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New COVID cases top 4,500 despite 82% vaccination rate

One MP, several Assembly employees test positive for coronavirus



KUWAIT: This photo taken yesterday shows the Kuwait Towers and Kuwait City engulfed in heavy fog. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: The health ministry yesterday reported 4,548 new coronavirus cases as the pandemic continued to spread, despite an 82-percent vaccination rate announced by the ministry. National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem said he declined a request by the health ministry to suspend Assembly sessions, adding that at least one lawmaker and a "large number" of Assembly employees have tested positive.

The health ministry also said the number of COVID-19 patients in intensive care units rose to 17, while those receiving treatment at hospitals increased to 200. With the number of cases detected yesterday, Kuwait has reported close to 30,000 cases since the start of the month, with the infection rate climbing to as high as 12.9 percent.

Kuwait currently has 28,466 active cases, a sharp hike from 3,467 cases at the start of January. There were only 272 active cases at the start of December, according to official figures. The ministry said in a statement yesterday that 568,000 people have

already taken the third booster dose. As many as 3.35 million people or 85.4 percent have taken one dose and 3.23 million, 82.4 percent, have taken two doses.

Meanwhile, a special Assembly session demanded by opposition MPs was not held yesterday because no Cabinet minister showed up, as ministers are in home quarantine after the health minister tested positive last week. Ghanem said yesterday he prevented some lawmakers from entering the Assembly chamber because they did not have a negative PCR test result, adding that no MP or employee will be allowed into the Assembly chamber without a negative PCR test result.

MP Mubarak Al-Hajraf said he was prevented from entering the Assembly chamber because the result of his PCR test did not come out. The speaker however insisted that he only applied the law and will continue to do so. Ghanem added the Assembly will hold a special session today to debate a number of draft laws on creating jobs for Kuwaitis, and amendments to the audiovisual law.

News in brief

Minister suspends four officers

KUWAIT: Interior Minister Sheikh Ahmad Al-Mansour Al-Sabah gave orders to suspend four officers involved in an ongoing investigation for suspected violations committed during interrogations, the interior ministry announced yesterday. Sheikh Ahmad also gave orders to reconsider all procedures taken by the State Security Bureau and improve them in line with international practices, it added. — KUNA

80-yr-old dead after Zionist raid

RAMALLAH: An 80-year-old Palestinian was found dead in a village in the occupied West Bank yesterday, with the mayor reporting his body was still handcuffed after arrest by Zionist soldiers. Around 30 to 40 Zionist troops took part in the predawn operation in the village of Jiljiliya. Omar Abdulmajeed Asad and other family members were returning from visiting relatives when they were stopped by the soldiers. — AFP

Saudi harasser named and shamed

RIYADH: A Saudi has been named in a newspaper after his conviction for sexual harassment, in an apparent first under new laws tackling a subject that is often seen as taboo. A court in Madinah ordered the public identification of Yasser Muslim Al-Arawi, who was named in Okaz newspaper after he was sentenced to eight months in prison and fined 5,000 riyals (\$1,300). — AFP

Thailand eyes \$9 visitor fee

BANGKOK: Thailand will introduce a \$9 entry fee for foreign visitors from April, officials said yesterday, even as the kingdom seeks to lure travelers back and repair its COVID-battered tourism sector. The new 300 baht (\$9) charge will be incorporated into airfares, government spokesman Thanakorn Wangboonkongchana said. An estimated five million foreign tourists are expected to enter the kingdom in 2022, down from nearly 40 million a year before the pandemic. — AFP

UK PM sorry for partygate scandal amid calls to quit

LONDON: UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson yesterday apologized for attending a lockdown-breaching party held in his Downing Street garden, but deflected calls to resign as the opposition leader called him a "man without shame". After days of dismal headlines and collapsing poll ratings, Johnson said he regarded the newly revealed boozy get-together in May 2020 as a work event for Downing Street staff.

He conceded he did not appreciate how the event

would look to millions of Britons who were respecting COVID rules, even missing out on farewells to dying relatives. "And to them and to this House I offer my heartfelt apologies," Johnson told a stormy session of questions in the House of Commons. "With hindsight I should have sent everyone back inside. I should have found some other way to thank them (his staff)," he added, admitting he had been present for about 25 minutes.

Keir Starmer, leader of the main opposition Labour party, said the public believed Johnson was "lying through his teeth". "The only question is will the British public kick him out, will his party kick him out, or will he do the decent thing and resign? The prime minister's a man without shame," Starmer added, for the first time joining other opposition leaders in demanding Johnson's ouster.

Continued on Page 2



LONDON: A video grab shows British Prime Minister Boris Johnson speaking in the House of Commons yesterday. — AFP

US on 'threshold' of living with coronavirus: Fauci

WASHINGTON: Despite soaring cases and record-high COVID-19 hospitalizations, the United States is approaching the "threshold" of transitioning to living with the coronavirus as a manageable disease, Anthony Fauci said Tuesday. Speaking to the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), the top US scientist said eliminating COVID was unrealistic and that "Omicron, with its extraordinary, unprecedented degree of efficiency of transmissibility, will ultimately find just about everybody."

"There's no way we're going to eradicate this" virus, he said, given its contagiousness, its propensity to mutate into new variants and the large pool of unvaccinated people. Those up to date with their vaccines remain well protected against severe outcomes, but vaccine efficacy against infection has fallen. But "as Omicron goes up and down," the country will hopefully enter a new phase "where there'll be enough protection in (the) community, enough drugs available so that when someone does get infected and is in a high risk group, it will be very easy to treat that person," said Fauci.

"When we get there, there's that transition, and we may be on the threshold of that right now," he said, while also stressing that with the country currently recording almost a million infections a day, nearly 150,000 people in hospital and more than

Continued on Page 2



WASHINGTON: Dr Anthony Fauci shows a screen grab of a campaign website while answering questions during a Senate hearing on Tuesday. — AFP

Archaeologists from Europe back in Iraq

NASIRIYAH, Iraq: After war and insurgency kept them away from Iraq for decades, European archaeologists are making an enthusiastic return in search of millennia-old cultural treasures. "Come

and see!" shouted an overjoyed French researcher recently at a desert dig in Larsa, southern Iraq, where the team had unearthed a 4,000-year-old cuneiform inscription. "When you find inscriptions like that, in situ, it's moving," said Dominique Charpin, professor of Mesopotamian civilisation at the College de France in Paris.

The inscription in Sumerian was engraved on a brick fired in the 19th century BC. "To the god Shamash, his king Sin-iddinam, king of Larsa, king of Sumer and Akkad," Charpin translated with ease. Behind him, a dozen other European and Iraqi

archaeologists kept at work in a cordoned-off area where they were digging. They brushed off bricks and removed earth to clear what appeared to be the pier of a bridge spanning an urban canal of Larsa, which was the capital of Mesopotamia just before Babylon, at the start of the second millennium BC.

"Larsa is one of the largest sites in Iraq, it covers more than 200 hectares (500 acres)," said Regis Vallet, researcher at France's National Centre for Scientific Research, heading the Franco-Iraqi mission.

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Local

Crown Prince receives Amiri Diwan Advisor, former ministers

Sheikh Mishal gifted book on UN General Assembly's role



KUWAIT: His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah receives the book from Amiri Diwan Advisor Mohammad Abulhasan. — KUNA photos

KUWAIT: His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received at Bayan Palace yesterday Amiri Diwan Advisor Mohammad Abulhasan, who gifted His Highness a book. The book included a documentation of the role of the Security Council and the UN General Assembly when Abulhasan was the permanent representative of



His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah meets former Minister of Electricity, Water and Renewable Energy and former Minister of Social Affairs and Community Development Dr Mishaan Al-Otaibi.

to the UN from 1981-2003. Meanwhile, His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received at Bayan Palace former Minister of Electricity, Water and Renewable Energy and former Minister of Social Affairs and Community Development Dr Mishaan Al-Otaibi. His Highness the Crown Prince also received for-



His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah meets former Minister of State for National Assembly Affairs Mubarak Salem Al-Harees.

mer Minister of State for National Assembly Affairs Mubarak Salem Al-Harees. His Highness Sheikh Mishal commended the minister for carrying out their responsibilities with dedication, thanking them for their efforts and serving the best interest of the country during their tenures as ministers, wishing them continued success. His Highness the Crown Prince had received at

Bayan Palace on Tuesday former Minister of Information and Culture and Minister of State for Youth Affairs Abdulrahman Badah Al-Mutairi. His Highness the Crown Prince commended him for carrying out his responsibilities with dedication then thanked him for his efforts and wished him success in his future endeavors. — KUNA

ACK students win award at Huawei ICT Competition

KUWAIT: Two Electrical Engineering students at the Australian College of Kuwait (ACK) took part in the team representing Kuwait at the Huawei Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Competition 2021 Middle East and earned the Outstanding Performance Award.

The Huawei ICT Competition took place over three stages, with the first being the preliminary stage that included students from the various universities of Kuwait conducting ICT examinations to qualify for the second stage of the competition, which is the national competition. Out of all the competitors, 30 were selected for the national competition, with 22 of them being ACK students. After the conclusion of the second examinations for the second stage of the competition, three students were chosen to represent Kuwait at the regional final, the Huawei ICT Competition 2021 Middle East which

was held in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

The regional final brought together teams of university students from around the Middle East representing their countries in the competition. It took place over the course of three days, and included a written examination portion and a laboratory portion. The Kuwait Team included the ACK Electrical Engineering students Dina Sammour and Asama Akhtar, and was under the supervision of Mohammad Zaki, Senior Instructor of Electrical Engineering at ACK. After the competition, the Kuwait Team received the Outstanding Performance Award, and furthermore Mohammad Zaki was awarded the Excellent Tutor Award, and ACK received the Excellent Academy Award for the fourth year in a row.

Commenting on the achievement, Mohammad Zaki expressed his pride in the students for their hard work and dedication, noting that although ACK does not offer majors in ICT, the students were still up for the challenge and excelled in the competition against others specialized in the field. Mohammad Zaki also thanked Dr Mohammed Abdul Niby, Dean of the School of Engineering at ACK, and Dr Hassan Salti, Head of Electrical Engineering at ACK, for their support throughout the competition.



KUWAIT: The winners in a group photo.

US on 'threshold' of living with...

Continued from Page 1

1,200 daily deaths, "we're not at that point". Official data showed there are currently 145,982 COVID hospitalizations, even though a significant percent are thought to be hospitalized "with" the disease rather than because of it.

Earlier, the 81-year-old director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases slammed vaccine skeptic Republican Senator Rand Paul for unleashing "crazies" who were threatening his life and harassing his family, in unusually emotional congressional testimony. President Joe Biden's top officials, including his chief medical advisor Fauci, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) director Rochelle Walensky and acting Food and Drug Administration (FDA) head Janet Woodcock were summoned to testify before the Senate about the pandemic.

While many fellow lawmakers focused their questions on the lack of adequate testing and confusing new guidelines on how infected people should end

their isolation, Paul, who has railed against vaccine mandates and refused to get vaccinated, said Fauci was personally to blame for people's deaths. Paul faulted Fauci for hundreds of thousands of deaths that occurred since Biden took office - although the vast majority of those fatalities were unvaccinated and health officials, including Fauci, have consistently advocated for vaccines.

"You personally attack me and with absolutely not a shred of evidence of anything you say," Fauci responded. "All of a sudden that kindles the crazies out there and I have life threats upon my life, harassment of my family and my children with obscene phone calls." Fauci recalled that in late December, a man was arrested on his way from California to the capital Washington armed with an AR-15 assault weapon and multiple rounds of ammunition.

The man said he wanted to kill Fauci, because of what he said was blood on the scientists' hands. Fauci then brandished a printout from Paul's website that showed the banner "Fire Dr Fauci" next to an invitation to donate to the Republican's campaign. Though Omicron causes severe cases at a lower rate than Delta, it is reaching more people because of its extreme infectiousness. By Dec 27, the age-adjusted vaccine efficacy against hospitalization was 92 percent, according to data from New York state. — AFP

UK PM sorry for partygate scandal...

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Johnson - who was fired twice in previous jobs for lying to his bosses - had managed to weather one of the world's worst COVID death tolls thanks to a successful mass vaccination campaign, and his record as the leader who effected Britain's Brexit withdrawal from the European Union. But Hannah Brady, spokesperson for the pressure group COVID-19 Bereaved Families for Justice, said: "The prime minister's lies have finally caught up with him. Not content with kicking bereaved families like mine in the teeth by breaking the rules he set and then lying to us about it, he's now taking the British public for fools by pretending he 'didn't know it was a party'."

Even some on his own side want Johnson to go, but in response to Starmer, he urged all sides to await the findings of an internal inquiry he has commissioned by a senior civil servant. "He is not resigning," Johnson's press secretary told reporters. There have been a flurry of accusations about Downing Street parties held during lockdowns in 2020 which have dogged Johnson since late last year, sparking public revulsion.

Lisa Wilkie was forced to film her brother dying of COVID in intensive care in May 2020, because their mother was not allowed to visit the hospital under the restrictions. "People died sticking to the rules, and they broke those rules to have a bottle of

wine," a tearful Wilkie told the BBC. Johnson's apology followed the same pattern as previous allegations of Downing Street parties during lockdowns in 2020: Denials or stonewalling, followed by a mea culpa in the face of documentary proof.

Senior Conservative MP Roger Gale said it was now clear that Johnson had misled parliament and was, politically, a "dead man walking". "Unfortunately what the prime minister has said today leaves people like me in an impossible situation," he told the BBC, warning that Tory backbenchers could now hold a no-confidence vote. Nigel Mills, another Conservative lawmaker, said: "If the prime minister knowingly attended a party I don't see how he can survive, having accepted resignations for far less."

The prime minister was rocked when the email was leaked late Monday in which a senior aide invited more than 100 colleagues to the event on May 20, 2020, encouraging them to "bring your own booze". The event occurred when the government was ordering members of the public not to meet, even outdoors, and tight restrictions were in place on social mixing, including at funerals.

