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Kuwait records new high of 2,820 COVID cases, 2 deaths

World tops 2m new daily cases, passes 300m total cases as Omicron breaks records



BERLIN: Pediatrician Steffen Lueder jokes with children using an oversized syringe during a vaccination campaign against COVID-19 yesterday. — AFP

KUWAIT: The health ministry yesterday registered 2,820 additional COVID-19 cases over a 24-hour period, taking total number of infections to 430,920. Two fatalities were also recorded, raising the death toll to 2,471. There were 313 fresh recoveries, taking the total to 413,309, with recoveries representing 96 percent of overall infections, MoH Spokesman Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad told KUNA.

Active cases amounted to 15,140, with 12 of them in intensive care units and 87 patients in hospital wards, he said. Health authorities conducted 30,862 swab tests, taking total tests to 6,166,679, which means 9.1 percent of swab tests performed in the past 24 hours were infections, Dr Sanad revealed.

The world recorded more than two million daily coronavirus cases on average between Jan 1 and 7 with figures doubling in 10 days, an AFP tally showed yesterday. An average of 2,106,118 new daily infections were reported over the seven-day period, shortly after the one million case threshold was passed in the week of Dec 23-29, 2021. New global case numbers have soared by 270 percent

since the highly contagious Omicron variant was discovered in South Africa in late November. But COVID-related deaths were at their lowest level since Oct 2020, with an average of 6,237 per day recorded in the period between Jan 1 and 7.

Europe, as well as the United States and Canada, are the world's infection hotspots. The two regions respectively represented 49 percent and 33 percent of global Covid cases in the past week. COVID cases skyrocketed by 47 percent in Europe and 76 percent in the United States and Canada compared with the previous week. In the same period, COVID infections increased by 224 percent in Oceania, 148 percent in Latin America and the Caribbean, 116 percent in the Middle East and 145 percent in Asia.

The number of new cases reported in Africa remained stable but, as elsewhere, were at their highest level since the start of the pandemic in March 2020. The figures are based on official statistics produced by national health authorities. A significant proportion of less severe or

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News in brief

21 die in Pak snowstorm

ISLAMABAD: At least 21 people died in an enormous traffic jam caused by tens of thousands of visitors thronging the Pakistani hill town of Murree to see unusually heavy snowfall, authorities said yesterday. Police reported that at least eight people had frozen to death in their cars. Interior Minister Sheikh Rashid said the military had mobilized to clear roads and rescue thousands still trapped. Video shared on social media showed cars packed bumper-to-bumper, with one-meter-high piles of snow on their roofs. — AFP

14 killed in Egypt bus crash

CAIRO: At least 14 people were killed and 17 injured yesterday when a coach and a minibus smashed into each other at high speed in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula, security officials said. The minibus and the coach, which had come from the capital Cairo and was heading for the Red Sea tourist resort of Sharm el-Sheikh, collided while speeding in poor visibility due to fog around dawn, officials added. — AFP

Detained Iran poet dies of COVID

PARIS: Dissident Iranian poet and filmmaker Baktash Abtin has died in detention in Tehran after falling ill with COVID-19, rights groups said yesterday, angrily blaming the Islamic republic's leadership for his death. "Baktash Abtin has died," the Iranian Writers Association said after the author was put into an induced coma in hospital earlier in the week. Paris-based media rights group Reporters Without Borders confirmed his death, posting a picture of Abtin in striped Iranian prison uniform shackled by his leg to a hospital bed. — AFP

Kurilla to lead Central Command

WASHINGTON: President Joe Biden is nominating Army Lt Gen Michael Kurilla to lead the US Central Command, which oversees military operations in the Middle East, the Pentagon announced Friday. If confirmed by the Senate, General Kurilla will succeed Marine General Kenneth McKenzie at the head of Centcom, which oversees military operations in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan and Yemen. — AFP

UAE works on Friday for the first time

DUBAI: Employees and schoolchildren juggled work and studies with weekly Muslim prayers on the first ever working Friday in the United Arab Emirates as the Gulf country formally switched to a Saturday-Sunday weekend. Some grumbled at the change and businesses were split, with many moving to the Western-style weekend but other private firms sticking with Fridays and Saturdays, as in other Gulf states.

The weekly day of prayer has

always been a free day in the UAE, which had previously observed a Thursday-Friday weekend until 2006. However, mosques appeared busy as worshippers carrying prayer mats arrived as usual, before many of them later headed back to the office. "I'd rather take (Friday) off," said 22-year-old Briton Rachel King, who works in the hospitality industry and has been living in Dubai for six months. "That is what we all know and love, having a Friday off and going to certain places that are open and we could do things. But now it is going to be Saturday."

The UAE made the surprise announcement of the weekend switch for the public sector in December as it grapples with rising competition in international business from other Gulf countries.

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DUBAI: Muslim men perform Friday prayers in an area close to their workplace on the first working Friday in the Gulf emirate. — AFP

Life in jail for killers of US black jogger

WASHINGTON: Three white men convicted of murdering African American jogger Ahmaud Arbery after chasing him in their pickup trucks were sentenced to life in prison Friday in a case that highlighted US tensions over racial justice. Travis McMichael, 35, and his father Gregory McMichael, 66, were sen-

tenced to life without parole, while their neighbor, William "Roddie" Bryan, 52, who had a less-direct role in the murder and cooperated with investigators, was given life with the possibility of parole.

The three were convicted in November of multiple counts of murder, aggravated assault and false imprisonment for chasing down 25-year-old Arbery on Feb 23, 2020 as he ran through their Satilla Shores neighborhood near Brunswick, in the southern US state of Georgia. Pronouncing the sentence, Georgia Superior Court Judge Timothy Walmsley called the murder "a tragedy on many, many levels".

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This combination of booking photos shows (from left) William Roderick Bryan, Gregory McMichael and his son Travis McMichael. — AFP

Turkmenistan 'Gateway to Hell' to close

ASHGABAT: Turkmenistan's strongman leader has ordered experts to find a way to finally extinguish a massive five-decade old fire in a giant natural gas crater in the Central Asian country, dubbed the "Gateway to Hell". Citing environmental and economic concerns, President

Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov appeared on state television yesterday telling officials to put out the flames at the Darvaza gas crater in the middle of the vast Karakum desert.

In 2010, Berdymukhamedov also ordered experts to find a way to put out the flames that have been burning ever since a Soviet drilling operation went awry in 1971. President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov said that the man-made crater "negatively affects both the environment and the health of the people living nearby".

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This file photo taken on June 11, 2014 shows people visiting "The Gateway to Hell", a huge burning gas crater in the heart of Turkmenistan's Karakum desert. — AFP

Local

Kuwait pursues relief in Yemen as part of seven-year campaign

'Kuwait by Your Side' campaign credited for projects in various cities



SANAA: Pictures showing various contributions as part of the 'Kuwait by Your Side' campaign in Yemen. — KUNA photos

KUWAIT: The State of Kuwait, via its various associations, has pursued relief and humanitarian aid to people suffering from deprivation of basic needs in Yemen as part of the 'Kuwait by Your Side' campaign, which has been ongoing for seven years. The Kuwaiti Humanitarian Relief Society overhauled and furnished two high-level schools in the Yemeni city of Taiz; the first such venture by the association this year in the war-stricken country, as part of the campaign. The Yemeni Al-Hekma Society that executed the project said in a statement that it had inked two agreements to maintain and repair buildings of 'Muadh bin Jabal School' in Taiz and 'Martyr Ahmad Mahmoud School' in the district of Al-Misrakh in the south of Taiz Governorate.



Winter clothes distributed to 400 families

Kuwait built the two schools many years ago. With time, they needed repair and renovation. Al-Hekma Society indicated in the statement that the two schools were equipped with solar energy systems in addition to various equipment and

furniture. The Kuwaiti Humanitarian Relief Society launched, last year, 28 educational projects in several Yemeni provinces, including furnishing and maintenance, in addition to granting financial allotments for 100 teachers serving at schools on the island of Socotra — sufficient for a year of work.

Meanwhile, the Kuwaiti Al-Najat Charity distributed winter clothes to 400 relocated families, settling at a camp in Maarib Governorate, also in line with the campaign. Mohammad Al-Saeedi, an official in charge of the relocated camps in Maarib, lauded the substantial Kuwaiti humanitarian assistance for the displaced, who have lost their houses due to the fighting and violence. Humanitarian needs of the displaced Yemenis have

drastically increased due to the military escalation witnessed in Maarib since months ago, he said. A large number of civilians escaped their homes in beleaguered Maarib, seeking shelter in relatively safer areas in Yemen. Some have already been relocated twice as arenas of fighting widened.

Ihab Al-Dabbous, the chairman 'Fahaheel Alms Committee', an affiliate of Al-Najat Charity, indicated in the meantime that the aid benefited 396 families settling at the shanty towns in Maarib. Mohammad Al-Senab, the director of the local bureau of 'Yanabee Al-Khair in Maarib' society, executor of the relief project for the relocated, said that hundreds of people who lost their homes were in dire need for support, namely dwelling, food and water. — KUNA

Kuwait records new high of...

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asymptomatic cases go undetected despite intensified testing regimes since the beginning of the pandemic. Testing policies also vary from one country to another. Taking into account excess mortality linked to COVID-19, the World Health Organization estimates the overall death toll could be two to three times higher.

Meanwhile, the total number of COVID-19 cases registered worldwide passed 300 million on Friday, with the Omicron variant's rapid spread setting new infection records in dozens of countries over the last week. In the past seven days, 34 countries have recorded their highest number of weekly cases since the start of the pandemic, including 18 nations in Europe and seven in Africa, according to an AFP count based on official figures.

While far more contagious than previous coronavirus variants, Omicron appears to cause less severe illness than its predecessors. France's public health authority said Friday that the risk of hospitalization was about 70 percent lower for Omicron. However, with a global average of two million new cases being detected daily, experts warn the sheer numbers threaten to overwhelm health systems.

World Health Organization chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said that Omicron should not be categorized as mild, as it "is hospitalizing people and it is killing people". "In fact, the tsunami of cases is so huge and quick, that it is overwhelming health systems around the world."

Omicron's dizzying spread since being detected six weeks ago has prompted many nations to push harder for more vaccinations and some to clamp down with restrictions. Germany's Chancellor Olaf Scholz said Friday that access to the country's bars and restaurants will be limited to those who are fully vaccinated or have recovered from the virus and can also provide a negative test result. However, people who have received a booster shot will be exempted from the test requirement.

In neighboring Austria, Chancellor Karl Nehammer meanwhile tested positive for COVID. "No cause for worry, I'm fine," he said. "I continue to plead: get vaccinated." In the United States, challenges against vaccine mandates imposed by the administration of President Joseph Biden were heard by the Supreme Court on Friday. Supreme Court Justice Elena Kagan asked: "Why isn't this necessary to abate the grave risk?" "It is by far the greatest public health danger that this country has faced in the last century," she added.

As cases skyrocket in the US - which also broke its daily caseload record last week - Biden said that COVID "as we are dealing with it now is not here to stay." "But having COVID in the environment - here and in the world - is probably here to stay." — Agencies

officials to "find a solution to extinguish the fire".

The crater was created in 1971 during a Soviet drilling accident that hit a gas cavern, causing the drilling rig to fall in and the earth to collapse underneath it. To prevent the dangerous fumes from spreading, the Soviets decided to burn off the gas by setting it on fire. The pit has been ablaze ever since and previous attempts to put it out have been unsuccessful. The resulting crater - 70 m wide and 20 m deep - is a popular tourist attraction in the ex-Soviet country. In 2018, the president officially renamed it to the "Shining of Karakum". — AFP

Turkmenistan 'Gateway to...

Continued from Page 1

"We are losing valuable natural resources for which we could get significant profits and use them for improving the well-being of our people," he said in televised remarks. Berdymukhamedov instructed

UAE works on Friday...

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Government bodies and schools will operate four-and-a-half-days per week, closing at 12 pm on Fridays for a fixed prayer time of 1:15 pm, whereas the Muslim prayer schedule usually depends on the position of the sun.

Out of 195 businesses polled by human resources consultancy Mercer, only 23 percent were preparing to follow the four-and-a-half-day week, but more than half would switch to Saturday-Sunday weekends. "Luckily I have the same days off as my kids, but that's not the case for my husband," said Fati, who works in an international distribution company, asking not to give her full name. "He works for a multinational that hasn't changed its schedule for the moment. I hope they will do it quickly, otherwise our family life

will be ruined."

Nearly a third of companies are worried about the impact of being out of sync with other countries in the region, the Mercer poll found. "We work a lot with Egypt and Saudi Arabia," said Rana, an employee of an events company who said some of her teams would have to work on Sundays. Dubai's financial district was unusually quiet on Friday with large numbers working remotely, especially at a time of rising COVID levels when many children are also doing online schooling.

"Today is the first working Friday, it feels a bit weird," said Ahmad Bilbisi, 34, a banking employee. "It makes sense to me, at least for the banking industry. We are now working on the same day as everyone else in the world." The new arrangement was a major talking point on social media, with one Twitter user complaining "it just feels so wrong". "My body and mind have fully acclimatized to having Fridays off. I think today is going to a long hard struggle," the tweet reads. Sharjah, an emirate neighboring Dubai, has found a simple solution: Mandating Friday, Saturday and Sunday as a three-day weekend. — AFP

Life in jail for killers of US...

Continued from Page 1

Weighing the verdict, Walmsley said he kept thinking of "the terror of the young man running through Satilla Shores". "He left his home apparently to go for a run and he ended up running for his life," Walmsley said. "He was killed because individuals here in this courtroom took the law into their own hands."

The Arbery case had added to a burst of nationwide anger and protests in 2020 over police killings and mistreatment of African Americans, sparked initially by the death in May that year of George Floyd in Minneapolis. In June last year Derek Chauvin, the police officer who was filmed pressing his knee on Floyd's neck until he lost consciousness, was sentenced to 22.5 years in prison for murder. Three other now-former police officers who were at the scene will

stand trial in March on charges of complicity in the homicide.

Before the sentencing, members of Arbery's family asked the court to give the three the harshest possible penalty. "They each have no remorse and do not deserve any leniency," said Arbery's mother, Wanda Cooper-Jones. "This wasn't a case of mistaken identity... They chose to target my son because they didn't want him in their community." "The man who killed my son has sat in this courtroom every single day next to his father. I'll never get that chance to sit next to my son ever again, not at a dinner table, not at a holiday and not at a wedding," said his father Marcus Arbery.

Graphic cellphone video taken by Bryan showed the armed men following Arbery in their trucks for about five minutes, suspecting with no evidence that he might have been a burglar. Arbery repeatedly tried to avoid them, but was blocked by the trucks and then shot and killed by Travis McMichael. The men claimed they were trying to make a "citizens' arrest," which was legal in Georgia at the time. — AFP

Local

Kuwait sets record for fourth straight day as daily cases near 3,000 mark

Relatively low hospital occupancy, mortality rates give reason for hope

By Ahmad Jabr

KUWAIT: Kuwait reported 2,820 new COVID-19 cases yesterday, setting a new record in daily infections for the fourth straight day as the country battles a new wave of the disease. Meanwhile, health authorities reported two new deaths yesterday after recording two days of zero mortalities, and the first time to register more than one death in a single day in months. The last time Kuwait registered two deaths in one day was on September 14, 2021.

On the other hand, the number of patients in ICU's remained at 12 as of yesterday, while the number of patients hospitalized increased from 66 to 87. Total active cases also jumped to 15,140 yesterday from 12,635 the previous day. The percentage of daily new cases to new tests increased from 7.5 percent to 9.1 percent, while the percentage of recovery reached 96 percent, according to the health ministry's bulletin. The health ministry has announced 313 new recoveries yesterday, up from 247 the previous day.

Daily cases in Kuwait have been on an upward trajectory since Wednesday when the country announced 2,246 new cases; setting a new record and the first time that daily cases crossed the 2,000 threshold since the start of the pandemic. Health authorities reported 2,413 and 2,645 cases on Thursday and Friday, respectively. Following this trend, Kuwait could break the 3,000 mark as early as today.

However, the relatively low number of deaths and hospital occupancy in the current wave caused by the Omicron variant of COVID-19, compared to previous waves, gives reason for optimism. At the time when the previous daily record was registered at 1,993 on July 6, 2021, there were 310 patients in intensive care units, 1,150 patients in hospital, as well as 18,600 active cases. Meanwhile, health authorities had reported 20 deaths on that day.

In the meantime, the high level of vaccination in Kuwait also drives hopes of overcoming the current wave despite the rise in daily infections. Latest health ministry statistics show that 522,754 people

have received booster doses of the COVID-19 vaccine as of yesterday afternoon. Meanwhile, 3,227,817 people are fully vaccinated (82.3 percent of the targeted category) and 3,343,768 have received the first dose (85.3 percent of the targeted people), according to statistics posted on the health ministry's website.

Kuwait's Health Ministry Spokesman Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad had said on Friday that the drop in daily cases of infection with the Omicron variant in South Africa before a new wave of deaths' increase is a positive indication. "In previous waves, we noticed that the wave would start with an increase in infection rates, followed by an increase in hospital occupancy and deaths," he said in a televised statement. "What is happening now in South Africa is a drop in cases before the emergence of a deaths' wave, which gives us a glimmer of hope, but with caution."

Recommendations mullied

This comes as the Cabinet prepares to discuss several recommendations from health authorities during a meeting this week. Kuwait's Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs and Ministry of Justice have already re-imposed coronavirus curbs due to the recent rapid surge infections caused by the ultra-transmittable Omicron variant. Mosques around Kuwait followed ministry instructions on Friday, requiring worshippers to observe distancing rules, wear facemasks, bring their own prayer mats and avoid direct contact with others. The ministry instructed mosque officials to keep mosque doors and windows open during sermons and prayer times. It also announced a time-cap of 15 minutes to the Friday prayer's sermon.

In the same vein, the Ministry of Justice re-imposed social distancing rules during marriage contract-writing ceremonies as of today, during that only six people could attend such a ceremony. Last week, the Cabinet announced banning all kinds of public gatherings in closed places as of today and until February 28 following the spike in the number of infections in the country.



KUWAIT: People are directed towards vaccination booths as they arrive to receive COVID-19 vaccine booster doses at the Kuwait Vaccination Center in Mishref on January 3, 2022. —Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

Head of the Center for Government Communication (CGC) Tareq Al-Mezrem had said on Thursday that the COVID-19 Ministerial Emergency Committee forwarded its recommendations and proposals to be included in the Cabinet's upcoming meeting's agenda. He did not mention the nature of the recommendations or whether introducing new restrictions will be on the table of discussion, however.

During a meeting in Seif Palace chaired by Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah, the emergency committee focused on the pandemic's development locally and how health measures were implemented to curb the rapid number of COVID-19 cases, the government's spokesman said in a statement. Health and educational officials updated the committee of the latest happenings in their fields, revealed Mezrem, noting that all proposals were forwarded to the Cabinet's next meeting for discussion and decisions.



Nearly 523,000 received booster dose



Academics urge authorities to keep in-person classes

By Ben Garcia

KUWAIT: The General Coordinator and Spokesperson for the Association of Faculty Members at Kuwait University Dr Mohammed Al-Onaizi called on the Cabinet's COVID-19 Emergency Committee to value the importance of continuing the educational process on campus, especially for secondary and higher education stages as well as universities, in order to preserve the quality of education.

In a press statement, Dr Onaizi confirmed that the association is calling for the interest of education in Kuwait to be taken into account, especially after online education showed significant drawbacks on the educational outcomes and quality.

Dr Onaizi confirmed that the association is following up on the latest developments related to the emerging coronavirus variant (Omicron) at the local and international levels, indicating that most countries around the world have not taken steps to return to online education.

