

Scrounging for food in 'hunger hotspot' Colombia

BOGOTA: While the Colombian government fumes over being listed as a "hunger hotspot" by UN agencies, Heidi Garzon—a single mother of nine-children where her family's next meal will come from. "We don't know what we're going to eat tonight," Garzon told AFP in a shantytown neighborhood of Ciudad Bolivar in the south of Bogota, two toddlers in diapers clinging to her legs.

Garzon, 38, and her kids live in a ramshackle shanty with six beds to a single clay-floored room in the poorest, most violent part of Ciudad Bolivar. Most days, they are lucky to eat two meals a day. On the day AFP visited, the family of 10 breakfasted on a few eggs, some chocolate and corn patties called arepas. They also shared a mango given to them by a shopkeeper.

"Hunger is terrible," Garzon said, adding it is "terrible to feel hungry and not be able to do anything" about it. Last month, a report by the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization and the World Food Programme stated that "7.3 million Colombians are food insecure and in need of food assistance in 2022."

The list of 20 "hunger hotspots" also included Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Haiti, Somalia, South Sudan and Yemen. In Colombia, the UN agencies blamed "a combination of political instability, economic challenges and the ongoing impact of the regional migratory crisis amplified by internal displacement." —AFP

Kashmir news archives vanish

SRINAGAR, India: One of the most comprehensive NGO reports on decades of violence and killings in Indian-administered Kashmir is Alleged Perpetrators, published by the most respected rights group in the disputed region. But clicking on the Greater Kashmir newspaper report it cites in the killing of a 16-year-old named Ishthiyah Ahmad Khanday and two other people now generates a "404 Oops... Page not found!" error.

For Sajad Ahmad Dar, who died in hospital after being in police custody in 2012, the Kashmir Reader link says: "Sorry the page you were looking is not here." And for Ghulam Mohi-ud-Din Malik, shot 19 times when paramilitaries searched his house, the My Kashmir page reads simply: "Forbidden. You don't have permission to access this resource."

And so on, over and over again. In recent months hundreds of reports chronicling decades of violence in the disputed Muslim-majority territory have disappeared from local media archives or been rendered unsearchable through a variety of methods.

Critics say it is an Orwellian effort to expunge history and control the narrative going forward, with most pointing the finger at the Indian government. In many cases, newspaper reports are the only publicly-accessible primary-source records of events in Kashmir.

"It's still very mysterious how the archives disappeared and why," Anuradha Bhasin, executive editor of the influential Kashmir Times daily,

Hunger blights the future of newborn babies in Chad

N'DJAMENA: Her tiny mouth is constantly open, trying to suck in air. Adama Assan is four months old, but tips the scales at a pitiful 3.3 kilograms (7.3 pounds) — not even the average weight at birth of a typical newborn in Europe. "Normally, a baby of her age would weigh six kilos," said Ousmane Ahmat Mahamat, a supervisor nurse at a ward in a hospital in N'Djamena, the capital of Chad, that specialises in infant malnutrition.

In respiratory distress, the scrawny baby is in intensive care, with a breathing tube inserted through a tiny nostril. Her 18-year-old mother, Zara Issa, sits by helplessly and watches. "I've been here for four days, watching over her," Issa says. In the same unit, run by a Senegal-based NGO called ALIMA, 10-month-old Alkhatir Djimiet is also intubated.

He has matchstick-like arms and ribs that stick out: he weighs only 4.5 kilograms, when it should be seven or eight for a healthy infant of his age.

"He is fighting to survive—he's in a virtual coma," said Ahmat Mahamat, putting the child's file down.

told AFP. "There are reasons to believe—though these are just suspicions—that somebody from the state could be complicit in this," she said.

Control of Kashmir has been contested between India and Pakistan since independence in 1947, and the nuclear-armed neighbours have fought two of their three wars over the territory. India has at least half a million soldiers permanently deployed on its side of the frontier, fighting a long-running insurgency that has claimed tens of thousands of lives since 1989. Delhi accuses Pakistan of backing the militants, which Islamabad denies.

Tensions intensified in 2019 after New Delhi rescinded the limited autonomy guaranteed to Kashmir under the Indian constitution and imposed direct rule, detained thousands of people including political leaders and activists in a huge security clampdown. It also cut phone lines and internet relays in what eventually became the world's longest communications blackout.

After connections were restored, journalists began noticing that swathes of reporting were missing from their publications' websites. Speaking on condition of anonymity for fear of reprisal, one editor in the main city of Srinagar told AFP that at first they thought it was a technical issue.

"But after a closer look into our online archives we realised that it was mostly of previous years of mass uprising and killings that were missing," they said, in a pattern that made it seem "as if nothing had happened in Kashmir before 2019". Many of the vanished reports cover huge demonstrations against Indian rule in 2008, 2010 and 2016, when in total nearly 300 protesters were killed by govern-

Hunger crisis

These children are among the growing numbers of infants suffering from malnutrition in Chad, a landlocked Sahel country that according to UN figures is the third poorest nation in the world. In 2021, Chad ranked 113 out of 116 nations on the "Global Hunger Index"—a peer-reviewed tool compiled by European NGOs designed to estimate calorie needs.

UNICEF estimates that of Chad's population of 15 million, around 5.5 million, including 2.7 million children, will need humanitarian assistance this year. The cause: a security crisis that has forced farming families to leave their fields, overlapping with extreme weather events and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Those factors are amplified by grinding poverty. Forty-two percent of the population live below the poverty line. The country ranks third in the world for child mortality, after Nigeria and Somalia, according to the World Bank.

With a death rate of 110 per thousand, more than one child in 10 fails to survive to the age of five.

Wasting away

ALIMA—the Alliance for International Medical Action—works in N'Djamena with a local charity called Alerte Sante (Health Alert). It reckons that several hundred thousand children in Chad aged between six and 59 months have "severe acute malnutrition", a medical determi-



MEXICO CITY: Mexico's President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador (C), his wife Beatriz Gutierrez (L) and Mexican Finance Secretary Rogelio Ramirez, attend the commemoration of the 109th anniversary of the death of Mexican former President (1911-1913) Francisco I. —AFP

a 29-year-old single mother who was also a model and actress.

The Mexico City prosecutor's office said its

femicide investigation team was in charge of the case and various lines of inquiry were being pursued. —AFP



SRINAGAR, India: In this photo taken on January 29, 2022, local newspapers hang from a newsstand in Srinagar. In recent months hundreds of reports chronicling decades of violence in the disputed Muslim-majority territory have disappeared from local media archives or been rendered unsearchable through a variety of methods. —AFP

ment forces and thousands more injured, including women and children.

Historian Siddiq Wahid, the founding Vice Chancellor of the Islamic University of Science and Technology in Pulwama, called the purge a "diabolical" attempt to ensure "only one interpretation" of events was possible. "It's an extraordinary effort to seize the narrative, in the sense that there should only be one narrative and that there should only be an official history," he told AFP. "Orwell's depiction of surveillance that was done in '1984' looks crude and primitive compared to what is happening today."

'Impossible to search'

India's government spokesperson in Srinagar did not respond to repeated requests by AFP for comment on this story. In the past Indian authorities have regularly dismissed rights

groups' accusations of abuse and UN reports as propaganda intended to defame government forces deployed in the territory. Several media personnel, speaking on condition of anonymity due to the sensitivity of the subject, said authorities had pressured their publications into hiding past reporting on killings, rape and torture blamed on Indian security forces.

One website manager working across several newspapers said counterinsurgency police repeatedly demanded he share technical details about websites he helped maintain. Another Srinagar newspaper editor said publishers had been coerced by authorities into hiding reporting on sensitive topics by scrubbing metadata from online stories. Metadata is information used to classify digital content and helps search engines find relevant results. —AFP



NDJAMENA, Chad: A mother tends to her malnourished child on February 15, 2022 at the pediatric ward of a hospital in Ndjamena. —AFP

nation that uses the circumference of the mid-upper arm as a benchmark.

In this phase of malnutrition, the body consumes muscle tissue to provide energy, and the child literally wastes away. "We are looking after 27 children right now—that's 10 more than at the same time last year," said Ahmat Mahamat. "We're looking at a disastrous situation."

The unit lacks funds and urgently needs Plumpy'Nut, a French-made peanut-based energy paste provided by international donors that is used to treat

severe, acute malnutrition. No child is ever turned away, though. In 2019, a surge of admissions meant that staff had at times three children per bed. So far this year, the unit, located at the Chad-China Friendship Hospital, has admitted 118 children.

They stay for between five and seven days, getting specialist care with intravenous feeding and round-the-clock monitoring. The survival rate is high — 94 percent—but the figure for treatment in locations outside the capital, while unknown, is likely to be lower. —AFP

International

Bloodshed and tears as east Ukraine faces Russian attack

Toll from the bombardment still being 'evaluated'

CHUGUIV: A son wept over the body of his father among the wreckage of a missile strike in a residential district in the eastern Ukrainian town of Chuguiiv as the country woke up yesterday to a Russian invasion. "I told him to leave," the man in his 30s sobbed, next to the twisted ruins of a car. Nearby a woman screamed curses into the wintry sky. A missile crater, some four to five meters wide, was scoured into the earth between two devastated five-storey apartment buildings. Firefighters battled to extinguish the remains of a blaze.



Several buildings seriously damaged

Several other buildings on the street were seriously damaged, their windows shattered and doorframe hanging in the frigid morning air. It was among the first reported damage after Russia launched an invasion of Ukraine yesterday, with explosions heard in several locations across the country in the early morning hours. Sergiy, 67, tried to use the leg of an Ikea table to block up his smashed window. The leg stuck out into the air.

He had received a few bruises but said he was fine. "I'm going to stay here, my daughter is in Kyiv and it's the same there," he told AFP. In Sergiy's opinion, the missile has targeted the nearby military airfield, close to Ukraine's second city Kharkiv and just some 40 kilometers from the Russian border. "It was one of the targets that Putin had cited, I'm not even surprised," he said, refusing to give his surname. "We will hang in there."

Thick black smoke could be seen billowing from the direction of the airfield—one of a raft of strategic locations across the country pounded by Moscow's firepower in an opening barrage. A policeman said the toll from the bombardment was still being "evaluated" without giving more details. Teenager Anastasia clutched her grey cat as she watched her grandfather



CHUGUIV: Firefighters work on a fire in a building after bombings on the eastern Ukraine town of Chuguiiv yesterday.— AFP photos

in a wheelchair being loaded onto a minibus waiting to rush them to a nearby village.

'Hope the war will spare us'

"We could never have expected this. We're going to the village, we hope the war will spare us there," she said. Ukrainian military personnel and trucks swarmed around the town as the government in Kyiv insisted its forces would do all they could to protect Ukraine. Across Ukraine's vulnerable eastern front civilians and soldiers scrambled

to react as one of the world's most powerful militaries began what authorities warned was a "full-scale invasion".

Some 300 kilometers to the south in key port city of Mariupol—close to the frontline where Russia-backed separatists have been fighting Ukraine—authorities were rushing to evacuate civilians as fighting raged. Local official Alexiy Babchenko said they were starting to move people out of two areas to the nearest railway station—but the violence was too heavy to begin in another location.

"It is under heavy artillery," he told AFP. Yevgeny Kaplin, head of the humanitarian organisation Proliska, said attacks were going on across the entire frontline that had divided Ukrainian forces from an enclave held by Russian-backed rebels. But poor communications were hampering information coming about victims. "The offensive is underway along the entire demarcation line in the Lugansk and Donetsk regions," he said. "Fighting is happening everywhere. We cannot yet receive information about victims, because there is no communication in this area."— AFP



CHUGUIV: A man sits outside his destroyed building after bombings on the eastern Ukraine town of Chuguiiv yesterday.

Comedian-turned-president stars in Ukraine-Russian war

KYIV: He was the comic from Ukrainian TV who implausibly became president. But Volodymyr Zelensky is now heading a nation under attack, after Russia invaded Ukraine yesterday despite weeks of diplomatic wrangling to avoid the worst-case scenario. The fresh-faced 44-year-old became president of Ukraine in time to witness the gravest standoff between the Kremlin and Western powers since the end of the Cold War more than three decades ago.

He watched Russia surround his country with more than 150,000 soldiers, despite calls from Washington and others to back off. He watched as Russia declared two rebels held republics in the east—Donetsk and Lugansk—independent, a dramatic escalation of the standoff. And then yesterday, he watched as Russia launched an all-out attack, with explosions heard across the country in the early morning hours after Russian President Vladimir Putin confirmed a "military operation". Zelensky quickly implemented martial law and appealed to his Western allies, calling for European unity after speaking with US President Joe Biden and France's Emmanuel Macron.

'Not that bad'

Zelensky ran for president seemingly as a joke in 2019. He was catapulted to fame by playing a foul-mouthed school teacher on TV who became president after one of his students filmed his profane rant against corruption and posted it online. The evening comedy show became a huge hit just as the country was gripped by cataclysmic change. Ukraine's 2014 pro-EU revolution ousted a Kremlin-backed leader and brought in a new team that had to grapple with a spiralling conflict in the east and an economy teetering towards collapse.

Ukrainians watched the president on the comedy show make crude jokes to his wife and pedal to work with a startled look of panic. It captured the zeitgeist—and made Zelensky a small fortune. He defeated Petro

Poroshenko—an incumbent mired by crises on all sides—in a runoff by winning more than 70 percent of the vote. But some Ukrainians braced for the worst. His critics compared him unfavourably to celebrity politicians such as Italy's Silvio Berlusconi and then US president Donald Trump. His early decision to fill his team with members of his Kvarial 95 TV production company did little to build public confidence.