The party was held just over a month after Johnson had come out of intensive care with COVID, and some reports said it was staged with his full knowledge as a "welcome back" event. Police at the time were fining people breaching the COVID rules, and had the option to prosecute repeat or egregious offenders. Johnson could yet face a more serious, criminal probe by London's Metropolitan Police. Even the front pages of newspapers that normally back him and the Tories were damning. "It's my party and I'll lie low if I want to," mocked The Sun tabloid. — AFP

WHO: Omicron 'dangerous' for unvaccinated

GENEVA: The Omicron variant of COVID-19 is dangerous - and especially so for those who have not been vaccinated against the disease, the World Health Organization said yesterday. The WHO said the huge global spike in cases was being driven by Omicron but insisted there should be no surrender to the variant of concern.

"While Omicron causes less severe disease than Delta, it remains a dangerous virus, particularly for those who are unvaccinated," WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus told a press conference. "We mustn't allow this virus a free ride or wave the white flag, especially when so many people around the remain unvaccinated."

"In Africa, over 85 percent of people are yet to receive a single dose of vaccine. We can't end the

acute phase of the pandemic unless we close this gap." Tedros wanted every country to have 10 percent of their population vaccinated by the end of September 2021, 40 percent by the end of December, and 70 percent by mid-2022.

But 90 countries had still not reached 40 percent, 36 of them still short of the 10-percent mark, he said. The "overwhelming majority" of people admitted to hospitals around the world were unvaccinated, he added. While vaccines remain very effective at preventing death and severe COVID-19 disease, they do not fully prevent transmission, said Tedros.

"More transmission means more hospitalizations, more deaths, more people off work - including teachers and health workers - and more risk of another variant emerging that is even more transmissible and more deadly than Omicron," Tedros said that the numbers of deaths worldwide had stabilized at around 50,000 per week.

"Learning to live with this virus does not mean we can, or should, accept this number of deaths," he said. WHO emergencies director Michael Ryan added: "This is not the time to declare this is a welcome virus." — AFP

Archaeologists from Europe...

Continued from Page 1

The team of 20 people have made "major discoveries", he said, including the residence of a ruler identified by about 60 cuneiform tablets that have been transferred to the national museum in Baghdad.

Vallet said Larsa is like an archaeological playground and a "paradise" for exploring ancient Mesopotamia, which hosted through the ages the empire of Akkad, the Babylonians, Alexander the Great, the Christians, the Persians and Islamic rulers. However, the modern history of Iraq - with its succession of conflicts, especially since the 2003 US-led invasion and its bloody aftermath - has kept foreign researchers at bay.

Only since Baghdad declared victory in territorial battles against the Islamic State group in 2017 has Iraq "largely stabilised and it has become possible again" to visit, said Vallet. "The French came back in 2019 and the British a little earlier," he said. "The Italians came back as early as 2011." In late 2021, said Vallet, 10 foreign missions were at work in the Dhi Qar province, where Larsa is located.

Iraq's Council of Antiquities and Heritage director Laith Majid Hussein said he is delighted to play host, and is happy that his country is back on the map for foreign expeditions. "This benefits us scientifically," he told AFP in Baghdad, adding that he welcomes the "opportunity to train our staff after such a long interruption".

Near Najaf in central Iraq, Ibrahim Salman of the German Institute of Archaeology is focused on the



AL-HIRA, Iraq: Members of a German-Iraqi archaeological expedition follow up on a geophysical survey at this ancient site about 25 km south of Najaf on Oct 24, 2021. — AFP

site of the city of Al-Hira. Germany had previously carried out excavations here that ground to a halt with the 2003 US-led invasion that toppled Saddam Hussein. Equipped with a geomagnetic measuring device, Salman's team has been at work in the one-time Christian city that had its heyday under the Lakhmids, a pre-Islamic tribal dynasty of the 5th and 6th centuries. "Some clues lead us to believe that a church may have been located here," he explained.

He pointed to traces on the ground left by moisture which is retained by buried structures and rises to the surface. "The moistened earth on a strip several meters long leads us to conclude that under the feet of the archaeologist are probably the walls of an ancient church," he said. Al-Hira is far less ancient than other sites, but it is part of the diverse history of the country that serves as a reminder, according to Salman, that "Iraq, or Mesopotamia, is the cradle of civilizations. It is as simple as that!" — AFP

Local

Customers, mall visitors face heavy fine if not wearing masks

Shops could pay KD 5,000 if staff, customers don't wear facemasks

By Nawara Fattahova

KUWAIT: Business owners may be forced to pay a fine of up to KD 5,000 if their staff or customers don't wear facemasks. This decision was issued during the beginning of the pandemic in 2020 but stopped being applied when the country entered the fifth phase of normalization. But for the past two weeks, the rule is strictly enforced by municipal inspectors.

Customers and mall visitors will be penalized if they take off their facemasks. "The salespeople should ask customers to wear their facemasks. If they refuse, the salesperson should not service them and ask them to leave. They can also ask the security guards or police officers for help, who will escort the violating customer to a room at the mall. They will then be taken to the police station where a case will be registered against them to be transferred to the court," Ibraheem Al-Sab'an, a Hawally governorate municipal inspector told Kuwait Times.

"In the past two weeks, inspectors reported 90 violations and shut down 10 violating stores in all governorates. The owners of the closed stores should visit our department and sign a pledge so that the store can be reopened. If the violation is repeated, the store will be shut for as long as two weeks," he said.

Meanwhile, Kuwait Municipality announced yesterday that its inspectors closed 1,115 shops during crackdowns to make sure that health precautions are followed at markets around Kuwait. Deputy Director for the Capital and Jahra Governorates' Affairs Faisal Al-Jumaa said that inspection teams have covered 679,552 shops, markets and malls in their crackdown as of yesterday.



1,115 shops closed in crackdowns as of yesterday

On and off

At the beginning of the pandemic in 2020, wearing facemasks and gloves was mandatory in all stores and institutions. Shopping malls wouldn't allow anybody to enter without a facemask, and supermarkets even required customers to wear gloves. When the vaccination campaign started in Kuwait at the end of 2020, and then became obligatory to enter most public places in June, security guards or employees were no longer asking or checking if people were wearing facemasks. The focus was only on the proof of vaccination.

When coronavirus cases dropped to below 20 in late summer, even checking for the vaccination status was abandoned in most places including shops, salons, restaurants and other places. Although no official decision from the health authorities or the Cabinet was issued to cancel the obligatory wearing of facemasks, most people stopped wearing it.

This only lasted for a few months, and by the end of 2021, cases suddenly increased and have reached record numbers. So the Cabinet again decided to enforce health precautions and strictly demand facemasks to be worn in all institutions.

Management instructions

A salesman at a store in Shuwaikh asked this reporter to wear a mask to avoid a fine of KD 5,000. He said the management gave instructions to not let any customer in the store without a mask, as Municipality inspectors may issue a fine. Shopping malls, grocery stores and other businesses are now strict again over wearing the facemask. Municipal inspectors are inspecting shopping malls and markets to check the application of health measures. There are three teams of inspectors. "The evening team inspects salons, health clubs and



KUWAIT: A person (right) walks into a ministry building yesterday as signs reading 'no entry without facemask' are placed on the main door. —Photo by Fouad Al-Shaikh

some markets. Then there is a fixed team permanently present at crowded malls. And finally, there is the surprise team that randomly checks various businesses at different periods. The teams always inform the stores and business before the law is applied through a notice that is given to them," stressed Sab'an.

During its weekly meeting on Monday, the Cabinet introduced new restrictions following a spike in daily COVID-19 cases that went into effect yesterday. Among these restrictions are bringing down the attendance rate at state departments to no more than 50 percent, while the private sector is required to bring down the attendance rate to the least possible percent-

age. The Cabinet also assigned the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Ministry of Commerce and Industry to make sure that staffers of kindergartens and children clubs are fully vaccinated against COVID-19 and committed to the health precautions. Furthermore, all means of mass transportation must limit the number passengers to 50 percent of their total respective occupancies while applying the health precautions, notably putting on facemasks. The government committee on following up the health precautions must also ensure that all staffers and clients of barbershops, salons and health spas are fully vaccinated against COVID-19.

Kuwait registers new record of 4,548 COVID cases

KUWAIT: The Kuwaiti Ministry of Health announced yesterday a record 4,548 new infection cases with the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) registered in the previous 24 hours, in addition to zero deaths. With the new contamination cases, Kuwait's caseload climbed to 446,547. MoH spokesperson Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad said in a press statement that the medical authorities recorded 741 new recovery cases, increasing the overall count of the cured to 415,608, noting that the proportion of the healed as compared to the total number of the cases reached 93.1 percent. Dr Sanad also revealed that deaths remained at 2,473. As to the number of people still receiving medical treatment at intensive care units, he said that there were 17 patients in these wards as of yesterday; up from 15 the previous day. The whole count of the cases with confirmed infection that continue to receive treatment has reached 28,466 and the number of people that are treated at



the COVID-19 wards has stood at 200. Also in the same duration, the medical staff conducted 35,335 PCR tests with the whole number of these examinations soaring to 6,308,844. Dr Sanad said, also noting that the proportion of the infection cases to the tests reached 12.9 percent. —KUNA

Team inspects health protocols at parliament



KUWAIT: A technical team from the health ministry inspected health protocol measures and gave the necessary preventive instructions ahead of yesterday's National Assembly session. The team included

doctors from the ministry's public health sector who supervised the inspection and monitored health protocols in the National Assembly's chamber and MPs' resting areas.

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Indian embassy in Kuwait celebrates National Youth Day

KUWAIT: Embassy of India in Kuwait celebrated National Youth Day yesterday on the occasion of the birth anniversary of Swami Vivekananda.

V. Muralidharan, Minister of State for External Affairs and Parliamentary Affairs was the Chief Guest at the celebrations and delivered the 'Annual Swami Vivekananda Address' virtually. In his address on the theme 'Swami Vivekananda: An Eternal Youth Icon', the minister recalled that Swami Vivekananda through his life and teachings energized the youth of India, made them aware of India's civilizational ethos and unleashed their creative energies. He stressed on Swami's open, rationalist and optimistic outlook of world and urged the Indian youth and children in Kuwait to follow Swami's inspiring example. He also highlighted that with the vision and leadership of Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi ji, it is the constant endeavor of the Government of India to extend all support to Indian diaspora in these difficult times of COVID-19 pandemic and at the same time continue to connect with them to be stakeholders in our efforts to create an Aatmanirbhar Bharat.

Ambassador Sibi George delivered the welcome address and paid rich tributes to the inspiring life of Swami Vivekananda. He also paid floral tributes at the portrait of Swami. Ambassador thanked the minister for his address to the community and also for the care and support he extends to the Indian community in Kuwait particularly during the difficult times of COVID-19 pandemic. The ambassador also thanked Minister Muralidharan for his support to the Indian students in Kuwait and for allotting Kuwait as the first center outside India for NEET examination which helped many students. The event was live streamed on Embassy's social media platforms, which saw participation of large numbers of community members.



Indian Ambassador Sibi George

Photo of the Day



KUWAIT: This picture taken yesterday shows an aerial view of the Green Island in Kuwait City. —Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

Kuwait, China hold talks on bilateral cooperation, coordination in vital domains

Chinese Foreign Minister praises Kuwait's political, diplomatic approach

BEIJING: Kuwait and China held official talks in the Chinese city of Wuxi yesterday, co-presided over by Kuwaiti Foreign Minister and State Minister for Cabinet Affairs Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah and Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi. The talks came within the framework of the Kuwaiti minister's official visit to China, heading a Kuwaiti delegation that comprised several senior officials.

During the meeting, Sheikh Dr Ahmad conveyed the greetings of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah to the government and people of China. He touted the firm and close relations between Kuwait and China, underlining that it is important to promote bilateral cooperation and mutual coordination to serve common interests, while upgrading relations to new horizons.

He added that Kuwaiti-Sino relations have been greatly developed over 50 years in various cooperative domains, pointing out harmony between Kuwait Vision 2035 and China's Belt and Road Initiative. The foreign minister boasted that Kuwait is the first Gulf and Arab country to have signed a memo of understanding for cooperation with China in the Belt and Road Initiative, which was launched in September 2013. He also spoke highly of existing cooperation between both nations at international fora, hoping that this could continue at all levels.

Meanwhile, Chinese State Councilor and Foreign



BEIJING: Officials from Kuwait and China hold official talks in the Chinese city of Wuxi yesterday. —KUNA photos



KUWAIT: Foreign Minister and State Minister for Cabinet Affairs Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah and Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi.

Minister Wang Yi conveyed the greetings of Chinese President Xi Jinping to His Highness the Amir, as well as the government and people of Kuwait. He said his country is proud of close friendly relations and existing strategic partnership with Kuwait in all fields. He added that amid the multiple and major changes the world is undergoing, Sino-Kuwaiti relations of all-out strategic partnership have been becoming firmer and closer.

During the official talks, both sides considered close ties and mutual high-level visits and meetings, the last of which was by Yang Jiechi, a member of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and Director of the Office of the Central Commission for Foreign Affairs, to Kuwait in February 2021 and the meeting between both Kuwaiti and Chinese foreign ministers in the Uzbekistan capital of Tashkent on July 16, 2021. They also looked into ways of creating fresh horizons for joint cooperation in various sectors at the behest of both countries' leaderships, in addition to response to the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Both sides finally discussed the latest regional and international developments and exchanged views on a set of issues and subjects that concern both nations.

Vital role

In his statement during talks with his Kuwaiti counterpart, Minister Yi praised Kuwait's political and diplomatic ties with all countries, especially with China. According to the statement, the Chinese minister hailed Kuwait's vital role in maintaining peace and stability regionally and globally. The minister stressed that the leaderships of the two countries had established a high degree of mutual trust and friendship, which provided

security and political stability for the Sino-Kuwaiti relations, and their development and advancement. Furthermore, he touched on the historic and friendly ties between the two countries, saying that Kuwait was the first Gulf country to establish diplomatic relations with China, and it was the first to respond to the Belt and Road Initiative. The statement also said that the two sides agreed on the need to enhance compatibility between the Belt and Road Initiative and Kuwait Vision 2035 and speed up the formulation of a five-year cooperation plan and the establishment of a work mechanism in this regard. Both sides also shed light on regional and international issues, such as Palestine, Yemen and the Iranian nuclear file, in addition to the situation in Iraq and Syria, it added.