"We appeal to our decision makers to bear in mind that the quality of education was compromised during the previous shift from traditional learning to online due to many reasons. To address this, we need to integrate a validated online-based curriculum with the current curriculum and get both the student and teacher to adapt to the new curriculum. All of this must be tailored to the Kuwait education system and requires research and proper planning. We are therefore advocating for the con-



Dr Mohammad Al-Onaizi

tinuation of in-person classes so that the educational process will not be compromised again," he said.

Amid a rise in the number of coronavirus cases in the country, celebrations for birthdays, weddings and anniversaries have been called off from today until February 28, as per an order by the government to suspend all indoor social gatherings. The decision triggered cancellations of numerous events and activities scheduled for January and February, including programs related to Hala February.

Kuwait has also urged its citizens to leave several European countries including Britain, France and Germany because of a surge in cases of the Omicron variant. In a series of statements last week, the state also warned Kuwaitis to avoid travelling to these countries. The foreign ministry said they should "delay their trips" generally and, in particular, to France, Germany, the United Kingdom, Spain and Italy, later adding Turkey, Cyprus and Morocco to the list.



KUWAIT: This October 4, 2020 file photo shows a teacher giving an online class inside an empty classroom in Kuwait. —Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

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News in brief

Kuwaiti oil price up

\$1.81 to \$83.45 pb

KUWAIT: Kuwait oil price rose by \$1.81 to \$83.45 per barrel Friday against \$81.64 pb Thursday, Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) said yesterday. In international markets, price of the Brent crude oil dropped by 24 cents to reach \$81.75 pb while that of the West Texas Intermediate crude fell by 56 cents, settling at \$78.90 pb.

Credit Bank gave
KD 400m loans in 2021

KUWAIT: Kuwait Credit Bank (KCB) said yesterday that its total loans disbursed in 2021 equaled KD 400 million (about \$1.3 billion) with a 23,000 loan requests. KCB spokesperson Habari Al-Khashti said that the effectiveness of the bank's electronic services saved time and effort for citizens, indicating that 99 percent of credit services have become electronic. She added that the social and real estate loan services which, provided with artificial intelligence technology, allow submitting the loan through automated system without visiting any of the bank's branches. Khashti pointed out that with the bank's 2020-2025 strategy, it has achieved the goals in digital transformation to provide the best service to citizens while preserving public money.

Assembly assigns panel to
solve cyclists' problems

KUWAIT: The National Assembly approved a letter from MPs Abdulaziz Al-Saqaabi and Abdullah Al-Mudhaf to assign the youth and sports committee to find solutions for problems facing cyclists in Kuwait.

Kuwaiti inters membership
of Int'l Hockey Federation

KUWAIT: Kuwait Winter Games Club announced on Friday that the development director at the club, Meshaal Al-Ajmi, has won membership in the construction committee of the International Hockey Federation. This accomplishment is the first to enter the club's records since joining the federation years back. Ajmi is the first Arab to become a member of the federation's commission. The club's chairperson, Fehaid Al-Ajmi, said the club had received a message from the federation in this respect.

Arab region to
witness economic
boom: ESCWA

BEIRUT: The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) said yesterday that the Arab region would see an economic recovery in 2022 and 2023. In the 2020-2021 survey of social and economic developments of the Arab region, the commission expected that the economic recovery started in 2021 would continue to help raise the gross domestic product (GDP) in the region by 3.7 in 2022 and by 3.6 percent in 2023. The pace of recovery will differ from one country to another in accordance with the vaccination campaigns against the coronavirus (COVID-19), revenue of oil and tourism, and the volume of financial remittances as well as the flow of credit aid, it added.

It revealed that its expectations depended on two scenarios: the first one is related to the continued slow vaccination campaigns and the average oil prices of \$60 per barrel (pb). While the second scenario is pertaining to accelerating the vaccination process and increasing demand for oil with \$80 pb. The poverty rate in the Arab region will decline from 27 percent out of the total population in 2021 to 26 percent in 2023, Ahmad Momy, head of the team prepared the survey, said.

Despite the disparity of poverty amongst the Arab countries, it will remain one of the highest rates in the world, mainly in women and youth, the commission noted. However, the poverty rate is expected to reach 10.7 percent in 2023 compared with 11.8 percent in 2021, it pointed out. The report shows that the GDPs of the countries affected by the conflicts are seen to hit 4.5 percent in 2022 and 6.9 percent in 2023. Due to the big economic and social challenges, the least growth in the Arab countries is expected to hit two percent in 2022 and 2.6 percent in 2023, the survey said. Nevertheless, the spread of COVID-19 Omicron might slow growth to reach only 1.7 percent in 2022, it said. —KUNA

Photo of the Day



KUWAIT: A picture taken on Thursday shows Kuwait Towers on a partly cloudy day. —Photo by Fouad Al-Shaikh

Al-Dousary's camel ranked first
at Crown Prince's racing festival

Annual camel race festival concludes



KUWAIT: Representative of His Highness the Crown Prince, Governor of Hawally Ali Al-Asfar hands over the trophy. —KUNA photos



One of the winners raises the trophy.



The camel owned by Nawaf Al-Dousary races to victory.



Camels pictured at the start of the race.



One of the participating camels.

KUWAIT: His Highness the Crown Prince's annual camel racing festival, held under the patronage of His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, came to a close yesterday as the camel owned by Nawaf Al-Dousary won the trophy.

The camels owned by Hussein Al-Dawwas and Saleh Al-Ajmi came second and third respectively in

the 8-kilometer race. Representative of His Highness the Crown Prince, Governor of Hawally Ali Al-Asfar expressed his pride for representing His Highness the Crown Prince at this big event. He told reporters that His Highness the Crown Prince's patronage of this festival embodies the political leadership's interest in backing these heritage

sports activities.

After honoring the winners, Asfar lauded the outstanding organization of the event and congratulated the winning camels' owners. Meanwhile, Kuwait Camel Race Club's Chairman Hussein Al-Dawwas extolled His Highness the Crown Prince's sponsorship of the festival. —KUNA



'I am not a virus,' insists Indian man named Kovid

After fiery speech on democracy, can Biden deliver on promises?

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ALMATY: This handout image grab taken and released by the Russian Defense Ministry yesterday shows Belarus paratroopers unboarding a military cargo plane after landing in Kazakhstan. —AFP

Kazakhstan detains ex-security chief

Russia hits back at US criticism of its deployment of troops

ALMATY: Kazakhstan said yesterday its former security chief had been arrested for suspected treason during days of unrest, as Russia hit back at US criticism of its deployment of troops to the crisis-hit country. News of the detention of Karim Masimov, a former prime minister and longtime ally of Kazakhstan's ex-leader Nursultan Nazarbayev, comes amid speculation of a power struggle in the ex-Soviet Central Asian nation. The domestic intelligence agency, the National Security Committee (KNB), announced that Masimov had been detained on Thursday on suspicion of high treason. President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev sacked Masimov earlier this week after protests over rising fuel prices erupted into widespread violence, with dozens killed and government buildings in the largest city Almaty stormed and set ablaze.

Tokayev told Russian President Vladimir Putin in a "lengthy" phone call that the situation in the country was stabilizing, the Kremlin said yesterday, and thanked the Moscow-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) for sending troops to help deal with the unrest. The CSTO has been dispatching several thousand troops to Kazakhstan, including Russian paratroopers, who have been securing strategic sites.

Tokayev says the deployment will be temporary, but US Secretary of State Antony Blinken warned on Friday

that Kazakhstan may have trouble getting them out. "I think one lesson in recent history is that once Russians are in your house, it's sometimes very difficult to get them to leave," Blinken told reporters.

Russia slams 'boorish' US

The Russian foreign ministry slammed his comments as a "boorish" attempt "to make a funny joke today about the tragic events in Kazakhstan". "When Americans are in your house, it can be difficult to stay alive, not being robbed or raped," it alleged. Tensions between Moscow and the West are at post-Cold War highs over fears of a Russian invasion of Ukraine, with talks between Russia and the US to take place in Geneva tomorrow.

Authorities in Kazakhstan said Friday that the situation was largely under control, but Tokayev issued a shoot-to-kill order and rejected any negotiations with protesters. An AFP correspondent in Almaty said the city was quiet but tense yesterday, with security forces firing warning shots at anyone approaching a central square.

Masimov, 56, twice served as Nazarbayev's prime minister and had been head of the KNB since 2016. He was fired at the height of the unrest on Wednesday, when Tokayev also took over from Nazarbayev as head of the powerful security council. Nazarbayev's spokesman Aidos

Ukibay on Saturday denied rumors the ex-president had left the country and said he was urging Kazakhs to "rally around the president".

Denouncing those spreading "knowingly false and speculative information," he said the ex-leader was in the capital Nur-Sultan and in "direct contact" with Tokayev. In a headline address to the nation on Friday, Tokayev said 20,000 "armed bandits" had attacked Almaty and authorized his forces to shoot to kill without warning.

He ridiculed calls from abroad for negotiations as "non-sense", saying: "We are dealing with ... bandits and terrorists. So they must be destroyed." The initial cause of the protests was a spike in fuel prices but a government move to lower the prices and the sacking of the cabinet failed to stop demonstrations continuing.

More than 4,000 detained

The violence erupted when police fired tear gas and stun grenades at thousands protesting in Almaty late on Tuesday. The next day protesters stormed government buildings including the city administration headquarters and presidential residence, setting them ablaze, and a nationwide state of emergency was declared. The interior ministry said 26 "armed criminals" had been killed in the unrest. It said 18 security officers had been killed and more

than 740 wounded. More than 4,000 people have been detained, including some foreigners, the ministry says.

The full picture of the chaos has often been unclear, with widespread disruptions to communications including days-long internet shutdowns. In Almaty, few people were out on the streets yesterday. The military continued to guard the square adjacent to the burnt-out mayor's office, firing warning shots whenever passersby were slow to heed instructions to stay away.

Pensioner Leonid Kiselyev, 68, said his car had been hit by gunfire at around 8:30 am as he drove past, showing a bullet that had pierced the boot. "Yesterday it was calm so I drove here," said a shaken Kiselyev, standing in a long queue at a petrol station. The Zionist entity's foreign ministry said a 22-year-old Zionist citizen who had been living in Kazakhstan for several years was killed by gunfire on Friday night.

Much of the public anger appeared directed at Nazarbayev, who is 81 and had ruled Kazakhstan since 1989 before handing over power. Many protesters shouted "Old Man Out!" in reference to Nazarbayev, and a statue of him was torn down in the southern city of Taldykorgan. Critics have accused him and his family of staying in control behind the scenes and accumulating vast wealth at the expense of ordinary citizens. —AFP

Ethiopian oppn leaders freed under amnesty

NAIROBI: Several high-profile Ethiopian opposition leaders were granted freedom yesterday after the government granted a surprise amnesty for prominent political detainees, including senior Tigrayan figures. The government said the move was designed to promote "national dialogue" and follows a dramatic shift in fortunes in the brutal 14-month war between forces loyal to Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and the rebel Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF).

TPLF fighters withdrew to their stronghold in the northernmost region of Tigray at the end of December in the face of a military offensive by government forces that saw them retake a string of strategic towns. Several TPLF figures were among

those pardoned, as well as opposition leaders from the Oromo ethnic group, the largest in Ethiopia, and the Amhara. "The key to lasting unity is dialogue. Ethiopia will make any sacrifices to this end," the government communications service said in a statement late Friday announcing the amnesty.

"Its purpose is to pave the way for a lasting solution to Ethiopia's problems in a peaceful, non-violent way... especially with the aim of making the all-inclusive national dialogue a success." The amnesty was welcomed by the United Nations and the African Union, which has been spearheading international efforts to end the conflict. It was not clear if the government was proposing any negotiations with the TPLF, the party that dominated politics for three decades until Abiy took power in 2018 but is now considered a terrorist group by Addis Ababa.

'National reconciliation'

There has been something of a pause in fighting since the TPLF retreat, although the rebels accuse the government of still carrying out deadly drone strikes on Tigray. The UN reported this week that

three people including two children had been killed in an air raid on a refugee camp in the region.

Tigray also remains under what the United Nations has called a de facto blockade that is preventing life-saving food and medicine from reaching Tigray's six million people, where many are living in famine-like conditions. The war in Africa's second most populous country has claimed the lives of thousands of people, displaced around two million, and inflicted atrocities on civilians in Tigray, as well as the neighboring Amhara and Afar regions.

Abiy - a Nobel peace laureate who reportedly went to the battlefield in November to direct his troops - called for "national reconciliation" and "unity" in a statement issued Friday as Ethiopia celebrated Orthodox Christmas. However, in another statement Saturday he lashed out at "foreign and internal enemies" and described the TPLF as "snakes". The pardons coincided with a mission to Ethiopia by US envoy Jeffrey Feltman, who is pushing for talks to end a conflict that exposed the deep divisions in a country with more than 80 ethnic groups. —AFP

Jailed Palestinian activist lands in Paris after release

PARIS: Egyptian-Palestinian activist Ramy Shaath arrived in France yesterday after almost two and a half years in detention in Egypt, after his family said he had to renounce his Egyptian nationality. The 48-year-old was a figure of the 2011 uprising in Egypt and the coordinator of the Egyptian chapter of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement against the Zionist entity. An AFP correspondent saw the activist walk out of Charles De Gaulle Airport outside Paris with his wife. —AFP

Erdogan courts evasive youth vote ahead of 2023

ANKARA: Yusuf Ziya Guler is one of nearly seven million Turks who grew up with Recep Tayyip Erdogan as their only leader and who can vote for the first time in general elections due by mid-2023. Like his peers, Guler has faded memories of Turkey's economic revival during Erdogan's first decade in power - and a clear impression of the turmoil during his second one. "I am pessimistic about the future," said the 20-year-old medical student, adding he was skeptical of all political parties. "We're an unpredictable country. Forget about what will happen after I graduate, I don't even know what will happen in five months," he told AFP.

Analysts think Gen Z voters - as politically diverse as Turkey itself - hold one of the keys to Erdogan's tricky path to presidential re-election and his ambition to keep his Islamic-rooted party in power for a third decade running. But unlike the youth of 2002, when Erdogan's rise represented a break from systemic corruption and economic stagnation, today's teens appear more tempted to blame his government for their woes.

These include runaway inflation, a battered currency and an economy in which more than 40 percent of the workforce earns the minimum wage. "Today's dire economic situation will only widen the gap between what the (ruling party) can provide and what young people want," said Ayca Alemdaroglu, associate director at Stanford University's Program on Turkey.

Erdogan, 67, and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) appear acutely aware of the importance of winning over young people,

staging rallies and trying to figure out ways to reach teens online. This push has gained added attention as speculation swirls that Erdogan may call an early election in an effort to catch his competitors off guard.

"The key to the next elections is our youth, not this or that party," Erdogan told the opening of a six-day festival for young people in the capital Ankara in Nov 2021. "Just following the president's and other party leaders' speeches... you can see that young people are a serious concern," said Alemdaroglu. The ruling party's efforts to woo this important demographic got off to a shaky start. A brief furor erupted in Sept 2021 over a TikTok account called XYZ Sosyal, which opposition media said was an AKP attempt to endear itself to Gen Z voters with jokes and pro-government clips.

XYZ Sosyal has since vanished but the official AKP youth branch now has a small verified account featuring a video about Erdogan's achievements in office. Alemdaroglu said the AKP has also compiled reports aimed at teaching "party cadres how to use digital technology effectively and speak to young people".

'Great work'

Despite historically low public approval numbers, the AKP retains some appeal among younger voters. Thousands stuck around for the entire November festival after Erdogan's inaugural address. Abdulsamet Semiz, an AKP youth branch chair for the northern Carsamba district, brushed aside suggestions that his party was losing touch with teens. "They're saying the youth are moving away from the AKP but there's no such thing. These are lies. The AKP cares for young people the most," said Semiz, 28.

Some of those attending the festival praised Erdogan for helping lower the age for becoming a member of parliament to 18 from 25, say-



ANKARA: In this photo taken on Nov 16, 2021, people wave Turkish flags during the Local Governments Youth Festival at the Nation's Garden. —AFP

ing this showed his devotion to the young. "Some great work is being done," 19-year-old university student Emrullah Aydin said at the gathering, where the mood was buoyant. Yet gaining the trust of young voters has proved to be elusive - and not just for the AKP. In a survey of 3,000 young people across Turkey's 81 provinces, polling agency Turkiye Raporu found 58 percent would not join any political movement or party as a way of trying to build a better society to live in.

"They don't believe that this current landscape can deliver for them," said Turkiye Raporu director Can Selcuki. "They have very little trust in political parties or in political establishments overall." Fellow pollster Murat Gezici said the generation born between 1980 and 1999 included many undecided voters - especially women - making them possibly more crucial in the next election than the youth demographic. "This group of 18.4 million makes up 32.6 percent of the electorate," Gezici told the Sozcuk daily. —AFP

CONDOLENCES

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Extend our Heartfelt
condolences to
Mr. Ashok Kumar & Family
(Senior Marketing Manager)

on the sad demise
of his Mother
who passed away in India

May her soul Rest in Peace

International

After fiery speech on democracy, can Biden deliver on promises?

US president needs to kickstart his first term in office

WASHINGTON: It was a defining moment: Joe Biden vowed in a searing speech on the first anniversary of the Capitol riot to defend American democracy from mortal danger, while skewering his predecessor Donald Trump. But what comes next? The veteran Democrat now wants to galvanize his party faithful in the run-up to midterm elections in November, and reboot his stagnant presidency.

But he's taking a major political risk, with little time and limited options to deliver on his promises. The 79-year-old Biden on Thursday delivered what is widely seen as his best speech to date since taking over the Oval Office, commemorating the attack on the US Capitol by a mob of Trump supporters with a solemn vow to protect the nation.

He shelved his usual easygoing manner and dad jokes for a serious, feisty summary of what happened on Jan 6, 2021 - and how the nation can move forward amid such a stark political divide. "I did not seek this fight brought to this Capitol one year ago today, but I will not shrink from it either," he said.

'Come out hard'

For the first time since his inauguration nearly a year ago, Biden took on Trump directly. Without ever using Trump's name, he savaged the "defeated former president" for questioning his 2020 election

win and for sparking his supporters to storm the Capitol. "Those who stormed this Capitol and those who instigated and incited and those who called on them to do so held a dagger at the throat of America - at American democracy," he said. "I will allow no one to place a dagger at the throat of democracy."

For David Schultz, a professor of political science at Hamline University in Minnesota, Biden "was in sort of a no-win situation" before the speech. "Say nothing, and you'd be put on the defensive. Or come out hard like he did" to mobilize his Democrats, which also would spark action on the Republican side, Schultz said. Indeed, Trump fired back quickly after Biden's speech, as did other Republican heavyweights, accusing Biden of politicizing a tragedy to further divide the country.

But there is no mistaking the fact that Biden needs to kickstart his first term in office. After a more or less harmonious start marked by economic

recovery and a waning of the coronavirus pandemic, Biden is certainly bogged down. The chaotic US withdrawal from Afghanistan has bruised him, and Americans are run down by the ongoing pandemic and the rise of the Omicron coronavirus variant, along with a spike in inflation.

Biden's approval rating is hovering around 43 percent - a weak level, and a sizeable obstacle to overcome as he tries to push legislation through with a progressive-centrist split in his own party and a razor-thin legislative majority. For now, the president has had to put his signature social spending bill on the back burner, after Democratic Senator Joe Manchin of West Virginia refused to back it.

Biden approval rating hovering around 43%

'Too little and too late'

And so with the midterm elections - traditionally a tough round for the party in power - on the horizon, Biden has pivoted to focus on the protection of voting rights. Democrats have accused Republican-controlled state legislatures of enacting laws that

would restrict the voting rights of minorities as well as curtail early voting and mail-in casting of ballots.