Zelensky's initial media appearances with other world leaders looked stilted. "I think our international partners have a fairly difficult time dealing with him. He is not on their level," said Ukrainian political analyst Mykola Davydyuk. "They are playing at a very high level that he cannot reach—and cannot understand." But some Western diplomats appear taken by his charm. "He hasn't done that bad, to be honest," one diplomat said this month, ahead of Russia's attack. "He has an impossible job. He is stuck, under pressure from both the Russians and the Americans," the diplomat said. "He has shown composure."

Defining moment

The standoff with Russia over Ukraine's dream of joining NATO—aspirationally written into the constitution—will define Zelensky's presidency. He came to power attempting to open lines of communication with Putin that could finally resolve the bloody separatist conflict that claimed more than 14,000 lives when Russia invaded. The two held a Parisian summit a few months after Zelensky's election that Putin hailed as an "important step".

But Zelensky read from a different script at his own post-summit media event. "My counterparts have said it is a very good result for a first meeting. But I will be honest—it is very little," he said. Relations between the two men have been deteriorating ever since. Putin accused Zelensky's government of "discriminating" against Russian-speakers and reneging on past promises for settling the eastern conflict. Zelensky's offer of a three-way summit with Putin and US President Joe Biden fell on deaf ears in Moscow last month.— AFP

Ukrainians in 'Moscow on the Med' look on in horror

LIMASSOL: Ukrainians living alongside fellow expats from "brother" Russia in the Mediterranean seaside town of Limassol in Cyprus looked on in horror yesterday at the Russian assault on their homeland. "This is the worst-case scenario we could have imagined. They are bombing all regions of Ukraine, attacking all our airports and bases," said Evgeny Staroselskiy, a director of Russian Radio Cyprus based in Limassol.

He said nationals from both countries had awoken in shock to hear of the full-blown conflict unfolding between Ukraine and its giant neighbor. "A lot of people have family on both sides of the border," said the 60-year-old native of Kharkiv, a mainly Russian-speaking city in eastern Ukraine considered in the "red zone" because of its proximity to the border with Russia.

But Staroselskiy stressed the influence of Russian media on the attitude of citizens from their side, even in sunny Limassol, also known as "Limassolgrad" or "Moscow on the Med" as being home to tens of thousands of people from ex-Soviet republics as well as a favourite holiday destination. "We are all brothers but we are now receiving telephone calls from some Russians who actually support this crazy (Russian President Vladimir) Putin. We are very surprised."

A group of Russian bikers, clad in leather waistcoats with Moscow and Saint Petersburg emblazoned on the back, gathered at Limassol's gleaming marina tried to play things down. "This is all bullshit; it's all politics," said Grigori, declining to give a surname. "We are family." Ksenia, a 36-year-old Ukrainian yacht stewardess whose mother's family hails from Siberia, said she used to celebrate the Soviet Union's February 23 "Defender of the Fatherland Day" holiday until Russia's 2008 war in Georgia, a harbinger of its 2014 annexation of Crimea, seized from Ukraine.

"Talking to Russians, Crimea is the one issue we've never been able to agree on," she said of the peninsula located some 1,000 kilometers due north of Cyprus.



LEMESOL: Ksenia Bordianou, a 36-year-old Ukrainian yacht stewardess whose mother's family hails from Siberia, poses for a picture in the Mediterranean seaside town of Limassol.



CHUGUIV: Emergency unit staff treat an injured man after bombings on the eastern Ukraine town of Chuguiiv.

For many ordinary Ukrainians, said Oksana, a mother from Kherson, a Russian-speaking city close to the Crimean Peninsula, "the biggest immediate concern" was rising food and utility prices as well as access to the banking system.

Fallout fears

As for Cyprus, whose economy is heavily dependent on tourism revenues, to which Russia and Ukraine are both major contributors, it fears the fallout from the crisis and the mounting sanctions being slapped on Moscow. More than 780,000 Russian tourists visited Cyprus in 2019 before Covid struck, out of a total of some 3.9 million, making it the holiday island's second largest market after Britain. Over 95,000 Ukrainian arrivals were registered in the same year. Cyprus, an EU but non-NATO member, has since counted on tourists from both Russia and Ukraine for a revival.

Ethnically divided, Cyprus is a close friend of Russia, but Nicosia has defended Ukraine's independence as the only EU country with occupation troops on its soil. In response to Russia's attack on Ukraine, Cypriot President Nicos Anastasiades, himself a native of Limassol yesterday condemned "any actions which violate the sovereignty and territorial integrity of an independent country". "It is with great disappointment that we are witnessing the violation of international law," he told journalists during a visit to Expo 2020 in Dubai.

The eastern Mediterranean island has been split since 1974 when Turkish forces occupied its northern third in response to a military coup sponsored by the junta in power in Greece at the time. Russian Radio's CEO, Stanislav Andonov, a 58-year-old from Moscow, said relations on the island between Ukrainians and Russians had at least until yesterday been unaffected by the drums of war. "I have not felt any friction and doubt there will be any," he said.

Andonov said the "Defender of the Fatherland Day", as previously celebrated across the Soviet Union to mark the 1918 foundation of the Red Army, was treated by Russian-speaking expats simply as a "men's day", equivalent to the March 8 International Women's Day. Staroselskiy's wife, Yuliya, a DJ at Russian Radio, pointed out that many of the Russians living in Cyprus were "not supporters of Putin in any case", lowering a source of tension with their Ukrainian fellow expats.— AFP

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 25, 2022

Business

Americans ponder the cost of 'defending freedom' in Ukraine

'Nobody is home using my electricity and gas, and it's still going up'

JESSUP, United States: President Joe Biden has told Americans to prepare for the "costs" of Washington's efforts to stop Russia from invading Ukraine, but truck driver Jeremy Rakestraw wonders if he hasn't already paid enough.

He decided to sell his truck when its monthly fuel bill more than doubled to \$17,000, and though he's back on the road towing cargo in the vehicle of a company that covers his gas, the high inflation Americans have faced over the past year continues to eat into his pay.

"Nobody is home using my electricity and gas, and it's still going up," Rakestraw said as he sat in his idling 18-wheeler at a truck stop in Jessup, Maryland, 31 hours from his house in Salt Lake City and two-and-a-half hours from the New Jersey town where cargo was waiting for him to pick up. As for Biden, "I don't think he's doing nearly enough," Rakestraw said. Such is the dilemma the US president faced as he announced new sanctions against Russia on Tuesday while warning a nation weary from months of massive leaps in consumer prices that "defending freedom will have costs for us as well."

The tensions with Moscow have already played a part in pushing up fuel prices, yet some who make their living roaming America's roads also recognize the need for Washington to take action to stop a bloody war—even if it could push gas prices up even higher.

"Everything has a cost of opportunity. If they don't take action, Russia would do the same thing," said Abdullahi Ali, a taxi driver waiting for a fare outside Union Station in Washington, where passengers traffic is far more scarce than before the pandemic. "For every action there is equal and

opposite reaction. They have to do something."

'Risk premium'

For months, rising costs for everything from fuel to food have worn Americans down, making them feel less content with Biden's leadership and unenthusiastic about the economy even as wages rise and millions of people who lost their jobs when COVID-19 broke out return to work. The University of Michigan index tracking consumer sentiment plunged this month to its lowest level in 10 years while the average gallon of gas currently goes for \$3.53, about a dollar more than before the pandemic, according to the American Automobile Association.

"Americans are already paying a little bit of a risk premium, if you will, simply because the temperature has risen" with Russia, said Patrick De Haan, head of petroleum analysis at GasBuddy. Yet the United States is also a major oil producer, and Keith Wood, a truck driver waiting to set out from Jessup, wondered why events far beyond its borders would bleed into what he pays at the pump. "We're supposed to be self-sufficient so I don't know why the price would go up," he said.

Energy independence

Oil is traded on a global market, meaning that even though the United States is a major exporter of crude, that doesn't necessarily offer drivers relief when prices spike. While Biden has promised to take steps to offset price increases, De Haan said, "No president can upend change in the global market." Moscow understands that well, and De Haan predicted it will use the threat of cutting off access to its own ample production of



WASHINGTON: A shopper looks at tools at a Lowe's hardware store in Washington, DC. Lowe's is expected to release their earnings figures today. — AFP

oil to try to get Western countries to back off when it comes to Ukraine.

"It would shoot themselves in the foot if they limit oil exports but even the talk of it could inspire some kind of breakthrough that goes in Russia's favor," he said. The prices of gas and diesel are among the most prominent indicators of the cost of living in the world's largest economy, and voters have been known to take out their frustration over

high costs on presidents and their political parties.

Dipson Abass' earnings as a taxi driver in Washington have already suffered as prices rose, yet as he pondered the situation in Ukraine, he expressed a willingness to bear whatever consequences the sanctions bring.

"Price of gas is nothing compared with human life," he said. "So I will just say whatever sanction they can pass onto Russia, let it go." — AFP

Asian markets down, oil up as Ukraine keeps traders on edge

HONG KONG: Asian markets fell and oil prices rose yesterday on growing fears of a war in eastern Europe after Moscow said separatists had called for help to repel Ukrainian forces and Vladimir Putin announced a 'military operation'. US officials had warned of an imminent incursion by Russia after the Kremlin this week recognised two breakaway regions in Ukraine and said it would provide "peacekeepers".

Russian President Putin is said to have around 200,000 soldiers amassed on the border with Ukraine, borders and Washington said many are in attack positions. World leaders continue to work for a de-escalation but have so far failed, while Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said he had tried to call Putin but there was "no answer, only silence".

He added that Russia could start "a major war in Europe" in the coming days. And the United Nations was told a full-scale Russian invasion would have a devastating global impact that would likely spark a new "refugee crisis". The threat of a conflagration has sent markets spiralling, with traders fretting over supplies of key com-

modities including wheat and metals. Crucially, oil has soared to within spitting distance of \$100, and both main contracts were up more than one percent yesterday.

"Russia/Ukraine tensions bring both a possible demand shock (for Europe), and more importantly a much larger supply shock for the rest of the world given the importance of Russia and Ukraine to energy, hard commodities and soft commodities," said National Australia Bank's Tapas Strickland. The crisis comes as governments struggle to contain runaway inflation fuelled by demand as life returns after recent lockdowns, with many fearing the fragile global economic recovery from the pandemic could be knocked off course.

After staging a slight bounce Wednesday in reaction to what were considered light sanctions against Moscow, Asian markets were back in the red after a hefty drop on Wall Street. Hong Kong, Tokyo, Shanghai, Seoul, Sydney, Singapore, Taipei, Jakarta and Wellington all fell.

'Policy mistakes'

The stand-off in Europe has pro-



TOKYO: Pedestrians walk past an electronic share price board showing the closing numbers on the Tokyo Stock Exchange in Tokyo. — AFP

vided central banks with a further headache as they move to remove pandemic-era financial support and tighten monetary policy. Attention is on every utterance from Federal Reserve officials as they prepare to hike interest rates next month, with speculation over how fast and hard it will move. Commentators said bets are on six increases this year, down from previous forecasts for up to seven, and they said the stakes are rising further. "Policy mistakes at this point

in time are almost guaranteed," Shana Sissel of Banrion Capital Management told Bloomberg Television.

"The question isn't, is there going to be a policy mistake, but how bad will it be? Will the Fed hike too much too fast, will they front-load everything?" And with uncertainty reigning supreme, warnings abound of worse to come, with BNY Mellon Investment Management's Lale Akoner saying: "Expect volatility to really persist in the next few months." — AFP

Rolls-Royce back in profit

LONDON: Rolls-Royce, the British maker of aircraft engines, announced yesterday a return to annual profit in 2021 after it slashed costs, adding that its long-serving chief executive would step down. Rolls posted net profit of £120 million (\$162 million, 144 million euros) last year, compared with a loss after tax totalling £3.2 billion in 2020. That year it axed thousands of jobs and launched a major divestment programme to navigate damaging pandemic fallout across the aviation industry.

Share price crash

Rolls yesterday said that Warren East would leave his role as CEO at the end of 2022 after eight years in the top role. "As a result, the board will now launch a thorough and extensive search for his successor," a statement said.

The announcement of his departure, coupled with Russia's military attack on neighbouring Ukraine, sent shares

in Rolls tumbling 14 percent in early London trading. "Even though markets were already in a bad mood because of... Ukraine, shares in Rolls-Royce fell by even greater magnitude as investors reacted really badly to the resignation of CEO Warren East," noted Russ Mould, investment director at AJ Bell.

"East has been at the helm of Rolls-Royce for a comparatively long time and while progress may have been slower than the market may have liked... he was given the benefit of the doubt in a slow rehabilitation of the business," Mould pointed to "a string of damaging profit warnings in the early 2010s and a serious cash flow problem. "It has been pretty turbulent under East too, though in part that reflects a global pandemic which had a disastrous impact on Rolls-Royce's aviation sector clients," he added.

East said Rolls benefitted last year from a restructuring programme ahead of schedule, "positioning civil aerospace to capitalise on increasing international travel" as economies reopen after pandemic lockdowns. In the military defence sector, Rolls has "seen growth driven by strong demand in all" its markets. — AFP

Telefonica profits soar in 2021

MADRID: Spanish telecoms giant Telefonica registered a sharp rise in profits in 2021 thanks to a major asset sale that allowed it to reduce its debt levels. The group posted net income of 8.1 billion euros (\$9.1 billion), a five-fold increase on its figure of 1.6 billion a year earlier, but lower than the 9.2 billion euros expected by FactSet analysts.

The shortfall resulted from the inclusion of a 1.4-billion-euro allocation to fund a voluntary redundancy scheme in Spain that meant Telefonica posted a 1.2 billion euro net loss in the fourth quarter. Telefonica's results were boosted by the sale of its mobile phone masts unit Telxius to American Tower Corporation, one of the world's largest tower companies, for 7.7 billion euros.

It also benefited from the fusion of its British unit O2 with Virgin Media,

creating a company worth more than £31 billion (38 billion euros). Both transactions helped the telecoms group to continue reducing its huge debt, which fell by 26.1 percent last year to stand at 26 billion euros.