China backs GCC

Earlier yesterday, Minister Yi said that China firmly supports GCC countries in safeguarding their national independence, security and stability. The Chinese minister made the remark while meeting with the visiting Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Secretary-General Nayef Al-Hajraf in Wuxi, China's Foreign Ministry said in a statement carried by Xinhua news agency. He said that, in recent years, China and the GCC have consolidated their political mutual trust and deepened practical cooperation, adding that China appreciates the GCC's

understanding of and support for China's propositions on issues concerning China's core interests and major concerns. He said that China will continue to oppose any country's interference in the internal affairs of GCC countries under the pretext of "human rights" and oppose linking terrorism with any particular religion or ethnic group.

Both China and the GCC are important forces for stability, Wang said, adding that in the face of uncertainties caused by profound changes of a scale unseen in a century and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, both sides should work together to play a more positive role in promoting regional peace and stability as well as world peace and development. The two sides agreed that the conditions for China and the GCC to establish a strategic partnership are ripe, and they will accelerate this process. They will also work together to formulate and sign an action plan for strategic dialogue in the next three years. The two sides agreed to complete negotiations on a free-trade agreement between China and the GCC at an early date, and agreed to strengthen coordination and cooperation on international and regional affairs to jointly address global challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change. The Chinese foreign minister and the GCC chief also exchanged views and coordinated their positions on the Iranian nuclear issue and the Yemen issue. —KUNA

News in brief

Education Ministry, ICESCO discuss cooperation

KUWAIT: Kuwaiti Undersecretary of the Education Ministry Dr Ali Al-Yaqoub held a meeting with the Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ICESCO) Director-General Dr Salim Al-Malik to exchange views and aspects of cooperation between the two parties. In a press statement yesterday, Malik praised Kuwait's efforts and humanitarian initiatives throughout history. He also noted that the aim of the visit is to benefit from Kuwaiti expertise and competencies, in addition to building partnerships and agreements with different Kuwaiti institutions. ICESCO's General Supervisor of the Committees and Conferences Dr Ahmad Saeed extended his gratitude to the competent authorities for this kind invitation, wishing the relations between Kuwait and the organization further excellence and success.

Kuwait oil price down to \$82.78 pb

KUWAIT: The price of Kuwaiti crude oil went down by 38 cents to settle at \$82.78 pb on Tuesday, compared with the previous day's \$83.16 pb. Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) announced yesterday. Globally, the Brent crude hiked by \$2.85 to \$83.72 pb and West Texas Intermediate also rose by \$2.99 to \$81.22 pb.

Arab cooperation with Gulf States

CAIRO: Arab League Secretary General Ahmad Abul-Gheit affirmed the need to boost cooperation with the Arab Gulf Program for Development (AGFUND), to support Arab states' recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. Abul-Gheit made the statement during his meeting with head of AGFUND Prince Abdulaziz bin Talal, for the occasion of launching the Arab Forum for Sustainable Development (AFSD), the League said in a statement yesterday. He also underlined the importance of working on achieving the 2030 sustainable development goals by both sides. Meanwhile, Prince Abdulaziz presented some of AGFUND's initiatives including the poverty bank, education for refugees in Zaatari camp and other initiatives aiming to ease the suffering of people in conflict-zones, the League added.



China reiterates backing for GCC



Pakistan court
shuts military
golf course

French police arrest man over 2012 Alps killing of UK family



ATLANTA: US President Joe Biden speaks to a crowd at the Atlanta University Center Consortium, part of both Morehouse College and Clark Atlanta University, on Tuesday. — AFP

Biden gambles big on voting rights reform

President's bid for suspension of filibuster rule is controversial

ATLANTA: President Joe Biden took a major political gamble Tuesday in calling for a break in the Senate's supermajority rule so that Democrats can override Republican opposition to voting rights reforms that he called crucial to saving US democracy. Speaking in Atlanta, Georgia, the cradle of the civil rights movement, Biden - who called last year's Capitol riot by Donald Trump supporters an "attempted coup" - declared "this is the moment to decide to defend our elections, to defend our democracy."

He challenged Democrats holding a razor-thin majority in the Senate to stand up for two bills that would expand access to polls and prevent practices that Biden said are being used to suppress black and other Democratic-leaning voters. "Each one of the members of the Senate will be judged by history for where they stood before the vote and after the vote. There's no escape," Biden said.

The 50 Democrats in the Senate support the two bills. However, under current the supermajority requirement, 60 votes are needed to get them passed. Biden said that if Republicans don't cooperate then the supermajority requirement, called the

filibuster, should be tossed to get the voting rights acts through.

Facing Republican obstruction, "we have no option but to change the Senate rules including getting rid of the filibuster for this." It's a high-risk, high-gain issue for Biden, who is infuriating Republicans, while also trying to balance the more conservative wing of his party with the increasingly frustrated black community.

History is watching

Coming off a powerful speech last week marking the Jan 6 anniversary of the pro-Trump riot, Biden described the push to enshrine greater voter protections as "a turning point". Democrats accuse Republican state legislatures of enacting a spate of laws deliberately restricting the voting rights of minorities and curtailing early voting and mail-in voting in an effort to suppress Democratic support.

Biden said Republicans are passing local laws "designed to suppress your vote, to subvert our elections". Then throwing down the gauntlet to the Senate, Biden said: "History has never been kind to those who sided with voter suppression over voter

rights. I ask every elected official in America: how do you want to be remembered?"

Political risk

Republicans describe the Democrats' Senate push for voting rights as an attempt to manipulate the election landscape by switching power to federal authorities. They are unanimous in opposing the two bills, which Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said could come up for a vote as early as yesterday. Biden's bid for a suspension of the filibuster rule is also controversial.

Republicans warn that a supposedly one-off maneuver could open the floodgates to lifting the filibuster on all sorts of issues, thereby ending any semblance of bipartisanship in the chamber. Lead Republican Senator Mitch McConnell called the idea of suspending the filibuster for voting rights reforms "disturbing" and an attempt to "break our institutions to get a political outcome they want".

Perhaps worse for Biden, the maneuver needs unanimous Democratic support to happen - and that's far from assured, with at least two of the more conservative Democratic senators clearly skeptical.

If circumventing the filibuster fails, Biden will not only see the voting rights bills defeated but emerge from the fight looking politically weakened.

'Keep the faith'

The president traveled to Georgia at a time when his approval ratings are stuck in the low 40s and Republicans are predicted to take over Congress in November midterm elections. He not only faces ferocious pushback from Republicans on his voter rights initiative, but complaints from black activists - a crucial part of his coalition - that he has done too little, too late. Underlining Biden's shaky political standing, prominent black politician and Georgia voting rights activist Stacey Abrams missed his Atlanta event due to what Biden called a "scheduling" glitch, while a big civil rights group said it was boycotting due to lack of tangible progress. Still, the speech was the boldest step yet into the issue by Biden, who attended a wreath laying at the crypt of slain civil rights icon Martin Luther King Jr and visited the historic Ebenezer Baptist Church ahead of his speech. "Keep the faith," Biden said as he entered the Ebenezer Baptist church. — AFP

Several killed in blast in Somali capital

MOGADISHU: Several people were killed yesterday in a suicide car bomb blast in Somalia's capital Mogadishu, officials said. The attack was claimed by the Al-Shabaab jihadist group, which said in a brief statement that it was targeting "foreign officers". It took place only days after Somali leaders had agreed on a new timetable for long-delayed elections in the troubled Horn of Africa country.

The government said in a statement on Twitter that it condemned the "cowardly" suicide attack, and gave a toll of four dead and six injured. "Such acts of terrorism will not derail the peace & the ongoing development in the country. We must unite in the fight

against terrorism." Local government security officer Mohamed Abdi had earlier told AFP that at least six people were killed.

"It has also caused devastation in the area," he said, warning that the toll could be higher because a large number of people were in the area. The United States, the largest foreign donor to Somalia's embattled government, condemned the attack and extended its sympathies to the families of those killed and injured.

'Destroyed buildings'

Witnesses said a multi-vehicle private security convoy escorting foreigners was passing by the area in southern Mogadishu when the explosion hit. "I saw some of the passengers injured and being carried after the blast," said one witness, Osman Hassan. Another witness, Hassan Nur, said: "The blast was so huge that it has destroyed most of the buildings nearby the road and vehicles passing by the area. I saw several dead and



MOGADISHU: A general view of the scene of a car bomb explosion yesterday. — AFP

wounded people strewn in the road."

The United Nations Assistance Mission in Somalia said contrary to early reports "there were no UN personnel or contractors in the convoy targeted in the suicide attack". Somalia has been in the grip of a political crisis since February last year

after the president's term expired before fresh elections were held. A disagreement over the election process set off a bitter power struggle between President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed, better known as Farmajo, and his Prime Minister Mohamed Hussein Roble. — AFP

NATO, Russia lay out differences on Ukraine crisis

BRUSSELS: NATO allies warned Russia yesterday that they would not compromise on the alliance's right to defend its eastern members to avoid further conflict in Ukraine, but invited Moscow to further talks on calming security concerns. Speaking after talks with Russian envoys at NATO headquarters in Brussels, alliance Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg warned: "There are significant differences between NATO allies and Russia on these issues."

Stoltenberg said that it would be impossible for the 30 NATO members to agree to Moscow's core demands for a new security order in Europe, and in particular added that Russia would have no veto on Ukraine's right to eventually join the alliance. President Vladimir Putin's government has issued a

series of demands for the West to rule out accepting new members like Ukraine, Georgia or Finland on its eastern flanks and demanded limits on allied deployments in former Soviet allies that joined NATO after the Cold War.

Stoltenberg said it was "positive" that the two sides had been able to sit down together, reviving the NATO-Russia Council platform, and that NATO members had invited Russia to agree to a series of talks to discuss arms control and "many other issues to prevent a new armed conflict." "Russia was not in a position to agree on that proposal. They didn't reject it either, but the Russian representatives made it clear that they needed some time to come back to NATO with an answer," he said.

Stoltenberg warned, however, that Russia would have no veto over any bid by Ukraine to join NATO and called for a "de-escalation" in Russia's military build-up on its neighbor's border. "Ukraine as a sovereign nation, Ukraine has the right to self-defense. Ukraine is not a threat to Russia," he said. "It is Russia that is the aggressor. It is Russia that has used force and continues to use force against Ukraine. And then they're building up, with around

100,000 troops, artillery, armor, drones, tens of thousands of combat ready troops and threatening rhetoric - that's the problem."

The West defends NATO's "open-door policy" towards potential future members, while Moscow is demanding a cast-iron guarantee that the alliance will not expand further towards its territory. Russia denies that its massive troop build-up around already partially occupied Ukraine is a threat, but the deployment has forced Washington to engage with Moscow to head off fears of an all-out military confrontation. Before yesterday, the NATO-Russia council had not met since 2019. NATO and Russia broke off practical cooperation in 2014 after Moscow occupied and annexed the Ukrainian region of Crimea.

Russia's diplomatic mission to the alliance was withdrawn in October last year after eight of its staff were expelled on allegations of espionage. But the former ambassador - now a deputy foreign minister - Alexander Grushko was back to confront Stoltenberg and US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman, having earlier this week described the meeting as a "moment of truth". — AFP

Kazakh leader vows to rebuild city hit by clashes

ALMATY: President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev visited Almaty yesterday for the first time since clashes there left dozens dead, vowing to repair damage to oil-rich Kazakhstan's largest city and financial hub. "The task now is to rebuild the city in the shortest possible time (...) I have no doubt the city will be restored," he told a government meeting, according to a statement on the presidential website.

The visit comes on the eve of the start of the announced withdrawal of a Russia-led military contingent of more than 2,000 troops that were sent to help restore order after peaceful protests gave way to violence and looting. "Tomorrow begins the organized withdrawal of the peace-keeping contingent" from the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the alliance led by Moscow, confirmed Tokayev.

Almaty showed further signs of a return to normal life yesterday with many more people out on the streets than last week and most restaurants and shops open. AFP correspondents saw helicopters flying overhead as Tokayev met officials in the city where municipal services were cleaning up broken glass from shop windows smashed by looters.

Tokayev said Russian and allied forces "played a very important role in terms of stabilizing the situation in the country". "Without a doubt, it was of great psychological importance in repelling the aggression of terrorists and bandits. The mission can be considered very successful," he added. Tokayev also spoke with relatives of law enforcement personnel killed in the riots and visited injured people in hospital, the presidential website said. Almaty airport, closed since last week after being ransacked, is due to resume service today for national and international flights, according to the Kazakhstan Civil Aviation Committee. The scale of non-military casualties is not yet clear but hundreds of people were injured and police said they arrested more than 10,000 people. — AFP

International

Mali travelers stranded as West African sanctions bite

Relations between Mali and its neighbors have steadily deteriorated

BAMAKO: A bus station in Mali's capital stands unusually quiet, with foreign passengers left in limbo after West African countries closed their borders with the military-ruled nation. Africa Tours Trans is one of the main bus firms in the impoverished Sahel state, offering connections to its regional cities as well as to neighboring countries. But late Tuesday morning only one bus arrived at its station in Bamako, coming from the central Malian city of Sevare.

Dozens of would-be passengers were hanging around next to their luggage, left in limbo by recent border closures. On Sunday, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) agreed to shutter borders with Mali and impose a trade embargo over delayed elections. The move came after Mali's army-dominated government last month proposed staying in power for up to five years before restoring democracy - despite international demands that it respect a promise to hold elections on February 27.

Relations between Mali and its neighbors have steadily deteriorated since Colonel Assimi Goita took power in a military coup in Aug 2020. The sanctions are already affecting travelers in Mali, a vast landlocked nation of 19 million people that borders seven other states. The country's location makes it a key transport hub for the region, with Bamako a key stop along the land route linking countries such as Senegal to states further east, such as Nigeria.

'Shocked'

Jennifer Edong, a Nigerian in her 30s who works in fashion, was among the passengers stranded at the Africa Tours Trans station in Bamako. She had

been travelling to The Gambia for work, and had arrived in Mali on Friday expecting her next connection to depart on Tuesday - only to turn up at the station and find the connection cancelled. "We are stuck here, I cannot do anything," she said, adding that she didn't have a local SIM card and disliked Malian cuisine.

Only the routes to Mauritania and Algeria - which are not ECOWAS members - and Guinea remain open. Guinea is a member of the regional bloc, but is also governed by a military junta and has decided to leave its border with Mali open. Peter Adeyemo, 48, another Nigerian who was en route to his home in The Gambia, was sleeping on a

“ We are stuck here, I cannot do anything ”

bench nearby. He opened his eyes to ask when the borders were due to open, but no one was able to answer. "I was shocked," Adeyemo told AFP of the cancelled routes, explaining that being forced to camp at the bus station meant he could not bathe, among other problems.