Biden made a "big promise", Schultz said, and Democrats have an "incredibly narrow window to do something on voting rights" before the midterms, when they risk losing control of Congress. "If he can't get the voting rights done, that's a major blow for his presidency," Schultz said. A first procedural vote is due later this month.

Some civil rights activists expressed skepticism about the pledges made Thursday by Biden, who depended on wide support from African American voters in his Nov 2020 election win over Trump. "Do you think that he means well? Yes, we believe that he means well. (...) But he really just hasn't done enough over the past year that he's been in office to get voting rights," said Cliff Albright, the co-founder of the Black Voters Matter Fund.

Albright and his organization have campaigned for voter participation in the southern state of Georgia, where Biden will speak about voting rights on Tuesday. But for Albright, "it just feels like it's too little and it's too late. And he's just using Georgia as a prop." "For him to come here now and give this speech without having something major to announce is, you know, at best counterproductive and at worst almost disrespectful." — AFP



BERLIN: German Chancellor Olaf Scholz takes off his facemask before addressing a press conference at the Chancellery on Friday. — AFP

Scholz pushes mandatory jabs amid resistance

BERLIN: German Chancellor Olaf Scholz insisted Friday that his plan to introduce mandatory coronavirus jabs was on track, despite fierce debate about the controversial move and growing resistance from his own coalition partners. Scholz, who recently took over as chancellor from Angela Merkel, in late November touted compulsory jabs for all adults as the surest way out of the pandemic.

The center-left Social Democrat asked MPs in the lower of house parliament to draft the necessary legislation with the goal of introducing the measure in "late February or early March". Little progress has been made since then however, and the fast-spreading but less severe Omicron strain has raised fresh doubts about the project, particularly among the pro-business FDP party.

Speaking after a meeting with the leaders of Germany's 16 states on tighter coronavirus curbs, Scholz reiterated that "it would be good if we ended up with a general vaccine mandate". He said all of Germany's state premiers had declared their backing for the plan. "I feel fully supported" by them, he said. The same cannot be said for the FDP, who along with the Greens make up Scholz's three-way coalition government.

Although coronavirus cases are rising, Germany has so far been spared the steep Omicron surge that has swept other nations - prompting Justice Minister Marco Buschmann from the FDP to call for a wait-and-see approach on a general vaccine mandate. FDP chief Christian Lindner said new findings "could play a role in the decision", in a nod to Omicron infecting even the triple jabbed, and studies suggesting a lower hospitalization rate than with the Delta variant.

"Protecting human health and life is highly desirable. But our greatest asset... is and remains our freedom," he said on Thursday. Germany's first parliamentary debate on compulsory jabs is only scheduled for late January, even though Scholz himself had originally aimed to have lawmakers discuss the issue before 2021 was out. "The longer the discussion about mandatory vaccinations lasts... the more the project wobbles," wrote Sueddeutsche newspaper. Hundreds, at times thousands, of protesters have taken to the streets to rail against the government's COVID approach and vaccine plan in recent weeks, occasionally resulting in clashes with police.

Austrian example

With just over 71 percent of the population double jabbed, Germany has a lower coronavirus vaccination rate than France, Italy or Spain. Almost 42 percent of Germans have had their booster shot, considered crucial in the fight against Omicron. Like several other countries, Germany has already announced vaccine mandates for those in certain professions, including soldiers and health workers.

Neighboring Austria has gone further and is on the verge of introducing a general vaccine mandate, in what could be the first in Europe. While it has stirred controversy there too, the measure is backed by all the political parties except Austria's far-right FPÖ. "Compulsory vaccination will come, all experts agree on the high protective effect also against Omicron and hospitalizations," said Austrian Chancellor Karl Nehammer. — AFP

'Bomb cyclone' blankets northeast US in snow

NEW YORK: A winter snowstorm known as a "bomb cyclone" blanketed the northeastern United States on Friday, canceling hundreds of flights, closing schools and causing treacherous driving conditions. Meteorologists say the weather phenomenon is effectively a winter hurricane that occurs when air pressure drops at least 24 millibars in 24 hours, bringing heavy downfalls and strong winds.

The storm brought snow to Kentucky, Nashville and Tennessee, then Virginia and the Washington DC area before heading north up the Atlantic seaboard. "When it rapidly intensifies close to the coast, it can mean a big storm for the east coast cities," Tom Kines, senior meteorologist at Accuweather, told AFP. The National Weather Service recorded more than eight inches of snow at New York City's LaGuardia airport, where 340 flights were canceled as of 9:15 am (1415 GMT).

The number was "expected to increase", the airport said in a tweet. Nearby JFK airport reported 220 flight cancellations while 250 flights were canceled at Logan International Airport in Boston. The National Weather Service (NWS) said that the highest snowfall recorded so far was 18 inches in Cheektowaga in upstate New York on the border with Canada.

Biden comforts families in fire ravaged Colorado

LOUISVILLE, Colorado: Some asked to hug, others got hugged without asking and one man, wearing the only clothes he had left, just clasped hands with Joe Biden as the US president made an emotional tour Friday of a devastating Colorado wildfire. Surrounded by apocalyptic damage from the inferno, Biden sought to comfort locals. The 79-year-old Democrat has long been famous for his ability to show empathy with the suffering and his powers were on full display as he moved along a line of families and firefighters in Louisville, which burned to cinders in the December 30 Marshall Fire.

"We lost everything," a man told Biden and his wife, First Lady Jill Biden. "I'm not even properly dressed because this is all I have," the man said to Biden, gesturing at his long shorts. "We definitely need help," said the man's son, who was also dressed in shorts, despite the snow lying over the blackened ruins of the neighborhood.

Bosnia Serbs mark national day amid fears of secession

SARAJEVO: On the eve of the Serbs' national day in Bosnia, Mira Vuletic is not in a festive mood as talk of secession lingers again, stirring fears the country is set to return to the dark years of inter-communal conflict. The holiday, which falls today, marks the creation of the Republika Srpska (RS), Bosnia's Serb entity that was declared three decades ago - one of the events seen as putting the country on the path to a war in the 1990s that killed over 100,000 people.

"They're stirring up panic and that scares me," says Vuletic, a 70-year-old pensioner, one of the few willing to give her name in eastern Sarajevo, an area that falls under RS jurisdiction. "But I think they do this to hide their schemes and theft," Vuletic added, pointing the blame at leaders from all of Bosnia's ethnic groups for endemic corruption.

Tensions have been rising for months in Bosnia with the Serb's political leader Milorad Dodik setting in motion plans last month to withdraw from the country's central institutions including the army, the



NEW YORK: People pose for photos beneath snow-covered trees in Central Park after the first snowstorm of the season on Friday. — AFP

Several inches of snow closed hundreds of schools in Massachusetts but in New York City, where plows spread out across the metropolis, Eric Adams kept public schools open. "Children need to get in school," he said, referencing previous closures caused by the coronavirus pandemic. "We don't have any more days to waste and the long-term impact of leaving our children home is going to impact us for years to come," he said.

In New Jersey, Governor Phil Murphy declared

a state of emergency, sparking some school districts to call Friday a "snow day". "We urge all New Jerseyans to stay off the roads, stay updated, and stay safe," Murphy wrote on Twitter. Meteorologist Kines said the storm would move north, with freezing temperatures and high winds bringing "blizzard conditions" to parts of Nova Scotia and Newfoundland in Canada on Friday night. The NWS said a winter storm warning was in effect in Maine. — AFP



LOUISVILLE, Colorado: US President Joe Biden and First Lady Jill Biden meet with fire victims after touring a neighborhood destroyed by the Marshall Fire at the Louisville Recreation and Senior Center on Friday. — AFP

Biden held the father's hand for a long time, and after shaking hands with a dozen firefighters, gave them all ceremonial coins. One woman looked at Jill Biden and said, "May I?" and then embraced her. Biden put his arms around others. "We'll get through this," one of the local men said. Some 1,000 homes were destroyed in the blaze near the state's biggest city Denver, and two people remain missing, authorities said. — AFP

judiciary and the tax system. The move earned fresh sanctions from the US on Wednesday, with Washington chiding him for attempting to undermine the landmark Dayton Peace Accords that brought an end to fighting in Bosnia in 1995.

Bosnia was effectively split in two as a result, giving one half to the country's ethnic Bosnian Serbs while the other was to be ruled by a Muslim-Croat federation. Despite the sanctions, celebrations for the national day moved forward this week as municipal employees hung red, white and blue RS flags across eastern Sarajevo.

The holiday has long been considered a "provocation" by the country's Muslim community who were targeted by Bosnian Serb paramilitary groups just three months after RS was unilaterally created in 1992. For the 30th anniversary, RS authorities are planning three days of celebrations, which will include a parade of their police forces in the Serbs' capital Banja Luka. Dodik's increasingly aggressive rhetoric along with his plans to start withdrawing from the Bosnian government has cast a large shadow over this year's holiday. "One should never rule out the possibility of conflict in Bosnia," warns Srećko Latal, the editor of Balkan Insight, a regional investigative journalism network. "Dodik is going further and further into a story that may end in an attempt at secession that could not pass without further conflict," Latal added. — AFP

US Supreme Court appears split over vaccine mandates

WASHINGTON: The US Supreme Court appeared to be divided on Friday over President Joe Biden's COVID vaccination-or-testing mandate for businesses with liberal justices strongly in favor and conservatives expressing skepticism. But a majority of the nine justices appeared to support an administration requirement that healthcare workers at facilities receiving federal funding get their shots.

After months of public appeals to Americans to get vaccinated against COVID-19, which has killed more than 830,000 people in the United States, Biden announced in September that he was making vaccinations compulsory at companies that employ 100 workers or more. Unvaccinated employees would have to present weekly negative tests and wear face masks at work.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), a federal agency, has given businesses until Feb 9 to be in compliance with the rules or face the possibility of fines. Vaccination has become a politically polarizing issue in the United States, where 62 percent of the population are vaccinated. A coalition of 26 business associations filed suit against the OSHA regulations and the conservative-dominated Supreme Court agreed to hold an emergency hearing and also hear arguments about the vaccine mandate for healthcare workers, which is being challenged by Republican state lawmakers.

The three liberal justices on the court appeared to strongly favor both mandates. "Why isn't this necessary to abate the grave risk?" Justice Elena Kagan asked the lawyer representing business associations opposed to the policy. "This is a pandemic in which nearly a million people have died," Kagan said. "It is by far the greatest public health danger that this country has faced in the last century. And this is the policy that is most geared to stopping all this."

Scott Keller, a former Texas solicitor general representing the business groups, said the rule requiring COVID vaccinations at companies that employ 100 people or more would lead many workers to quit. "An economy-wide mandate would cause permanent worker displacement, rippling through our national economy," Keller said. — AFP

International

As cases rise, India fearing another COVID catastrophe

Urban centers moved to impose curbs • Court allows huge Hindu festival

NEW DELHI: Haunted by the specter of last year's crisis, India is bracing for a deluge of COVID-19 cases, with authorities of various megacities bringing in restrictions in a bid to keep infections in check. Case numbers have yet to match the enormous figures seen last spring, when thousands died each day and the Hindu holy city of Varanasi maintained round-the-clock funeral pyres for the mass cremation of virus victims.

New cases passed 100,000 on Friday, a surge driven by the highly contagious Omicron variant that some experts worry could again see the country's hospitals overwhelmed. An overnight curfew has been imposed in the Delhi area that includes the capital, where weekend movement restrictions began on Friday evening, with all non-essential workers asked to stay home.

Tech hub Bangalore has also declared a weekend curfew, while sprawling financial center Mumbai introduced a night curfew. "Even a small percentage of a large number of cases translates to a large number in absolute terms," Gautam Menon, a professor at India's Ashoka University who has worked on COVID infection modelling, told AFP. "This could potentially stress out healthcare systems to levels comparable to or worse than the second wave."

Doctors and nurses who spoke to AFP have so far been optimistic, with fewer severe cases among those patients admitted to hospital - and with the benefit of experience. "Last year, we didn't know what exactly we were dealing with. I think now, mentally, it's a little

better," one frontline worker at a Delhi hospital said. Suresh Kumar, director of Lok Nayak Jai Prakash Hospital in the capital, where cases have quadrupled from a handful at the start of the week to 20, said the rise was "not a cause for panic".

Meanwhile, an Indian court on Friday rejected a bid to cancel a major Hindu festival despite fears the vast gathering could spread coronavirus infections. Hundreds of thousands of people are expected to attend the annual Gangasagar Mela festival, which began yesterday on an island where the holy river Ganges enters the Bay of Bengal. It marks the harvest season and will reach a climax next weekend ahead of the new moon on Jan 17.

Kolkata-based doctor Avinandan Mondal sought a court order to ban the festival over coronavirus concerns. But the Calcutta High Court rejected the request, instead asking the regional government - which estimated attendance at no more than 500,000 and supported the gathering - to issue advertisements warning people about the risks of attending. "People from all states in the country will attend the religious festival and take a holy dip," environmentalist Subhash Dutta told AFP. "They may carry variant viruses and this religious festival may end up being the biggest superspreader in the coming days," he added.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's administration has so far shied away from the drastic nationwide lockdown introduced during last year's catastrophic outbreak. But local officials have watched the sharply rising case numbers with alarm and some of India's



KOLKATA: Pilgrims wait in a queue for their turn to get themselves tested for the coronavirus at a transit camp ahead of the upcoming annual Gangasagar Mela annual religious fair at Sagar Island yesterday. — AFP

biggest urban centers have moved to impose restrictions again. Earlier virus lockdowns were a hammer blow to the Indian economy and many are worried about the financial impact of new restrictions.

"I will be working only for 15 days this month," said Delhi resident Tumul Srivastava, whose office is subject to the 50 percent occupancy limits imposed by the city. "My salary may be deducted. All this is adding to my anxiety."

India appears better placed to weather Omicron than it was ahead of the calamitous Delta wave it suffered last spring, when more than 200,000 people

died in a matter of weeks. Back then, hospitals ran out of oxygen and patients desperately scrambled to source medicine after a run on pharmacies. In the time since, Indian health workers have injected nearly 1.5 billion vaccine doses, with government data showing nearly two-thirds of the country fully vaccinated.

That campaign, combined with last year's Delta sweep of towns and villages around the country, may help lessen the impact of the latest spread. "Though we do not have data, this may give strong hybrid immunity against severe outcomes," University of Michigan epidemiologist Bhramar Mukherjee told AFP. —AFP

“ I think now, mentally, it's a little better ”

Taliban issue posters ordering women to cover up

KABUL: The Taliban's religious police have put up posters around the capital Kabul ordering Afghan women to cover up, an official said Friday, the latest in a string of creeping restrictions. The poster, which includes an image of the face-covering burqa, was slapped on cafes and shops this week by the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice. Since returning to power in August, the Taliban have increasingly curtailed freedoms - particularly those of women and girls.

"According to Sharia law, Muslim women must wear the hijab," the poster reads, referring to the practice of covering up. A spokesman for the ministry, responsible for enforcing the Taliban's interpretation of Islamic law, confirmed to AFP on Friday that it was behind the orders. "If someone does not follow it, it does not mean she will be punished or beaten, it's just encouragement for Muslim women to follow

Sharia law," Sadeq Akif Muhajir said.

In Kabul, women already cover their hair with headscarves, though some wear modest western clothing. Outside of the capital the burqa, which became mandatory for women under the Taliban's first regime in the 1990s, has remained common. "What they're trying to do is to spread fear among the people," a university student and women's rights advocate, who did not want to be identified, told AFP. "The first time I saw the posters I was really petrified, I thought maybe (the Taliban) will start beating me. They want me to wear a burqa and look like nothing, I would never do that."

The Taliban, which is desperate for international recognition to allow funding flows to reopen to the war-ravaged country, have so far refrained from issuing national policies. Instead, they have published guidance for men and women that has varied from province to province. "This is not



KABUL: A sticker reading "According to sharia law, Muslim women must do the hijab" is seen on the window of a shop on Friday. — AFP

good. 100 percent, this will create fear," said Shahagha Noori, the supervisor of a Kabul restaurant where the poster had been put up by the Taliban. "I think if the Taliban get international recognition, then they will start to enforce it."

Although the Taliban have promised a lighter version of the headline rule that characterized their first stint in power from 1996 to 2001, women

are largely excluded from government employment, and secondary schools for girls have remained shuttered in several provinces. They have also been banned from travelling alone on long journeys. No nation has yet formally recognized the Taliban government and diplomats face the delicate task of channeling aid to the stricken Afghan economy without propping up the hardline Islamists. — AFP

'I am not a virus,' insists Indian man named Kovid

NEW DELHI: What's in a name? For Indian travel start-up founder Kovid Kapoor, it has made him a social media sensation. The 31-year-old's Twitter profile declares: "My name is Kovid and I am not a virus." He posted this week that he had travelled outside India for the first time since the onset of the pandemic "and got a bunch of people amused by my name". "Future foreign trips are going to be fun!" he said in a tweet that had been liked 40,000

times and received 4,000 retweets by Friday.

The comment triggered a barrage of jokes, memes, messages and interview requests, in a moment of light relief as the highly contagious Omicron variant sees case numbers surge in India. Kapoor has joined in himself, declaring that he was been "Kovid positive since 1990" and posting a picture holding a bottle of Corona beer. "I am Kovid that wants more travel," the co-founder of Holidify quipped.

The sudden spurt of attention was "totally unexpected" but he hoped it would bring some publicity



Kovid Kapoor

to his business during a "very difficult time" for the sector, he told AFP. He has never had a shortage of icebreakers at business meetings since the start of the pandemic, but has told coffee shops not to announce his name when handing him a beverage.

Kovid is a highly unusual name in India but means a scholar or a learned individual in Hindi and Sanskrit, with the 'd' pronounced with a very soft emphasis. Kapoor's mother picked the name well before his birth. "It's a memorable name with a beautiful meaning," he said. "It makes for a striking introduction with anyone. I'd never change it." — AFP

In Chavez fiefdom, a fight for survival

SABANETA, Venezuela: Venezuela's governing party is leaving nothing to chance in its bid to reclaim a fiefdom of ex-president Hugo Chavez which shocked the establishment by seemingly siding with the opposition in a recent election. The western state of Barinas, controlled by the Chavez family for over two decades, voted in large numbers in November 21 regional elections for an outsider - opposition figure Freddy Superlano.

The vote count was stopped by a court as Superlano claimed what would have been the first defeat in Barinas since 1998 for the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV), now run by President Nicolas Maduro. Superlano is an ally of opposition leader Juan Guaido, recognized by the United States and dozens of other governments as Venezuela's true president over Maduro, whose 2018 reelection was not seen as legitimate by

part of the international community.

As the opposition participated in regional and local elections for the first time since 2017, Superlano took the lead over incumbent Barinas governor Argenis Chavez - the deceased ex-president's older brother, who subsequently resigned his post. But the opposition triumph was not to last. The ballot count was suspended in the region of 870,000 voters and Venezuela's Supreme Court - accused of pro-government bias by the opposition and observers - annulled the preliminary result a week later.

It granted a request by the country's public finances watchdog to declare Superlano "ineligible" due to "administrative and criminal investigations" into accusations of corruption, and ordered new elections to be held.

'A warning'

Superlano's Popular Will party replaced him with Sergio Garrido, an unknown regional lawmaker, who faces off today against the PSUV's Jorge Arreaza - a former foreign minister and father to Chavez's oldest grandson. Arreaza has been campaigning fervently, taking no chances. The November defeat was "a warning", said Reinaldo Chavez, a

lawmaker in the local council in the town of Sabaneta and a relative of the ex-president. "Perhaps we were beaten by our own triumphalism," he told AFP.