Annual turnover fell in 2021 by 9.3 percent to 39.3 billion euros. This fall is linked to the change in the scope of Telefonica's operations due to its sale of assets—if left unchanged, turnover would have reached 42.8 billion euros, compared with 43 billion in 2020, a company statement said. In Spain, its main market which accounted for some 30 percent of sales, turnover reached 12.4 billion euros, the same as in 2020.

"Telefonica has once again delivered on all its targets in 2021. The strength of our results demonstrates the success of our strategic priorities," said chairman and CEO Jose Maria Alvarez-Pallete, describing the group as "leaner, more efficient and stronger".

Telefonica was very slightly higher in late morning trade, up 0.17 percent on Spain's Ibex 35 index, which like markets across Europe, was weighed down by the Russia-Ukraine crisis, trading 3.81 percent lower. — AFP

What impact will the sanctions have on Russian debt?

PARIS: The financial sanctions adopted by Western countries on Russia over its recognition of breakaway Ukrainian territories include limiting Moscow's ability to issue debt on international markets. What impact will this have on investors and on Moscow?

How do countries finance themselves?

Most countries need to borrow large amounts of money to finance their public spending. They issue debt obligations, which are called bills or bonds, and are bought by a range of investors including banks, pension funds, insurers and others. The duration of the bond, the payment calendar and interest payments are determined in advance. This is called the primary debt market. The secondary market is where investors sell the debt amongst themselves.

Countries frequently issue new debt to reimburse bonds coming due. This is called debt refinancing. As long as investors have confidence in a country, it can borrow at reasonable rates.

What do the sanctions change?

US investors will not be able to buy Russian bonds issued after March 1. Russia will also be banned from European markets to refinance its debt. Japan plans to ban both the placement of new Russian debt and the trading of its bonds in the secondary market. Canada has also banned trading in Russian bonds.

What other options for Russia?

"Now what they will do is rely only on domestic sources and on the domestic market, which is small, in order to finance themselves," said Kaan Nazli, an economist and asset manager who specialises in emerging market debt at Neuberger Berman.

"If it was an emerging market like for example Turkey or South Africa which rely fully in the financial market for their budget deficit it would have been a much bigger issue but because of Russia's balance sheet being very strong ... it's not something that is disruptive for them," he added.

What impact on Russian finances?

For UBS economist Anna Zadornova "the fiscal implications from the restrictions on the new sovereign debt issuance are limited by the low level of public debt" that Russia has. At 16 percent, Russian public level debt is low. Zadornova also pointed out that Russia benefits from higher than planned revenue, which is in part due to the high energy prices. Russia also has the capacity to raise ruble-denominated debt on the domestic market.

According to Bloomberg data, foreign investors hold only a little over a quarter of Russian government bonds. Zadornova said that apparently the initial sanctions will not force international investors to liquidate their holdings of existing Russian bonds, nor force their removal from bond indices. — AFP

Business

Despite sanctions, UK accused of swimming in 'dirty Russian money'

Another delay to an 'economic crime' bill: Boris Johnson

LONDON: As Prime Minister Boris Johnson moves to confront Moscow over its Ukraine invasion, he stands accused of leaving the financial back door wide open by ignoring a "sewer" of Russian money coursing through Britain.

Johnson on Wednesday confirmed another delay to an "economic crime" bill, which he says will eventually dismantle the "Matryoshka doll" hiding the ownership of UK companies and properties by Russian oligarchs. "We do need to stop corrupt Russian money in London and every other financial capital," he told parliament, insisting New York, Paris and other centres needed to be part of the sanctions effort.

"No country is doing more than the UK to tackle this issue," the prime minister claimed. But despite its new-found freedoms since Brexit, Britain has lagged behind the European Union in targeting named individuals in Russian President Vladimir Putin's inner circle.

Rich Russians have long found it easy to acquire expensive properties in London, or a world-class education for their children in Britain's private schools, or control of top Premier League football clubs. According to multiple studies into the "Londograd" phenomenon, they have been enabled by a service industry encompassing blue-chip bankers, accountants, lawyers, property agents and public-relations advisors. And since Johnson entered Downing Street in 2019, his Conservative party has stepped up a drive to entice cash-rich donors, including from wealthy backers originally from Russia.

'True loyalties'?

"It may be that all these people want to do is play tennis with Boris or have dinner with him," said Thomas Mayne, an expert on corruption in Russia and Central Asia at the Chatham House think-tank.

"But the question has to be asked as to their true loyalties, and the origins of their money," he told AFP. From 1994, as the Russian economy turned into a post-Soviet free-for-all and China was opening up, foreign investors were able to effectively buy UK residency via a "golden visa" programme.

The scheme only ended last week, as Putin stepped up his threats against Ukraine, long after he was accused of orchestrating a 2018 nerve-agent attack in the English city of Salisbury. One beneficiary of the scheme was Roman Abramovich, the owner of Chelsea football club, who last year brought a libel action against British journalist Catherine Belton and



KHARKIV: People queue outside a bank office in Kharkiv yesterday, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced a military operation in Ukraine yesterday with explosions heard soon after across the country and its foreign minister warning a 'full-scale invasion' was underway. — AFP

the publisher of her book "Putin's People".

The government failed to renew Abramovich's visa in 2018. On Wednesday, using parliamentary privilege, Liberal Democrat MP Layla Moran named him as one of 35 "key enablers" to Putin who should be sanctioned. One Russian couple who did become UK citizens were Vladimir Chernukhin, Putin's former deputy finance minister, and his wife Lubov Chernukhin. She has given more than £2 million to the Conservatives since 2012 and, according to the Sunday Times, is part of an elite club of donors to enjoy preferential access to Johnson and other government ministers.

Can't follow the money

Opposition parties smell a rat. "Under the Tories, a sewer of dirty Russian money has been allowed to run

through London for years," Ian Blackford, Westminster leader of the Scottish National Party, told Johnson in parliament.

He said that as far back as 2017, when Johnson was foreign secretary, he had raised the issue of UK-registered limited partnerships which had been used to funnel more than \$20 billion out of Russian banks. "Plenty of these golden (visa) handshakes just so happened to find their way into the coffers of the Conservative party, £2.3 million in fact, since the prime minister took office," Blackford added.

"How can our allies trust this prime minister to clean up dirty Russian money in the UK when he won't even clean up his own political party?" The Tories say they comply with legal requirements that only UK citizens or UK-based companies can donate

to political parties, and that all donations are registered transparently.

But given Russian oligarchs' penchant for shell companies, tax havens and opaque ownership structures, experts say it is hard for any party to truly know the source of such funds. And new elections legislation being pushed by the government will make the problem of foreign influence in British politics worse, not better, according to Transparency International.

"It's not fanciful to be concerned that money from Russia is infiltrating the UK political system," the campaign group's director of policy, former Liberal Democrat MP Duncan Hames, told AFP. "But our view would be that you ought to be concerned about any individual, wherever they're from, giving large sums of money in a manner that distorts democracy." — AFP

'Phenomenal' pace of ME reforms praised at HSBC's biggest capital markets forum

DUBAI: Economic reforms across the Middle East have set conditions for a surge of new liquidity into the region and a re-appraisal of prospects for the region's financial markets by global investors, according to HSBC Global Co-Head of Securities Services Richard Godfrey.



Richard Godfrey

"The region continues to offer significant investment opportunities and the pace of reforms has been phenomenal. Local markets have reflected this through increased market activity and higher growth," Godfrey told an audience of more than 400 delegates at the bank's annual gathering of regulators,

institutional investors and exchange managers at HSBC's annual Markets & Securities Services Middle East forum.

Billions of dollars of fund inflows into the region's asset markets from around the world have been triggered by a series of reforms to liberalise access for international investors, create new hedging instruments, and increase institutional investor participation.

The reforms have led to the inclusion of key regional equity markets in benchmark indices tracked by major mutual and pension funds, supporting further inflows of long term capital. And a structural reform to the UAE's working week announced early in 2022 that aligns the country to the schedule of the world's biggest capital markets in Asia, Europe and the United States, has set

the stage for a further surge of fund flows, Godfrey said.

"The change of working days in the UAE, aligns well with global markets and has been viewed positively by the international community," said Godfrey. "It reflects innovative, new thinking about how work-life balance is being incorporated in this region as many markets around the world are testing new models and ways of working. With the new weekend change, trading volumes on both the Dubai Financial Market and Abu Dhabi Securities Exchange should surge."

Now in its fifth year, HSBC's four-day annual forum is the only such securities services event in the region to be run by a custodian bank. Comprising two days of expert panel discussions and two days for delegates to have a series of one-on-one meetings with local market regulators, broker-dealers, global custodians and major institutional investors, the event is designed to promote collaboration and understanding on the most important trends in capital markets.

Antoine Maurel, HSBC's Head of Markets & Securities Services in the Middle East North Africa and Turkey region, commented: "We're bringing together the full spectrum of market participants to further improve understanding on what matters most for investors. It's our shared responsibility that the global securities services industry becomes more efficient and less complex."

Key themes to emerge from the forum over the four days include the increased focus on sustainability-linked issuances and the importance of developing common sustainability standards as well as how regulation can successfully oversee the growing role of distributed ledger technology or 'blockchain' in finance.

Buoyed by listings of major Chinese companies, Hong Kong's stock exchange started strong in 2021 but later underperformed, with profits dropping in the three subsequent quarters. HKEX saw a net income of \$HK2.67 billion in the last three months of 2021, representing an 8.6 percent drop year-on-year. China's regulatory crackdown on the property and technology sectors last year roiled markets, wiping billions from company values and preventing a number of major corporations from listing in the finance hub.

Bloomberg News says Hong Kong is no longer in the global top three destinations for IPOs. Hong Kong is also currently in the throes of its worst coronavirus outbreak, deepening the city's economic woes and international isolation. This year HKEX will be affected by "uncertainty surrounding the pandemic recovery, ongoing geopolitical risks, restrictions on travel and upcoming interest rate hikes", bourse chair Laura Cha said in a statement. In its Thursday annual report, HKEX also reported a 10 percent increase in core business revenue last year, driven by high trading and clearing fees. Average daily turnover of cash equities rose by 32 percent in 2021.—AFP

China crackdown chips away at HKEX profits

HONG KONG: Hong Kong's stock exchange operator posted HK\$12.5 billion (US\$1.6 billion) for 2021 but also registered its worst quarterly earnings in two years as China's crackdown on a host of business sectors hit trading and company debuts. The Hong Kong Exchanges and Clearing (HKEX) said its 2021 profits rose by nine percent from the year before, thanks to a record first quarter.

"HKEX had a strong year in 2021, despite a turbulent macro backdrop and the ongoing pandemic," said the bourse's chief executive Nicolas Aguzin. Aguzin said HKEX also broke records in cash market turnover and in its "stock connect" and "bond connect" programmes, which allow international investors to access Shenzhen and Shanghai markets.

العيد الوطني و عيد التحرير لدولة الكويت

KUWAIT NATIONAL AND LIBERATION DAYS

On the occasion of the National and Liberation Days of the State of Kuwait.

The Executive Management and all the employees of HSBC Bank Middle East Limited extend their warmest congratulations and best wishes to the honorable leadership and people of the State of Kuwait.

Wishing Kuwait, His Highness the Emir and its people all prosperity, security and safety.

بمناسبة العيد الوطني و عيد التحرير لدولة الكويت.

تقدم الإدارة التنفيذية وجميع العاملين في بنك إتش أس بي سي الشرق الأوسط المحمود، بأسمى آيات التهاني والتبريات لقيادة وشعب الكويت الكرام.

كل عام والكويت وأميرها وأهلها متوجه بالخير والازدهار والأمن والأمان على الدوام.

Opening up a world of opportunity

Business

Lebanese turn to public libraries to check out of financial crunch

Libraries are managed by the Assabil non-governmental group

BEIRUT: In many countries, public libraries are considered a dying relic amid the shift to digital, but in Lebanon they are getting a new lease of life as its economy flatlines. Every Friday afternoon, Munira Khalifa takes her son Elia to a public library in Beirut for a weekly storytelling event—one of the last affordable pleasures as a crashing local currency has rendered books something of a luxury.

"We had reached a point where we couldn't find anywhere to take Elia because of the coronavirus pandemic and our difficult financial situation," Khalifa said. She is just one of hundreds of parents who are hitting the shelves at three public libraries in Beirut in the heat of the unprecedented financial crisis.

The libraries are managed by the Assabil non-governmental group, which was founded in 1997 to promote free access to books and culture. At one of them in the neighbourhood of Bachoura, the mother and son were the first to arrive ahead of a reading.

The library offered them some relief, Khalifa said, adding: "It is safe, comfortable and close to home." "Financially, it helps us cut on costs for transportation and new books, which have become more expensive," she told AFP.

Throughout the reading, laughter abounded as a storyteller acted out a book using puppets. Librarian Samar Choucair said the number of visitors at the facility had increased in the past year, largely since people cannot afford to buy new books.

This is especially the case for children's books, which are mostly produced abroad and tend to be more expensive, she said. "We keep hearing from parents that this is the spot they choose to take their children... in light of the economic crisis."

'Need to read'

Sluggish internet speeds and the absence of credit cards have also hindered the take-up of digital books

in Lebanon, where banks have locked people out of their accounts. Lebanon is facing a financial crisis that the World Bank says is of a scale usually associated with wars, with more than 80 percent of the population living in poverty.

The local currency has shed more than 90 percent of its value against the dollar on the black market, causing skyrocketing inflation. As a result, the cost of printing and buying books has soared, while the monthly minimum wage remains unchanged at 675,000 pounds, the equivalent nowadays of just \$32.