It is not clear when the sanctions will be lifted, nor how Mali will respond to them. Mali's interim government has pledged to "develop a response plan to safeguard our sovereignty and preserve the



BAMAKO: Travelers sit on benches at a bus station whilst waiting for cross border transport to resume on Tuesday. — AFP

integrity of our national territory", but has not offered any details.

'We'll deal with it'

For Malian travel firms, the border closures will also compound commercial problems posed by the Covid-19 pandemic, which has already made travel across the region more difficult. Yaya Zakaria Toure, a representative of Africa Tours Trans, said the sanctions would "make the problem even worse". All international connections scheduled this week have

been cancelled, he said. "But we'll deal with it because we have no other choice. We follow the government".

Several transport industry officials told AFP that many buses are still running, but they are now simply dropping passengers off at the border. Travelers must then cross the border on foot, baggage in hand, before catching a bus on the other side. "That's how we do it at the border with Ivory Coast, which has been closed for two years because of coronavirus," said one bus driver, who declined to be named. — AFP

France, US, Algeria pile pressure on sanctions-hit Mali

BAMAKO: Pressure on Mali's junta increased Tuesday as France and the United States underlined their support for the West African bloc ECOWAS, which has slapped sanctions on the country over delayed elections following two coups. In a sharp escalation after months of diplomatic tensions, leaders from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) on Sunday agreed to shutter borders with the Sahel state and impose a trade embargo.

The move came after Mali's interim government last month proposed staying in power for up to five years before staging elections - despite international demands that it respect a promise to hold elections on Feb 27. As well as shutting borders and imposing a trade embargo, ECOWAS also agreed to halt financial aid to Mali and freeze its assets at the Central Bank of West African States.

Mali's junta has condemned the measures, and urged Malians to stage nationwide demonstrations against them tomorrow. But France, Mali's former colonial power which also holds the European Union's rotating presidency, backed the sanctions. "We are in complete solidarity with the region and with this very courageous and clear stance" by ECOWAS, French President Emmanuel Macron told reporters on Tuesday. He added that the EU would seek to strengthen sanctions on the junta.

Separately, French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian accused mercenaries from the Russian Wagner group of "supporting" the junta under the guise of fighting a jihadist insurgency. "What is happening in Mali is a headlong rush by the... junta which, in defiance of its commitments, hopes to hijack power for years and deprive the Malian people of their democratic choices," he added.

Washington also supported the "strong actions" by ECOWAS and urged the Mali regime to honor its pledge to return to democracy, said the US ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield. "A five-year transition is not in their interest and extends the pain of the people," she told a Security Council meeting. The presidency of Algeria, which shares a long border with Mali, also called on the junta to negotiate with ECOWAS and "reach a plan to end the crisis, taking into account international demands and the legitimate demands of the Malian people".

So far, Mali's junta has remained defiant. The country's strongman Colonel Assimi Goita, in an address late Monday, called the sanctions "illegitimate, illegal and inhumane", although he added that he remains open to dialogue with Mali's West African neighbours.

The latest political crisis caps a period of steadily deteriorating relations between Mali and its neighbors and partners, which began after Goita led a coup in August 2020 that toppled president Ibrahim Boubacar Keita. Under threat of sanctions following that putsch, Goita had promised to hold presidential and legislative elections, and to restore civilian rule by Feb 2022. But the strongman staged a de facto second coup in May 2021, forcing out an interim civilian government and disrupting the timetable to restore democracy. Goita also declared himself interim president. Then in December, his government proposed staying in power for up to an additional five years. — AFP

A year on from Argentine abortion law, change is slow

BUENOS AIRES: A year ago Argentina joined the limited ranks of Latin American countries to have legalized abortion, but while that gave hope to millions of women, changing mentalities, practices and infrastructure has proved more difficult. "In small villages, you go for an ultrasound in the morning and in the afternoon the baker congratulates you on your pregnancy," Monik Rodriguez, 33, told AFP.

Rodriguez, who has three children, runs a service accompanying women who want to have an abortion in Salta, a conservative Catholic province in the South American country. Away from the big city of Buenos Aires, where women erupted in celebration when the law was approved, many in more remote and conservative areas of Argentina face the same stigma as before. "There are still things that need to come out of hiding," said Rodriguez, who can take up to 125 telephone calls a month as part of the project launched by the Women's Strength civil association. "The most important thing is to listen. It's about trying to overcome the hurdles, accompanying them through the health system so they don't get lost in the bureaucratic labyrinth."

Rodriguez takes calls from all sorts: Teenagers and first-time mothers to women with large families and even those that are pre-menopausal. "On this line, abortion is not recommended but neither is motherhood romanticized," said Rodriguez, who

Owners of problem flats welcome UK cladding move

LONDON: Owners of flats built with combustible cladding have welcomed a UK government move to make developers contribute more to the cost of its removal following the deadly 2017 Grenfell Tower fire but say much more is needed. "I would say it's a step in the right direction, but it's certainly not a solution," said Lucy Brown, 47, a financial headhunter who lives on the top two floors of an apartment block in London's Docklands.

Housing Secretary Michael Gove on Monday said he wants the construction industry to stump up around £4 billion (\$5.4 billion) to cover the expense of removing the dangerous cladding from apartment buildings between 11 and 18 meters tall. The move marked a U-turn on heavily criticized plans announced early last year which would have required flat owners with unsafe material on their properties to

French police arrest man over 2012 Alps killing of UK family

GRENOBLE, France: French police yesterday detained a man over the 2012 killing of a British family of Iraqi origin in a remote Alpine region, prosecutors said, a rare development in one of France's most notorious unsolved cold cases. The arrest will allow investigators to carry out searches and check the individual's movements around the time of the killing of three members of the Al-Hilli family and a passing cyclist on September 5, 2012, prosecutors in Annecy said.

The individual was detained by police from the



BUENOS AIRES: This file photo taken on Dec 10, 2020 shows an aerial view of demonstrators displaying green headscarves outside the Argentine Congress as legislators debate a bill to legalize abortion. — AFP

underwent a secret abortion a decade ago when already mother to one child.

"I was late and had an abortion. It went badly and I had to go to hospital. The tests showed I hadn't been pregnant. It was the secrecy that created worry. Along with misinformation, that is what puts us at risk." The government estimates that 3,000 women died between 1983 and 2020 in clandestine abortions, of which there were up to 500,000 a year.

Anti-abortion pressure

For a century, abortion was only legal in cases of rape or if the mother's life was at risk. Legalization has not led to a sudden spate of abortions, particu-

access a low-interest loan scheme to help pay for the removal costs.

Brown, whose apartment block is around 18 m high, says she still has no idea when the cladding around her flat will be removed, or how much she will be charged. "This makes it very difficult to sell," said mother-of-three Brown, who is part of the End Our Cladding Scandal (EOCS) campaign. "Because anybody looking to buy the flats will have to take on what's essentially an uncapped charge to remediate the buildings and make them safe."

Huge costs

Gove's new proposals came after more than four years of inaction and wrangling with the property industry following the June 2017 blaze in west London that killed 72. An official report blamed highly combustible cladding fixed to the 24-storey block as the "principal reason" the fire spread. A public inquiry is still going on. Brown says the cost of making a flat safe - wrapping the building in plastic sheets and keeping all the windows closed for up to a year - can be £200,000. "And also typically when the cladding comes off, is when they find out the full extent of the defects, and what else needs to be remedied," said

Alpine town of Chambéry. BFM TV said he was a man who had already been interviewed by police as a witness in the case but never detained. Saad Al-Hilli, a 50-year-old Iraqi-born British tourist in France, was gunned down along with his 47-year-old wife Iqbal and her 74-year-old mother in a woodland car park close to the village of Chevaline in the hills above Lake Annecy.

Each was shot several times in their British-registered BMW estate car and more than two dozen spent bullet casings were found near the vehicle. The couple's two daughters, aged seven and four at the time, survived the attack, but the older girl was shot and badly beaten. A 45-year-old French cyclist, Sylvain Mollier, was also killed after apparently stumbling upon the scene. Further details will only be made public once the man's detention period expires, the prosecutors said.

Repeated false leads

Almost a decade after the killings, French and British police have so far failed to make any real progress in the case despite a massive effort involving officers on both sides of the Channel. During the course of the investigation, several individuals have been detained but without ever being charged. In 2014, French authorities said that a biker long wanted in connection with the murders had been identified but had no link to the killings.

After a review, authorities also no longer believe former soldier Nordahl Lelandais, who has already confessed to the killing of a hitchhiking soldier and an eight-year-old schoolgirl, could be linked to the killings. Meanwhile, Saad Al-Hilli's brother Zaid Al-Hilli, who was arrested in Britain in June 2013 on suspicion of conspiracy to commit murder, was told in early 2014 by British police there was not enough evidence to charge him. — AFP



LONDON: Britain's main opposition Labour Party shadow Housing Secretary Lisa Mandy speaks during a debate on cladding removal costs in the House of Commons on Jan 10, 2022. — AFP

Brown. She felt let down by a "systematic failure" and concerned about her family's safety. "We had to have very difficult discussions with our three daughters, we had to explain to them all of the measures that they needed to do in the event of a fire because having cladding on the building means that you've got minutes before it spreads everywhere," she said. — AFP

International

Kim urges more 'military muscle' after hypersonic missile test

Pyongyang claims it accurately hit target some 1,000 km away

SEOUL: Kim Jong Un personally oversaw the successful test of a hypersonic missile, state media said yesterday, and urged North Korea to press ahead with building more "strategic military muscle" despite international sanctions over its nuclear weapons program. Pictures in state media showed Kim using binoculars to observe the second missile launch by the nuclear-armed nation in less than a week.

Hypersonic missiles are listed among the "top priority" tasks for strategic weapons development in North Korea's five-year plan. After the launch, Kim said North Korea must "further accelerate the efforts to steadily build up the country's strategic military muscle both in quality and quantity and further modernize the army", according to KCNA.

The Tuesday test, which came as the UN Security Council met in New York to discuss Pyongyang's weapons program, sparked swift condemnation, with the US State Department branding it a "threat... to the international community". It was the third reported North Korean test of a hypersonic gliding missile. The first, which took place four months ago, was followed by one last week.

North Korea's state news agency KCNA said the most recent test demonstrated "the superior maneuverability of the hypersonic glide vehicle". It also claimed it accurately hit a target some 1,000 km away. South Korea's military, which had cast doubt on Pyongyang's initial claims, said the missile

launched on Tuesday had reached hypersonic speeds and showed clear signs of "progress" from last week's test.

The missile flew 700 km at an altitude of about 60 km at Mach 10 speed, Seoul's Joint Chiefs of Staff said. Hypersonic missiles travel at speeds of at least Mach 5 - five times the speed of sound - and can maneuver mid-flight, making them harder to track and intercept. "Everything about this test is a reminder that North Korea is all-in on a new military modernization campaign," Ankit Panda of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace said on Twitter yesterday.

"Kim's working his way down his 8th Party Congress wish list and is once again personally guiding tests," Panda said, referring to a recent meeting of high-level North Korean officials. Russia, the United States and China have all reported successfully testing hypersonic glide missiles. Russia is generally seen as the world leader in the technology. Leif-Eric Easley, a professor at Ewha University in Seoul, said the weapon was not ready for deployment. "Nonetheless, Pyongyang's ability to threaten its neighbors continues to grow," he said.

The fact that Kim attended the missile test indicates that North Korea is satisfied with the level of progress, said Lim Eul-chul, a professor of North Korean studies at Kyungnam University in Seoul. "Since ... the test was the final verification, addition-

demanded a policy document signed by the chiefs of the three armed forces of the country.

The military holds vast sway over many aspects of commercial, cultural and political life. Last year a United Nations report said it owned "the largest conglomerate of business entities in Pakistan", as well as being the country's biggest urban real estate developer and manager, with wide-ranging involvement in public construction projects.

Tuesday's court ruling ordered the golf course to be sealed and handed over to the Capital Development Authority and Islamabad Wildlife Management Board. It said it should be demolished within four weeks unless it can be used for "an environmentally friendly activity". A popular restaurant in the Margalla hills - on land the army claimed it owned and leased out commercially - was given a similar fate.

Mazher Allahyar, general manager of the Monal Restaurant, said they were considering challenging the court ruling, which he said would lead to job losses for around 600 people. Pakistan has around 50 golf courses - many built on military land - but the sport is largely exclusive and played mostly by the wealthy or top brass of the armed forces.

hibiting any foreign political organizations from conducting activities in Hong Kong or local political organizations establishing ties with similar overseas bodies.

No opposition

China imposed its own security law after huge and sometimes violent democracy protests swept Hong Kong in 2019, saying it was needed to restore order and would only affect a "tiny minority". It has begun transforming Hong Kong into a mirror of the authoritarian mainland, criminalizing much dissent, setting new legal precedents and sparking sanctions by Western governments who argue it has trashed the city's freedoms and autonomy.

It also empowered China's mainland security apparatus to operate openly in the city, and allows the government to freeze the assets of any company or individual deemed to be a national security threat. Most of Hong Kong's best-known democracy activists are in jail, have quit politics or have fled overseas. The vast majority of national security charges revolve around people holding or vocalizing political views now deemed illegal.

In 2003, an attempt by Hong Kong's government to pass its own national security law sparked large protests and was eventually aborted - which is why Beijing imposed a law directly on the city in 2020. It is unlikely the city government will face much opposition in passing the new law. Under new "patriots only" political rules also imposed by Beijing, the city's legislature has been cleared of any opposition. All lawmakers are now vetted for political

reported in the central Chinese city of Zhengzhou since last week, as China battles to contain multiple local outbreaks of the Delta and Omicron variants. Parts of the city were abruptly placed under lockdown last Wednesday when a woman nicknamed Wang was having dinner at her blind date's house. "Just after I arrived in Zhengzhou, there was an outbreak and his community was put under lockdown and I could not leave," Wang told Shanghai-based outlet The Paper on Tuesday, adding that she went there for a week-long trip to meet potential suitors.