Maduro's party won 19 gubernatorial races in the Nov 21 vote. Barinas was alone among Venezuela's 23 states not to have the outcome confirmed by election authorities. EU observers said the vote countrywide was marred by irregularities, including the widespread use of state resources by the PSUV, and "arbitrary disqualifications" of challengers.

'The people are sick'

In Sabaneta, a town of 28,000, stands a six-meter bronze-and-granite statue of Chavez, its most famous son, who died of cancer in 2013. Murals everywhere honor the man beloved by many for redistributing Venezuela's vast oil wealth to the poor, but also blamed for the country's now miserable economy and sky-high crime rate. There are no opinion polls to test the voters' pulse ahead of Sunday's re-run.

"We have no electricity," a woman shouted from her home as Arreaza campaigned Wednesday in an open-roof car emblazoned with the slogan: "Hope returns." Edixon Nieto, a 22-



SABANETA: A motorbike ride past a mural depicting the late Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez in Barinas state on Jan 5, 2022. — AFP

year-old farmer, said he had voted for Superlano. "Here in Sabaneta, I won't lie, people are sick," he told AFP, citing problems with basic services such as water and electricity.

Impoverished Venezuela is battered by recession and hyperinflation, and three in four of its citizens live in extreme poverty, according to a recent study. Millions have left the country in recent years to try their luck elsewhere. But Arreaza still hopes to profit from what remains of Chavez's

popularity. "Arreaza is the father of a beloved symbol of our commander Chavez: The beloved grandson of our commander," Maduro said when announcing Arreaza's gubernatorial run.

The boy, Jorge Arreaza Chavez - nicknamed "El Gallito" (Little Rooster) accompanied his father on his campaign to Sabaneta, riding in the 4x4 with him through the streets as Arreaza waved in a red shirt with a white star on the left sleeve, like Chavez used to wear. — AFP

News in brief

Nine bodies found on road

VERACRUZ, Mexico: Nine bodies were found Friday on a road in eastern Mexico, officials said - the latest gruesome discovery in a country plagued by drug cartel-related violence. The corpses were left on a highway in the municipality of Isla in the state of Veracruz, state governor Cuatlahuac Garcia said. The region, which borders the Gulf of Mexico, is a flashpoint in turf wars between rival drug gangs, and one of the country's most violent states. — AFP

Charity gets back access to funds

KOLKATA: The Indian government renewed permission for late Catholic nun Mother Teresa's charity to receive foreign funds, weeks after rejecting it, the organization said yesterday. On Christmas Day the Narendra Modi government moved to cut off foreign funding to the Missionaries of Charity and refused to renew its license under the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA). "The FCRA application has now been renewed," said Sunita Kumar, a close aide to Mother Teresa. — AFP

HK officials to leave quarantine

HONG KONG: Multiple Hong Kong officials and lawmakers will be allowed to leave a quarantine camp after one of two coronavirus cases detected at a party they attended was declared a false positive on Saturday. Dozens of senior officials and lawmakers were ordered into Hong Kong's 21-day quarantine facilities this week as health officials warn of an imminent outbreak due to the Omicron variant. Hong Kong's top cop Raymond Siu and financial services and treasury chief Christopher Hui will be among those leaving quarantine after a day-long stay. — AFP

Business

SUNDAY, JANUARY 9, 2022

Threats and theft: The wretched life of C Africa's peanut growers

Low prices affect peanut farmers and the entire industry in Paoua

PAOUA, Central African Republic: Hunching over her work, Marissa shells peanuts under a blazing sun, sweat dripping down her face. Growing peanuts is a mainstay activity in the Paoua region in the Central African Republic, about 500 kilometers (300 miles) northwest of the capital Bangui. But for many growers, life is a daily battle.

First, they have to coax the plants from the ground, harvest the nuts and shell them. And then they have to survive theft, extortion or worse, in a region where rebels and pro-government forces are at war. The town of Paoua is regularly targeted by armed groups, notably the powerful 3R movement (Return, Reclaim, Rehabilitation), among several in the region that are seeking to control the peanut business.

The rebels that have ravaged the deeply poor, landlocked country for years have adopted guerrilla tactics after being driven back from large towns. For the past several months, they have been planting explosive devices along the main roads to delay the advance of pro-government forces.

"There are too many threats and thefts," says Celestine Inforo, 33, shelling peanuts along with Marissa and a dozen others on the outskirts of Paoua. "We had to sell our production very quickly and at a low price." The women separate the nuts' fine skins by pouring them onto the ground from shoulder height. Inforo and her co-workers each fill several sacks in a few hours, then a pair of oxen haul the day's production to a secure storeroom loaned by the Oxfam non-governmental organization.

Outside the storeroom, each bag is weighed and

recorded at between 35 and 45 kilograms (75-100 pounds). In the town, a sack of shelled nuts fetches around 10,000 CFA francs, the equivalent of \$17 (15 euros).

This is a far cry from the prices in distant Bangui, where a sack can sell for between 20,000 and 30,000 CFA francs, says Jean-Paul Ndayaye, president of the Paoua Rice Growers Union. Production greatly exceeds demand in the region, bringing down prices. The impact is dramatic in a town of some 40,000, since "80 percent of the population of Paoua has an activity related to peanuts", according to Noel Zingani, head of the local Oxfam office. When low prices affect the entire industry in Paoua, Marissa barely gets 250 CFA francs, around 43 cents, for each bag she fills.

Unprecedented malnutrition

The CAR is one of the poorest countries in the world, in the grip of a civil war since 2013. The conflict has diminished in intensity in recent years, but it flared up again during the last presidential election a year ago. In the greater Ouham-Pende region, the World Food Programme (WFP) says malnutrition is at unprecedented levels, measured on the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC).

"Sixty-one percent of the population is in phase 3 of crisis and in phase 4 of food emergency," states Mahoua Coulibaly, local manager of the UN agency.

In the shade of a mango tree, three women turn peanuts into oil, butter and "kuli-kuli" sticks, which have a high nutritional content thanks to the natural proteins and fibers. Marie roasts the nuts, stir-



PAOUA, Central African Republic: A woman is torrefying peanuts as part of the artisanal transformation process in Paoua, northwestern Central African Republic—AFP

ring them while taking care not to burn herself. Kneeling beside her, Lena kneads peanut butter on a wooden board.

"Extracting oil with this method is physically exhausting, it can take hours," says Moussa Issoufou, Oxfam's food security manager. "We must

find modern equipment to facilitate their work," he adds, convinced that this is the only way for the women to earn more from their labor. "The problem is processing. This is what must be invested in for the wellbeing of the population, but for the moment the funds are lacking," Coulibaly says. — AFP

Omicron: Mild or severe impact on economy?

WASHINGTON: After limping its way back from the COVID pandemic last year, the global economic recovery has been rattled by the Omicron variant's rapid rise. The travel industry has been thrown into disarray again, workers have been forced to isolate at home and governments are facing a stark choice between imposing restrictions or letting the economy be.

Could the highly-contagious Omicron variant have a severe impact on the recovery? Or will its mild symptoms keep the economy from sinking again?

How bad a hit on growth?

The head of the International Monetary Fund, Kristalina Georgieva, warned last month that global economic growth forecasts may have to be slashed following the emergence of Omicron.

The IMF has previously banked on growth of 5.9 percent for 2021 and 4.9 percent this year, but it could now revise its estimates later this month. To soften the blow on the economy, US health authorities have cut the isolation period for asymptomatic cases by half to five days.

Mark Zandi, chief economist at

Moody's, told AFP he expects US growth of 2.2 percent in the first quarter, more than half lower than a previous estimate of 5.2 percent.

"Omicron is already doing economic damage, as is clear from weaker credit card spending, a decline in restaurant bookings, air flight cancellations, and many schools going back to online learning," Zandi said. "However, I do expect Omicron to pass through quickly and for growth to rebound in the second quarter, and growth for the year to be unaffected," he added. "Broadly, I think each wave of the virus is doing less damage to the healthcare system and economy than the previous wave."

In the eurozone, tighter restrictions, consumer caution and absenteeism will reduce economic activity in the next few weeks, but the economy will rebound in February, according to Andrew Kenningham, chief Europe economist at Capital Economics. Countries with lower vaccination rates, which are mainly developing economies, face greater uncertainty, and a zero-COVID policy in China could put a brake on growth in the world's second biggest economy as it locks down entire cities.



PARIS: Members of the public queue outside a pharmacy to receive COVID-19 antigen tests in Paris as COVID-19 cases soared in Europe. — AFP

Will tourism suffer?

The travel industry was looking forward to a rebound in 2022 after it was devastated by border closures and lockdowns. But the emergence of Omicron during the key winter holiday season caused thousands of flight cancellations, cruises to be forced to dock and fewer hotel bookings. Investors, however, have been optimistic, as shares of airline and cruise companies have risen in recent weeks. "The markets seemed to be looking at the post-Omicron period," said Alexandre Baradez, analyst at IG France.

Will inflation worsen?

The economic recovery has had an

adverse side effect: Inflation that has soared to decades-high levels in the United States and Europe as energy prices soared and rising demand faced supply shortages. Central banks have insisted that high inflation is only temporary and prices will eventually fall, but it has hurt consumers and businesses.

"Little is certain about Omicron's impact on consumer demand, but people who stay at home because of the variant are more likely to spend their money on retail goods rather than services like dining out or in-person entertainment," said Jack Kleinhenz, chief economist at the US National Retail Federation. — AFP

Omicron slams UK retail recovery

LONDON: Restrictions imposed in the wake of the Omicron coronavirus variant have "wiped out" much of a recent recovery enjoyed by UK bricks-and-mortar stores, the British Retail Consortium revealed Friday. It comes as UK businesses and consumers face mounting fallout from surging inflation, including higher interest rates.

Much of the progress made in late 2021 "was wiped out in December as surging Omicron cases and new work-from-home advice deterred many from shopping in-store, particularly in towns and city centers", said BRC chief executive Helen Dickinson. "Nevertheless, while UK footfall saw a moderate decline compared to previous months, it remained above levels of other major European economies, as the country avoided some of the more severe restrictions implemented elsewhere," she added in a statement.

The number of shoppers visiting UK stores fell 18.6 percent in December compared with two years earlier, or before the onset of the coronavirus pan-



LONDON: Shoppers walk past stores in Camden Market in London, on Friday as UK businesses and consumers face mounting fallout from surging inflation, including higher interest rates. — AFP

dem, according to the BRC. "December footfall capped a challenging year for brick-and-mortar stores, which saw footfall down one-third on pre-pandemic levels," Dickinson added.

Soaring virus cases

The UK, already among the worst hit countries in Europe by the pandemic with a virus death toll of nearly 150,000, has seen a fresh surge in cases owing to the arrival of the Omicron variant in late November. More than one in 20 people had Covid-19 in the week ending December 31 — the highest UK infection rate recorded during the pandemic.

British companies are meanwhile suffering a "huge headache" because of continuing supply chain disruptions, soaring inflation and rising energy costs, a business group warned Thursday. The British Chambers of Commerce said its study of almost 5,500 companies found that a record 58 percent expect an increase to their prices in the quarter. "The persistent weakness in cash flow is troubling because it leaves businesses more exposed to the economic impact of Omicron, rising inflation and potential further restrictions," noted Suren Thiru, head of economics at the BCC. — AFP

Sri Lanka bows to Chinese pressure over fertilizer

COLOMBO: Sri Lanka paid a Chinese company \$6.8 million despite rejecting its shipment of organic fertilizer as substandard, officials said yesterday, even though Colombo is in the throes of a foreign exchange crisis. The state-run People's Bank of Sri Lanka said it paid Qingdao Seawin Biotech Group \$6.87 million in connection with an out-of-court settlement over the shipment.

Fertilizer is one of the items in short supply in Sri Lanka, but authorities said in October tests had shown the shipment was contaminated and banned it from landing anywhere on the island. China retaliated by blacklisting the bank and threatening international legal action against Colombo.

Beijing is a key development partner of Colombo and has given billions of dollars in loans, raising concern that Sri Lanka may be heading for a Chinese debt trap, though both nations have rejected such worries. The settlement comes ahead of a visit to the island by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi later.

The Chinese representative is making a two-



day visit for talks with President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and other leaders, and to mark the 65th anniversary of diplomatic ties between the two sides. Sri Lanka originally ordered the Chinese organic fertilizer as part of Rajapaksa's drive to become the world's first 100 percent organic farming nation. Following widespread protests by farmers who said abandoning agrochemicals would critically hit yields, the government in October lifted a ban on chemical fertilizer imposed in May last year. — AFP

US ends 2021 with disappointing job growth

WASHINGTON: The US economy ended 2021 on a sour note with a worse-than-expected employment report Friday underscoring the challenges awaiting President Joe Biden in the new year, as the Omicron variant runs rampant and his legislative agenda stalls. The world's largest economy gained only 199,000 jobs in the final month of the year, the Labor Department said, defying expectations for an increase of hundreds of thousands of positions fueled by the recovery from COVID-19.

However, the unemployment rate dropped to 3.9 percent, not far from where it was before the pandemic struck, and Biden hailed the report as marking "a historic day for our economic recovery."

Analysts warn the days ahead may nonetheless grow darker as COVID cases caused by the new variant surge and again complicate daily life. "All of this is before Omicron, which is making lots of people sick and disrupting lots of businesses," Mark Zandi of Moody's Analytics tweeted, noting that the survey was based on data collected before the recent spike in infections. — AFP

Business

Chileans take to the streets to protest lithium contract sale

Chile inflation jumps to a 14-year high

SANTIAGO: Chileans took to the streets Friday to protest a government plan to sell a lithium extraction contract, reviving debate about nationalization of the resource as a new leftist president prepares to take over. Protests were called by the opposition under the banner: "To reclaim our resource."

Opposition lawmakers launched a court action-rejected Friday because the clock on the process had run out-earlier this week to stop the bidding process for a 20-year contract to extract 400,000 tons of lithium in the world's second-largest producer of the metal, which notably is used in electric car batteries. The tender process, which opened last October, will close this month, just two months before center-right president Sebastian Pinera is replaced by leftist Gabriel Boric.

In Santiago Friday evening, marchers chanted, "Pinera, understand that lithium is not for sale." Boric, Chile's youngest-ever leader, was elected last month on a promise of installing a "social welfare" state and has said Chile cannot repeat the "historical error of privatizing resources" such as lithium.

Boric has proposed creating a "national lithium company" similar to the national Copper Corporation (Codelco) — the world's biggest copper company formed in the 1970s out of nationalized mining firms.

Copper mining was nationalized by the government of Marxist ex-president Salvador Allende, ousted by dictator Augusto Pinochet who introduced a neoliberal, free market-friendly constitution that is now being rewritten in response to a mass uprising in 2019 against deep social inequality. "We have two options: either we leave lithium in the ground or we use lithium for the benefit of all

Chileans," President Pinera told reporters Friday. "After seeing that lithium production had stagnated in Chile... and that countries such as Argentina and Bolivia were threatening to overtake Chile, we decided to launch a strategic plan to use lithium," he added.

But lawmaker Raul Soto of the center-left Party for Democracy, who submitted court papers Tuesday to stop the tender process, said Pinera's government was "putting the general interest of the nation at risk." The government argues the sale is needed to return Chile to the position of the world's largest lithium producer, which it was until 2016.

It is currently number two, after Australia. Five companies, including Chilean mining giant SQM and American Albemarle, have submitted tenders worth tens of millions of dollars for the license.

The government says the contract will cover no more than four percent of Chile's known lithium reserves-it holds 57 percent of the world total-and insists the winning bidder will have to comply with strict environmental regulations.

Meanwhile, Chile registered inflation of 7.2 percent in 2021, the highest level in 14 years, the INE statistics agency said on Friday. For the month of December, the figure was a higher-than-expected 0.8 percent, driven by higher prices for transport and food.

Annual inflation was far higher than the Central Bank's target of 3.0 percent, the level of the year before. Price rises were fueled partly by increased public spending boosted by government grants amounting to some \$3 billion to stimulate a pandemic-ravaged economy, and individual withdrawals from private pension funds totaling \$50 billion.



SANTIAGO, Chile: Demonstrators march holding a banner reading "Copper and Lithium for Chile" to protest a government plan to sell a lithium extraction contract on Friday in Santiago, reviving debate about nationalization as a leftist new president prepares to take over. —AFP

The withdrawals, three in total, were approved by Congress in response to strong public pressure—a short-term poverty alleviation measure that will leave millions of Chileans with less money to retire on. Chile's central bank has already raised interest rates twice since October, by 1.25 percentage

points each time. The government expects GDP to have expanded about 11.5 percent in 2021 compared to a fall of 5.8 percent in 2020. Elsewhere in Latin America, inflation is at more than 10 percent in economic giant Brazil, while in Argentina it is around 50 percent. — AFP

Sri Lanka rations electricity as dollar crisis worsens

COLOMBO: Sri Lanka imposed electricity rationing Friday with the main power utility unable to buy fuel oil for its power stations as a result of the island's worsening dollar crisis. Oil normally accounts for around nine percent of electricity generation on the island, but a Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) official said the company had run out of dollars to buy it from the state-run Ceylon Petroleum Corporation.

The CEB was having to rely on its coal- and hydro-powered generating facilities and was applying rotating one-hour power cuts around the island, he said. He did not say how long the rationing would last but added that the 160-megawatt Sapugaskanda power station and a barge-mounted 60-megawatt generator at a Colombo port had been closed for an indefinite period.

"The power cuts are being imposed

because the Ceylon Petroleum Corporation has not supplied us with fuel," the official said. Sri Lanka's acute foreign exchange shortage has already led to rationing of milk powder, sugar, cooking gas and cement.

The island's tourism-dependent economy has been hammered by the pandemic and the government imposed a broad import ban in early 2020 to try to save foreign exchange reserves. The power cuts came as the country's energy minister warned of an impending petrol and diesel shortage within two weeks. Udaya Gammanpila said stocks of the transport fuels could run out by "the third week of January" unless orders were placed for fresh supplies.

"I have taken up this issue with the cabinet and told them eight times now to ensure that a part of dollar inflows are reserved for oil and medicines imports," Gammanpila said.



This file shows a view of a deserted street during a nationwide ten-day lockdown in Colombo. — AFP

He also urged motorists to reduce consumption. A 10 percent increase in prices two weeks ago was insufficient to discourage drivers, Gammanpila said. The latest energy setbacks came as the country's economic crisis showed signs of worsening, with the statistics office reporting record food inflation of 22.1 percent last month. International rating agencies have

downgraded Sri Lanka and expressed fears that the island may default on its \$26 billion foreign debt after the country's foreign reserves fell to dangerous levels. Reserves were at \$7.5 billion when the current government of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa's administration took over in November 2019 and had fallen to \$1.5 billion two years later. — AFP

Stocks mostly fall after US hiring disappoints

NEW YORK: Stocks mostly fell Friday on both sides of the Atlantic after data showed that the US economy added far fewer jobs than expected last month and eurozone inflation hit a record high. London's FTSE 100 index bucked the trend, ending the day 0.5 percent higher, but Paris and Frankfurt slid. On Wall Street, the Dow tumbled, but both the S&P 500 and Nasdaq declined to conclude a down week for US stocks.

Asia faced a mixed trading session after another round of losses on Wall Street on Thursday as investors continued to mull signals by the US Federal Reserve that it was ready to tighten monetary policy more quickly to combat spiking inflation.

The dollar dipped, while oil pulled back modestly after days of strong gains. Government data showed that the US economy added only 199,000 jobs in December. While that was less than half of what analysts expected, the unemployment rate fell to 3.9

percent, wages rose strongly and participation in the labor force held steady, indicating the job market remains tight.