While this may have translated into more footfall at libraries, it has eaten into booksellers' profits. Lana Halabi, who runs a family-owned bookshop in Beirut's Tariq al-Jadideh neighbourhood, said all new books were priced in dollars and therefore hit by the fluctuating exchange rate. "Book purchases are not a priority" for many Lebanese, the 33-year-old told AFP.

"This has reflected negatively on us and other publishing houses," she added, pointing to a drop in orders at the Halabi bookshop. But in a public library in Beirut's Getawi neighbourhood, demand is on the rise, prompting management to add 300 new covers to their collection in the past two months, said librarian Josiane Badra.

"Books have become very expensive and people can't afford them... especially novels that are in great demand in the region, whether in French or in Arabic," she said. For literature student Aline Daou, the Getawi public library is an indispensable lifeline. "As a literature student, I always need to read," the 21-year-old said. "I prefer to borrow novels from here," she added, explaining that it helps her set aside money to buy books not carried by public libraries.

'Breathing room'

Ali Sabbagh of the Assabil organisation said public

libraries offered people "breathing room", but they were beset by challenges. "We run these libraries in partnership with the Beirut municipality which used to front around 80 percent of operating costs in Lebanese pounds," he said.

The e-banking transactions includes: opening a bank account online for citizens and residents to join become a KFH customer without having to visit the branch, local and telex financial transfers, opening deposits, adding beneficiaries, balance inquiry, cheque book request, requesting financing, opening an account, requesting Al-Kheir Card, and checking the PINs for credit and debit cards, activating new bank cards, reporting a lost credit/debit cards, checking the financing obligations and the number of installments, perusal of investment plans, receiving account balances and deposits summary, along with other wide range of digital services.

KFH has recently launched digital signature service in personal financing products through KFH mobile app or desktop from anywhere without having to visit the branch, instant card issuance within 3 minutes, Live FX Pricing, instant cross-border payments service at KFHTurkey using Ripple's technology and digital Wallet service through smart mobiles and watches which provides advanced and smart digital payment methods according to highly developed security standards in cooperation with Samsung, Fitbit and Garmin.



LEBANON: People work at one of the Lebanese capital Beirut's public libraries, in the Bachoura neighbourhood. In many countries, they are considered a dying breed, but in Lebanon, libraries are being given a new lease on life as the country's economy flatlines. —AFP

The currency devaluation, according to Sabbagh, has meant the value of municipal funding has plummeted. "We are trying as much as possible to reach out to donors that can provide us with the necessary support to continue," Sabbagh told AFP.

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"Relying solely on public funds during this time has become very difficult." International donors, meanwhile, tend to focus on humanitarian projects as opposed to cultural spaces, said Sabbagh. At the Getawi library, fine arts student Valentina Habis said funding should not overlook culture.

"In the midst of economic collapse, we need cultural spaces... places that develop thought and culture, because culture is the basis of society," she said. —AFP

KFH offers 24/7 eservices during holidays

KUWAIT: Kuwait Finance House (KFH) continues to provide its banking services around the clock through a group of various technological and digital tools during the holidays. Most of the banking services are available in several channels around the clock, whether through the bank's website, KFH.com, or via the KFHonline mobile application, or through the KFHGO electronic branches that are spread in many important locations, in addition to the KFH accounts on social media and many E-service channels as per the latest financial technology and digital platforms.

KFH Go branch is considered a new electronic channel that helps transfer normal customer transactions to an innovative automated branch that provides capabilities that allow customers to benefit from highly efficient banking services. It includes more than 80% of the services and business provided by the branches in their traditional sense, which makes KFH Go branches the

ABK announces winner of weekly draw prize

KUWAIT: Al Ahli Bank of Kuwait (ABK) announced Mullaq Hadi Al Temeemi as the winner of KD 10,000 in the Alfouz weekly draw. The draw was held under the supervision of the Ministry of Commerce and Industry yesterday. The Alfouz draw account offers ABK customers the chance to win life-changing rewards. With Alfouz, ABK customers will get a chance to win KD 10,000 in Kuwait's highest single weekly draw and the ultimate grand prize of KD 5,000 monthly additional income for 10 years. Both new and existing ABK customers can benefit from this opportunity, with a minimum account balance of KD 100 only. The next draw winner announcement will be on Monday, 7th March 2022.

AI Shall Weekly Economic Report

Kuwait's real estate deals reached 471 this month

KUWAIT: The latest released data by the Ministry of Justice -Real Estate Registration and Authentications Department- (after excluding the crafts activity and the coastal strip system) indicate a drop in real estate market liquidity during January 2022 versus December 2021 liquidity. Total value of contracts and agencies traded during January was at KD 243.3 million, a -17.3% decrease than its counterpart value in December 2021 which scored KD 294.3 million, also lower by -6.2% when compared with January 2021 that totalled KD 259.7 million.

Trading during January 2022 was distributed between KD 238.7 million to contracts and KD 4.8 million to agencies. Number of real estate deals in this month reached 471 deals of which 456 contracts and 15 agencies. The highest share in real estate deals went to Ahmadi Governorate by 193 deals representing about 41% of the total number of real estate deals. Hawally Governorate came second by 82 deals and representing 17.4%. The lowest share went to Jahra Governorate by 18 deals, representing 3.8% of the total.

Value of private residential activity reached KD144.1 million, lower by -28.2% compared with KD 200.6 million in December 2021. Its contribution percentage decreased to 59.2% of the total real estate trading versus 68.2% in December 2021. The monthly average value for private residence trading in the last 12 months was at KD 242 million. This means that January trading value is lower by -40.4% than the average. The number of deals for this activity decreased to 378 deals versus 464 deals in December 2021. Accordingly, the average value of private residence activity deal scored KD 381 thousand versus KD 432 thousand in December 2021, indicating a -11.8% decline.

Value of investment housing activity scored KD 62.3 million, lower by -10.6% from KD 69.7 million in December 2021. Its contribution to total liquidity increased to 25.6% versus 23.7% in December 2021. Monthly trading average value of investment housing during 12 months scored KD 66.1 million. This means that trading value during January 2022 was lower by -5.7% compared with 12 months' average. In addition, its deals dropped slightly to 86 deals compared with 88

deals in December 2021. Therefore, the average value per deal for investment housing scored KD 725 thousand versus KD 792 thousand in December 2021, i.e. -8.5% decrease.

Commercial activity trading value rose to KD 35.6 million, or by 81.6% compared with KD 19.6 million in December 2021. Its percentage out of total real estate trading value rose to 14.6% compared with 6.7% in December 2021. Average value of commercial activity trading in 12 months scored KD 17 million. This means that total trading value in January was higher by 109.4% than the last 12 months' average. Its deals totalled to 6 deals compared with 5 deals for December 2021. The average value per deal for January 2022 scored KD 5.9 million versus KD 3.9 million average for December 2021, a 51.3% increase. Moreover, a single deal went to the warehousing activity valued at KD 1.4 million during January 2022.

When comparing total January 2022 trading with January 2021, we note that liquidity decreased in the real estate market from KD 259.7 million to KD 243.3 million, i.e. a -6.2% decline as mentioned previously. The drop included the liquidity of the private residential by -26.7%, while the commercial activity rose by 166.5% and the investment housing activity by 29.4%.

Performance of Boursa Kuwait

February performance was more active compared to January performance, where the average daily trading value increased alongside positive performances regarding all indices. The Premier Market index increased by 3.8%, the Main Market index by 4.0% and the All-Share Market index (reflective of both previously mentioned markets) rose by 3.9%, also the BK Main 50 index rose by 4.1%.

Boursa Kuwait's total liquidity rose during February versus January, reaching KD 1.299 billion compared with KD 1.289 billion in January. The average daily trading value in February was KD 72.2 million, increasing by 17.5% above January's average of KD 61.4 million. Traded value during the first 2 months of 2022 (39 working days) totaled to KD 2.588 billion, with an average daily trading value of KD 66.4 million. This represents an increase of 50.1% over the same average for the same period of 2021, which stood at KD 44.2 million, this also represents an increase of 19.4% over the same average for the entire previous year at KD 55.6 million.

Liquidity trends since the beginning of the year indicate that half of the listed companies represent only 2%

of total liquidity, of which 50 companies contributing to 0.4% of that liquidity and 9 companies without any trading. As for the small liquidity companies, 12 companies whose market value equals 9.3% of all listed companies' value, captured about 20.3% of total market liquidity. This means that major liquidity activity is still deprived in almost half of the listed companies. On the contrary, liquidity favors companies with small market value even if that direction lowers. The liquidity distribution between the two markets during

February 2022 was as follows:

Premier Market (26 Companies)

The Premier market contributed to KD 827.4 million or 63.7% of Boursa's liquidity, with half of its companies capturing 79.4% of its liquidity and 50.6% of total Boursa's liquidity, while the other half represented 20.6% of its liquidity. Liquidity concentration rate in the Premier Market reached a high level, as 8 companies made up 64.8% of its liquidity. During the first 2 months of the current year, the Premier Market captured 62.5% of total Boursa's liquidity.

Monthly Report of the State's Financial Administration Accounts

In its monthly follow-up report to the State's financial administration until the end of January 2022 as published on its website, the Ministry of Finance mentions that total collected revenues until the end of the 10th month of the current fiscal year 2021/2022 reached KD 14.491 billion, or 32.6% higher than total estimated revenues of KD 10.929 billion for the entire current fiscal year.

In details, actual oil revenues until 31/01/2022 reached KD 12.844 billion, 40.7% higher than the estimated oil revenues for the entire current fiscal year in the amount of KD 9.127 billion and 88.6% out of total collected revenues. Average Kuwaiti oil price scored US\$ 75.1 per barrel for the first 10 months of the current fiscal year 2021/2022. In addition, an amount of KD 1.646 billion has been collected from non-oil revenues, a monthly average of KD 164.619 million. The budget estimate for the entire current fiscal year is KD 1.802 billion which means that what has been received, if it continues at this rate will be more by KD 173.342 million than the estimated amount for the entire current fiscal year.

Gulf Bank Financial Results 2021

The Gulf Bank announced its results for the fiscal year ending December 31 2021, which indicate that the bank achieved profits (after tax deduction) by KD

42.1 million, rising by KD 13.3 million or by 46.2% compared with KD 28.8 million in 2020. The rise in net profits was due to total provisions decreasing by a greater value than the decrease in the operating profit. Where the operating profit dropped by KD 2.5 million or by 2.6%, while total provisions dropped by KD 16.4 million or by 25.7%.

In details, total operating income of the bank increased by KD 11.8 million or by 7.4%, to reach KD 170.1 million compared with KD 158.3 million in 2020. This was achieved due to the increase in net interest income by KD 7.5 million or by 6%, reaching KD 132.3 million versus KD 124.8 million. In addition, item of net fees & commissions increased by KD 3.3 million or by 13.6%.

Total operating expenses rose by KD 14.3 million or by 22.3%, reaching KD 78.2 million compared with KD 63.9 million in 2020. That was due to the rise of staff expenses and other expenses by a total of KD 15.2 million, while occupancy costs and depreciation declined by KD 932 thousand. Percentage of total operating expenses to total operating income reached 46% compared with 40.4%. Total provision declined by KD 16.4 million or by 25.7% as mentioned previously, reaching KD 47.6 million versus KD 64.1 million. Therefore, the bank's net profit margin rose to 22.6% compared with 13.8% in 2020.

The financial statements show that the bank's total assets increased by KD 443.2 million or by 7.3%, to reach KD 6.556 billion versus KD 6.113 billion in 2020. Loans and advances to customers rose by KD 441.5 million or by 10.7%, reaching KD 4.558 billion (69.5% of total assets) versus KD 4.117 billion (67.3% of total assets) in 2020. Percentage of total loans and advances to customers, to total deposits and other balances was at 81.8% compared with 77.8% in 2020. While cash and cash equivalents declined by KD 163.4 million or by 14.8%, reaching KD 942.5 million (14.4% of total assets) versus KD 1.106 billion (18.1% of total assets) in 2020.

Weekly Performance of Boursa Kuwait

The performance of Boursa Kuwait for last week was more active, where the traded value, traded volume, number of transactions and the general index (AI Shall Index) increased. AI Shall Index (value weighted) closed at 676.9 points as of last Thursday, showing an increase by 2.5 points or by 0.4% compared with its level last week. While it remained higher by 54.1 points or by 8.7% compared with the end of 2021.

Business

Risk 'high' for South Africa's economic recovery: Finance minister

Economic growth is projected to be 2.1 percent this year

CAPE TOWN: South Africa's economic recovery-encumbered by the pandemic, riots, graft and high unemployment-will be difficult, the finance minister of the continent's most industrialised economy warned on Wednesday.

Economic growth is projected to be 2.1 percent this year, dropping to an average of 1.8 percent over the next three years, Enoch Godongwana said as he tabled the government's annual budget statement.

"Our economic recovery has been uneven and risks remain high," he said. "We must proceed with caution." Restrictions imposed last year and in 2020 to control the spread of COVID-19 brought most economic activity to a standstill and plunged millions of people into unemployment.

With more than 3.6 million COVID cases and nearly 99,000 fatalities, South Africa is the continent's hardest-hit country. Godongwana said his budget was aimed at striking "a critical balance between saving lives and livelihoods, while supporting inclusive



Enoch Godongwana

growth". South Africa was also rocked by riots in July last year which wiped more than \$3 billion off the economy's books after businesses were looted in the two most populous provinces of Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal.

Inequality

The unrest, sparked by the jailing of ex-president Jacob Zuma for refusing to appear before graft investigators, threw millions more people out of work. Unemployment rates range from 35 percent of the general population to 65 percent among young people. Analysts say unemployment is a ticking time bomb in South Africa, which attracts many economic migrants from other African countries. The country has in recent weeks experienced a wave of protests against the employment of foreign migrants in low-skilled and menial positions.