"I'm getting old now, my family introduced me to ten matches... The fifth date wanted to show off his cooking



This picture taken on Tuesday and released yesterday shows North Korean leader Kim Jong Un speaking with military officials during an observation of a hypersonic missile test at an undisclosed location in North Korea. —AFP

al tests of hypersonic missiles, at least, are not expected for a while," Lim said.

The tests come as North Korea has refused to respond to US appeals for talks. At a key meeting last month of North Korea's ruling party, Kim vowed to continue building up the country's defense capabilities, without mentioning the

United States. Dialogue between Washington and Pyongyang remains stalled, and the country is under multiple sets of international sanctions over its nuclear and ballistic missile programs. The impoverished nation has also been under a rigid self-imposed coronavirus blockade that has hampered its economy. —AFP

Pakistan court shuts military golf course

ISLAMABAD: A golf club belonging to Pakistan's military was closed yesterday after a court ruled it encroached on national park land in the capital and breached environment regulations. In a rare ruling against the country's powerful armed forces, judge Athar Minallah said yesterday that the navy had "illegally" established Margalla Greens Golf Club, an 18-hole course adjacent to the country's top military university.

The course, which opened in 2010, also abuts the Margalla Hills National Park in a range of Himalayan foothills that partly ring Islamabad. Pakistan has been ruled by the military for roughly half its 74-year history, and court decisions against the powerful institution are almost unheard of. But only last year the Supreme Court questioned the use of military land for commercial projects and

HK to create more national security crimes

HONG KONG: Hong Kong will create a host of new national security crimes, the city's leader said yesterday, as she presided over the first session of a new "patriots only" legislature scrubbed of political opposition. The legislation will add to a sweeping national security law imposed directly on Hong Kong by Beijing that has transformed the international finance hub and empowered authorities to carry out a widespread crackdown on dissent.

The current national security law defines four crimes - secession, subversion, terrorism and colluding with foreign forces - and offenders can face up to life in prison. But yesterday, Chief Executive Carrie Lam confirmed that her government would create new "local legislation" that meets Article 23 of Hong Kong's mini-constitution, which calls for the city to pass its own national security laws.

"Article 23 legislative work is part of Hong Kong's constitutional duty and cannot be further delayed," Lam told lawmakers, adding that the government aimed to publish a draft by June. Lam did not outline what the new crimes would be. But the specific offences Article 23 lists are treason, secession, sedition, subversion and theft of state secrets. It also includes pro-

Woman stuck in blind date's house after lockdown

BEIJING: Imagine being on a first date you couldn't end? That's what happened to a woman in China whose video blogs about going into a citywide lockdown during a blind date have gone viral. Over 100 virus cases have been



ISLAMABAD: Employees gather outside the sealed hill-top Monal Restaurant following a court order at the Margalla Hills National Park yesterday. —AFP

Tuesday's ruling was greeted with glee by some activists on social media. The judge was hitting the military where it "matters most to them", wrote one, followed by emojis of a money bag and a pile of dollars. The Margalla Hills National Park is home to hundreds of different bird species as well as dozens of types of mammals and reptiles. —AFP



HONG KONG: This overhead view shows Hong Kong's Chief Executive Carrie Lam speaking to Legislative Council (LegCo) members during the first session of a new "patriots only" legislature yesterday. —AFP

loyalty before standing, and only 20 seats are directly elected. Just one of the 90 vetted legislators who were selected in polls last month describes himself as "non-establishment".

Prevent and punish

A small committee of Beijing loyalists will choose Hong Kong's next leader in March, and Lam has not yet said whether she will stand for a second term. Her first term ends in June. Yesterday, Lam said it would be difficult for the new national security bill to be completed by the end of

her first term, meaning the legislation will probably fall to her successor.

Addressing a chamber whose walls now bear China's red-and-gold national emblem - placed above the city's official seal - Lam praised Beijing's security law. "Its function now is to act as an anchor to guarantee stability, to let people know there are consequences," she told lawmakers, adding the new legislation would be similarly "well written". "The law requires us to prevent, curb and punish crimes. If prevention is done well, we can punish less." —AFP

News in brief

16 burnt to death in S Africa crash

JOHANNESBURG: Sixteen people were burnt to death on Tuesday when a minibus taxi and an SUV collided on a highway in South Africa's northeastern Limpopo province, a local official said. The SUV driver lost control after a tyre burst and collided head-on with a 22-seater Mercedes-Benz bus, provincial transport ministry spokesman Mike Maringa told AFP yesterday. "The bus burst into flames and 16 occupants trapped inside were burnt alive," he said. The SUV driver was killed on impact, he said. Eight other people survived with injuries. —AFP

Heavy rains kill 10 in Brazil

RAPOSOS, Brazil: Torrential rain in the Brazilian state of Minas Gerais killed 10 people in two days, according to an official report Tuesday, which warned of more intense downpours in the region. The victims, among them an 11-year-old girl, died on Sunday and Monday due to rains, flooding, and landslides, according to the State Coordinator of Civil Defense. Since the rains began at the beginning of October, 19 people have died in the southeastern Brazilian state. Ten more were killed Saturday when a large rock fragment broke free of a ravine and plunged onto four tourist boats in Furnas Lake. —AFP

Indonesia launches booster drive

JAKARTA: Indonesia opened its coronavirus booster campaign to the public yesterday as the country records rising infections driven by the Omicron variant. The free shots will be given to the elderly and at-risk residents as a priority, but will be available to everyone who received their second dose six months prior, President Joko Widodo said on Tuesday after announcing the decision. The boosters will be administered as half doses - which a local study confirmed was sufficient protection against the virus - due to supply shortages, said health minister Budi Gunadi Sadikin. —AFP

Third COVID infection for Bolivian VP

LA PAZ: Bolivia's vice president David Choquehuanca, who touts indigenous treatments for COVID-19, has contracted the virus for a third time, the government said Tuesday, with six government ministers also testing positive. All are self-isolating and working from home, with no major symptoms, the president's office said in a statement. All had been vaccinated against the coronavirus, although Choquehuanca - a member of the Aymara indigenous group - has had only one jab. Last month, he revealed he had contracted COVID-19 twice, and recovered after taking what he called traditional medicine. —AFP

which I think is great." Wang did not disclose her age or the identity of the man in the videos.

Related hashtags have racked up over six million views on the Twitter-like social media site Weibo by yesterday. However, Wang said the recent surge in online attention prompted her to remove the videos. "Friends have been calling him and I think this has definitely affected his life, so I have taken them down for now," she said in a video posted Tuesday that was widely republished in Chinese local media. "Thanks everyone for your attention... I hope the outbreak ends soon and that my single sisters also find a relationship soon." —AFP

Business

THURSDAY, JANUARY 13, 2022

London's City finance reigns in Europe despite Brexit fallout

The City has yet to strike a post-Brexit deal with Brussels on equivalence

LONDON: One year after Britain's formal exit from the European Union, London's powerful City financial sector still reigns on the continent despite losing key business and bankers to rival hubs.

"London has spent hundreds of years as a global financial center. Brexit will not change that, certainly not anytime soon," said Lee Wild, head of equity strategy at Interactive Investor. The City, whose skyscraper offices are largely deserted by COVID restrictions, has yet to strike a post-Brexit deal with Brussels on equivalence, which would allow London-based firms to fully operate in Europe.

London has over the past year lost out to rivals on equity trading, struggling to recover ground after a hammering triggered immediately after Britain's EU exit. Trading on London's stock market slumped by about 40 percent at the start of 2021, with London prevented from offering EU-listed shares to clients outside the United Kingdom.

Amsterdam has benefitted the most, overtaking London to become Europe's biggest hub in terms of equity trading volumes for much of the past year, according to Cboe Global Markets.

London remains the world's second biggest financial center behind New York when various factors are taken into account including infrastructure, reputation and business environment, according to the Global Financial Centers Index 2021. The City also remains a dominant financial center on a global scale in several markets, including foreign exchange and derivatives. "Leaving the EU brings challenges and there are threats from Paris, Brussels, Frankfurt and Amsterdam," Wild told AFP.

"But the likelihood that European rivals will wrest the crown of Europe's primary finance hub from the UK is slim." The City is able to maintain a strong standing in the world of finance also thanks

to a large network of support services.

"London still has a huge amount in its favor," said Russ Mould, investment director at AJ Bell.

He said the City offered "an ecosystem of banks, advisers, lawyers, fund managers and hedge funds... (providing) appropriately-priced capital to companies who need it so they can invest, innovate, grow and create jobs".

No staff exodus

Nevertheless in the wake of Brexit, about 44 percent of UK-based financial services firms have moved or plan to move operations or staff to the European Union, according to financial group EY. Asset transfers totaled £1.3 billion (\$1.8 billion, 1.6 billion euros) at the end of last year, it added.

Dublin and Luxembourg are home to the biggest amount of office moves, while Paris has won the most staff switches. French President Emmanuel Macron in June inaugurated the Paris premises for several hundred JP Morgan Chase traders switching from London.

The British capital has so far lost only about 7,400 financial roles, according to EY.

That is seen as a drop in the ocean, with the UK financial sector employing more than one million people, 400,000 of which are based in London. Recruitment consultants said that while the pandemic had contributed to limiting the movement, a future exodus of staff from London to the European Union remained unlikely. "London continues to be an attractive destination for business investment and finance professionals alike," said Hakan Enver, managing director at Morgan McKinley.

"To date we are yet to see an exodus due to Brexit, and it's now unlikely that will ever happen," he told AFP. London's financial attractiveness was



LONDON: London's powerful City financial sector still reigns on the continent despite losing key business and bankers to rival hubs.

last year highlighted by a record number of companies making their stock market debut.

There were 122 initial public offerings—the highest amount since 2007 — for a total market capitalization of £16.8 billion. There was, however, in 2021 also a record IPO showing by the Euronext, whose exchanges include the Paris and Amsterdam stock

markets and others across Europe.

"The real risk (for London) is not a 'big bang' but a slow deflation as activity moves to other centers, most probably in the US or Asia, and this only if the UK fails to respond to competitive pressures from other global financial centers," said Jack Neill-Hall of financial sector lobby group TheCityUK. —AFP

Powell pledges to fight inflation in second term

WASHINGTON: The pressures pushing prices to multi-decade highs are likely to last through the middle of the year, and the US central bank is ready to respond to this risk, but policymakers are committed to extending the economic expansion to promote employment, Federal Reserve chief Jerome Powell said Tuesday.

The world's largest economy is on a strong footing, and with inflation rising and employment recovering. "The economy no longer needs or wants the very highly accommodative policy" provided by the Fed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Powell told lawmakers, underlining the likelihood interest rate increases are coming.

Surging prices for cars, housing and food have become a political liability for Democratic President Joe Biden, who in November tapped Powell, a Republican, to continue in his role as Fed chief for another four years, and also named Fed governor Lael Brainard, a fellow Democrat, to serve as Powell's vice chair. In the nomination hearing before the Senate Banking Committee, Powell again vowed that the Fed will do all it can to ensure high inflation does not become entrenched. Economists are projecting that government data due out Wednesday will show annual consumer price inflation hitting seven percent in December, its highest level in 40 years, and the issue dominated the questions from senators. Inflation is "very near the top of the list" of risks to the eco-

nomical outlook, Powell said, acknowledging the current rate is now "very far above target."

But the Fed chief attributed most of the price surge to a "mismatch" between supply and demand caused by global logistics snarls, although policymakers also are watching wage growth carefully. The central bank expects a "return to normal supply conditions" in the coming months, but "if we see inflation persisting at high levels longer than expected... we will use our tools to get inflation back."

Fostering full employment

The Fed is in the process of winding down its bond buying stimulus program, which will end in March, and is expected to raise the benchmark lending rate off zero soon after. While Powell stressed that policymakers have not decided on the timing or any rate increases, some economists and even some Fed officials say that first move could come in March. "It's time to move away from emergency pandemic settings," Powell said. "The labor market is recovering incredibly rapidly," he added, with the jobless rate falling "pretty close to half-century lows" at 3.9 percent in December. Still, removing the stimulus measures "should not have negative effects" on employment, Powell said.

In fact, getting prices to return to around the Fed's two percent target is key to ensuring the US economy continues to expand, and brings more people into the labor force, he said. "High inflation is a severe threat to the achievement of maximum employment and to achieving a long expansion that can give us that." Businesses nationwide have complained that they struggle to fill open positions, and record numbers of workers have left their jobs while the share of adults in the labor force has barely budged in recent months, even as wages have risen.

India's Infosys hikes growth forecast after strong quarter

MUMBAI: India's Infosys raised its full-year revenue guidance yesterday, with the software giant forecasting robust demand for digital services after another strong quarter. The country's second-largest IT firm exceeded analyst expectations with revenues of 318.67 billion rupees (\$4.31 billion) in the three months to December 31, up 23 percent from last year.

Net profit at the Bangalore-headquartered company rose nearly 12 percent to 58.09 billion rupees.

"Our year-on-year growth was the fastest we've had in 11 years," chief executive and managing director Salil Parekh told a media briefing. "The growth was broad-based across industries, service lines and geographies, driven by our differentiated digital and cloud capabilities."

Fact-checkers urge YouTube to fight disinformation

WASHINGTON: More than 80 fact-checking organizations yesterday urged online video platform YouTube to better combat disinformation, offering to help debunk false statements. "Every day, we see that YouTube is one of the major conduits of online disinformation and mis-

information worldwide," said the groups spanning the globe, from Politifact and the Washington Post in the United States to the Kenya-based Africa Check.

Videos containing false information had gone "under the radar of YouTube's policies, especially in non-English speaking countries," they said in an open letter to YouTube chief Susan Wojcicki. "We urge you to take effective action against disinformation and misinformation... and to do so with the world's independent, non-partisan fact-checking organizations," they added.

"Our experience as fact-checkers together with academic evidence tells us that surfacing fact-checked information is more effective than deleting content." It



WASHINGTON: Federal Reserve Board Chairman Jerome Powell speaks during his re-nominations hearing of the Senate Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs Committee on Capitol Hill on Tuesday. —AFP

Powell acknowledged that child care is one factor keeping the participation rate down, as the industry also has struggled to find workers. The central bank is juggling competing forces amid the global pandemic, with price spikes that took policymakers by surprise coupled with workers reluctant or unable to return to their jobs. Some senators and observers argue the Fed has waited too long to fight back against inflation and even the three rate hikes many predict the central bank will approve this year will not be enough. The Fed's easy money policies were a boon to financial markets during the pandemic, but the central bank's recent signals that they will roll them back has spooked investors, sending share prices tumbling at times, especially in the tech sector. —AFP



MUMBAI: Infosys chief executive and managing director Salil Parekh briefs the media yesterday.