"The key takeaway from the report is that it shows the Fed is close to meeting its objective of maximum employment and that wage growth in a tight labor market risks feeding into more persistent inflation pressures that will need to be addressed with a tighter policy position," said market analyst Patrick O'Hare at Briefing.com. Surging inflation has pushed the Fed to begin to wind down its bond-buying stimulus program ahead of raising interest rates, and central banks in a number of other countries have already raised rates.

Minutes released earlier this week from the Fed's December policy meeting signaled a more aggressive rate-tightening path, arguing "it may become warranted to increase the federal funds rate sooner or at a faster pace than participants had earlier anticipated." There were also indications officials were considering reducing its massive bond holdings, putting further upward pressure on lending costs.

"Investors remain apprehensive following the Federal Reserve's move to a more hawkish stance, with the jobs report later providing further color to the economic backdrop," said Richard Hunter,

grounded by the coronavirus epidemic. The government investigation that followed discovered dozens of Pakistani pilots had faked their certifications or flying hours, prompting the airline's suspension from Europe and America. On Thursday Aviation Minister Ghulam Sarwar Khan told a press conference a team from the International Civil Aviation Organization's Universal Safety Oversight Auditing Programme said Pakistan had now resolved outstanding issues.

"We addressed significant safety concerns," Khan said, adding: "We hope to resume our flight operations to Europe and the US by February or March this year." He said a follow-up inquiry into pilot certifications was part of the clean-up process. Some 262 licenses were found to be "dubious," he said, most of which have now been cleared after further training and testing.

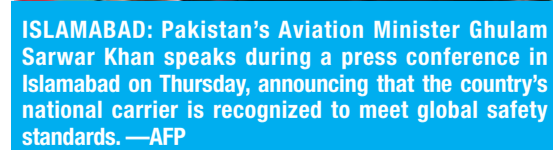
However, 50 pilots had been dismissed because of irregularities. "There has been a lot of criticism on us during the last two years, but we improved our safety standards," Khan said. He added that Pakistan had signed an agreement with British civil aviation authorities for its pilots to be tested and certified in the UK. Until the 1970s PIA was consid-



ered a top regional carrier, but its reputation plummeted amid chronic mismanagement, frequent cancellations and financial woes. It still operates some domestic and regional routes, but Khan said the airline now hoped to resume intercontinental flights and add new destinations. — AFP

head of markets at Interactive Investor. Data showing that eurozone inflation hit a record high of 5.0 percent in December was likely to heap additional pressure on the European Central Bank, which has so far indicated it has no plans to raise interest rates this year.

The surge in prices in recent months is mainly due to the exceptional rise in gas and electricity prices. In December, the annual increase in energy prices reached 26 percent, far ahead of the other products surveyed in Eurostat's basket. —AFP



ISLAMABAD: Pakistan's Aviation Minister Ghulam Sarwar Khan speaks during a press conference in Islamabad on Thursday, announcing that the country's national carrier is recognized to meet global safety standards. —AFP

US job boom in Dec lynchpin to Fed rate hikes

WASHINGTON: The American economy likely saw strong job gains in the final month of 2021, which could shorten the timeline for the US central bank to raise interest rates. The Federal Reserve has been setting the stage to increase borrowing costs more aggressively to rein in growing inflation, and that prospect sent markets into a tailspin this week, even though policymakers have telegraphed the possibility of rate hikes in advance.

The COVID-19 pandemic and waves of new variants have buffeted the world's largest economy, with massive layoffs followed by a strong recovery and business reopenings followed by renewed closures.

Rather than rushing back to work, many Americans, flush with high savings helped by government aid, opted to stay on the sidelines and out of the labor force, further straining businesses. In these uncharted waters, supply chain snarls have contributed to a wave of record price increases, all conspiring to complicate the Fed's policy deliberations. The central bank has nervously eyed inflation as consumer prices hit their highest level in four decades, and began to pull back on its stimulus programs more aggressively in November. But when it comes to raising the benchmark lending rate off zero, the Fed is waiting to see the economy return to maximum employment—a difficult-to-define target.

The Labor Department is set to release its December employment report on Friday, and the consensus forecast is for a gain of 440,000 jobs—more than double the disappointing November tally. But some economists think the economy could finally see the boom that they forecast in prior months but which never materialized. Ian Shepherdson of Pantheon Macroeconomics projects a jump of 850,000 positions, and noted that private surveys indicate hiring could exceed one million. "The case for expecting the best payroll report since March is compelling," he said.

Maximum employment target

After its December policy meeting, Fed Chair Jerome Powell explained that the central bank is waiting for the economy to reach maximum employment before lifting rates off zero.

But while the economy is making "rapid progress" towards the goal, "it is admittedly a judgment call," he said. Unemployment is expected to dip to 4.1 percent, a tenth below the November rate, but the share of workers in the labor force has struggled to recover.

The conundrum includes a wave of retirements and record numbers of workers quitting their jobs—either to leave the labor force or simply because they are confident they can get another position easily. And with the economy still short nearly four million jobs compared to the start of the pandemic, vacancies are at an all-time high.

The greater focus is on rising inflation, which Powell said was not what officials were expecting and driven by supply side barriers rather than rising employment, unlike previous recoveries. The minutes of the Fed's December policy meeting released Wednesday reiterated an aggressive inflation-fighting posture, which has made more economists project the first rate hike as soon as March, when the central bank finishes its bond-buying program, and three or more in 2022. —AFP

Pakistan's national carrier closer to full international flights

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan has addressed significant safety concerns regarding its national carrier, the country's aviation minister said Thursday, but the airline still needs authorities in Europe and the United States to lift a ban before it can resume flights to major Western destinations.

Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) was barred from flying in Europe and the USA in 2020 months after one of its Airbus A-320s crashed while landing at Karachi's Jinnah International Airport, killing all but two of the 99 passengers and crew.

Flight 8303 damaged its engines when the pilots attempted to land without the undercarriage lowered, and crashed into a crowded neighborhood while circling for a second attempt. The accident was attributed to pilot error as a result of the crew being out of action for months, having been

Business

Markaz: Saudi's real estate sector continues to recover

'KSA Real Estate Outlook H1 2021' report

KUWAIT: The Kuwait Financial Centre "Markaz" recently issued its "KSA Real Estate Outlook H1 2021" report, where it highlighted expected GDP growth in Saudi Arabia's for 2022, mainly on the back of increasing oil prices and higher production.

The report also revealed positive indications of stability and recovery in the Saudi real estate sector, and expects real estate prices to stabilize after a long period of decline since 2015. Government spending on infrastructure projects as part of the Vision 2030 program is expected to boost non-oil GDP growth, and the fiscal balance, which was severely dented due to Covid-19, is expected to improve in 2021 and beyond.

Markaz's report indicated that investments are expected to pick up as the Government initiates major projects like Neom City, and follows through with the Saudization policy. Moreover, steady population growth, government subsidies, and the enacted mortgage law are enabling banks to finance home purchases fueling the growth in the residential sector.

Commenting on the current Real Estate scene in

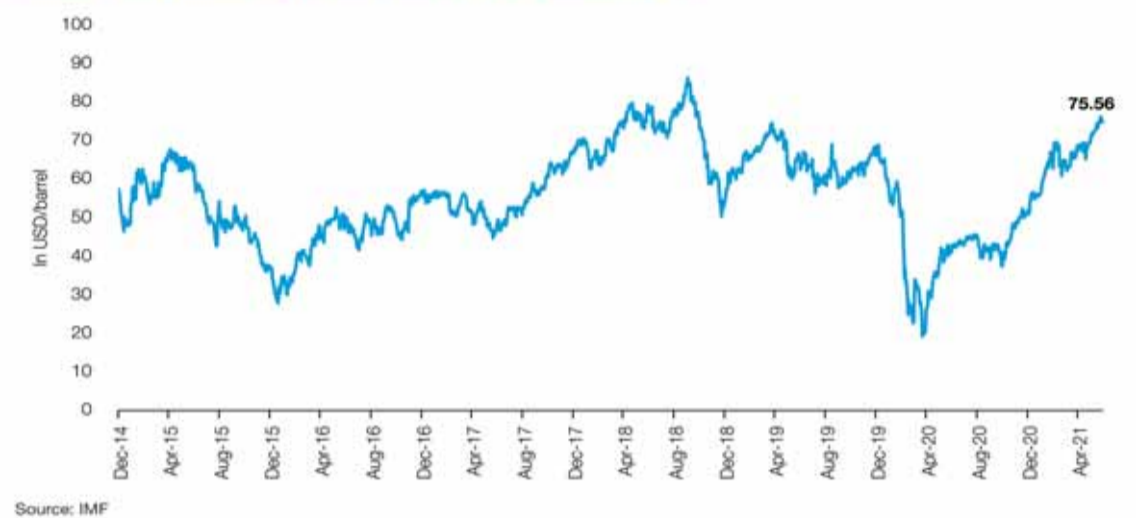
KSA, Bassam N Al-Othman, Managing Director, MENA Real Estate at Markaz, said: "We strongly believe that the Saudi Arabian real estate sector is currently recovering, and we anticipate an acceleration in pace over the next few years, based on our expectations of favorable macroeconomic factors during this period."

"Markaz analysis is based on its proprietary 'Real Estate Index', which helps investors assess the real estate market. The Real Estate Index is derived from various economic indices, such as oil and non-oil GDP, inflation rates, increase in employment opportunities, and others. We also analyzed data related to the Saudi real estate market covering the past seven years from which we extrapolated our expectation for the sector," Al-Othman added.

The report also indicated that the Saudization program may lead to an increase in employment opportunities, which is yet another positive indicator for the real estate sector. Moreover, resuming work from office spaces and an increase in tourism is expected to improve the overall demand for the office, commercial, and hospitality sectors.

Kuwait Financial Centre k.p.s.c. and Subsidiaries

Month-End Brent Oil Prices (Dec 2014 – June 2021)



KIB expands reach by installing more ATMs across Kuwait

KUWAIT: Aiming to strategically expand its reach and provide its banking services to its customers in every part of the country, Kuwait International Bank (KIB) recently installed a series of new ATMs in several locations across Kuwait, including in Al-Rawda, Qortuba, and Surra.

Providing a comprehensive suite of banking services to customers, KIB ATMs are designed to save customers the hassle of having to visit the branches and wait in line to complete their transactions. These services include cash deposits and withdrawals, balance inquiry and account statements, as well as updating civil ID data. These ATMs also enable customers to carry out vital services, such as new card activation, password change, prepaid card recharge, and credit card payment. Customers can also redeem loyalty program points through the Bank's designated ATMs. A KIB customer can also transfer funds using ATMs, whether for own account transfer to a beneficiary. These alternative banking channels also feature a cash withdrawal service using a civil ID or a mobile phone.

Speaking about the ATM installations, General Manager of KIB's Retail Banking Department, Othman Tawfeeq said: "Following our current strategy, as we continue to elevate our experience and expand our services, we have focused heavily on continuing to expand our network of branches to cover all areas in Kuwait; ensuring we remain close to the largest possible number of customers across all governorates. In addition to installing more KIB ATMs in many vital locations across the country, we have strived to enhance these machines with additional digital services that customers can benefit from to complete their banking transactions anywhere and with complete ease."



Othman Tawfeeq

AUB announces KD 250,000 grand prize winner

KUWAIT: Ahli United Bank announced the result of the quarterly grand prize in Al-Hassad Islamic prize program and named Sader Allah Aftabi as the lucky winner of KD 250,000 during the draw broadcasted live on FM 88.8 Kuwait Pulse in 360 Mall on 5 January 2021.

On this occasion, Hanadi Khazal, Head of Retail Distribution at AUB congratulated the winner, wishing him all the best. She expressed her hope that all the Bank's customers will be lucky in the upcoming draws. Khazal expressed her happiness with the value trust of the customers in the Bank. Khazal assured that AUB is keen since the beginning of launching Al-Hassad Islamic prizes program to offer a host of exclusive prizes to contribute in making the aspiration and dreams of its clients true, and to enhance the culture of savings, stressing that the bank is committed to provide state-of-the-art banking solutions, which are in line with the client's different requirements.

In its new design, Al-Hassad Islamic Saving Account presents a broader variety of rewards. Customers could now participate in the draw to win monthly KD 100,000 prize, in addition to 10 weekly prizes of KD 1,000 each. The grand quarterly prizes of KD 250,000 in cash for the winner remains the most important aspiration of customers. It is a real chance for them to realize their life dreams. In addition to this attractive package, there will be the annual expected profits on the basis a Wakala contract that increases the attractiveness of the Al-Hassad Islamic Saving Account to customers. Al-Hassad Account provides a suite of unique features, including the simplest and easiest savings program, and unique account opening feature online with all ease with instant deposit option.

To be eligible to participate in the draw, the customer should have a minimum balance of KD 100, whereby the customer has two chances to participate, with up to 30,000 chances per draw, in addition to rewarding annual profits. Every KD 50 invested entitles the customer to one chance in the draws, provided that to maintain his balance for at least fifteen days before the draw date. The longer the customer keeps his balance the bigger the changes of participation in the draw with every KD 50 in the account. Draws are held every Wednesday based on the draw scheme. On religious and national holidays, the draw is postponed to the next business day.

Samsung Electronics forecasts 52.5% jump in Q4 profits

SEOUL: Samsung Electronics expects operating profits for the fourth quarter to soar 52.5 percent, the South Korean tech giant said in a statement on Friday, spurred by record sales. The world's biggest smartphone maker forecast 2021 fourth-quarter operating profits at around 13.8 trillion won (\$11.5 billion), up from 9.05 trillion won in the same quarter last year.

The firm was boosted by record sales in the quarter, estimated at 76 trillion won, up 23.5 percent on-year, according to the statement, which added that the forecast reflected a one-time bonus payment to employees. A spokeswoman told AFP annual sales in 2021 are also expected to be the highest ever. The operating profit estimate was below analysts' estimate of 15.2 trillion won, according to Bloomberg News.

"A continued price growth in memory chips that ran three consecutive quarters until October last year has boosted Samsung's profit margins," said Park Sung-soon, an analyst at Cape Investment & Securities. "The most significant source of income for Samsung lies in the memory chip business."

Samsung Electronics did not provide details Friday on the performance of its various divisions. The firm is expected to release its full results on January 27. Analysts and investors are also keeping an eye on the impact of the citywide COVID lockdown in Xi'an, China, which is home to a Samsung semiconductor plant. Samsung said last week that it had to "temporarily adjust operations" at the Xi'an facilities, without detailing how that would impact production.

Pandemic boom

While the coronavirus pandemic has wreaked



SEOUL: People walk past an advertisement for the Samsung Galaxy Z Fold3 and Flip3 smartphones at the company's Seocho building in Seoul Friday. —AFP

havoc on the world economy, it has helped many tech companies boom. Pandemic-driven working from home has boosted demand for devices powered by Samsung's chips, as well as home appliances such as televisions and washing machines. Analysts had also expected the firm to benefit from the traditionally lucrative holiday season. The world's biggest memory chip maker, Samsung Electronics has aggressively stepped up investment in its semiconductor business as the world battles chip shortages that have hit everything from cars and home appliances to smartphones and gaming consoles.

In November, it announced a new microchip factory in Texas, a \$17 billion investment. The plant is

expected to be operational by the end of 2024. It joined rivals TSMC from Taiwan and US firm Intel in expanding chip manufacturing capacity in the United States, which sees the sector as an area of strategic competition with China.

The firm is also investing in the development of advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence, robotics and 5G/6G communications. Samsung Electronics is the flagship subsidiary of the giant Samsung group, by far the largest of the family-controlled empires known as chaebols that dominate business in South Korea.

The conglomerate's overall turnover is equivalent to around one-fifth of South Korea's gross domestic product. —AFP



India raises growth forecast to 9.2% despite COVID risks

NEW DELHI: India on Friday raised its growth estimates for this financial year to 9.2 percent despite a surge in coronavirus infections threatening the country's recovery. The National Statistics Office (NSO) forecast Asia's third-largest economy will bounce back strongly from a 7.3 percent contraction last year, when it saw a ferocious wave of coronavirus infections and deaths. But economists say a new pandemic surge could threaten its economic recovery. India reported 117,100 new COVID-19 infections on Friday, its single-day tally crossing the 100,000-mark for the first time since June 2021.

Madan Sabnavis, chief economist at CARE Ratings, told AFP the figures "say very clearly that they have not yet included the COVID impact".

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's administration has so far refrained from announcing a drastic nationwide lockdown, as it seeks to limit the economic toll of the current wave. "The impact on GDP growth will depend on the extent to which restric-

tions need to be extended across states in the coming weeks," said Aditi Nayar, chief economist at ratings agency ICRA.

The NSO figures are below the most recent forecast by the International Monetary Fund, which projected 9.5 percent GDP growth for India in the current financial year ending March 2022. The country's central bank has also estimated India's GDP growth at 9.5 percent this year, "assuming no resurgence in COVID-19 infections in India". But despite an apparent bounce-back in India's headline growth numbers following the second wave, other economic indicators have remained under pressure.

The country's unemployment rate touched a four-month high of 7.9 percent in December, data from the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE) showed, revealing signs of strain even before the outbreak of the third wave. India this week began vaccinating children aged between 15 and 18 years for the first time, administering over 12 million doses since January 3.

In total, the country of 1.3 billion has administered nearly 1.5 billion jabs, with 61 percent of adults receiving two doses, according to the health ministry. India will roll out third "booster" doses to senior citizens aged 60 years and over and those with co-morbidities beginning on Monday. —AFP

German industrial output stalls even as exports rise

BERLIN: German industrial production fell slightly in November as persistent supply bottlenecks weighed on companies, official figures showed Friday, despite exports climbing again. The country's manufacturing sector produced 0.2 percent less in November than in the previous month, the federal statistics agency Destatis said, after a revised rise of 2.4 percent in October.

Production levels in November 2021 were 2.4 percent below the same month in 2020, and lagged Germany's pre-coronavirus crisis output in February 2020 by seven percent.

While output lagged, exports from Europe's top economy rose by 1.7 percent in November on the previous month, according to further data from Destatis, the second consecutive increase in the indicator. The value of exports totalled 125.7 billion euros (\$142.1 billion), with exports to other European Union countries rising by 14 percent year on year.

"The revival of exports and to a lesser extent industrial production in the first months of the fourth quarter indicate how fast and strong German industry can rebound once global supply chain frictions show any relief," said Carsten Brzeski, head of macro at ING. Such a prospect was some way off, however, with industry still "in the stranglehold of global supply chain frictions" and needing at least until spring to be back on a sustainable path to recovery, Brzeski said.

The pandemic has caused widespread disruptions in supply chains, leading to shortages of raw materials and key components. Germany's flagship auto industry has been particularly hard hit by a shortage of semiconductors, a crucial component in both conventional and electric vehicles, leading to sporadic stoppages on factory lines through 2021. —AFP

Lifestyle | Features

French prophet of doom
launches political thriller

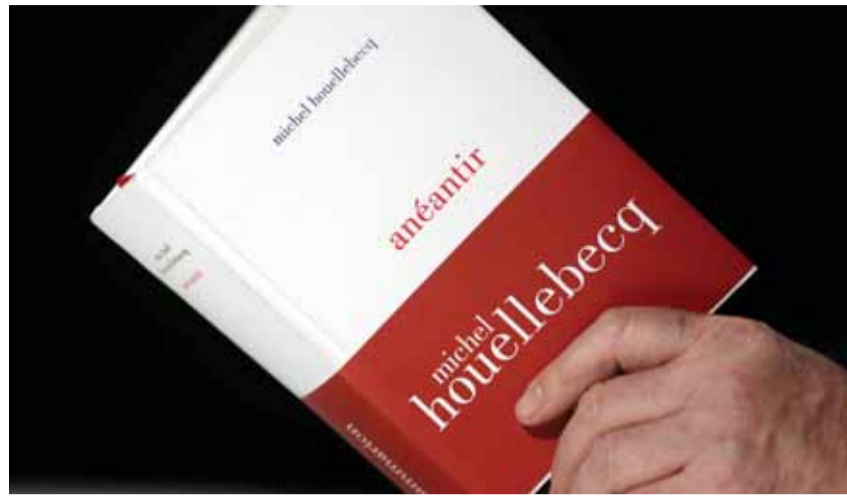
France's biggest literary star, Michel Houellebecq, was back in bookshops Friday, with many eager to know what the famously prescient author has to say in the midst of a bruising presidential election campaign. Houellebecq sells in big numbers: 300,000 copies have been ordered for the French release of his eighth novel "Aneantir" ("Annihilate"), with an English edition due later this year. And he has an uncanny knack for capturing the moment. His 2015 novel "Submission" about a Muslim winning the presidency, which taps into right-wing fears over the rise of Islam, was released on the day of the Charlie Hebdo terror attacks in Paris.