Nearly half of the population of 59 million in one of the world's most unequal countries are now receiving monthly payouts due to poverty and joblessness. "While tackling inequality is necessary, it will become increasingly challenging considering that South Africa already spends 3.3 percent of its GDP on social expenditure," said Hannes van den Berg, an analyst at financial advisory group Consult.

He also cautioned against creating dependency on social grants rather than creating employment. The government will set aside some 76 billion rand (\$5 billion) for job creation programmes in the medium term.

Government debt is forecast to climb to 5.4 trillion rand in the medium term from the current level of 4.3 trillion rand, Godongwana said, calling the debt burden "a matter of serious concern". The cost of servicing the debt annually is more than the budget allocated to such key ministries as health and police.

Godongwana promised to stabilise debt and narrow the consolidated budget deficit from 5.7 percent of GDP to 4.2 percent of GDP by the year 2025. Massive state corruption and cronyism under Zuma, laid bare in a series of reports since January, have played havoc with growth forecasts.

"Corruption is a major blight on our country," said Godongwana. "It has lowered our economic growth potential, made us fiscally more vulnerable, and severely weakened the capability of the state." — AFP

US home ownership jumps, but race gap widens: Data report

NEW YORK: US home ownership jumped at an historic rate in 2020, but a racial gap widened as more Black households were priced out, according to a report released Wednesday. Low interest rates helped fuel a 1.3 percent rise in home ownership in 2020, the biggest annual increase since the US Census Bureau began tracking the data in 1960, according to a report by the National Association of Realtors (NAR).

But it showed the persistence of a racial ownership gap in the United States that the report says has actually widened as home prices have soared. Home ownership of Black Americans was 43.4 percent in 2020, below the 44.2 percent in 2010, although it rose 1.4 percent in 2020 from 2019.

That increase is below that of white and Hispanic households. "This is the only race/ethnic group whose homeownership rate is lower than 10 years ago," the NAR report said. "As a result

the home ownership gap between White and Black households became even larger in 2020."

Home prices have soared nearly 30 percent since 2019, which means a typical home is about \$80,000 more expensive than before the coronavirus pandemic, a reflection of tight inventories, NAR said. Among other groups, 72.1 of white households owned homes in 2020, compared with 61.7 percent of Asian households and 51.1 percent of Hispanic households.

The difference in home ownership has been seen as a critical component of the persistent US racial wealth gap highlighted by the Biden administration. However, legislative efforts to directly address racial inequity have repeatedly faced legal challenges in the Biden years on programs such as restaurant aid and support for farmers.

The NAR report said Black Americans have the highest mortgage denial rates, saying that "low income seems to be the main reason" for the rejections. But the report also pointed to survey results that nearly half of African-American households were steered away from specific neighborhoods, a similar level to that experienced by Latinos and Asians. Black and Asian households also said they encountered more strict lending requirements due to discrimination, the NAR report said. — AFP

Meta lays out moves being made to build the metaverse

SAN FRANCISCO: Meta chief Mark Zuckerberg on Wednesday talked up his company's efforts to build the metaverse, an immersive virtual world he has billed as the Facebook parent's future. Doubts have swirled about whether the major metaverse investments will pay off for Meta, which changed its name from Facebook last year to highlight its shifting focus — though critics claim it was to distract from negative media reports.

Meanwhile, formidable rivals such as Apple, Google and Microsoft seem poised to compete with Meta on the new virtual terrain. The metaverse is a 3D virtual world where people will be able to interact using sensors, head gear and other gadgets.

Meta's early metaverse platform, called Horizon Worlds, already allows people to socialize virtually while represented by avatars. "The kinds of experiences you'll have in the metaverse are beyond what's possible today," Zuckerberg said as he opened a conference aiming to offer a glimpse inside Meta's development labs.

"That's going to require advances in a whole range of areas from hardware devices to software for building and exploring worlds." Artificial intelligence is key to unlocking those advances, according to Zuckerberg, who noted that future platforms will need to be able to understand virtual worlds, and provide translation services for the many languages used in them.

Hit global video games such as Fortnite, Minecraft, and Roblox, which run on traditional gaming platforms, are seen as precursors to the metaverse. But rivals are not letting Meta's claim to the metaverse go unchallenged. Google, which stumbled early with augmented reality glasses, has a team of engineers, designers, and scientists "building the foundations for great immersive computing," according to an online job posting.

Apple, meanwhile, has bought start-ups specializing in the field and is rumored to be working on its own mixed-reality headset. Microsoft, a video game industry powerhouse through its Xbox system and titles such as "Minecraft," has made a \$69 billion deal to buy Activision Blizzard, mentioning the metaverse as part of its motivation for the merger.

Meta's stock price has plummeted since its most recent quarterly earnings showed growth slipping and its revenue taking a major hit due to Apple's changes to its ad targeting rules. In addition to Facebook, Meta's products include Instagram, WhatsApp, Messenger, and virtual reality headset Oculus. On Wednesday, Meta shares sank lower than \$200 for the first time in nearly two years. — AFP



شركة الصفاء للاستثمار
AL SAFAT INVESTMENT COMPANY

KUWAIT BOURSA WEEKLY REPORT

WEEK ENDED ON 24 FEBRUARY 2022

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No.	Ticker	Sector	Price Movement & Performance										Valuation Multiples *				
			Open Price	Close Price	Week High	Week Low	Range	Volume	WTD Change	WTD %	YTD %	Support Level	Resistance Level	P/E	P/B	Yield	Beta
101	National Bank of Kuwait	Banking	1053	1055	1057	1036	21	27,135,961	-3	-0.28%	5.82%	1052	1060	22.8	2.21	2.8%	1.26
102	Gulf Bank	Banking	308	309	314	305	9	28,455,165	0	0.00%	10.75%	303	310	24.8	1.44	2.2%	1.13
106	Kuwait International Bank	Banking	226	230	234	225	9	56,744,410	3	1.32%	5.50%	228	233	NM	1.00	1.7%	1.01
107	Burgan Bank	Banking	275	272	275	268	7	15,631,773	-4	-1.45%	8.37%	271	275	20.6	1.24	1.8%	1.05
108	Kuwait Finance House	Banking	935	944	945	924	21	49,178,108	11	1.18%	13.46%	938	945	37.0	4.13	1.3%	1.40
109	Boubyan Bank	Banking	819	823	824	810	14	4,095,870	3	0.37%	4.18%	822	826	60.8	4.75	0.6%	1.04
204	National Investments	Financial Services	329	359	387	320	67	54,595,764	33	10.12%	63.93%	343	365	11.4	1.52	2.8%	1.26
205	Kuwait Projects	Financial Services	164	194	195	162	33	60,704,693	31	19.02%	36.62%	179	196	44.2	2.40	1.9%	0.60
252	Al Imtiaj Investment	Financial Services	135	133	136	132	4	29,291,603	-4	-2.92%	12.71%	132	137	NM	0.81	6.4%	1.00
401	Kuwait Real Estate	Real Estate	174	170	175	164	11	27,152,103	-5	-2.86%	-5.03%	166	174	26.2	1.23	0.0%	0.97
413	Mabaneer	Real Estate	820	848	849	820	29	6,067,155	28	3.41%	6.94%	841	857	18.8	1.93	1.7%	1.10
501	National Industries	Financial Services	289	287	290	283	7	12,202,210	-3	-1.03%	1.41%	284	292	5.6	1.03	0.0%	1.44
505	Gulf Cable	Industrials	1168	1473	1513	1140	373	9,767,716	305	26.11%	69.12%	1450	1513	52.0	1.49	3.4%	0.95
514	Boubyan Petrochemical	Basic Materials	945	934	959	925	34	4,018,177	-13	-1.37%	9.62%	915	935	26.5	2.20	5.7%	0.74
526	Al Qurain	Basic Materials	400	391	400	386	14	52,111,095	-9	-2.25%	12.68%	388	393	NM	1.06	3.9%	0.75
603	Agility	Industrials	1,035	1016	1,039	981	58	22,488,559	-19	-1.84%	7.51%	1005	1016	2.3	1.10	0.9%	1.48
605	Zain	Telecommunications	629	620	629	607	22	16,241,056	-10	-1.59%	4.20%	617	621	14.2	2.26	3.7%	1.34
623	Human Soft Holding	Industrials	3,690	3,665	3,703	3,602	101	1,928,085	-31	-0.84%	13.68%	3585	3704	8.0	4.00	10.9%	0.50
642	ALAFCO	Industrials	228	223	230	220	10	11,864,546	-6	-2.62%	2.29%	222	226	NM	0.71	0.0%	0.88
654	JAZEERA	Consumer Discretionary	1,770	1,727	1,839	1,725	114	3,529,398	-73	-4.06%	33.88%	1680	1770	NM	16.47	1.9%	0.74
818	Ahli United Bank	Banking	293	299	308	291	17	122,503,358	5	1.70%	7.55%	297	308	20.5	2.31	4.0%	1.15
821	Warba Bank	Banking	277	275	278	270	8	15,843,419	-3	-1.08%	0.36%	275	278	20.9	2.72	0.0%	1.00
823	Mezzan Holding	Consumer Staples	583	589	595	580	15	8,320,071	6	1.03%	0.00%	583	590	18.4	1.66	2.9%	0.43
824	Integrated Holding	Industrials	390	384	397	371	26	4,032,887	-9	-2.29%	2.30%	380	385	NM	1.61	0.0%	0.47
826	Shamal Az-Zour	Utilities	222	221	224	220	4	4,512,841	-2	-0.90%	-3.07%	220	224	18.8	3.92	4.1%	0.62
827	Boursa Kuwait	Financial Services	2,295	2,370	2,483	2,211	272	2,405,368	84	3.67%	17.33%	2300	2439	30.3	8.43	2.7%	0.67

* As of end of week closing



Irish actress Catherine Clinch poses on the red carpet upon her arrival for the opening ceremony of the Dublin International Film Festival, in Dublin. — AFP photos



Irish director Colm Bairread (left) and Irish producer Cleona Ni Chrualaoi (right) pose on the red carpet upon their arrival for the opening ceremony of the Dublin International Film Festival, in Dublin.

DUBLIN FILM FESTIVAL RETURNS AFTER BUMPER YEAR FOR IRISH FILM

The Dublin International Film Festival, forced online last year, opened Wednesday with stars of the feted Irish-language "An Cailin Ciuin" ("The Quiet Girl") taking to the red carpet in the centre of the Irish capital. Twelve-year-old Catherine Clinch, who plays the film's eponymous quiet girl and grew up only a few kilometers (miles) away in a south Dublin suburb beamed as she spoke with fans and posed for photographs. She told AFP all the attention was "pretty crazy", adding that acting for the very first time in the film, she had "never expected anything this much".

The gala screening marks the festival's return after it moved to online-only events in 2021, when Ireland was under some of Europe's longest and strictest coronavirus restrictions. The opening of the festival, which runs until March 6, follows on the heels of what has proven to be, in spite of

COVID restrictions, a record-breaking year for Ireland's screen industries. February figures from Screen Ireland, the national film and television agency, showed a record-breaking 500-million-euro (565-million-dollar) investment in the Irish economy across television, movie and documentary production in 2021, a 40-percent increase on a pre-pandemic record set in 2019.

The dramatic rise in virtually every sector has been attributed to increased investment from Screen Ireland and the government during the pandemic. International production, which grew by 45 percent in 2019, was driven by projects like Disney's blockbuster film "Disenchanted", starring Amy Adams, which was filmed on location in Dublin and Wicklow and scheduled for release this year.

Spending on Irish television drama

increased by 40 percent from 2019, bearing such fruits as the ITV/Virgin Media television drama "Holding", based on the debut novel by talk show host and actor Graham Norton, also due to air later this year. The growth in Irish cinema has made itself felt at awards ceremonies around the world last year, with Screen Ireland-funded film, television and animation projects picking up over 35 major international award nominations, by the agency's own count.

"An Cailin Ciuin"-part of Ireland's burgeoning local film scene which grew 52 percent on 2019 — was one of the winners. The feature, which tells the story of a young girl sent to live with foster parents in rural Ireland, won two honors after it premiered at the Berlin International Film Festival earlier this month. "We're blown away by how the film has been received so far. Just to get into Berlin is a

huge achievement. To have won the grand prix in our section was kind of a dream come true," the film's Director Colm Bairread told AFP.

"After the two years that we've had, it just feels like a total privilege to be able to present our film to a full home audience," he added. "There's been so much uncertainty for so long." "Despite immense challenges, the producers, directors, writers, cast and crew continued creating world-class stories," Desiree Finnegan, Screen Ireland's chief executive said in a statement. She added that government support had played an "essential role in the industry's recovery and subsequent growth, generating a substantial contribution to the economy". — AFP

Dog kennel hit by meteorite sells at auction

A Christie's auction of rare meteorites Wednesday sold a rock from space that narrowly missed a German Shepherd when it smashed into his kennel in Costa Rica. But the offer of the third-largest piece of Mars on Earth failed to make an impact at the auction house's annual sale of unusual meteorites.

The buyer paid \$21,420 for the three-by-1.5 inch (eight-by-four centimeter) carbonaceous chondrite stone that landed in the garden of dog Roky's owner's home in Aguas Zarcas in April 2019. The wood and tin doghouse itself, complete with a seven-inch hole marking where the meteorite punctured the roof, sold separately for \$44,100, Christie's said.

That was much less than the pre-sale estimate of between \$200,000 and \$300,000. A bidder paid \$189,000 for a chunk of lunar rock that was discovered in Morocco in 2007, below pre-sale estimates of up to \$300,000.

Another slice of the Moon-found in the Sahara desert in Mauritania fetched \$69,300 during the two-week online sale that ended Wednesday. It was a disappointing auction for Mars, though. The 20-pound (9.1 kg) Martian rock had been priced at between \$500,000 and \$800,000 but failed to find a buyer. — AFP



Milan
Fashion Week



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

Lifestyle | Features



This picture shows a piece of bread shrouded with cheese by robot built by the start-up Workshop 4.0 to cook Swiss fondue.