Over 60 percent of its revenue comes from North American markets. Shares in the company closed more than one percent higher in Mumbai ahead of the earnings announcement. —AFP

also urged the platform to make sure its recommendation algorithm did not actively promote disinformation to its users.

YouTube spokesperson Elena Hernandez defended the platform, saying that fact checking was a "crucial tool", but just "one piece of a much larger puzzle to address the spread of misinformation".

"Over the years, we've invested heavily in policies and products in all countries... to connect people to authoritative content, reduce the spread of borderline misinformation, and remove violative videos," she added. She said YouTube had seen "important progress". —AFP



NEW YORK: In this file photo, the price of gasoline is displayed at a gas station in New York. —AFP

US consumer prices rose 7% in 2021

WASHINGTON: US consumer prices in 2021 rose at the fastest pace in four decades, the government announced yesterday, an inflation wave that has troubled President Joe Biden as the economy recovers from the pandemic. The consumer price index (CPI) in the 12 months to December jumped seven percent, the highest since June 1982, the Labor Department said, with housing, autos and energy among the biggest contributors.

However, month-on-month CPI growth slowed to 0.5 percent from November, indicating the price surge may be nearing a peak. The world's largest economy saw a record price increase last year as rising demand and a return to normalcy collided with labor shortages and global supply chain snarls.

While the spike was initially confined to items like used cars and energy, the latest data confirms inflation spread in December beyond those sectors and into consumer staples. Prices for shelter, including rental properties, were one of the main contributors to the increase, the Labor Department said, rising 4.1 percent in the year, while food rose 6.3 percent.

However, in both cases the monthly increase in the final month of the year was less than in November. Used car prices jumped 37.3 percent in 2021, the report said, and in December prices accelerated again, rising 3.5 percent from the month prior. With volatile food and energy prices stripped out, "core" CPI was up 5.5 percent for 2021 — the highest since February 1991, the report said. Core CPI rose 0.6 percent for the month, faster than analysts anticipated and above its rate of growth in November. —AFP

Business

China inflation eases in December, providing opportunity for rate cuts

Figures give policymakers room to unveil new economic measures

BEIJING: Inflation in China eased in December thanks to falling food and commodity costs, with analysts saying yesterday figures give policymakers room to unveil measures to kickstart the stuttering economy including interest rate cuts. Like most other countries, China has seen prices surge for much of the past year owing to pick-up in the cost of energy, putting pressure on an economy also being battered by a crisis in the key, growth-driving property sector.

Factory price inflation has been particularly affected, hitting a 26-year high in October and raising concerns that those rises will filter through to the global economy owing to China's crucial role as an exporter. But yesterday, figures showed producer prices rose a less-than-expected 10.3 percent on-year last month, extending a slowdown seen in November. The consumer price index (CPI), a key gauge of retail inflation, came in at 1.5 percent—down from 2.3 percent in November and also short of forecasts. "The probability of a rate cut in the first quarter is high, and the closest window is this month," Bruce Pang, at China Renaissance Securities Hong Kong, said. CPI "will not be a concern in 2022" and the core measure, which strips out volatile food and energy costs, will stay muted below 1.5 percent, he added.

And Sheana Yue of Capital Economics said the current trends suggest inflation concerns are not likely to hold back the central bank from "further loosening measures including policy rate cuts".

Some commentators say the People's Bank of China could cut borrowing costs as soon as next week, marking the first since April 2020. Surging inflation has caused a headache for policymakers as they tried to walk a fine line between trying to keep prices from running out of control while also trying to kick start an economy struggling with a troubled property market and fresh lockdowns caused by COVID. The consumer inflation slowdown came on the back of easing vegetable prices, said National



SHENYANG, China: Residents visit a market in Shenyang in China's northeastern Liaoning province yesterday. — AFP

Bureau of Statistics senior statistician Dong Lijuan, adding that the accelerated slaughter of live pigs helped pork costs to moderate.

According to the NBS, the cost of the staple meat dropped 36.7 percent on-year. Meanwhile, producer prices were helped as "there were outright declines in the price of most upstream industrial goods such as coal and metals thanks to the fall in global commodity prices", Yue at Capital Economics added.

While worsening virus outbreaks could disrupt supply chains again, Yue said, and "with coal supply improving and property construction slowing, we see further downside to the price of industrial metals and energy".

While a narrowing gap between consumer inflation and factory gate costs reduces a squeeze on profit margins, HSBC senior economist Jing Liu added that "more easing is needed, as the consistently low core CPI points to growth pressure". —AFP

Stocks, dollar edge high before key US inflation data

WASHINGTON: Stock markets and the dollar advanced yesterday with all eyes on the latest US inflation reading as countries battle high prices. US Federal Reserve chief Jerome Powell on Tuesday said he was determined to rein in runaway inflation, a day ahead of an official update on cost pressures in the world's biggest economy.

Meanwhile data out of China yesterday showed the country's inflation had eased, handing policymakers room for measures to kick start its stuttering economy including interest rate cuts, according to analysts. "As optimism rises over the economy, inflation remains a key concern and today we could see a new multi-decade high for US consumer prices," noted Fawad Razaqada, analyst at ThinkMarkets.

"If CPI comes in hotter than anticipated this could even derail the two-day Nasdaq rally as it would cement (US) rate hike expectations further." But he added that weaker-than-expected US inflation data should boost equities further, with European and Asian stocks enjoying solid gains yesterday.

Powell on Tuesday said that inflation was "very near the top of the list" of risks to the economic outlook. Prices are currently rising at their fastest pace in decades owing to a number of pressures including surging wage growth, supply chain snarls and high energy costs.

The Fed expects a "return to normal supply conditions" in the coming months, Powell said, but "if we see inflation persisting at high levels longer than expected... we will use our tools to get inflation back".

"Jerome Powell telling the congressional hearing that the US economy will be able to withstand the combination of Omicron and the Fed tightening was music to Wall Street's ears," said Matt Simpson of StoneX Financial. "And with markets getting too used to the idea of inflation being rampant, perhaps expectations (for much higher inflation) are ahead of themselves."

Traders have been worried by the prospect of an end to the ultra-loose policies, which have helped power a two-year market rally and support the pan-

demic-hit economy. But Powell managed to soothe some of those fears Tuesday during his Senate reconfirmation hearing.

He said the economy was on a strong footing, and with inflation rising and employment recovering, "the economy no longer needs or wants the very highly accommodative policy".

Inflation was "very near the top of the list" of risks to the economic outlook, he said, adding that the current rate is "very far above target". Prices are currently rising at their fastest pace in four decades owing to a number of pressures including surging wage growth, supply chain snarls and high energy costs. The Fed expects a "return to normal supply conditions" in the coming months, Powell said, but "if we see inflation persisting at high levels longer than expected... we will use our tools to get inflation back".

The comments were taken by traders to be less hardline than feared, suggesting recent fears about a swift removal of easy-money measures may have been overdone. Michael Hewson of CMC Markets said Powell appeared "mindful of the dangers of going too quickly in draining liquidity, although he was clear to stress that the Fed was also alive to the risks of acting too slowly, in curbing inflation risks".

Music to the ears

And Matt Simpson, of StoneX Financial, added: "Jerome Powell telling the congressional hearing that the US economy will be able to withstand the combination of Omicron and the Fed tightening was music to Wall Street's ears. "And with markets getting too used to the idea of inflation being rampant, perhaps expectations (for much higher inflation) are ahead of themselves."

Simpson added that if US inflation figures came in below forecasts later Wednesday, that "could be enough to shake out some pre-emptive doom-mongers and further support equities, as part of the reason they sold off was the upward revision to Fed hikes, based upon inflationary fears".

Wall Street cheered, with Nasdaq climbing more than one percent, having taken a severe hit recently as tech firms are more susceptible to higher borrowing rates. The gains extended into Asia, with Hong Kong up 2.8 percent, thanks to a boost in tech firms, and Tokyo up a little shy of two percent.

Seoul and Manila were also up more than one percent, while Shanghai, Sydney, Taipei, Mumbai and Bangkok were up. London, Paris and Frankfurt were all well up at the open. — AFP



WASHINGTON: Stock markets and the dollar advanced yesterday

Cathay Pacific: Crews spent 73,000 nights in quarantine in 2021

HONG KONG: Cathay Pacific has said its crews spent a combined total of 73,000 nights in quarantine last year as the airline struggles to keep flying through Hong Kong's strict zero-COVID controls. The city government says the carrier faces possible legal action over an outbreak of the Omicron variant of the coronavirus that began with two aircrew breaking home quarantine rules and has forced a tightening of social distancing measures.

An ongoing government investigation is the latest setback for Cathay Pacific, which has been battered by the pandemic and seen rising anger from pilots and crew over Hong Kong's virus controls. Chairman Patrick Healy sent a video message to all staff on Tuesday thanking them for the sacrifices they have made during measures that often leave them separated from families for weeks.

"What you have been through during the past two years is quite simply unparalleled," he said.

"Collectively our crew spent over 62,000 nights in quarantine hotels in 2021, in addition over 1,000 of you have spent more than 11,000 nights in Penny's Bay," he added, referring to Hong Kong's government quarantine camp. Healy argued that a "tiny minority" of rule-breakers should not overshadow Cathay Pacific's contributions to Hong Kong and that he believed the airline's crew arrangements were in line with government policy.

Following China's lead, Hong Kong maintains a strict zero-COVID strategy that has kept cases low but largely cut the international finance hub off from both the mainland and the rest of the world for the last two years. Most arrivals currently face at least 21 days in quarantine, among the longest isolation periods in the world.

Pilots and aircrew face less strict rules but must still often spend time in either hotel or home quarantine when they return from trips overseas. Cathay Pacific has also been operating "closed-loop" routes where pilot and crew volunteer to spend weeks only shuttling between their planes and airport quarantine hotels. The figure of 73,000 nights in quarantine—the equivalent of 200 years-laid bare the extent of isolation for the airline's crews. Unlike other carriers, Cathay Pacific has no domestic market to fall back on and a recent tightening of quarantine rules for aircrews has pushed it to scale back cargo flights—the one part of the business that was making money. — AFP

Genting blames German state after shipbuilder's collapse

FRANKFURT: Asian tourism and casino group Genting accused a German state of failing to pay out money promised as part of a rescue plan for its now-insolvent shipbuilding subsidiary MV Werften.

Negotiators for Mecklenburg-West Pomerania "presented a mechanism that hid the political motivation", lawyers representing the group's Genting Hong Kong unit told a state court in Schwerin, Germany, a day after MV Werften filed for bankruptcy.

The company took Mecklenburg-West Pomerania to court in December for the payment of \$88 million (78 million euros). The money Genting HK claimed dates back to an agreement with the government in June to provide a bridging loan for the struggling dockyard operation on the Baltic coast. A ruling in the case is expected shortly.

According to Genting, the state linked the payment to conditions that were not in the original contract, including increasing Genting's own contribution to the rescue package from 30 million to 60 million euros. Lawyers representing Mecklenburg-West Pomerania rejected the suggestion the state had a political motivation, saying it was required under its budget law to closely examine the loans it made.

The state also said that the June agreement extended a credit line of up to 148 million euros, while the shipbuilder's funding gap had risen to 600 million euros.

The shipbuilder MV Werften, which employs around 2,000 people across three dockyards, filed for bankruptcy on Monday after failing to secure funding for the completion of the "Global One" cruise ship. Until recently the company was engaged in negotiations with stated and federal government to try and reach an agreement on a financial support package to finish the mega-liner, 80 percent built up to now.

Economy and Climate Minister Robert Habeck said on Monday that the government had "pulled out all the stops" to avoid MV Werften filing for bankruptcy. The region was looking at options to support the "continued operation" of the site and "the future of the employees", local economy minister Reinhard Meyer said in a statement on Monday. — AFP



COLOMBO: Sri Lankan President Gotabaya Rajapaksa meets with State Councilor and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi who was paying an official visit to Sri Lanka. — AFP

Sri Lanka rules out IMF bailout, seeks new China loan

COLOMBO: Sri Lanka ruled out an IMF bailout yesterday and said it plans to seek another loan from China to address an economic crisis that has led to food and fuel shortages. The island's tourism-dependent economy has been battered by the pandemic, with supermarkets rationing goods and rolling blackouts imposed by power utilities unable to fund oil imports.

International rating agencies have warned of a looming sovereign default on Sri Lanka's \$35 billion foreign debt as the treasury battles a crunch on foreign exchange reserves and a gaping budget deficit.

But central bank governor Ajith Nivard Cabraal rejected mounting calls from local and international economists to seek an International Monetary Fund bailout and debt restructure. "The IMF is not a magic wand," he told a news conference in Colombo. "At this point, the other alternatives are better than going to the IMF."

Cabraal added that talks with China over a new loan were at an "advanced stage", and a fresh agreement would service existing debt to Beijing. "They would assist us in making the repayments... the new loan coming from China is in order to cushion our debt repayments to China itself," he said.

Beijing is already the island's biggest bilateral lender, accounting for at least 10 percent of Sri Lanka's external debt. Cabraal's remarks come days after a visit from Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi who discussed a debt payment restructure with President Gotabaya Rajapaksa.

Sri Lanka has borrowed heavily from China for infrastructure in the past, some of which ended up as white elephants. Unable to repay a \$1.4 billion loan for a port construction in the south, Sri Lanka was forced to lease out the facility to a Chinese company for 99 years in 2017.

The United States and India have warned that the Hambantota port, located along vital east-west international shipping routes, could give China a military toehold in the Indian Ocean.

Cabraal did not give an indication of the size of the loan sought from China, but said talks were also underway with India for a \$1 billion credit line to fund a broad range of imports. He also said Colombo will repay a \$500 million sovereign bond that matures next Tuesday despite local business leaders publicly asking him to withhold the repayment and seek IMF help. — AFP

Business

Markaz named 'MENA Real Estate Asset Manager of the Year' for 2021

Global Investor recognition for managing income-generating real estate assets

KUWAIT: In yet another recognition that cements its leadership in asset management in the Middle East and North Africa, Kuwait Financial Centre (Markaz) has been named the 'MENA Real Estate Asset Manager of the Year' for 2021 by Global Investor, which recognizes outstanding performance in the real estate sector, in addition to asset management, fund administration, and wealth management, among many others.