His next novel, "Serotonin", about the plight of rural farmers, appeared just as the French countryside was exploding with "yellow vest" anti-government protests. The new book looks similarly topical. It is part-thriller, set during an election in 2027 with characters that clearly resemble current politicians, including President Emmanuel Macron, who faces a tough re-election battle in real life this April. But the novel's focus ultimately proves more personal, as the narrator tackles his relationships with a dying father and estranged wife.

Houellebecq himself, who cultivates the image of a depressed reactionary, dismisses any grand intentions in his work. "Fundamentally, I'm just a whore. I write for the applause. Not for the money, but to be loved, admired," he told Le Monde newspaper last week, between multiple glasses of white wine. The fans were still keen in Paris on Friday. "He's the greatest living writer in France. And he's counter-cultural: a white male heterosexual," said Leonardo Orlando, a Spanish-Argentinean buying his book soon after the shops opened.

'Cantankerous old uncle'

The uncharacteristic traces of love and even hope in the new book suggest the 60-something chain-smoker, who married for the third time in secret in 2018, may be mellowing slightly with age. "There's no need to celebrate evil to be a good writer," he told Le Monde. But there is still plenty of the familiar misogynistic and xenophobic vitriol from his characters, alongside diatribes about France's spiritual



The new novel book of French writer Michel Houellebecq 'Aneantir' is pictured in Paris. — AFP

and cultural decline.

For many critics, it's too much. "From a young, highly lucid writer on society, Houellebecq has become a sort of cantankerous old uncle completely overwhelmed by his time," wrote left-wing magazine Les Inrockuptibles. But many other critics, across the political spectrum, have been full of praise. Le Monde gushed over "fleeting moments, in the midst of the loneliness and dereliction, that make you cry". Houellebecq was a darling of the left in the 1990s, when his uncompromising accounts of those left behind by globalization and sexual liberation in novels such as "Atomised" and "Platform" struck a chord around the world.

But in recent years, that same pessimism, which he has summed up as "the suicide of modernity", has mapped more neatly onto right-wing fears about the decline of nation, church and family-as well as the misogyny of "incel" men, who blame gender equality for leaving them sexless. In 2020, he released a book of essays praising writer Eric Zemmour, now a far-right candidate for the presidency with strident views about migrants.— AFP

Mystery solved?
FBI arrest suspect
in manuscript
theft scam

A mystery that has shaken the literary world for years - the theft of hundreds of unpublished manuscripts from distinguished authors - may finally be about to be solved. In New York this week, the FBI arrested Filippo Bernardini, a 29-year-old Italian employee of major publisher Simon & Schuster. He is accused of impersonating literary agents and publishers over email to steal unpublished works from writers and their representatives.

The alleged scam had been known in literary circles for around five years with Margaret Atwood, Ian McEwan and Sally Rooney among the novelists reportedly targeted. Bernardini was arraigned in court in Manhattan on Thursday after being arrested by agents at JFK airport the day before. He has been charged with committing wire fraud and identity theft between 2016 and 2021, crimes punishable by 22 years in prison.

"Filippo Bernardini allegedly impersonated publishing industry individuals in order to have authors, including a Pulitzer prize winner, send him prepublication manuscripts for his own benefit," said US prosecutor Damian Williams. "This real-life storyline now reads as a cautionary tale, with the plot twist of Bernardini facing federal criminal charges for his misdeeds," he added in a statement. Bernardini pleaded not guilty and was released under "home detention" with a \$300,000 bond secured on his home, a spokesperson for the Southern District of New York told AFP.

Bernardini worked in London for Simon & Schuster, which said in a statement it was "shocked and horrified to learn of the allegations." "The employee has been suspended pending further information on the case," the publisher said in a statement. "The safekeeping of our authors' intellectual property is of primary importance to Simon & Schuster, and for all in the publishing industry, and we are grateful to the FBI for investigating these incidents and bringing charges against the alleged perpetrator," it added.

Unknown motive

Prosecutors say the suspect's modus operandi was well established. He would impersonate real people in the world of publishing by sending emails from fake accounts. The addresses would be made to resemble the domain names of legitimate publishers but with a letter changed here and there. The indictment accuses him of registering more than 160 fraudulent domains. What baffled alleged victims was that the thefts were never followed by demands for money, nor did the works ever seem to appear online or on the dark web.

In 2019, Atwood's agent revealed that the manuscript for "The Testaments" had been targeted. Last year, New York Magazine reported that the Swedish editors of Stieg Larsson's "Millennium" series had been approached by a purported colleague in Italy who requested an advance copy so that it could be translated before release. A New York Times investigation at the end of 2020 found that "Normal People" author Rooney, "Atonement" author McEwan, and actor Ethan Hawke had also been targeted.

Little is known about Bernardini. Screenshots from a LinkedIn profile that was inaccessible Friday described him as a "rights coordinator" at Simon & Schuster. The biography said he obtained a bachelors in Chinese Language in Milan and a masters in publishing from UCL in London owing to his "obsession for the written word and languages." One element of the story prosecutors hope to find out is what the accused's motivations might have been as the indictment does not mention whether he made any financial profit from the alleged thefts. — AFP



A note and flowers are seen on Sidney Poitier's star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame in Hollywood, California. Poitier, Hollywood's first major Black movie star and the first Black man to win the best actor Oscar, has died at 94, prompting an outpouring of grief from the entertainment industry and beyond. — AFP photos



In this file photo, US President Barack Obama presents the Presidential Medal of Freedom to ambassador and actor Sidney Poitier during a ceremony in the East Room at the White House in Washington, DC.

Sidney Poitier: Trailblazing
Black film star and activist

Sidney Poitier, who has died at age 94, was a pioneering Black movie star who opened doors for racial minorities in film decades before the #OscarsSoWhite and Black Lives Matter movements. The trailblazing thespian became the first male Black star nominated for an Academy Award with 1958's "The Defiant Ones" and, six years later, was the first to win the best actor Oscar for his performance in "Lilies of the Field." Collecting his historic award, Poitier told the glamorous audience of mainly white contemporaries it had been "a long journey to this moment" - but his achievement would not be matched until 38 years later, when Denzel Washington won for his leading role in "Training Day."

Poitier, who died Thursday night at his home in Los Angeles, achieved mainstream popularity with a series of groundbreaking roles at a time of great racial tension in America in the 1950s and 1960s. He balanced success with a sense of duty to choose projects that tackled bigotry and stereotypes, including his 1967 classics "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner" and "In the Heat of the Night."

Poitier was awarded an honorary Oscar in 2002 for his "extraordinary performances" on the silver screen and his "dignity, style and intelligence" off of it. "I accept this award in the name of all the African American actors and actresses who went before me in

the difficult years and on whose shoulders I was privileged to stand to see where I might go," Poitier said. Poitier also praised the "visionary choices of a handful of American" producers, directors and studio bosses who were not afraid to stand up for the cause of equality, despite the difficulties such a stance may have caused them.

'I'll always be chasing you, Sidney'

By coincidence, Poitier received his 2002 honorary Oscar the same night Washington won for best actor, which was also the night Halle Berry became the first - and only - African American best actress winner. In his acceptance speech, Washington paid a heartfelt tribute to Poitier, telling him: "I'll always be following in your footsteps." In a statement to AFP following news of his death, Washington said "it was a privilege to call Sidney Poitier my friend."

He was a gentle man and opened doors for all of us that had been closed for years," Viola Davis, herself an Oscar-winning actress, shared a similar note of admiration for Poitier's barrier-breaking life, saying his "dignity, normalcy, strength, excellence and sheer electricity... showed us that we, as Black folks, mattered!!!"

Discrimination

Born in the southern US state of Florida in 1927

where his tomato farmer father was selling his produce, young Sidney and his family moved back to the Bahamas, where he grew up in poverty. A dual national of the Bahamas and United States, he got his first taste of the cinema as a youth his Caribbean island before dropping out of school at the age of 13 and returning to Miami when he was 15 to join his brother Cyril.

It was there that the impressionable young man experienced his first taste of racial discrimination, an experience that left an indelible mark on him. Poitier soon relocated to New York where he worked as a dishwasher and busboy, reportedly sleeping in bus station pay toilets as he tried to scratch out a meager existence in the tough city.

During World War II, Poitier joined the US Army as a physiotherapist until 1945, when he returned to New York, his heart set on becoming an actor. Poitier worked to lose his Caribbean lilt and adopt an American accent, which earned him his first stage acting job as an understudy to singing star Harry Belafonte in 1945's "Days of Our Youth," before making his Broadway debut in an all-Black production of "Lysistrata."

In 1950, the thriving young actor starred in his first film, "No Way Out," quickly followed by classics such as "Blackboard Jungle" and "Edge of the City." From 1957's "Something of Value" - which portrayed Kenya's anti-colonial Mau Mau uprising - his choices turned more consistently to themes of racial harmony, as seen in Chicago-set "A Raisin in the Sun" (1961) and Mississippi murder mystery "In the Heat of the Night" (1967). — AFP

Galapagos volcano, home to endangered lizard, erupts



Handout picture shows an aerial view of lava spewing from a fissure of the Wolf Volcano after it erupted for the second time in seven years on January 7, 2022, on Isabela Island in the Galapagos Islands in the Pacific Ocean, 900 km off the Ecuadorean coast. — AFP photos



Aerial view of lava expelling by the Wolf Volcano after it erupted for the second time in seven years on January 7, 2022.

A volcano on a Galapagos island that is home to a species of critically endangered lizard has erupted for the second time in seven years, national park officials said Friday. The Wolf volcano's slopes host the pink iguana, only 211 of which were reported to be left on Isabela, the largest island in the Galapagos archipelago, as of last August. The eruption began around midnight Thursday, the Galapagos National Park (PNG) said in a statement. A team of park rangers and scientists working with the iguanas confirmed Friday that the creatures were out of harm's way, it added.

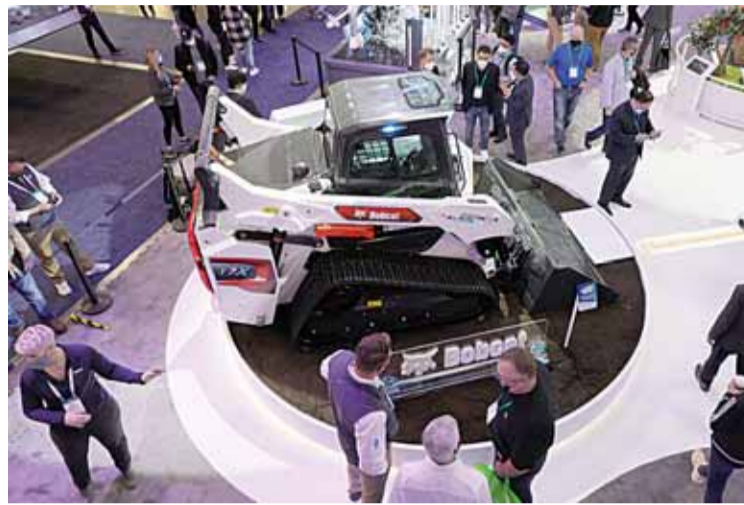
For its part, the Geophysical Institute of Quito said the 1,707-meter (5,600-foot) volcano spewed gas-and-ash clouds as high as 3,800 meters into the air, with lava flows on its southern and south-eastern slopes. The volcano, the highest of the Galapagos, is some 100 kilometers (62 miles) from the nearest human settlement. The area also hosts yellow iguanas and the famous Galapagos giant tortoises. Located in the Pacific some 1,000 kilometers (600 miles) off the coast of Ecuador, the Galapagos Islands are a protected wildlife area and home to unique species of flora and fauna.

The archipelago was made famous by British geologist and naturalist Charles Darwin's observations on evolution there. The Wolf volcano last erupted in 2015 after 33 years of inactivity, without affecting local wildlife. The pink iguanas that inhabit its slopes were identified as a separate species only in 2009, and occupy an area of 25 square kilometers. They are found nowhere else. Isabela island also hosts four other active volcanoes. — AFP

CES SHOW HIGHLIGHTS: ROBO-DOGS, SELF-SAILING BOAT AND BRAIN TECH



A good luck rubber duck on a TUM Autonomous Motorsport team table during the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) at the Las Vegas Motor Speedway on January 7, 2022 in Las Vegas, Nevada. —AFP photos



A Bobcat T7X, the world's first all-electric compact track loader, is displayed at the Doosan booth at CES 2022 at the Las Vegas Convention Center.



Doosan Mobility Innovation's DS30W hydrogen fuel cell drone is displayed at CES 2022 at the Las Vegas Convention Center.

The CES tech show in Las Vegas closed its 2022 edition on Friday, after pushing ahead with a significantly downsized gathering despite surging COVID cases. Industry behemoths like Amazon and Google stayed away over the virus risk, but the more than 2,200 firms big and small in attendance still pitched their hopes for the next big thing. Here are some parting highlights from the show:

Mind control?

French startup Wisear is working on technology that detects the signals that zip between the brain and certain muscles, in order to use them to operate connected devices. "Over the past 30 years we have significantly improved the digital power around us but we still use the same tools—keyboards, mice, touchscreens" to interact with machines, said Wisear co-founder Yacine Achiakh. "Voice control is coming, but it's slow, and it doesn't always work. So we want to create an interface that is inclusive and easy to use," he added. At this stage, his team has paired the system with earphones that can recognize the movements of their user's jaw.

The user can pause the music playing on their cell phone and then restart it by moving their jaw in chewing-like motions. The idea came to them by observing the progress of Neuralink, a firm that belongs to Tesla chief Elon Musk, and which is conceiving implants to be able to communicate with machines by thought.

"We figured it would be a shame to wait 50 years to have brain implants before allowing people to be able to have a much better way to interact with the digital world that surrounds us," Achiakh noted. His company intends to perfect its technology (and expand the range of actions) to sell to the tech industry's giants. They will be able to integrate it into headphones but also augmented reality glasses, allowing users to control the display without taking out their smartphone.

Dancing (robot) dogs are here again

The Boston Dynamics robot dogs—the ones compared to the killer four-legged bot in a dystopian "Black Mirror" episode—are back and this time they are going to the metaverse. Hyundai snapped up the robot maker last

year, raising questions about the South Korean automaker might be planning. To the bright pop of South Korean boy band BTS, the yellow-bodied four-legged tech did a choreographed routine at Hyundai's booth for a crowd recording every step on their phones.

But the performance also included an animation of a vision for using the robots as the eyes and ears on Mars for people who could then experience the Red Planet in the metaverse. "The idea behind metamobility is that space, time and distance will all become irrelevant," Chang Song, president of Hyundai Motor Group, said in a statement. "By connecting robots to the metaverse, we will be able to move freely between both the real world and virtual reality."

Snow-e-bike

A ski on the front, a track on the back, handlebars, a padded seat and, most importantly, a battery: the MoonBikes are the first electric snowbike, according to the start-up that makes them. "It's electric and quiet, so it doesn't bother customers and it protects the environment," said Nicolas Muron, founder of the French company. His idea was to make this type of vehicle more attractive and accessible. "88 percent of snowmobile users are men, with an average age of 46. So they are not for everyone. I wanted to make a machine that was easy to use," Muron said, adding the machines feel a bit like skiing. They are priced at around \$8,500 for pre-order in the United States.

The self-sailing boat

Spoiler alert: It's a boat that sails itself. Hyundai presented what it called the first "self-driving" boat, equipped with cameras, depth sensors and artificial intelligence systems. "By applying autonomous navigating technology to leisure boats, users can greatly reduce the time required for berthing and docking as well as the risk of accidents during operation," said Do-Hyeong Lim, the boss of the Hyundai Heavy Industries subsidiary Avikus that designed the navigation technology. The boat in 2021 made a 10-kilometer trip with 12 passengers on board in South Korea, and Hyundai has announced preparations for a large merchant ship to sail with this same technology. —AFP



A screen shows video of an instructor on a Hydrow rowing machine during the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) in Las Vegas.



UV Air Purifier technology by Valeo is displayed during the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) in Las Vegas, Nevada.

SELF-DRIVING RACE CARS ZIP INTO HISTORY AT CES



The MIT-PITT-RW, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, University of Pittsburgh, Rochester Institute of Technology, University of Waterloo (Canada) autonomous race cars enter pit row during the Indy Autonomous Challenge during the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) at the Las Vegas Motor Speedway on January 7, 2022 in Las Vegas, Nevada.



Photo shows cameras and LiDAR sensors on top of TUM Autonomous Motorsport race car from the Technische Universität München (Germany) during the Indy Autonomous Challenge in Las Vegas, Nevada. —AFP photos

A racecar with nobody at the wheel snaked around another to snatch the lead on an oval track at the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas Friday in an unprecedented high-speed match between self-driving vehicles. Members of Italian-American team PoliMOVE cheered as their Formula 1 racecar, nicknamed "Minerva," repeatedly passed a rival entered by South Korean team Kaist.

Minerva was doing nearly 115 miles per hour (185 kilometers per hour) when it blew past the Kaist car, easily beating the top speed hoped for by race organizers. But every racer was deemed a winner by organizers who saw the real victory as the fact that self-driving algorithms could handle the high-speed competition.

"It's a success," Indy Autonomous Challenge (IAC) co-organizer Paul Mitchell said to AFP before the checkered flag was waved. The race pitted teams of students from around the world against

one another to rev up the capabilities of self-driving cars, improving the technology for use anywhere. In October, the IAC put the brakes on self-driving F1 cars racing together to allow more time to ready technology for the challenge, opting instead to let them do laps individually to see which had the best time.

"This almost holds the world record for speed of an autonomous car," PoliMOVE engineer Davide Rigamonti boasted as he gazed lovingly at the white-and-black beauty. The single seat usually reserved for a driver was during this race instead packed with electronics. PoliMOVE had a shot at victory at another race in October in Indianapolis, clocking some 155 miles per hour (250 kilometers per hour) before skidding out on a curve, according to Rigamonti.

Friday, it was the South Korean entry that spun out after overtaking a car fielded by a team from the University of Auburn in the southern US state of

Alabama. "The students who program these cars are not mechanics; most of them knew nothing about racing," said IndyCar specialist Lee Anne Patterson. "We taught them about racing."

The students program the software that pilots the car by quickly analyzing data from sophisticated sensors.

The software piloting the cars has to anticipate how other vehicles on the course will behave, then maneuver accordingly, according to Markus Lienkamp, a professor at Munich, TUM, which won the October competition. Nearby, Lienkamp's students are glued to screens. "It plays out in milliseconds," said Mitchell. "The computer has to make the same decisions as a human driver, despite the speed." The IAC plans to organize other races on the model of Friday's — pitting two cars against each other, with the hope of reaching a level sufficient to one day launch all the vehicles together. —AFP



Davide Rigamonti speaks about the PoliMOVE autonomous race car from Politecnico di Milano (Italy) and University of Alabama in pit row during the Indy Autonomous Challenge during the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) at the Las Vegas Motor Speedway in Las Vegas, Nevada.