(From left) Project manager Ludovic Aymon and co-creator Nicolas Fontaine pose next to Bouebot, a robot built by the start-up Workshop 4.0 to cook Swiss fondue.



This picture shows a robot built by the start-up Workshop 4.0 to cook Swiss fondue.

Swiss fondue robot out to cause a stir in Paris

Switzerland's national dish is fondue, a simmering pot of heartwarming melted cheese—that can now be prepared, stirred up and served by a robot, thanks to some hi-tech wizardry. A Swiss team has been beaver away on Bouebot, the robotic creation putting a futuristic twist on an Alpine tradition. Outside in the Rhone glacial valley bisecting Switzerland's southern Wallis region, crisp mountain air blows down from the glistening snowy peaks. But inside Workshop 4.0's headquarters in Sierre, below the Crans-Montana ski resort, the air is hot from Bouebot's whirring servers and thick with the smell of melted cheese.

The robot is set to make its grand debut at the Paris International Agricultural Show, one of the world's major food production trade fairs, which runs from February 26 to March 6. Bouebot is for demonstration purposes only and is far from appearing in kitchenware stores. The entire project cost 250,000 to 300,000 Swiss francs (\$270,000 to \$325,000, 235,000 to 285,000 euros), with the robot arm alone costing 80,000 francs.

'Cheese passion'

Workshop 4.0 co-director Nicolas Fontaine, 30, who wears a black baseball cap reading "cheese passion", said Bouebot had been nearly two years in the making. "We wanted to do a... project that combined innovation with Swiss tradition, and fondue was the perfect choice," Fontaine told AFP. "For the

Swiss, fondue is emblematic. It's something very emotional too because it's part of our identity, our know-how.

"Fondue is something convivial... it's a nice opportunity to draw people in to talk about robotics and how it can be used." Whether at home, in a restaurant or in an Alpine cabin, sharing a fondue remains the heart of Swiss social life. Bouebot is named after the bouebos: teenage boys who spent the summer up in the mountain chalets, helping herders while they took care of making cheese.

Grate, stir, eat, repeat

Pivoting on six different axes, Bouebot swings into action. It glugs the right amount of white wine into the "caquelon" pot, then places it under the cheese grater. The classic fondue mix is called a half-and-half-an even amount of Vacherin Fribourgeois and Gruyere cheese.

The project's technical manager Ludovic Aymon, using his control pad, manoeuvres the robot arm down towards each cheese triangle, which is lifted up by creating a vacuum on the top. After shearing off the rind on a circular blade, it starts swiping the underside down the grater.

Back on the heater, Bouebot does some vigorous figure-of-eight stirring as the cheese melts, then wipes off the spoon and sprinkles in some pepper. It then picks up a metal spike, pierces a piece of bread, swipes it around the caquelon before placing it in a holder for fondue-lovers to try before the gooey cheese drips down.



These pictures show a robot built by the start-up Workshop 4.0 cooking a Swiss fondue.



Aymon said the biggest challenge was to get a precision mechanical robot to cope with imprecise organic material. The cheese wedges are not perfectly flat, nor the same height, while Vacherin is much softer than Gruyere. However, there is no chance of the traditional duo being changed for more robot-friendly cheeses—not if the creators want to stay alive, jokes Aymon.

Rise of the robots

When seeing Bouebot at work, some

onlookers are thrilled by the future possibilities for such technology, while others worry about machines encroaching into the human sphere. "The effect I find the most interesting is fear... that fear of being replaced by something more powerful," Aymon told AFP. "Robotics should not be to the detriment of human beings. It should help humans. "It could help someone cook in the future. It shows that it could be done, for people who can't do it themselves."

With each run-through, Aymon spots

tiny modifications to make, requiring yet more slabs from the cheese-stuffed fridge. "I can't just work with a 3D simulation, like I could with lots of industrial processes. I have to do real tests," the 35-year-old said. And with every fondue made, the end result must be eaten quickly. "I think I'll never be sick of fondue, but there are times when I just can't stand the smell of cheese in here any longer," Aymon said. — AFP

Video game developers cash in on Africa's booming mobile market

Two manga-like avatars lock swords against a comic strip backdrop, as Alexander Poone explains the different worlds of "The Traveller"—a video game based on a graphic novel. The 27-year-old from Johannesburg is showcasing his creation at the annual Africa Games Week taking place in Cape Town. Organizers of the continent's largest gathering of game developers aim to help the gaming industry meet demand for African-made content and boost the potential of local talent. Most of the games on the market are from America, Europe and Japan, but African content is negligible, said Poone.

There's "a lot of content that is new and not been fully explored yet," said Poone, founder of Dream Shards. The hybrid event opened on Wednesday and will run through Friday, attracting some 2,500 developers, coders, designers, investors, and publishers, with 600 of them attending in-person. Event co-founder Nick Hall said a lot of publishers say they want African-made content.

'One billion gamers'

"There's a huge opportunity. Now is...the best time really to be making games or trying to get into the games industry because we're hoping in the next few years we're going to see a massive spike in growth," he said. Burdened with poverty and infrastructure problems such as reliable telecoms and electricity supply, Africa traditionally lagged far behind other continents in gaming. But recent years have seen an extraordinary boom—gamers in sub-Saharan Africa increased to 186 million in 2021 from 77 million in 2015, according to a study by game analytics company Newzoo.

Of those 186 million, 63 million pay for games as the continent embraces digital currencies. Nine-five percent of the market is on mobiles, reflecting the continent's improved Internet access and affordable smartphones. Previously, many Africans got their virtual fix on computers in internet cafes. Africa, along with China and India, is expected to surpass a billion gamers, and the continent is



Two participants play a popular game, with fish visible in a tank in the background, at Africa Games Week. — AFP photos

home to industry's "last untapped consumer audience", Hall said.

He predicts that Africa could reach one billion users in the next five years. To cash in on Africa's gaming boom, large developers need to work with local content creators, such as streamers and YouTubers, Hall said. South Africa is by far the continent's largest gaming market with 40 percent of its population playing, followed by Ghana and Nigeria. And a lot more are upcoming.

'New El Dorado'

In the Central African Republic, Teddy Kossoko founded Masseka Game Studio, which creates games telling stories of African cultures and history. He is highly optimistic despite lacking resources to train youngsters to become professional gamers. "For me, the future of this industry, and not only this industry, is in Africa—it's the new El Dorado," he said. "Centuries ago there was a gold rush in America. Today, I believe this gold rush is happening here on the African continent, and we (Africans) have to be first".

Others developers are making games not just for fun, but for social causes. Jay Shapiro of Usiku Games, a Kenya-based social impact gaming company, created Seedballs, which helps replenish Kenya's lost forests in the semi-arid north of the country. Kenya this year hopes by end of this year to have increased its forest cover from seven percent to 10 percent. Shapiro says the game is helping achieve that goal.

"We created a mobile game for them when you fly a plane, and instead of the usual dropping bombs and trying to destroy things, you're dropping seeds and trying to plant trees," he said. At the end of the game, players are congratulated on the numbers of virtual trees they have planted, and are asked if they would like to turn those into real trees. They are urged a donation of one Kenyan shilling (just 0.008 of a dollar) per virtually planted tree. "It's the only example we've seen of actually using gaming to plant real trees," Shapiro said. — AFP

'Rust' shooting victim husband 'angry' as Baldwin denies blame

The husband of the "Rust" crew member shot dead by Alec Baldwin on a movie set said he holds the US actor responsible and was "so angry" to see him denying blame. Baldwin was holding a Colt gun during a rehearsal for the low-budget Western in New Mexico in October when it discharged a live round, killing cinematographer Halyna Hutchins. Matt Hutchins told NBC's Today program "the idea that the person holding the gun, causing it to discharge, is not responsible, is absurd to me." "But gun safety was not the only problem on that set. There were a number of industry standards that were not practiced and there's multiple responsible parties," he said in an excerpt, released ahead of the full interview yesterday.

Baldwin, who was the star and a producer on "Rust," has said he was told the gun contained no live ammunition, had been instructed by Hutchins to point the gun in her direction, and did not pull the trigger. In December, Baldwin told ABC that he does not feel guilty for Hutchins' death. "I feel that someone is responsible for what happened and I can't say who that is. But I know it's not me," said Baldwin. Asked about Baldwin's interview, Matt Hutchins said: "Watching him, I just felt so angry."

"I was just so angry to see him talk about her death so publicly, in such a detailed way, and then to not accept any responsibility after having just described killing her." Baldwin's lawyers did not immediately respond to an AFP request for comment. Last week, Matt Hutchins filed a lawsuit against Baldwin and other "Rust" producers claiming "substantial" damages for his wife's wrongful death. — AFP



In this file photo actor Alec Baldwin attends the 'Exploring the Arts' 20th anniversary Gala at Hammerstein Ballroom in New York City. — AFP



Participants play games at Africa Games Week.

Sports

KFH opens registration for KFH's Obstacles Challenge

KD 6,000 for first positions and valuable medals for all

KUWAIT: Kuwait Finance House (KFH) has opened the door for registration in the KFH Obstacles Challenge in collaboration with Suffix Event Management Co. to be held tomorrow 26/2/2022 at Marina Beach. KFH indicated that this competition comes as part of the event series held by the bank during the year to support youth and sports and affirm the bank's role in social responsibility.

KFH revealed that this race shall be 5 km long and obstacles shall be at different heights for participants. The competition shall be available for the youth category (men) +16 years and participants shall be divided into 4 different categories: First category: 16 - 24 years; Second Category: 25 - 34 years; Third Category: 35 - 44 years; Fourth category: 45 years and above.

Registration method

KFH shall present valuable prizes to the winners in this challenge as part of its support to sports and youth. The first three winners "at all categories and participants level" shall receive prizes worth KD 6000 ie KD 3000 for first position, KD 2000 for second position and KD 1000 for the third

position. The first three winners in each category shall receive a trophy and a medal while all participants reaching the finish line shall receive valuable medals.

Regarding registration method, KFH emphasized that registration shall be available for participants through KFH website www.kfh.com or the website of Suffix



Participants shall receive required equipments

Event Management Co., www.suffix.events. Also, there will be other registration channels which shall be announced later through KFH social media channels @kfhGroup.

Each participant in the race shall receive all equipment required for the race includ-

ing a special bag which shall carry the participant No. and the race official shirt. As KFH is keen on conducting a perfect organization of the event each participant shall be given an electronic chip to authenticate the start and finish timings and register the results accurately.

During the signing ceremony of the strategic partnership, KFH Assistant Sponsorships & CSR Manager - Abdulaziz Deyab said that KFH is keen on supporting sport and youth initiatives as part of its strategy to focus on youth and part of its integrated sustainability strategy. Deyab noted that this event which is titled "Self-Challenge" is the biggest event of its kind in Kuwait as it fulfills youth aspirations in the sporting field.

He indicated that there will be a considerable participation in the competition as KFH has received, on its social media channels, several inquiries about registration and participation in the competition. On the other hand, Project Development Officer at Suffix Event Management Co. Ahmed Al-Tawala expressed his delight and pleasure with KFH trust in this major collaboration. He added that such events reflect KFH keen-



Abdulaziz Deyab and Ahmed Al-Tawala

ness to support sports and youth and its belief in social service and the benefit of all segments and categories of society.

Al-Tawala reiterated that the cooperation between Suffix and KFH is 5 years old, during which several sport and health

events were held with the participation of thousands of youths. He emphasized the significance of continuing this fruitful cooperation to achieve further successes that would increase society's sport and health awareness.

Ostapenko downs Krejckova in Doha to reach quarters

DOHA: Jelena Ostapenko continued her excellent form by brushing aside second seed Barbora Krejckova to reach the Qatar Open quarter-finals on Wednesday, while top seed Aryna Sabalenka eased through. Former French Open champion Ostapenko, who won the title in Dubai last week, cruised to a 6-3, 6-2 victory to set up a last-eight tie with Garbine Muguruza, who thrashed Madison Brengle 6-0, 6-2. Ostapenko, who dropped out of the world's top 50 last year, has won eight straight matches, including five against Grand Slam winners.

The 24-year-old is closing in on a return to the top 10, having climbed to 13th in the rankings ahead of this week. She was far too strong for world number three and reigning Roland Garros champion Krejckova, breaking the Czech's serve five times. Ostapenko is bidding to win a WTA 1,000 tournament for the first time in her career. Third seed Paula Badosa was also knocked out in the last 16, losing 6-2, 6-3 to Coco Gauff. It was the fifth time the 17-year-old Gauff has beaten a top-10 player, but the first since last May.

The American will take on Maria Sakkari for a semi-final spot, after the Greek's 6-4, 7-5 win over Jessica Pegula. Belarusian world number two Sabalenka swept past Swiss player Jil Teichmann 6-2, 6-1 in just 65 minutes. The 2020 Doha champion won 10 of the last 11 games in a dominant performance as she seeks to win her first title since last year's Madrid Open in May. "It was an amazing match, I really played well today," Sabalenka said. "She played well as well, but maybe I was a little bit more lucky today."

Sabalenka will face Iga Swiatek in the next round after the former Roland Garros champion breezed past Daria Kasatkina 6-3, 6-0. World number eight Swiatek has only ever won one hard-court tournament, a low-key event in Adelaide last year. Tunisia's Ons Jabeur is also through after beating Tereza Martincova 6-1, 3-6, 6-3. The eighth seed will play fourth-seeded Estonian Anett Kontaveit in the quarters after her 6-3, 0-6, 6-2 success against Elise Mertens.—AFP

England recall 'full-tilt' Tuilagi for Wales clash

LONDON: England coach Eddie Jones said he planned for Manu Tuilagi to be at "full tilt" after recalling the powerhouse centre for tomorrow's pivotal Six Nations Championship clash against Wales at Twickenham. The injury-plagued Tuilagi returns to midfield after three months out with a torn hamstring for what will be his first Six Nations start in nearly two years. "Manu is a gain-line accumulator, isn't he?," Jones said after naming his side yesterday. "He wins the gain line consistently, draws defenders in which he creates space for other options. He does that better than anyone else in the world when he's at full tilt. "We're planning for him to be at full tilt on Saturday, mate."