The coveted honor recognizes Markaz's excellence in serving institutions and individuals seeking to unlock the investment potential of real estate asset classes in the region, operating at the highest industry standards, under the oversight of the Capital Markets Authority (CMA).

Markaz brings over 30 years of experience in the real estate sector globally and regionally, with 18 years of actively managing real estate assets across the MENA region. Markaz manages real

estate assets of KD 300 million in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and the UAE real estate through funds and client-tailored portfolios. Notably, Markaz manages the Kuwait Investment Authority's (KIA) National Real Estate Portfolio in addition to Markaz Real Estate Fund (MREF) and Markaz Gulf Real Estate Fund (MGREF), a private placement fund. Ever since its inception in 2003, MREF, a KD 70 million Sharia-compliant income-generating fund investing in Kuwait income properties, has been distributing monthly cash dividends, which stands now at 5 percent, and generating an unlevered IRR (internal rate of return) of 7.5 percent p.a. (Latest factsheet detailing information on the fund is available on Markaz website www.markaz.com). MGREF invests in residential, commercial and industrial income-generating properties in Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Kuwait and distributes monthly cash dividends to investors.

Commenting on this achievement, Bassam N Al-Othman, Managing Director, MENA Real Estate at Markaz said: "We are delighted to have received 'MENA Real Estate Asset Manager of the Year' award, which represents an acclaimed recognition of our commitment to providing our clients with solid investment opportunities."

Al-Othman added: "Markaz's unique ability to bring added value to real estate assets stems from the distinguished strength of our solid team of 27 professionals, who are stationed in Kuwait and in our regional offices in Riyadh and Khobar since 2006, as well as in Dubai and Abu Dhabi since 2010, providing in-depth local market insight, our best-in-class policies and procedures, and our advanced technology platforms for enhanced financial and operating reporting."

Markaz unleashes added value by acquiring properties based on research to



Bassam N Al-Othman

identify targeted sectors and geographical asset allocation, taking into account market insights, trends, supply/demand and risks, and while also managing acquisition risk through thorough legal, technical, operational and commercial due diligence on target properties. It also works closely with property managers to enhance the performance of assets by optimizing rent levels, increasing rent col-

lection rates and efficiency, and improving occupancy, rent levels and tenant retention, as well as managing expenses and maintaining the properties. Luke Jeffs, Managing Editor of Global Investor, said: "The Markaz Real Estate Fund sets the benchmark in the Middle East region. The low bar to entry, enabling smaller investors to participate, the monthly dividend and the open-ended nature of the fund have continued to its ongoing success, while Markaz's innovative approach to tenant retention has further contributed to the success of this best-in-class real estate fund."

Markaz's excellence and market-leading performance in asset management, investment banking, real estate investment, and wealth management have been recognized by more than 50 prestigious awards since its inception. In 2021, it was named the 'Best Investment Bank in Kuwait' by Global Finance Magazine for the 10th time in 11 years.

KFH launches funds transfer service via mobile numbers

KUWAIT: Kuwait Finance House (KFH) launched a new service which is the first of its kind in Kuwait. The service enables mobile application "KFHonline" users to transfer funds to any account in local banks via mobile Number.

KFH Group Acting Chief Retail Banking and Private Banking Officer, Khaled Yousef Al-Shamlan said that the new service, launched solely by KFH at the market level, enables KFH customers to execute financial transfers from their bank accounts to any other account in local banks easily and swiftly according to high security standards through KFHonline application by selecting KFH PAY from the list then select "Send Funds" and follow simple steps to complete the transfer transaction.

He added that the beneficiary shall only click on the link which he receives in SMS, fill in the bank card details and receive the amount directly in his account through Knet. If the customer is a KFH customer, he may receive the amount through KFHonline directly.

KFH Pay service enables KFH customers to request funds. This service is to request the payment of funds to KFH customer account either by sharing the link with KFH customers or other local banks or through direct

pay from the customer accounts in local banks. Al-Shamlan reiterated that this service takes the local banking transfers to a new level of speed and simplicity, thus enhancing customer's experience in which KFH has come a long way.

KFH provides an integrated package of digital banking services which have proved its pioneering and distinction in this field. KFH has launched recently, for the first time in Kuwait, the smart watch service to execute transactions on ATM. KFH banking services may be availed round the clock and at any place. Services include online personal finance request online, opening accounts for new customers without the need to visit branches, electronic signature endorsement through "My ID" application, local and international fund transfers, opening investment deposits, opening gold account, buy/ sell gold, request cheque book, instant printing of ATM card through QR Code, Cheque deposit, follow up finance transactions and installments, swift transfer service to KFH Turkey using RippleNet, digital wallet service through smart watches and mobiles which provide the most advanced smart digital payment methods according to the most advanced and secured calibers in collaboration with



Khaled Yousef Al-Shamlan

Samsung, Fitbit, Garmin and several other e-banking services.

Furthermore, KFH provides XTM machines and smart KFH Go branches in various Kuwait governorates including Kuwait Airport. KFH GO branches enable customers to benefit from the diversified package of banking services including: Instant cheque book printing, instant banking card printing without pre-request, receipt of gold biscuits (10 g), opening (gold, saving, winner, ATM) account, buy/ Sell gold, cash withdrawal without card using QR Code on mobile or through Civil ID or mobile number, printing IBAN certificate, request commercial transactions "Murabaha", request credit and prepaid cards, update information and mobile number, activate banking cards, open deposits and accounts and many other finance and banking services.

52 winners of Al-Jawhara draw prizes worth KD 2.2m

KUWAIT: National Bank of Kuwait (NBK) is keen on rewarding its customers with an outstanding array of draws, prizes and offers all year round. In this context, the bank conducted its Al-Jawhara weekly, monthly and quarterly draws for 2021, with 52 winners of prizes worth KD 2.2 million.

NBK's prizes were not limited to Al-Jawhara draw winners, but also included the audience who participated in the competitions during the engaging events organized by the bank on the occasion of the quarterly draw, featuring various activities that saw remarkable interaction from the audience who expressed their pleasure to participate in these activities.

On this occasion, Suresh Varadarajan Head of Liabilities & Insurance, Consumer Banking Group at National Bank of Kuwait said: "Al-Jawhara Account is a unique saving vessel enabling NBK customers to save while getting chances to win the exceptional prizes offered on weekly basis."

"We are keen to reward our customers from all segments, and this year, we had 52 winners of Al-Jawhara weekly, monthly and quarterly prizes, which increases the chances of winning for a larger number of our customers," he added. Varadarajan noted that NBK will continue to organize engaging events during this year, promising to provide exceptional offers and to continue to offer more unique rewards and campaigns to maximize customers' benefit from NBK's excellence and leadership.

Al-Jawhara Account can be opened very quickly and easily by visiting the nearest NBK branch or through NBK mobile banking or NBK online banking for existing customers.

Al-Jawhara Account gives customers the opportunity to enter draws and win prizes of KD 5,000 weekly, KD 125,000 monthly as well as the grand prize of KD 250,000 quarterly. Every KD 50 deposited into Al-Jawhara Account gives the customer a chance to be one of the next lucky winners. If no withdrawals or trans-

fers are made on the account during the holding period, the customers will receive an additional chance to enter the draw for every KD 50 held in the account, doubling their chances to win.

In addition to providing top-notch, highly advanced and secure banking services, NBK is keen to provide customers with a wide range of offers, rewards and prizes that match their interests all year round.



Suresh Varadarajan

Parts of Kenya suffer second day of power cuts

NAIROBI: Kenya yesterday faced a second consecutive day of rolling power cuts after a damaged transmission line caused a nationwide outage in East Africa's most dynamic economy.

The country of nearly 50 million suffered a nearly day-long blackout Tuesday after four electricity pylons connecting Nairobi to a hydroelectric dam collapsed, state-run utility Kenya Power said. By evening, Kenya Power had declared the problem resolved in most of the country but a second outage caused by another malfunctioning transmission line cut supply once again to many areas yesterday. Kenya Power said Tuesday's collapse had triggered "glitches" in other supply units and only a small portion of the country remained without electricity.

"If you have such a major outage, you will have small issues here and there of the main system being unstable," Kenya Power spokesman Gregory Ngahu told AFP. Kenya taps hydro, geothermal and wind to help generate energy but power costs remain high, in part because of a fuel surcharge for running diesel generators to cover peak demand times.

President Uhuru Kenyatta's government last week announced a 15 percent reduction in power tariffs to assist lower income households.

"Maybe it will be achieved by not supplying power 15 percent of the time," quipped a Twitter user following the blackouts. In 2016 a monkey tripped a major power cut in Kenya after falling onto a transformer at a power station.

The primate survived its brush with death but large parts the country were left without power for several hours. —AFP

stc opens its newest flagship branch in Mahboula

KUWAIT: Kuwait Telecommunications Company - stc, a world-class digital leader providing innovative services and platforms to customers, enabling the digital transformation in Kuwait, opened the doors to its new flagship branch in Mahboula equipped with advanced technology to provide an exceptional customer experience. Incorporating digitized and smart solutions, stc's latest flagship branch falls in line with the Company's digital transformation vision and corporate strategy to efficiently support the lifestyle choices of its valued customers.

The branch features a new design concept that integrates both innovative features and convenient solutions, acknowledging stc's understanding in meeting the diverse needs of its growing customer base in Kuwait. Opening its doors to serve new and existing customers, the new Mahboula branch welcomes visitors to a customer-centric lifestyle experience that incorporates stc's extensive offering line and exclusive promotions.

Built with customer convenience in mind, the branch includes wide stations showcasing the latest smartphone and entertainment devices on display for a firsthand shopping experience. Customers will have a chance to test products, get a feel for the grip and size of devices, and test features before making a purchase. Additionally, there will be a 24/7 self-service area dedicated to fulfilling customers' requests at their convenience.

In support of the decisions taken by the Ministry of Health, the new branch will apply the necessary precautionary measures such as social distancing, mandatory face masks and regular sanitization to ensure the safety of both customers and employees. stc also maintains the same safety standards in its headquarters, branches, and at any external initiatives it participates in to mitigate the risk associated with the current pandemic.

Commenting on the opening, Chief Consumer Officer (CCO) of stc, engineer Amer Atoui, said, "We are proud to open the door to another flagship branch that purely focuses on providing a customer-centric experience while granting access to our latest products, services, and offers to the Mahboula area. Our goal remains to consistently enhance the customer journey for both new and existing customers while



easing access to the breadth of our extensive offering line. With our new flagship branches, we aim to bestow a simplified and personalized shopping experience that enables our customers to find out more about our products and services prior to making any commitments."

Atoui added, "Engaging with our customers in innovative ways allows us to get a better understanding of their lifestyle choices and customize our offerings in a way that can add value to their daily routines and activities. Whether it is through one of our branches, digital platforms, or through our call center, our pri-

mary objective of delivering an exceptional experience to our customers remains consistent. This goes hand in hand with our corporate strategy that builds on our exclusive offers and promotions, strengthening our 5G network, and offering a range of solutions at affordable and competitive prices."

To find out more about stc's events, promotions, and sponsorships, follow stc's official social media platforms, visit one of stc's branches, download mystc mobile application, visit www.stc.com.kw or contact the customer service center by dialing 102 for around the clock assistance.



COVID pall over Vietnam's pink incense village as the Lunar New Year nears



A man transports bamboo sticks past dried incense sticks along a road in Quang Phu Cau village on the outskirts of Hanoi.

Vietnam's "incense village" is dazzling pink as workers prepare the fragrant sticks for the Lunar New Year holiday, but strict rules to stop the spread of COVID-19 are dulling its lustre. January is usually the busiest time of year for workers in Quang Phu Cau village on the outskirts of Hanoi, where the tradition of making incense goes back more than a century.

As Vietnam's Tet new-year holiday approaches - this year it begins on February 1 - sales tick up with throngs of people crowding into temples to light incense during worship, or burn the sticks on the ancestral altar at home. But while villagers are busy dyeing, drying and whit-

ening bamboo bark to make the sticks, they complain that business is slow. "I think our sales must have dropped by 30 percent compared with the same period last year," says Nguyen Thi Luyen, 59.

Communist Vietnam reported economic growth for 2021 of just 2.58 percent - its lowest in three decades - as the country endured draconian restrictions to fight the pandemic. Production, supply chains and businesses were seriously hit as almost the entire country went into lockdown for at least three months. Things have started to improve, but the consequences remain. "Normally, there would be trucks carrying our products from central provinces and border provinces. This year, due to pan-

demical preventive policy, trucks cannot carry goods there," Luyen told AFP.

Quang Phu Cau is among several places dotted across Vietnam making the sticks, the scent of each batch carefully tailored to suit the tastes of the regions where they will be sold. Most households in the village are involved in the ancient trade, from cutting bamboo planks and dipping thin strips into pink dye to coating the dried sticks in an aromatic paste. "We really hope things will come back to normal soon," Luyen said. — AFP



A worker collects dried incense sticks for sale in Quang Phu Cau village on the outskirts of Hanoi ahead of Lunar New Year celebrations, known in Vietnam as Tet. — AFP photos



Residents cut bamboo sticks to make incense sticks in Quang Phu Cau village on the outskirts of Hanoi, ahead of Lunar New Year celebrations.



A worker cuts bamboo sticks to make incense sticks in Quang Phu Cau village ahead of Lunar New Year celebrations, known in Vietnam as Tet.

Music-loving pope visits record store

Pope Francis, a lover of classical music, made a surprise visit to a Rome record store to bless the premises - and picked up some vinyl while he was there. The 85-year-old pontiff slipped into Stereosound, located near the Pantheon, on Tuesday evening to bless the shop after its recent renovation, a Vatican source told AFP. The owners of the store are longtime friends of the Argentine pontiff, who has previously spoken of the power of music and is said to enjoy classical composers but also tango.

He left with a 33 RPM record of classical music, a gift presented by the owner's daughter, according to Vatican News. A small crowd gathered outside the shop while he was inside, for around 10 minutes, but he made no public comments as

he got into a white Fiat 500L and was driven away. Vatican News reported the owner, Letizia, saying that the pope was an "old customer" who had been going to the shop since he was made a cardinal, in 2001.