WORK(OUT) FROM HOME: COVID FUELS ONLINE EXERCISE BOOM



An attendee rides an Echelon exercise bike while an instructor is displayed on screen during the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) in Las Vegas, Nevada. —AFP photos



An attendee uses a Liteboxer interactive boxing home workout during the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) in Las Vegas, Nevada.

Interactive comment sections and virtual reality headsets: internet-connected fitness gear and services have boomed during the pandemic as at-home athletes seek a proxy for gym life. While home workouts long predate the coronavirus, they have taken on a social aspect that looks set to become the standard in a world reshaped by the pandemic.

"A big part of going to the gym together is sort of suffering together... you build a camaraderie around that," Jeremy Needham, who does customer education for US boxing fitness company Liteboxer, told AFP at the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) in Las Vegas. "And now that we don't share that space, at least in real time, we have to do it virtually," he added.

Like other companies that sell internet-connected fitness gear, Liteboxer offers customers access to workouts, competitions and other features for a monthly charge on top of the roughly \$1,200 wall-mounted machine. The market for fitness tech has been growing for years, but the industry has gotten a boost in the last couple of years, similarly to how the pandemic accelerated e-commerce and remote working trends.

"Connected equipment exploded onto the scene in a big way as consumers had to shift the way to work out during the pandemic," CES organizer Consumer Technology Association (CTA) noted in an industry forecast. Internet-connected exercise equipment was a nearly \$3.8 billion market in 2021, and double-digit percentage growth is expected this year, CTA's forecast said. "(Customers) want connectivity," said Richard Kowalski, an analyst with CTA. "They want to engage with other people online."

Need for pandemic release

Connected rowing machine maker Hydrow allows customers to comment and like others' workouts, and users have developed their own social media groups. "You start talking to each other and then all of a sudden, you have a group of maybe six guys, you know, from all over the world," Aquil Abdullah, who leads workouts on the system, told AFP. "A guy is in London, a guy is out in California, a guy is down in Florida, and you have this community." The machines, which sell for \$2,295, have the usual rowing bar and seat, but also a screen that allows clients to exercise

along with instructors on the water, in locales from Miami to London.

"We do these workouts, and so that's part of building community and building those connections," said Abdullah, who rowed for the US at the 2004 Olympics in Athens. But the connected fitness industry has shown some sensitivity to the changing conditions of the pandemic and the way it affects equipment users' lives. Fitness firm Peloton's shares have been under pressure since early November, when the company cut its forecast as more consumers returned to reopening gyms.

Credit Suisse downgraded the firm in December, saying the market shifts have forced Peloton to increase advertising and discounting. However, as cases of COVID's Omicron variant break records around the world, many are again hunkering down at home. That shift could work in favor of home fitness tech companies. CTA took a bullish perspective, saying "the growth trajectory suggests that health-conscious consumers are finding practicality and convenience in exercising at home, even as gyms and workout classes reopen."

And exercise of any kind has offered some people a relief from the pandem-

ic's impacts—as work, school and travel disruptions and simmering health worries offer plenty to stress about. "The pandemic locked us inside... we couldn't do the things that we loved," said

Needham. "But the human body still needs cardiovascular activity, it's quite simple. You just need a really engaging way... to release that energy that builds up in you." —AFP



An attendee uses a Liteboxer interactive boxing home workout during the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) in Las Vegas, Nevada.



Yang Kaiyuan (right), a cosmetic doctor at beauty clinic PhiSkin, performs an operation at the clinic in Shanghai.



Yang Kaiyuan (right), a cosmetic doctor at beauty clinic PhiSkin, performs an operation at the clinic in Shanghai.

BEAUTY IS ONLY SKIN DEEP IN CHINA 'MICRO-PROCEDURE' CRAZE

Midday queues snake out to the street in an upmarket Shanghai neighborhood, but it's not lunch at the city's hottest restaurant that people are lining up for—it's cosmetic "micro-procedures", which are surging in popularity in China. The "lunchtime facelift" and other "medical aesthetics" procedures are booming as a new generation of Chinese consumers grapple with the pressure to look good on social media as well as in person.

Kayla Zhang has never actually gone under the knife for cosmetic reasons, but she's had laser treatments, injections and a thread lift—a barbed string inserted under the skin and pulled up to "lift" the face. "I'm not changing my nose or my eyes, which would be an extreme change in my looks," the 27-year-old told AFP, adding that she's seeking a "better version" of herself rather than "a totally new face."

Already popular in the West because they are less invasive and more affordable than traditional cosmetic surgery, micro-procedures—from laser facials and fillers to thread lifts—are fast becoming the norm in China's cities where disposable incomes have jumped in the past decade. The Chinese Association of Plastics and Aesthetics estimates, overall, the cosmetic industry will grow to \$46 billion this year compared to around \$6.5 billion in 2013. Micro-procedures are now an expanding segment of that market, while traditional surgery's growth rates slow, according to data from consulting firm Frost and Sullivan.

Changing values

But a government crackdown looms over the boom. The ruling Communist Party is pushing a broad campaign to "purify" social values, which includes taking aim at mounting youth pressure to go under

the knife. The government has banned industry advertising practices that contribute to "appearance anxiety" such as before-and-after images, and has levied tens of millions of dollars in fines this year over various infractions.

Model Li Li already gets monthly laser treatments to correct skin blemishes but admits she feels social pressure to continually fix her appearance. After friends said her face was out of proportion she opted for a "chin filler," which makes the chin more prominent. "I went to get it immediately," the 27-year-old confessed.

But Li and Zhang insist that micro-procedures—which can cost on average a third of the price of cosmetic surgery, according to research by Deloitte—are a less-invasive alternative to traditional surgery and are being unfairly stigmatized. "Everyone had the



A cosmetic doctor at beauty clinic PhiSkin checks an equipment at the clinic in Shanghai.

same standard of beauty before, but now it feels like this norm is being tipped over," added Zhang, who likens micro-procedures to skincare, but faster. A decade ago, cosmetic doctor Yang Kaiyuan said customers often came to him with a picture of a celebrity, telling him: "I want to look like this." "Nowadays, people just hope to make slight improvements on what they already have," Yang explained.

Unrestrained growth

But the government is concerned by the rise in unlicensed, unregulated providers. In 2019, 15 percent of the 13,000 licensed beauty clinics in China were operating outside of their business scope and only 28 percent of doctors in the industry were certified, according to iResearch. Its report added that for every up-to-standard needle used, two unapproved ones were in circulation.

Earlier this year, a Chinese actress shared cautionary photos online of a botched operation that left her nose badly infected. But Ken Huang, CEO at beauty clinic PhiSkin, says the societal factors pushing young Chinese to seek cosmetic adjustments to advance their careers or to boost social media popularity remain strong.

"Good-looking people will have more opportunities than others," Huang said. "If you don't look good on the outside, even if you have an interesting personality, people might not get the chance to see it." Still in her twenties, Zhang already opts for monthly micro-procedures and will keep this routine until she feels her appearance leaves her "no choice but to go under the knife". She explained: "Then I may need stronger methods to be able to return to a younger state." —AFP

Philippine literary giant F Sionil Jose dies aged 97

Philippine novelist Francisco Sionil Jose, whose widely translated works delved into the Southeast Asian country's painful colonial past and social injustices, died Thursday, according to a literary guild he had founded. He was 97. In a prolific writing career spanning seven decades, Jose penned more than a dozen novels, several short story collections, essays and a regular newspaper column. He also owned a bookshop.

He died at a Manila hospital one day before he was to undergo an angioplasty, the Philippine Center of International PEN said in a statement on its Facebook page. His death was also announced by The Varsitarian, the student paper which he had edited at the Manila university where he studied. A self-declared "agnostic", the writer took to Facebook earlier Thursday in what would effectively be his last words, thanking God as well as his "brave heart" for "this most precious gift" as he waited for his blood vessel procedure.

"Now, that I am here in waiting for an angioplasty, I hope that you will survive it and I with it, so that I will be able to continue what I have been doing with so much energy that only you have been able to give," he wrote. The son of a church minister and a dressmaker, Jose grew up in a poor rural village in the northern province of Pangasinan — where he developed an early love for reading and later set many of his novels.

His writing was deeply influenced by the Philippine national hero Jose Rizal and he was best known for his "Rosales Saga". The five-novel series follows several generations of two families over 100 years from the Spanish colonial period to martial law under former dictator Ferdinand Marcos, exploring issues such as social inequalities, land rights and insurgencies. "One of the greatest tasks of Filipino writers is how to make Filipinos remember. Not only to remember but to love this country," Jose said in a 2011 interview.

Jose was born on December 3, 1924, when the Philippines was an American colony. After working in the US Army Medical Corps during World War II, he studied literature and edited The Varsitarian, the student publication at the University of Santo Tomas in the capital Manila. He quit college before finishing his degree. After a stint at the now-defunct United States Information Agency at the US embassy in Manila, Jose joined the Manila Times newspaper where he worked for a decade. In the early 1960s, he moved to Hong Kong to edit Asia magazine. He later returned to the Philippines, where he opened the Solidaridad bookshop in 1965 in what was then a middle-class neighborhood of the capital. —AFP

Sports

COVID-hit Bayern humbled at home by Moenchengladbach

Bayern Munich crash to a 2-1 defeat

BERLIN: COVID-hit Bayern Munich crashed to a 2-1 defeat at home to Borussia Moenchengladbach Friday with the Bundesliga leaders forced to name a makeshift team after nine stars tested positive for the coronavirus. Robert Lewandowski cracked in his 20th league goal this season to give Bayern an early lead, but Gladbach hit back with two goals in four first-half minutes by Florian Neuhaus and Stefan Lainer.

"Gladbach aren't our favorite opponents," said striker Thomas Mueller as Bayern had already crashed to a 5-0 defeat at Gladbach in the German Cup last October. "It is bitter to lose, but we have to swallow the defeat." Mueller refused to blame the loss on their depleted squad. "We had a lot of quality on the pitch and we shouldn't have given away

so much possession in the final third of the pitch," he said.

"The worst thing is we didn't put our chances away," Mueller admitted after he twice came close to grabbing a second-half equalizer. Despite the defeat behind closed doors in Munich, Bayern remain nine points clear at the top of the table, but second-placed Borussia Dortmund can trim the gap at Eintracht Frankfurt. Gladbach climbed three places in the table to 11th, but still remain only five points from the bottom three places.

With so many of his stars sidelined by COVID, Bayern coach Julian Nagelsmann named a patched-up squad with six reserve team players on the bench while forward Malik Tillman, 19, started his first

Bundesliga match. He was replaced in the second-half by Paul Wanner, who at 16 years, 15 days became the youngest Bayern player to make his German league debut having been called up from the club's Under-19 team. Germany star Joshua Kimmich, who missed the previous two months with COVID, played at right-back with another defensive midfielder Marcel Sabitzer named on the left of defense.

Gladbach were also missing US defender Joe Scally and Swiss midfielder Denis Zakaria, who both also tested positive for COVID. Bayern took a deserved lead in wintry conditions when Lewandowski hammered an unstoppable shot inside the post past goalkeeper Yann Sommer with 18 minutes gone. Gladbach equalized when the visitors

unpicked the Bayern defence and moved the ball to Neuhaus, who fired past Bayern stand-in goalkeeper Sven Ulreich.

First-choice keeper Manuel Neuer is quarantining in the Maldives after testing positive for Covid-19 on holiday. Ulreich was again beaten from a corner soon after when Lainer flicked in a header with half an hour played. Neuhaus and Swiss striker Breel Embolo missed chances to extend Gladbach's lead while at the other end Lewandowski clipped the post with a stunning shot across the goal. Bayern dominated long spells of the second-half with Jamal Musiala, Mueller and Kimmich all going agonizingly close while Lewandowski again hit the woodwork, but Gladbach held on. — AFP

News in brief

Man City thrash Swindon

SWINDON: Manchester City shrugged off the absence of manager Pep Guardiola and seven first-team players due to coronavirus to ease past League Two Swindon 4-1 in the FA Cup third round on Friday. Rodolfo Borrell took charge of the English champions with Guardiola and assistant Juanma Lilo among 14 backroom staff affected by a major outbreak. "We were in touch at half time. There was not a massive change because everything was as planned as before," said Borrell on his contact with Guardiola. "He has great confidence in all of us. Not just me but all the backroom staff." City were still able to name a strong starting line-up featuring just four changes from their 2-1 win at Arsenal last weekend with England international Kyle Walker and captain for the night Ilkay Gundogan among those coming into the side. Seventy-one places separate the sides in the English football pyramid and the visitors' class quickly showed. — AFP

Terranova wins sixth stage

RIYADH: Argentinean veteran Orlando Terranova won the sixth stage of the Dakar Rally on Friday, driving his Prodrive car to a first stage victory since 2015. "It was a difficult stage because there were the tracks of the bikes, but some went in the wrong direction, so we had to stay very focused," said Terranova, competing in the Dakar for the 14th time. "In the end, we won the stage and that's a great feeling. The car is fantastic and we are going to carry on pushing because we know that there is still a long way to go and that we can put in some fine performances." Sweden's Mattias Ekstrom became the third of the Audi Sport team to climb onto the stage podium this year after Stephane Peterhansel and Carlos Sainz when he finished second, Imin Obasec off Terranova. Saudi driver Yazeed Al Rajhi came in third, at 1:49, a result that saw him take second place in the overall standings at the expense of France's nine-time world rally champion Sebastien Loeb. — AFP

Khawaja torments England

SYDNEY: Usman Khawaja finessed his second century of the match to place Australia in a commanding position to chase down yet another victory over weary England in the fourth Ashes Test in Sydney yesterday. The Pakistan-born Khawaja has been in imperious form in his comeback from a 30-month Test exile, hitting 137 in the first innings before adding an unbeaten 101 to break English hearts. His domineering 179-run partnership with youngster Cameron Green set up a late declaration and left a beleaguered England having to defy history with a formidable target of 388. The tourists got to the close without losing a wicket for 30, with Zak Crawley on 22 not out and Haseeb Hameed on eight. They trail by 357. The highest winning run chase in the fourth innings at the Sydney Cricket Ground stands at 288-2 by Australia against South Africa in 2006. No touring team has gone past 200. — AFP

Arsenal against knife crime

LONDON: Arsenal will wear an all-white kit for today's FA Cup trip to Nottingham Forest as part of an anti-knife crime campaign titled 'No More Red'. Last year saw the highest number of teenage murders in a year in London since records began, the vast majority of which involved knife attacks. England internationals Bukayo Saka and Emile Smith Rowe were joined by actor Idris Elba and former Arsenal striker Ian Wright in a promotional video in which the Gunners swap their traditional red colours for white. Arsenal manager Mikel Arteta also sported a white hoodie for his pre-match press conference on Friday. "We have been really involved as a club over the years with knife crime and we have the capacity to give exposure to that issue in London," said Arteta. "Everyone at the club has been extremely supportive, especially with the players and our sponsor Adidas who have been exceptionally good to come with some great ideas to support. I think it's very beneficial." — AFP



KUWAIT: Kuwait's Jet Ski championship, organized by Kuwait Sea Sport Club was concluded Friday near the Green Island area in the presence of Secretary Khalid Al-Foudary, and head of jet ski Committee Hussain Dashti. The first place went to Mohammad Albaz; Fahad Alrayes was second and Amer Einati took the third position. In the Beginner Category - Bu Rabea was first in the sitting category while Ahmad Alwuhuib won the standing category.

Lewandowski, Messi and Salah finalists for FIFA Best award

PARIS: Robert Lewandowski, Lionel Messi and Mohamed Salah were named on Friday as the three finalists for the FIFA Best Men's Player award, while Ballon d'Or winner Alexia Putellas was nominated for the women's prize. Poland star Lewandowski

won last year's FIFA award but had to settle for second in the 2021 Ballon d'Or voting behind Messi, winner of the accolade for a record seventh time. The awards ceremony will be held virtually from FIFA's headquarters in Zurich on January 17.

Putellas, Barcelona team-mate Jennifer Hermoso and Chelsea's Australian striker Sam Kerr are the finalists for the FIFA Best Women's Player award. The trio were also the top three vote-getters for the Ballon d'Or. The winner will succeed England's Lucy Bronze, who took home the previous award. The prizes for the best men's and women's player, coach and goalkeeper are voted for by the captains

and coaches of all national teams around the world, as well as an online ballot of fans and a select number of journalists.

Voting closed on December 10. Manuel Neuer, Gianluigi Donnarumma and Edouard Mendy are in the running for best men's goalkeeper honours, while Roberto Mancini, Thomas Tuchel and Pep Guardiola are the three nominees for best men's coach. Luis Cortes, who led Barcelona's women to a treble last season, is up against Chelsea coach Emma Hayes and Sarina Wiegman, the former Netherlands boss now in charge of England, for top women's coach. — AFP

'Body got a shock': Osaka pulls out of Open warm up

MELBOURNE: Naomi Osaka pulled out of a warm-up tournament for the Australian Open yesterday, saying her "body got a shock" after playing her first matches for four months, opening the Melbourne Summer Set title door to Simona Halep. Osaka, the reigning Australian Open champion, hit the court this week for the first time since her tearful early exit at the US Open, after which she took a long break to deal with personal matters.

In Melbourne, she played three matches in quick succession and they took a toll. She withdrew before the start of her semi-final on Rod Laver Arena against Russian Veronika Kudermetova. "Unfortunately I have an abdominal injury which I need to rest and prepare for the #AusOpen," the Japanese superstar and top seed said in a statement released by the Australian Open on Twitter.

Osaka, who has fallen to 13 in the rankings, added on her own Twitter feed that it had been a tough

return and she didn't want to push too hard with the opening Grand Slam of the year starting on January 17. "Sad to withdraw due to injury from my match today, my body got a shock from playing back to back intense matches after the break I took," she said. "Thank you for all the love this past week I'll try to rest up and I'll see you soon."

The four-time Grand Slam champion had beaten France's 61st-ranked veteran Alize Cornet 6-4, 3-6, 6-3 in her first match back on Tuesday. She then demolished Belgium's Maryna Zanevska 6-1, 6-1 before blasting past Germany's Andrea Petkovic 6-1, 7-5 to make the semi-finals. Her withdrawal sent Kudermetova into the final with a walkover where she will meet Halep, who crushed Chinese teenager Zheng Qinwen 6-3, 6-2. The win ensured the Romanian, whose season was plagued by injury last year, reached a WTA singles final for the 13th straight season.

Positive

"I'm really happy that I can play the final for the first tournament of the year. I'm feeling good, and I'm happy with the way I played," said the two-time Grand Slam winner and former world number one. "Last year definitely was the worst year that I ever had. The toughest mentally also. "But I want to forget about that. I just want to get the feeling



MELBOURNE: Naomi Osaka of Japan hits a return against Andrea Petkovic of Germany during their women's singles in the Melbourne Summer Set tennis tournament in Melbourne. — AFP

from now. I am positive. I am feeling fit on court. I'm moving well. I'm playing good." Halep missed Roland-Garros, Wimbledon and the Olympics last year with a calf injury and ended her season early due to a knee issue, which culminated in her ranking slumping to 20. There are two simultaneous WTA events being run as part of the Melbourne Summer Set in the lead-up to this month's Australian Open. — AFP

Djokovic held for eight hours 'mostly incommunicado'

MELBOURNE: Australian border agents held tennis superstar Novak Djokovic for eight hours at Melbourne airport, mostly incommunicado, before cancelling his visa and sending him to a detention centre, his lawyers said yesterday. Djokovic secured a Covid-19 vaccine exemption from Tennis Australia and the Australian government because he had tested positive for the virus in December, which should have qualified him for entry, the lawyers argued.