Jones has also restored Courtney Lawes as England captain after the Northampton back-row missed the opening two rounds following a concussion suffered on club duty. Lawes, who deputized for Owen Farrell as captain during the Autumn internationals, was set to be England's first-choice skipper this Six Nations after fly-half centre Farrell was ruled out of the entire tournament following ankle surgery. Stand-in captain Tom Curry remains in a loose forward trio also featuring No 8 Alex Dombrandt.

Both England and reigning Six Nations champions Wales' title ambitions are on the line this weekend given they have one win and one defeat apiece from their opening two matches. "They (Tuilagi and Lawes) are both very experienced players, have won big Test matches and understand what's needed for games like the one against Wales," said Jones.—AFP

Zverev's racquet-smashing spree 'dangerous, reckless'

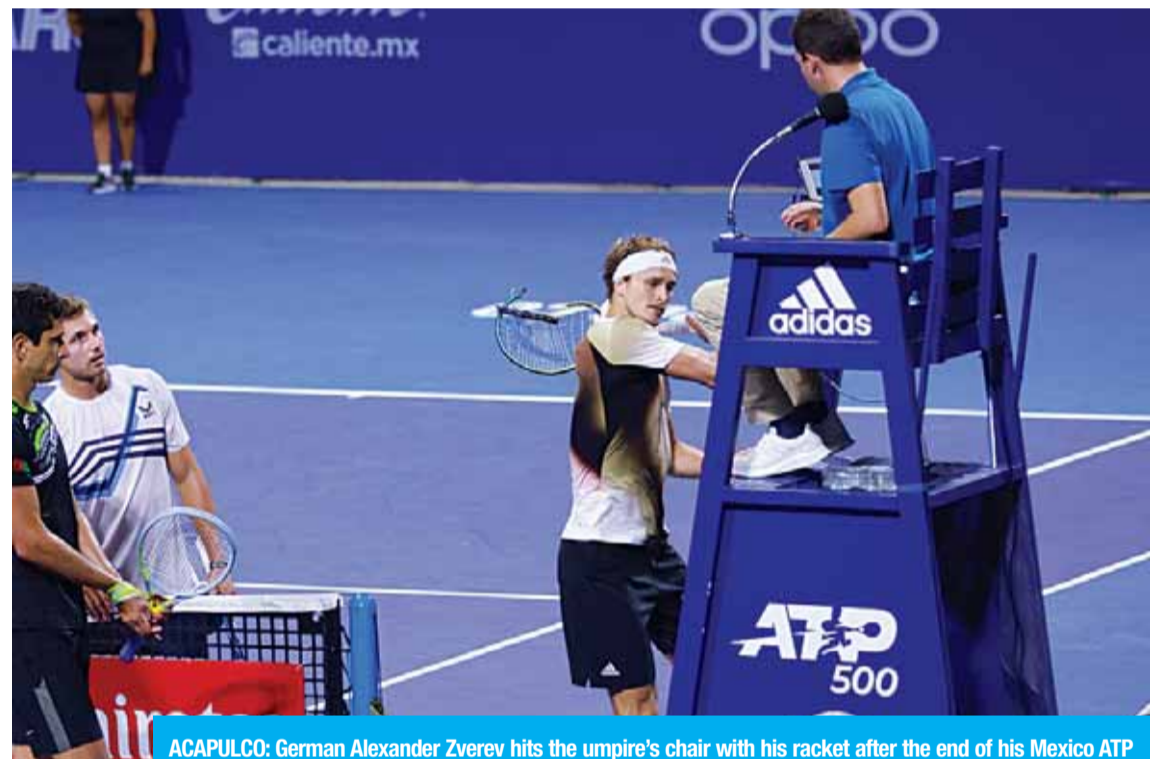
DUBAI: Novak Djokovic has deemed the tour's decision to disqualify Alexander Zverev from the Acapulco tournament as "correct" while Andy Murray described the German's racquet-smashing spree as "dangerous" and "reckless". Djokovic, playing his first tournament since his deportation from Australia, continued his fight to keep his number one ranking with a convincing 6-3, 7-6 (7/2) victory over Karen Khachanov in Dubai to move into his 10th consecutive quarter-final on Wednesday.

The Serb later weighed in on Zverev's violent behavior towards a chair umpire that got him kicked out of the ATP event in Acapulco. Zverev went on a tirade over a disputed call during his doubles opener alongside Marcelo Melo, verbally abusing the official and repeatedly hitting the umpire's chair with his racquet at the end of the match.

The ATP tour announced that Zverev had been "withdrawn" from the tournament "due to unsportsmanlike conduct" and the world number three will not be able to defend his singles title in Acapulco. Zverev later issued a statement regretting his behavior and apologized to the official for his "wrong and unacceptable" outburst. Djokovic, who was disqualified from the US Open in 2020 for accidentally hitting a line judge with a ball, said he expects 24-year-old Zverev to reflect on what he has done.

"I think he said it all in that statement. He realizes that it was a mistake. I understand the frustration. Sometimes on the court you feel in the heat of the battle lots of different emotions," said Djokovic. "I made mistakes in the past where I've had tantrums on the court. I understand what the player is going through. But, of course, I do not justify his actions. He has, with the words that he had in the statement, handled it in a right way."

The ATP has yet to reveal the extent of the fine Zverev will no doubt be handed, and it is unclear whether a suspension is on the table. Djokovic firmly stated he would never encourage the tour to hand out harsh sanctions against a player and said there were many others who have committed similar offences. "I'm never going to encourage ATP disqualifying or fining a player because I'm not in a



ACAPULCO: German Alexander Zverev hits the umpire's chair with his racket after the end of his Mexico ATP Open 500 doubles tennis match in Acapulco, Mexico.—AFP

position to do that. Why would I do that?," said the 20-time major winner.

Battle for No 1 continues

Djokovic must at least reach the semi-finals in Dubai to stand a chance of stopping Daniil Medvedev from replacing him at the summit of the rankings. Medvedev is competing in Acapulco this week and is guaranteed to end Djokovic's world number one reign if he clinches the title. There are other scenarios however that could allow Djokovic to extend his 361-week stay at the top, should Medvedev falter in Mexico, but the Serb must at least make it to the final four in Dubai.

Djokovic followed up his opening round win over Lorenzo Musetti with a fifth victory in six meetings with Russian world number 26 Khachanov. The five-time Dubai champion needed one hour 38 minutes to overcome Khachanov and set up a quarter-final against Czech qualifier Jiri Vesely, who knocked out Spanish eighth seed and last week's Doha champion Roberto Bautista Agut.

"I thought the atmosphere tonight in the stadium was terrific," Djokovic told a capacity crowd in Dubai that included his son

Stefan and his former coach Boris Becker. Earlier, Jannik Sinner stopped Murray from joining the 700 match-wins club as the Italian fourth seed advanced to the Dubai quarter-finals for a second consecutive year with a 7-5, 6-2 success over the former world number one.

The 20-year-old Italian has improved his 2022 record to an impressive 9-1 and next takes on fifth seed Hubert Hurkacz. Murray was asked about Zverev's ejection from Acapulco and did not hold back in assessing the situation. "It was dangerous, reckless," Murray said after his loss. "I've not always acted in the way I would want on the tennis court. I'm certainly not claiming to be an angel," added the Scot, who received a code violation for racquet abuse on Wednesday.

"However, when you're ripping your tennis racquet right next to the umpire multiple times, yeah, you can't be doing that." Second-seeded Andrey Rublev, a champion in Marseille last Sunday, picked up a sixth consecutive victory with a battling 4-6, 6-0, 6-3 performance against South Korea's Kwon Soon-woo to reach his third ATP quarter-final in as many weeks.—AFP

Philipsen sprints to second stage victory in UAE

PARIS: Jasper Philipsen recorded his second victory in this year's UAE Tour in a sprint yesterday, leaving the leader's jersey on the shoulders of Tadej Pogacar. The Belgian, who rides for Alpecin-Fenix and took the opening stage in a sprint on Sunday, was again fastest to the line as the 182-kilometre stage ended in a chaotic bunch finish at Al Marjan Island, in the emirate of Ras al-Khaimah.

Philipsen edged 20-year-old Dutch rookie Olav Kooij of Jumbo-Visma and Irishman Sam Bennett, who rides for Bora. "It was a really fast finish," said Philipsen after crossing the line. "My lead-out man's chain came off in the last kilometer, so it was chaos trying to find a good wheel. It all came out well in the end though." Pogacar, who rides for the home team UAE, collected a two-second bonus during the stage to double his lead over Italian Filippo Ganna of Ineos.

"I saw the opportunity to take some seconds in the intermediate sprint and took it," said the Slovenian. "I had a puncture today but I didn't panic, it happens sometimes," he said. "The team was perfect and I was not stressed." Today, the sixth and



AL MARJAN ISLAND: Alpecin-Fenix's cyclist Jasper Philipsen (2nd- left) crosses the finish line to win stage 5 of the United Arab Emirates cycling tour, from Ras Al-Khaimah Corniche to Al-Marjan Island yesterday.—AFP

penultimate stage is again likely to end in a sprint after a 180-kilometre ride round Dubai. "We'll go for it tomorrow, anything after this is an extra

bonus," said Philipsen, who leads in the green jersey classification by 30 points. The tour ends with a summit finish on Jebel Hafeet tomorrow.—AFP

Sports

Mitrovic breaks Championship goal record, hits 33 in a season

Fulham boost promotion bid

LONDON: Fulham striker Aleksandar Mitrovic broke the Championship goal record as he reached 33 for the season with a double in the leaders' 2-1 win against Peterborough on Wednesday. Mitrovic's first-half penalty was the record breaker and he netted again in the second half to increase Fulham's lead at Craven Cottage. The Serbian has smashed the record, set by Brentford's Ivan Toney when he scored 31 goals last season, with 14 games of the regular league campaign still remaining.

Jack Marriott pulled one back for Peterborough in the closing stages but it was too late for the strugglers to snatch a point. Fulham are nine points ahead of second-placed Bournemouth thanks to a third victory in their last four games. Luke Amos' last-minute goal gave 10-man QPR a 2-1 victory against Blackpool.

Josh Bowler's equalizer with eight minutes remaining cancelled out Jimmy Dunne's first-half

opener at Loftus Road. But Amos clinched QPR's first win in five matches, taking them up to third place, just two points behind Bournemouth, although the Cherries have three games in hand. Sheffield United beat play-off rivals Blackburn 1-0 through a stoppage-time goal from Ben Davies. United defender Charlie Goode was sent off in the second half, but Blackburn's Reda Khadra saw a penalty saved by Wes Foderingham.

Millwall maintained their impressive record at Pride Park with a 2-1 win that dented Derby's hopes of avoiding relegation. First-half goals from Jed Wallace and Tyler Burey put Millwall in command. Jake Cooper's 88th-minute own goal set up a tense finale but Millwall held on for a fifth victory in their last seven visits to Derby. Wayne Rooney's third-bottom team are eight points from safety. Luton edged closer to the play-off places with a 2-1 win at Stoke, while fourth-placed Huddersfield beat Cardiff 2-1. —AFP



Fulham striker Aleksandar Mitrovic

PGA players don't see setbacks ending Saudi league plans

MIAMI: Even after several top stars said they are staying with the US PGA Tour over a proposed Saudi-funded rival, other players do not see the upstart group stopping anytime soon. Dustin Johnson, Bryson DeChambeau, Jon Rahm and Rory McIlroy were among top players who last week expressed their PGA support over the Saudi Golf League plan backed by Greg Norman and LIV Golf Investments.

But US stars Brooks Koepka and Rickie Fowler see the big money and other issues that made the Saudi league tempting not going away quickly. "I think it's going to still keep going,"

four-time major winner Koepka said. "I think there will still be talk. Everyone talks about money. They've got enough of it. "I don't see it backing down. They can just double up and they'll figure it out. They'll get their guys. Somebody will sell out and go to it."

Six-time major winner Phil Mickelson on Tuesday apologized for comments from an upcoming book calling the Saudi backers "scary" and saying his desire for leverage over the PGA in a bid for more money allowed him to excuse concerns over human rights issues. "He can think whatever he wants to think, man. He can do whatever he wants to do," Koepka said. "I'm happy with the PGA Tour. I think everybody out here is happy. I think a lot of people out here have the same opinion."

Mickelson didn't back away from issues he had with PGA Tour commissioner Jay Monahan, who met with players over the Saudi proposal at the Honda Classic, which tees off Thursday at

Palm Beach Gardens, Florida. "I don't see it going away," Fowler said. "They're not scared about the situation. It has been interesting to kind of learn the ins and outs of both sides, but yeah, it has been an interesting week or so these last five to seven days." Fowler said competition for the PGA might lead to changes and improvements.

"I've always looked at having competition as a good thing," Fowler said. "Ultimately I think that if everything kind of goes the right way, I think everyone comes out in a better place. "If you're trying to be the best, you want to find ways that you can be better than your competitors. It goes through sport, business, tours, whatever it may be. "I just hope that everything kind of continues to either head the right way or not the wrong way, and we can all end up in a better place in the future. "Do I think the PGA Tour is the best place to play currently? Yes. Do I think it could get better? Yes." —AFP

Hamilton calls for more 'non-biased' stewards in F1

BARCELONA: Lewis Hamilton called for more "non-biased" officials in Formula 1 as McLaren's Lando Norris set the fastest time on the opening day of pre-season testing in Barcelona on Wednesday. Ahead of the new 2022 season, Hamilton said some stewards are too close to certain drivers. He also said there should be more female officials on the circuit. The seven-time world champion was dramatically pipped to the title by Max Verstappen in December, when Hamilton and Mercedes claimed Red Bull had influenced the decisions in a hugely controversial final race in Abu Dhabi. Race director Michael Masi has since been removed, with the role now split into two.

Asked if the change would result in better decision-making, Hamilton said: "We need to make sure we have non-biased stewards too. "Race drivers, some are very, very good friends with certain individuals, some travel with some individuals, take a more keen liking to some. "I think (F1 needs) people who have no biases, and are super central when it comes to making decisions." F1 races usually have four stewards to help race control look at incidents on the track. Mercedes team principal Toto Wolff backed away from Hamilton's accusations of bias.

"I think we need professionalism in the stewards' room," said Wolff. "I don't think there is a conscious bias to be honest. It's intelligent people." Red Bull's Christian Horner said: "I would agree with Toto that I don't think there's an intended bias. I'm not aware of any stewards travelling with drivers to races." Hamilton said there should also be more female stewards to boost diversity in the sport. "It would be awesome to have a male and female as the two race directors," he said.

The 37-year-old was speaking on the first day of pre-season at the Circuit de Barcelona-Catalunya before stepping into the new Mercedes W13 car in the afternoon. Hamilton recorded the fifth fastest time of the day, with 1min 20.929 sec. "I feel the freshest that I ever have," he said. "Of course, there are so many different ways you can re-focus and get re-centered, and I would say this break was one of the best I've ever experienced." "It was definitely more about being present and in the moment, and creating memories," said Hamilton, who used his break to spend time with his family. "I know sometimes in life, we get so focused and stuck into certain things like work that we forget to do those things. "So it was a great time, just refreshing with the family. It was the best period of time I've actually ever had with my family." In the first outing for the heavily redesigned cars, Norris recorded a time of 1:19.568 in the afternoon session, eclipsing the morning's fastest time of 1:20.165 set by Ferrari's Charles Leclerc. Hamilton drove only 50 laps while Verstappen totaled 147, the most of any driver, and his best time of 1:22.246 left him ninth. —AFP

Kuwaitis shine at West Asia games



By Abdellatif Sharaa

KUWAIT: Kuwait's Paralympic athletes collected 15 different medals Wednesday during the third West Asia games being held in Bahrain, as they dominated athletics, basketball and table tennis. The disabled basketball team defeated Bahrain 59-50. Kuwait's champion and silver medal holder of the 2020 Paralympics Faisal Surour had a new Asian record in the discus and won the gold medal. Abdallah Obaid Al-Enezi defeated the Tokyo 2020 winner of the 100-meter wheelchair race - taking the gold medal while Yasser Al-Musallam won the gold medal of the shot-put while

Hamad Hajji won the discus throw.

Yaqoub Al-Khalifa won the men's singles gold medal of table tennis while Malak Hadi Al-Enezi won the women's singles. Faisal Al-Rajhi won the silver medal of the 100-meter wheelchair and in ladies' event, Rawan Al-Enezi won the silver medal. Basima Najem grabbed the shot-put silver while Ahad Al-Rashidi won the singles table tennis silver. Other winners include Abdallah Al-Harz, Shamayel Al-Mulla, Hussein Al-Banai and Mohammad Al-Rashidi. Meanwhile, chairman of the Paralympic Committee Nasser Al-Ajmi dedicated this outstanding achievement to HH the Amir, HH the Crown Prince and Kuwaiti People.



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LIVERPOOL: Liverpool's Egyptian midfielder Mohamed Salah eyes the ball as he fights for it with Leeds United's French goalkeeper Illan Meslier (left) during the English Premier League football match between Liverpool and Leeds at the Anfield stadium on February 23, 2022. — AFP

Liverpool crush Leeds 6-0

Conte hints at Spurs exit after defeat

LONDON: Liverpool crushed Leeds 6-0 to close the gap on Premier League leaders Manchester City to three points, while Tottenham boss Antonio Conte demanded talks over his future after their top four bid was rocked by a 1-0 defeat at Burnley on Wednesday. Reds boss Jurgen Klopp believes his side must win every game for the rest of the season to pip City to the title. That ambitious goal can't be ruled out on Liverpool's current form and Leeds were no match for the title chasers at Anfield.

Mohamed Salah netted twice from the penalty spot either side of a Joel Matip goal. Sadio Mane bagged a brace in the second half and Virgil Van Dijk completed the rout. Liverpool have won their last nine games in all competitions, with none more important than this success in their game in hand on City. City were 12 points ahead of Liverpool just a few weeks ago, but that lead has quickly been whittled away by a combination of the Reds' blistering

streak and a couple of blips from the champions.

The stage is set for a titanic battle with 12 games left for both teams as City aim for their fourth English crown in five seasons and Liverpool look to win their second in the last three. "It is three points until the weekend and then City will probably win and then it will be six points. If we win all our games pretty much there will be a chance for us," Klopp said. Despite the League Cup final against Chelsea looming on Sunday, the title is Klopp's priority and he recalled Trent Alexander-Arnold and Andy Robertson among five change from the win against Norwich.

Robertson was involved when Liverpool took the lead in the 15th minute. Leeds defender Stuart Dallas was adjudged to have blocked the Scot's cross with his arm, conceding a penalty that Salah calmly converted for his 26th club goal this season. In the 30th minute, Cameroon defender Matip

advanced from the back and exchanged passes with Salah before dinking an expert finish past Illan Meslier for his first goal since December 2020.

Five minutes later, Luke Ayling conceded a penalty with a foul on Mane and Salah drilled high into the net for his second of the night. Mane made no mistake from Jordan Henderson's pass in the 80th minute and the Senegal star scored again from close-range in stoppage-time. Van Dijk's header capped Liverpool's biggest win this season. Leeds have lost seven of their past 10 league games and are only three points above the relegation zone.

On a wet and windy night at Turf Moor, Tottenham reverted to the kind of erratic display that has frustrated their fans so often in recent seasons. Just days after their epic 3-2 win at Manchester City, Conte's side were shattered in the 71st minute when Ben Mee met Josh Brownhill's free-kick with a far-post header past Hugo Lloris.

Tottenham remain in stuck in eighth place, seven points adrift of the top four as their hopes of qualifying for the Champions League begin to fade. "I came here to try to improve the situation but maybe in this moment I'm not so good," Conte said. "We will see how the situation is and make an assessment. I'm open to every decision because I want to help Tottenham. I'm too honest to close my eyes and continue in this way, and also take my salary, it's not right in this moment."

It was a second successive victory for third bottom Burnley, who are now just two points from safety with a game in hand. Crystal Palace enjoyed a 4-1 win over Watford at the expense of their former boss Roy Hodgson. Hodgson recently returned to management after leaving Palace at the end of last season and is aiming to save Watford from relegation. But Palace's first victory in seven league games kept Watford marooned in the bottom three. — AFP

Prolific Haller scores at both ends as Ajax draw with Benfica

LISBON: Sebastien Haller kept up his remarkable scoring record in this season's Champions League, finding the target at the right end shortly after putting through his own net as Ajax drew 2-2 with Benfica in their last 16, first leg on Wednesday. Haller's 26th-minute own goal cancelled out Dusan Tadic's opener for the Dutch champions at the Estadio da Luz in Lisbon, but the Ivory Coast striker then put Ajax back in front just three minutes later. It was not enough for Erik ten Hag's side to win the game, as Ukraine international Roman Yaremchuk came off the bench in the second half to earn Benfica a deserved draw.

However, Haller has now scored 11 goals in this season's Champions League after ending the group stage in double figures. "We are a bit frustrated. We could and should have done better and we are a bit disappointed to leave here having drawn 2-2," Haller told French broadcaster Canal Plus. Of his own goal, he added: "It's not the best feeling, especially as it gave them the equalizer and gave them a lift. "It was a blow to our morale but it is our job to remain focused, to not let our heads go down in such a situation."

Having never played in the competition before this season, Haller is the first player to score in each of his first seven Champions League appearances. Only Cristiano Ronaldo, Robert Lewandowski and Ruud van Nistelrooy have scored in more consecutive Champions League matches, with Ronaldo doing so in 11 straight games between 2017 and 2018. The former West Ham United man is also just the second Ajax player to score 11 goals in Europe in the same season, after Ruud Geels in 1975/76.

Tie in balance

However, with UEFA having abolished the away goals rule in Europe, the tie remains firmly in the balance going into the return leg in Amsterdam on March 15. Ajax took the lead in the 18th minute in this meeting of two clubs with six European Cups between them thanks to a fine finish from skipper



LISBON: Ajax's Brazilian forward Antony Matheus Dos Santos (left) fights for the ball with Benfica's Uruguayan forward Darwin Nunez during the UEFA Champions League football match between SL Benfica and Ajax on February 23, 2022. — AFP

Tadic. Alex Grimaldo lost possession under pressure from Noussair Mazraoui who then delivered a measured cross from the Ajax right for Tadic to score with a cushioned first-time finish for his 10th goal of the season.

However, Benfica drew level soon after as former Ajax defender Jan Vertonghen drilled a low ball into the six-yard box and Haller-for once in the wrong place-could only help it on its way into the net. Yet he made up for that just three minutes later, pouncing to convert the follow-up after Odisseas Vlachodimos had stopped Vertonghen diverting a Steven Berghuis cross into his own net. It was Haller's 29th goal in 29 games in all competitions this season for his club.

Ajax could have extended their lead just before the break as Antony slipped in Edson Alvarez, but the Mexican's shot came back off the far post and this time Haller was unable to turn in the rebound. Benfica, currently third in the Portuguese league, then stepped up the pressure in the second half and got their reward in the 72nd minute. Veteran Ajax goalkeeper Remko Pasveer could only parry out a Goncalo Ramos shot and the giant Yaremchuk—who had replaced Brazilian international Everton 10 minutes earlier—was able to head in the loose ball. — AFP

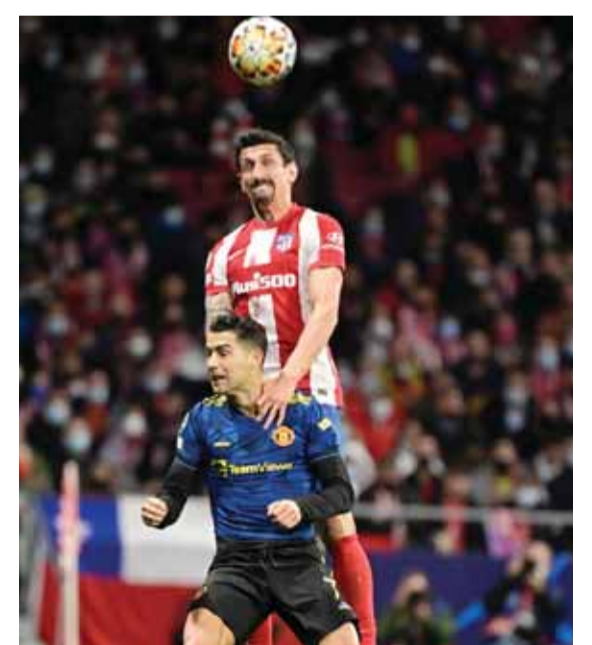
United escape with a draw after Elanga pegs back Atletico

MADRID: Manchester United were spared a damaging and deserved defeat by Atletico Madrid on Wednesday as Anthony Elanga's late goal rescued them a 1-1 draw in the first leg of the Champions League last 16. Atletico outplayed a sluggish United for the majority of the match at the Wanda Metropolitano and might have considered Joao Felix's early goal scant reward heading into the second leg at Old Trafford in three weeks' time.

But rather than extend their advantage, Atletico squandered it, Elanga racing onto a Bruno Fernandes through ball and applying a cool finish with 10 minutes left to earn United a draw that felt like a victory. United boss Ralf Rangnick was asked in his press conference what he told the United players at half-time. "I told them this is not enough," he said. "We have to have more energy. It's not about game-plans or tactics. It's about conviction. It's about belief. This is not enough. This is the Champions League."

Atletico's Sime Vrsaljko had already hit the crossbar at the end of the first half and Antoine Griezmann was also denied a late winner by the woodwork after Elanga's equalizer. But while United will breathe a sigh of relief at the result, this was another performance to prompt serious concerns about their progress and direction under interim coach Ralf Rangnick. In the first half, they failed to register a single touch in the Atletico Madrid box, the first time that has happened to a United side in the Champions League since at least 2005.

Cristiano Ronaldo was up against a familiar foe in Atletico, with 25 goals in 35 games against Diego Simeone's team and 10 in his last 10, including three hat-tricks. But the Portuguese cut a frustrated and isolated figure up front, his biggest contribution as a target for the enthusiastic whistling and booing from the Atletico supporters. Both Rangnick and Simeone have a veteran scorer whose needs per-



MADRID: Atletico Madrid's Montenegrin defender Stefan Savic (up) vies with Manchester United's Portuguese forward Cristiano Ronaldo during the UEFA Champions League football match between Atletico de Madrid and Manchester United on February 23, 2022. — AFP

haps come at the expense of the team, but while Rangnick started the 37-year-old Ronaldo, Simeone dropped the 35-year-old Luis Suarez, with Felix and Angel Correa named up front instead.

Ronaldo was whistled before kick-off, along with former Real Madrid defender Raphael Varane, and a fervent atmosphere provided the backdrop for a scintillating Atletico start. United were nervy as Harry Maguire needlessly headed behind for an Atletico corner before an anxious Fernandes touch allowed Jose Gimenez a shot at goal but Victor Lindelof made an excellent block. United looked uncomfortable playing out from the back and it was from a skewed David de Gea clearance that Atletico won a corner. United headed away but Renan Lodi swung in a brilliant cross from the left and Felix was there to meet it, his fine diving header flying in off the post. — AFP