"The date of the first positive Covid PCR test was recorded on 16 December 2021," his legal team said in a 32-page submission ahead of a federal court hearing Monday to appeal the visa

decision. Djokovic, who touched down in Melbourne on Wednesday night after a 25-hour trip via Dubai, had asked for a time to rest and consult his lawyers the following morning, his lawyers said. But after a border official initially agreed, his superiors successfully pressured Djokovic to allow them to take an immediate decision on his visa, the lawyers said.

Foreigners are still mostly banned from travel to Australia, and those granted entry must be fully vaccinated or have a medical exemption. The tennis star has been held since Thursday morning in a Melbourne detention centre "notwithstanding his requests to be moved" to another facility to train for the Australian Open, they added.

Although Djokovic has won a legal reprieve from deportation, it is unclear whether he will play in the January 17-30 tournament. If successful, he will be gunning for a 10th Australian Open crown and a record 21st Grand Slam title—a milestone that Spanish great Rafael Nadal is also chasing. In an



VIENNA: A man holds a placard reading 'Free Djokovic' as people demonstrate against the Austrian government's measures taken in order to limit the spread of the coronavirus during a protest yesterday. — AFP

internal video leaked yesterday, Tennis Australia chief Craig Tiley said his organization had done "everything they possibly could". — AFP

Sports

Football-mad Cameroon ready at long last for Cup of Nations

Cameroon take on Burkina Faso in Yaounde

YAOUNDE: The wait is finally over for Cameroon, which from today hosts the Africa Cup of Nations three years later than initially planned as its own Indomitable Lions measure up to the likes of reigning champions Algeria, the Senegal of Sadio Mane and Mohamed Salah's Egypt. Cameroon was initially supposed to be the host nation in 2019, before being stripped of the tournament due to delays in its preparations, with Egypt replacing it. The 33rd Cup of Nations was then postponed last year because of the pandemic.

The Central African country of 27 million people was therefore determined to press on with the competition amid reports last month that leading European clubs wanted it postponed again due to COVID concerns. This time it does go ahead, starting today when Cameroon, coached by Portugal's Toni Conceicao, take on Burkina Faso in Yaounde, but the specter of the coronavirus is not going away.

Arsenal star Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang and his Gabon team-mate Mario Lemina tested positive on Thursday and were in isolation in their hotel. Senegal, Africa's top-ranked national team, travelled to Cameroon without three members of their squad who had tested positive. "Unprecedented times," tweeted Egypt coach Carlos Queiroz on Friday

after reports emerged of positive tests in his squad's camp. "The more the situation becomes difficult, the more we stay together and strong," he added.

COVID not the only concern

COVID, though, is far from the only concern in a country dealing with a conflict in the English-speaking west. Matches in Group F, featuring Tunisia, Mali, Mauritania and Gambia, are due to be played in Limbe, a coastal city close to Mount Cameroon which is also a hotspot of separatist unrest. Jihadist raiders also pose a problem in the north, at least beyond the city of Garoua where Salah's Egypt and Nigeria will play group games.

It is because of the health crisis that organizers have capped crowd limits at 60 percent of capacity, or 80 percent when the hosts play. Spectators must be vaccinated and have a negative test result, but only six percent of the adult population is inoculated. It therefore remains to be seen how many venues will come

close to filling the restricted capacity, in particular the vast new 60,000-seat Olembe Stadium in Yaounde and the 50,000-seat Japoma Stadium in Douala.

Cameroon, though, is football mad and many fans will be desperate to attend games in a country that has only hosted the Cup of Nations once before, in 1972 when there were just eight participants. The dream for Cameroon this time is to be in the final in the capital Yaounde on February 6, as they look to add to their five titles, a tally bettered only by Egypt, African champions a record seven times. "We know that Cameroonians have high hopes because the competition is taking place here," coach

Conceicao told the BBC.

Senegal, Algeria the favorites

However, the nation that gave the world the likes of Roger Milla and Samuel Eto'o—the latter now president of the Cameroonian Football Federation—

no longer boasts the same level of stardust. They have Ajax goalkeeper Andre Onana and Bayern Munich striker Eric Maxim Choupo-Moting and they should certainly qualify from a group also containing Ethiopia and Cape Verde, but the real superstars of the continent will be elsewhere.

Senegal, who face Zimbabwe, Guinea and Malawi in the western city of Bafoussam, boast not just Liverpool forward Mane but also Chelsea goalkeeper Edouard Mendy, Napoli centre-back Kalidou Koulibaly and Paris Saint-Germain midfielder Idrissa Gana Gueye. Holders Algeria, unbeaten in 33 competitive games, will be led by Manchester City's Riyad Mahrez, while Morocco have PSG full-back Achraf Hakimi and Sevilla goalkeeper Yassine Bounou, amongst others.

Little wonder some European clubs are not happy about losing such a calibre of player for up to a month mid-season. Nigeria, meanwhile, cross the border without Napoli striker Victor Osimhen, or Watford's Emmanuel Dennis, whose club said they received notice of his call-up too late. In any case this Cup of Nations is not just about the big names, as Gambia, ranked 148th in the world, and the Indian Ocean island state of the Comoros make their debuts, while South Africa are among those to miss out. — AFP



Specter of COVID not going away



Salmiya's Mahdi Dashti #19 runs with the ball during his team's match against Fahaheel on Wednesday. — KUNA photos

Kuwait back on top as Kazma face tough test

By Ahmad Jabr

KUWAIT: Several important matches highlight Kuwait Premier League this week as former league leaders Kazma look to bounce back from their 3-0 defeat against Qadsia, while Kuwait's hopes to stay on top of the standings will be put to test when they host titleholders Al-Arabi on Tuesday.

Kazma came into their match against Qadsia last Tuesday as the favorites to win following a strong performance in the previous couple of weeks, while the latter were reeling off a loss and a draw in their previous two matches. The win put Qadsia in fourth place with 16 points as they look to capitalize on their momentum when they square off against Al-Nasr tomorrow. Aside from Kuwait who returned to the top with 19 points after beating Al-Shabab on Thursday, Salmiya were the biggest winners of last week's competitions when they climbed to second place after beating Fahaheel 2-0 on Wednesday. Salmiya and Kazma both have 17 points, with the former only leading by goal difference ahead of their key matchup on Tuesday.



KUWAIT: Kuwait's Dieumerci Mbokani #70 avoids a sliding tackle during his team's Kuwait Premier League match against Al-Shabab on Thursday.



Qadsia vs Kazma in action.

The 'CAN effect': Africa Cup of Nations throws up jab dilemma

YAOUNDE: "If I get the jab, it's just for the Indomitable Lions. I'm ready to die for them," says Vincent Nengne as he receives a coronavirus vaccine to see Cameroon open Africa's top football tournament. In the week before today's first match in the Africa Cup of Nations (CAN) in Cameroon, many fans have overcome reluctance and asked to be vaccinated. The African Football Confederation (CAF) has made vaccination mandatory to enter the stadium, along with a negative PCR test taken less than 72 hours before kick-off or an antigen test up to 24 hours before.

"There is clearly a CAN effect. We have gone from 10 people a day to more than 100 since Monday. This is increasing exponentially," Lucien Mama, coordinator of the Sports Palace of Yaounde vaccine centre, told AFP. "Until now, Cameroonians have refused to be vaccinated. The CAN has broken the psychological barriers and the hesitation," Mama added hopefully.

In the central African country of 27 million peo-

ple, just six percent of the population over the age of 18 has been jabbed, according to official statistics, and many people openly refuse to wear masks. But stringent stadium entry requirements imposed by CAF could still deter supporters from attending matches. On Tuesday, it was announced stadium attendances would be limited to 60 percent of capacity — increasing to 80 percent when the Indomitable Lions play.

'I will not go'

Next to the Sports Palace in the capital Yaounde, several dozen fans waited to get jabbed in tents. "I came to see how it goes," said Yaya Bachirou, 33. "I agree to be vaccinated only if I have my ticket for the match, and for the moment I do not have it yet." "For 15 minutes you sit and you don't talk," a nurse instructs a patient after the injection. "And you won't have sex today either," jokes her colleague.

Rumors that the vaccine causes sterility are widely believed, alongside several other myths. "The reluctance to be vaccinated is linked to a combination of factors," explains Larissa Kojoue, a researcher at Buea University in western Cameroon. "It is firstly linked to ignorance about this still-recent disease, to the sometimes chaotic handling of the epidemic in the country, and to disinformation," Kojoue said. "That has come mainly from Europe and the United States, and... reached a large part of the population, starting with the elites." — AFP

Marseille end the 45-year wait for win at Bordeaux

PARIS: Marseille won away to Bordeaux in Ligue 1 for the first time since 1977 as Cengiz Under's first-half goal secured a 1-0 victory on Friday. The Turkey international punished a poor kick from goalkeeper Benoit Costil by scoring the game's only goal eight minutes before half-time at an empty stadium in Bordeaux. The home side opted to play the match behind closed doors in response to league officials turning down their request for it to be postponed because of a host of COVID-19 cases in the Bordeaux squad.

Only 5,000 fans are permitted at football matches

under new government restrictions introduced to try and curb spiralling daily infection rates fuelled by the Omicron strain of the virus. Bordeaux on Wednesday said they had 17 players unavailable. They have returned 21 positive test results over the past three weeks and were forced to field several reserve-team players in their French Cup game last weekend, which they lost 3-0 at Brest.

The win for Marseille was their first in Bordeaux in 37 attempts and sent Jorge Sampaoli's team above Nice into second place, 10 points back of leaders Paris Saint-Germain. "We are indeed very satisfied to end this long run," said Sampaoli. "It's a great success so congratulations to the players. It was well-known and we were made to understand it everywhere we went." Bordeaux sit just one point above the relegation play-off place. They have won only three times in 20 league matches under former Switzerland coach Vladimir Petkovic this season. — AFP

Classifieds

Hospitals & Clinics

Sabah Hospital	24812000	Khaldiya	24848075
Amiri Hospital	22450005	Kaifan	24849807
Maternity Hospital	24843100	Shamiya	24848913
Mubarak Al-Kabir Hospital	25312700	Shuwaikh	24814507
Chest Hospital	24849400	Abdullah Salem	22549134
Farwaniya Hospital	24892010	Nuzha	22526804
Adan Hospital	23940620	Industrial Shuwaikh	24814764
Ibn Sina Hospital	24840300	Qadsia	22515088
Al-Razi Hospital	24846000	Dasmah	22532265
Physiotherapy Hospital	24874330/9	Bneid Al-Gar	22531908
		Shaab	22518752
		Qibla	22459381
		Ayoun Al-Qibla	22451082
		Mirqab	22456536
		Sharq	22465401
		Salmiya	25746401

Clinics

Kaizen center	25716707
Rawda	22517733
Adaliya	22517144

CHANGE OF NAME

I, Irfan S/O Munevar Khan holder of Indian Passport no. L1433185 issued at Kuwait on 03/09/2013 & Civil ID no. 281080104232 has changed my name from Irfan to Irfan Khan in all my dealings and documents. I will be known by name of Irfan (Given Name) and Khan

(Surname). (C 1000). 6-1-2022

My old name is **Nuruddin** change to new name as **Nuruddin Alimohammed bawaji**. Old place of birth Banswara Rajasthan change to new place of birth Partapur Banswara Rajasthan and I am divorced. (C 0999) 5-1-2022

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- Understanding the potential client needs by penetrating successful relationships with all clientele.
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Defending champ Bucks rout Nets

VanVleet leads Raptors past Jazz; Raptors clobber short-handed Jazz



NEW YORK: Giannis Antetokounmpo #34 of the Milwaukee Bucks has a shot defended by LaMarcus Aldridge #21 of the Brooklyn Nets during the first quarter at Barclays Center on January 07, 2022. — AFP

LOS ANGELES: Giannis Antetokounmpo scored a game-high 31 points as the defending NBA champion Milwaukee Bucks dominated the Brooklyn Nets in a 121-109 wire-to-wire victory on Friday night. The Bucks spread the scoring around as Antetokounmpo led six Bucks in double figure scoring, including all five starters in front of a crowd of 17,700 at the Barclays Center. This was Antetokounmpo's seventh straight 30-point game against the Nets.

"There is a lot of excitement in the air when you play Brooklyn," said Antetokounmpo. "We got wide open shots. We defended and we helped one another. We played well." The Bucks welcomed the return of Antetokounmpo, who was a late scratch from their last game on Wednesday with a non-COVID-19 illness. Antetokounmpo recently missed five

games due to the NBA's COVID-19 measures and is averaging 32 points and more than 10 rebounds per game in six contests since returning.

"He comes with the killer knockout blow," Bucks acting head coach Darvin Ham said of Antetokounmpo. "Once he sees us in position, he knows what spots he wants to get to." The Bucks beat the Nets in seven games in the Eastern Conference semi-finals last season before going on to win the NBA championship. On Friday, Khris Middleton scored 15 of his 20 points in the third quarter and Bobby Portis scored 20 of his 25 in the first half for Milwaukee, who ended a two-game losing skid.

Kevin Durant had 29 points, nine rebounds and seven assists in the loss. James Harden finished with 16 points, nine rebounds and seven assists. The Nets lost their fourth game in the past five and have

dropped five straight at home. They were without Kyrie Irving who is only allowed to play in road games after refusing to get vaccinated against the coronavirus. Irving is not permitted to play at home because of New York City's vaccine mandates.

In Toronto, Fred VanVleet finished with a triple-double of 37 points, 10 rebounds and 10 assists as the Toronto Raptors clobbered the short-handed Utah Jazz 122-108. VanVleet scored 24 points in the third quarter alone as he recorded his first career triple double. OG Anunoby added 22 points for the Raptors, who have won five straight.

VanVleet said his teammates made it easy for him to score. "I really thought it was the defense, to be honest with you," VanVleet said, "just picking up full court and trying to generate some aggressiveness." Pascal Siakam added 17 points, Chris

Boucher had 13 points and Scottie Barnes had 11 points and nine rebounds in the win. Utah was missing eight players, including All-Stars Donovan Mitchell (back strain) and Rudy Gobert (health and safety protocols).

Also sitting out for the Jazz were Joe Ingles (COVID-19 protocol), Mike Conley (knee), Bojan Bogdanovic (finger), Royce O'Neale (knee), Rudy Gay (heel) and Jordan Clarkson (back). In Chicago, Zach LaVine's scored a game-high 27 points as the Chicago Bulls extended their winning streak to nine games with a 130-122 defeat of the Washington Wizards. It is the Bulls longest winning streak in 10 seasons. In Los Angeles, LeBron James scored 32 points and Malik Morris finished with 29 as the Los Angeles Lakers beat the Atlanta Hawks 134-118 for their fourth consecutive win. — AFP

Canada stun Russia, book ATP Cup final

SYDNEY: Felix Auger-Aliassime and Denis Shapovalov stunned defending champions Russia yesterday in a decisive doubles rubber to send Canada storming into an ATP Cup final against Spain. Their Sydney showdown went to the wire after Shapovalov neutralized Roman Safiullin 6-4, 5-7, 6-4 in the opening singles match. But world number two Daniil Medvedev then thrashed 11th-ranked Auger-Aliassime 6-4, 6-0 to level it up with a flawless performance in an ominous warning ahead of the Australian Open later this month.

It forced the match into a doubles shoot-out which looked to be going Russia's way only for Canada to find an extra gear and grind out a 4-6, 7-5, 10-7 win to make their first-ever final in the team event. "Felix did an amazing job. I had a little bit of a slow start, had trouble returning, but we did a good job to fight," said Shapovalov, who missed Canada's first singles match at the tournament while he recovered from COVID-19.

"We have great team chemistry, team spirit, so it helped us a lot." Auger-Aliassime admitted he was down on confidence after crashing so heavily in the singles against Medvedev, but said his long-time friend Shapovalov helped him re-focus. "I had to try and stay positive. Of course, it was tough, especially (because) that second set went the way it went in singles," he said.

"Denis helped me and the team to push myself. We had a tough start in the doubles, so to be able to come back in this way, it's really a team effort. "That's what the ATP Cup is about. You can still win after being 1-all and losing a tough singles." Their reward is a clash with 2020 runners-up face Spain on Sunday and they have a big task ahead against the unflappable Roberto Bautista Agut and his solid teammate Pablo Carreno Busta. Both players are both in red-hot



SYDNEY: Roman Safiullin (right) and Daniil Medvedev of Russia return the ball during their men's doubles semi-final match yesterday. — AFP

form, each winning all four of their singles encounters so far.

Medvedev led Auger-Aliassime 2-0 in their singles head-to-heads going into the match, with his most recent triumph coming in a massive clash in last year's US Open semi-finals, a tournament he went on to win. But Auger-Aliassime nevertheless had confidence heading into the match after defeating world number three Alexander Zverev on Thursday.

The Russian master, however, never let him settle and cruised to victory in 69 minutes. The Canadian started well and used his serve to control points, but when he was broken at 4-4 in the first set his game unravelled. "He was serving just aces, playing good, so I knew I just had to stay in the match, try to do what I can, what's possible against his big game," said Medvedev, who will be the top seed at the Australian Open should Novak Djokovic not play. — AFP

Barty dismantles Swiatek in Adelaide semi-finals

ADELAIDE: Australia's Ashleigh Barty continued her excellent form this week when she dismantled fifth seed Iga Swiatek in the semi-finals of the season-opening Adelaide International yesterday. Barty, the world number one, dominated her Polish opponent to win 6-2, 6-4 and show why she will go into this month's Australian Open as a firm favorite.

She will take on Kazakhstan's Elena Rybakina in the final after the seventh seed beat Japanese player Misaki Doi 6-4, 6-3 in the first match on centre court. Barty has had a tough draw this week-facing three players inside the top 25 - but has gotten better each match. She had pulled out of all tennis following September's US Open because of the pandemic.

Barty came back from a set and a break down to rising American teenage star Coco Gauff in the second round, then demolished former Australian Open champion Sofia Kenin in the quarter-finals. "This tournament was exceptionally tough right the way through," Barty said. "There were certainly no easy matches, but I love to test myself against the best in the world and tonight was no different."

"I felt like each match I've got progressively better and hopefully I've got a little bit left in the tank for tomorrow." Barty broke Swiatek twice in the first set and once in the second, taking advantage of 31 unforced errors from her opponent. She served beautifully once again-Swiatek only had two break points opportunities in the match, once in each set. But Barty also tormented Swiatek with her range of shots, the world number nine particularly struggling with the Australian's slice backhand.

In the first semi-final, Rybakina started slowly but had too much firepower for Doi, winning 6-4, 6-3 in 83 minutes. She served nine aces and hit 22 winners in the straight-sets win to book her place in the final. The 22-year-old, who stands 1.84 metres (6 feet) tall, went



ADELAIDE: Ashleigh Barty of Australia hits a forehand against Iga Swiatek of Poland during their women's singles semi-final match yesterday. — AFP

into the tournament ranked 14th in the world.

Reaching the final will see her rise to 12th, and if she beats Barty she will end the week as world number 11. Against Doi, Rybakina looked sluggish early and dropped her first service game. But in a match of few long rallies, she broke straight back and then again at 5-4 to take the first set in 40 minutes. She found her range and was never troubled on serve, while Doi came under increasing pressure from her opponent's powerful hitting.

Rybakina broke at 3-3 in the second, then again at 5-3 to claim a comfortable win. In the men's semi-finals, second-seeded Russian Karen Khachanov ousted the big-serving Marin Cilic 7-6 (7/3), 6-3. Khachanov played more consistently than his Croatian opponent, whose forehand began to misfire in the first set tiebreak and during the second set. — AFP