The pope is known for being unpredictable and living more simply than his predecessors, carrying his own briefcase and making his own phone calls. In 2015, two years after being elected head of the world's 1.3 billion Catholics, he went to an optician in central Rome to change his glasses. The following year, he went to a shop to buy some new orthopaedic shoes. Francis lives in modest rooms measuring 50 square meters in the Casa Santa Marta guesthouse. — AFP

Free yoga for Delhi as Omicron shuts offices, eateries

New Delhi ordered Tuesday the closure of non-essential offices and restaurants and bars but offered free online yoga classes to those in home isolation, as COVID cases soared in the Indian capital and nationwide. With case numbers rising six-fold over the past week, the Indian government is terrified of a repeat of last year when thousands died of the virus every day and the health system teetered on the brink of collapse.

While stopping short of a full lockdown, authorities have steadily increased restrictions nationwide and capacity at private offices and eateries in the capital was already restricted to 50 percent. But those

in home isolation can take free online yoga classes, with Delhi's chief minister Arvind Kejriwal saying that it would help patients "boost their immunity and attain mental and spiritual peace".

India's capital registered 17 deaths each on Saturday and Sunday, the biggest single-day toll in more than 200 days, according to local media reports. Every fourth person tested is coming back positive. Nationally, India recorded almost 170,000 new cases on Monday, almost half the daily number recorded during the surge of last April and May. Deaths remain a fraction of what they were but are rising.

Meanwhile, the Indian Council of Medical Research, the government's apex scientific body, on Monday tweaked its mandatory testing guidelines to ease the strain on the testing infrastructure. Healthy, asymptomatic contacts of confirmed coronavirus patients no longer require mandatory testing. Experts say that India is better prepared to deal with the latest coronavirus wave, driven by the Omicron variant, than last year.

The country has now administered more than 1.5 billion vaccine shots and recently opened the program to teenagers. It has also begun giving boosters to vulnerable groups. The surge last year, which killed more than 200,000 people - and possibly several times more - was blamed in part on huge political rallies and religious events. The latest spike comes ahead of elections in five Indian states including Uttar Pradesh, home to 220 million people, beginning next month.

Political parties have been holding massive rallies with tens of thousands of people in attendance over the last few weeks. West Bengal state is also holding a massive Hindu religious fair this week on an island in the Ganges, while Tamil Nadu has allowed bull-racing festivals to take place next week. The India Open badminton championship meanwhile began in Delhi on Tuesday after a two-year gap with 219 players from 19 countries taking part - but without spectators. — AFP

Lifestyle | Features

Oscars will have a host again in 2022

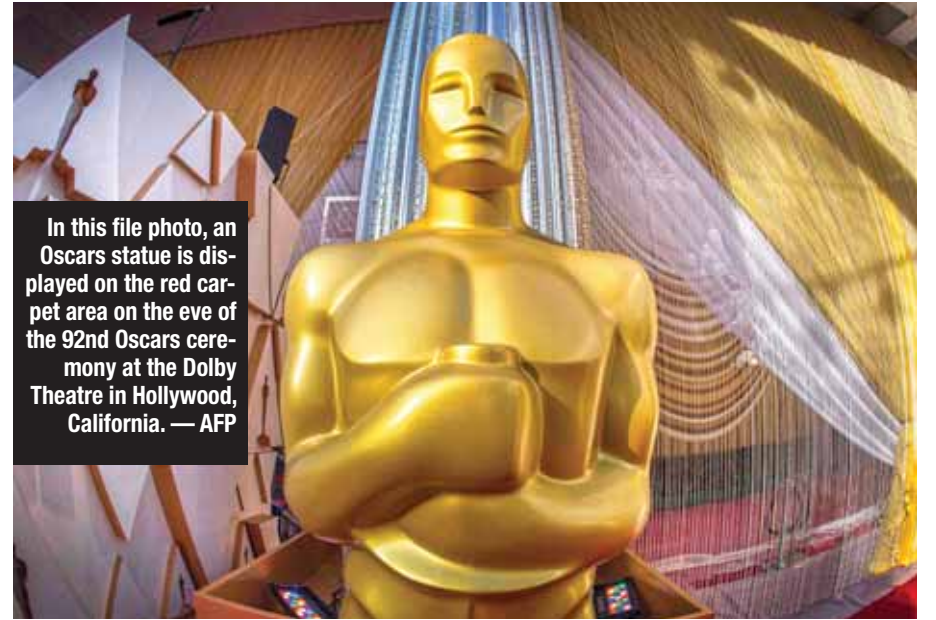
The Oscars will have a host for the first time since 2018, broadcaster ABC said Tuesday, after television ratings for film's biggest night have plummeted in recent years. The 94th Academy Awards, scheduled for March 27, will see Tinseltown's most important prize-giving event return to its traditional Dolby Theatre venue in Hollywood.

Last year's unorthodox edition, held at a Los Angeles train station with no host, was watched by just over 10 million viewers - a 56 percent decline from 2020, which was already a record low. "You heard it here first, I can confirm that this year's Oscars will have a host," Craig Erwich, president of ABC Entertainment and Hulu Originals, told a virtual panel discussion hosted by the Television Critics Association.

Erwich declined to give any further details, including whether Jimmy Kimmel - host of ABC's "Jimmy Kimmel Live!" and the last two hosted Oscars in 2017 and 2018 - will return. "It might be me," he quipped. In 2019, comedian Kevin Hart pulled out of hosting the Academy Awards after homophobic tweets he made several years earlier reemerged. He was not replaced, and while that year's hostless format drew praise and was even emulat-

ed by other awards shows such as the Emmys, subsequent Oscar ceremonies were criticized for lacking focus and humor.

Also on Tuesday, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences announced that veteran Glenn Weiss will direct the Oscars for a seventh consecutive year. Few details have been confirmed for the show, which will be produced by Will Packer and were postponed for a second consecutive year. The delay, reportedly to avoid clashing with February's Winter Olympics and the Super Bowl in Los Angeles, was announced months before the Omicron variant forced multiple Hollywood shows to scrap in-person events this winter. — AFP



In this file photo, an Oscars statue is displayed on the red carpet area on the eve of the 92nd Oscars ceremony at the Dolby Theatre in Hollywood, California. — AFP



An aerial picture shows stalls in the first camel hotel during the sixth edition of the King Abdulaziz Camel Festival in Rumahi region some 160km east of the Saudi capital Riyadh.

Hot milk and grooming for camels at Saudi luxury 'hotel'

With heated stalls and hot milk, life couldn't get more glamorous for Saudi Arabia's most beautiful camels when they stay at a luxury compound near Riyadh. For 400 riyals (just over \$100) a night, the camels are trimmed, scrubbed and pampered before taking part in beauty contests, where millions of dollars are at stake. The camels, many of which are rented, are checked closely for Botox and other illegal enhancements which could see them thrown out for cheating.

And it's all done in a COVID-safe environment to prevent any disruptive outbreaks. The Tatman, described as the first hotel for camels, is an open-air desert compound near the annual King Abdulaziz Camel Festival, which has prizes totaling \$66.6 million. It's a logical step for the lucrative industry in the well-heeled Gulf, where camels are prized as a symbol of traditional life. The animals are judged on attributes including their lips, necks, humps and coloring, and wins are highly prestigious for their owners.

Omair Al-Qahtani, who is Saudi, checked 80 camels into the Tatman for 16 days, saying it would cost him \$160,000-

213,000. The facility is "very comfortable, as the camels remain under their care and undergo regular medical examinations", the 51-year-old businessman told AFP. It has 120 enclosures, including singles and doubles, each equipped with plastic containers for water and fodder. Check-out is 12:30 pm. During their stay, 50 workers look after the animals and are kept under strict sanitary conditions to minimize the risk of COVID cases.

'Obsession with camels'

In years past, Qahtani and his assistants would set up tents near the festival, tending to and feeding the camels themselves. Many of the four-legged guests are competitors in Mazayen Al-Ibl contest, the world's biggest camel beauty pageant and a highlight of the King Abdulaziz Festival. Mohamed Al-Harbi, media chief of the camel club that organizes the competition, said the group dreamed up the hotel "to protect and preserve camels and also to reduce the burden on the owner".

He said the hotel was popular, bringing in revenues of more than \$1.6 million. Money is no object for some attending the festival, which features well-appointed



A Saudi man tends to a camel at the first camel hotel during the sixth edition of the King Abdulaziz Camel Festival in Rumahi region.



A worker grooms a camel in the first camel hotel during the sixth edition of the King Abdulaziz Camel Festival in Rumahi region.

buildings and tents in the middle of the desert, and booths for luxury car-makers Rolls-Royce and BMW. Saudi enthusiasts can spend hundreds of thousands of dollars on camels entered into the contests, where unscrupulous competitors sometimes seek an illegal advantage.

Forty-three dromedaries were

drummed out of the festival when camel checkers spotted infringements such as Botox, silicone and fillers injected into lips, humps and tails. But Harbi said the hotel provides a "check" so that people "can find any tampering early", reassuring them their rented beasts won't be sent packing. Qahtani said this is a big advantage, as

doctored camels can attract fines of up to \$26,000. The competitions "reinforce the obsession with camels in Saudi Arabia", Harbi said. — AFP



A picture released by the King Abdulaziz Camel Festival shows a Saudi man tending to a camel at the first camel hotel during the sixth edition of the King Abdulaziz Camel Festival in Rumahi region some 160km east of the Saudi capital Riyadh. With heated stalls and hot milk, life couldn't get more glamorous for Saudi Arabia's most beautiful camels when they stay at a luxury compound near Riyadh. — AFP photos



Royals and reality TV stars: Famous COVID rulebreakers

From reality TV star Kim Kardashian to the Dutch royals and now tennis superstar Novak Djokovic, a slew of politicians and celebrities have found themselves in hot water for falling foul of COVID etiquette. Here are some of the most famous offenders:

Selfie schtick

South Africa President Cyril Ramaphosa broke social distancing rules to pose for a selfie with two women who approached him in the street in May 2020. Laughing, he joked: "Come before we get arrested." He wasn't arrested but the video went viral sparking outrage.

Party on

Paraguay's deputy health minister Juan Carlos Portillo resigned after he was filmed at a party in June 2020 just after he had helped bring in new restrictions.

Downing Street follies

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson's top adviser Dominic Cummings caused uproar in Britain after breaching lockdown rules in May 2020 to travel the length of England to be with his parents. He later said he took another trip in a car to "check his eyesight" before eventually being forced to step down. It was to be the first of a long line of COVID-related scandals to rock Johnson and his government.

Kiss me quick

British Health minister Matt Hancock resigned for breaking the COVID rules he had himself set after being caught on film in a steamy clinch with his mistress in his ministry in June 2020.

Parties and quizzes

Johnson has since been undermined by a long string of revelations about boozy parties and quizzes at Number 10 that were allegedly in breach of the rules, with the prime minister photographed at one in his garden. His father Stanley has also been caught not wearing a face mask and flying to his villa in Greece when only non-essential travel was permitted, claiming he went to make it "COVID-safe".

Royal pardon

The Dutch royal family had to apologize last month when they invited 21 people to celebrate the 18th birthday of future queen Princess Amalia when only four were allowed. It was one of a string of COVID faux pas committed by the House of Orange with King Willem-Alexander repeatedly breaking social distancing rules by shaking hands and the family going on holiday to Greece during a partial lockdown.

Kardashian birthday bash

Reality television star Kim Kardashian sparked anger in October 2020 by throwing a party on a private island to celebrate her 40th birthday, with photos showing revelers without masks.

Costly meal

Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki apologized in May 2020 after posing for official photographs with staff in a restaurant when his own advice to others was to dine out only with close family.

Irish golf gala

European trade commissioner Phil Hogan was forced to resign in August 2020 along with two senior Irish politicians after they attended a parliamentary golf gala dinner for 80 when only six people were allowed to meet indoors. The head of the country's tourism board Catherine Martin was also forced to quit after going for a break in Italy when people were being told to holiday at home.

'Bad mistake'

California governor Gavin Newsom was forced to admit he made a "bad mistake" in November 2020 by attending a friend's birthday dinner during a spike in cases.

Match halted

A hugely anticipated clash between South American football giants Brazil and Argentina had to be halted in September after five minutes with officials claiming four Argentine players based in England had given them false information to get around COVID rules. — AFP



The PolMOVE 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.



An attendee plays a game of red light green light against a LiDAR sensor at the South Korea-based SOS LAB company booth during the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) in Las Vegas.

Car gadgets proliferate as health concerns rise

With personal health a rising priority around the world, the auto industry is on the hunt for new gadgets and accessories to make the car cockpit feel safer for the driver and passengers. Items on display at the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) include air purifiers, car seat alarms and intelligent sun visors.

The objective is to transform the automobile "into a sort of health cocoon," Christophe Perillat, deputy chief executive of Valeo said at a press conference at the show held in Las Vegas. The French auto supplier's wares at CES include devices to monitor drivers' attention and air filters and systems that allow personalized climate controls for passengers.

The company's filtration system for cars and buses clears out more than 95 percent of viruses, including COVID-19. CabinAir and Marelli also showcased car air purification systems that could be installed inside the cockpit or in a cup holder. Another offering by Gentex is a sensor composed of nano-fibers capable of surveying the air and identifying contaminants.

The latest generation of technologies comes after earlier efforts focused initially on the trucking industry, where lengthy periods behind the wheel marred physical health, said Carla Bailo, head of the Center for Automotive Research. After developing more ergonomic seats, auto suppliers have begun focusing on tools to help drivers get ahead of other health problems such as cardiovascular issues, and to maintain driver awareness.

Alerting parents

Some of the systems follow government requirements on autos. The Italian startup Filo developed an alarm system

for children's car seats following a law in its home country intended to prevent kids from being left in the car on hot days. The company was in Las Vegas to launch the technology for the United States, where there are dozens of casualties each year due to hyperthermia.



French startup Wisear cofounder Yacine Achiakh holds a pair of prototype earbuds that allow him to stop the music playing on his smartphone simply by moving his jaw through a technology that enables a connected device to detect and interpret electric signals sent by the brain to a muscle during the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) in Las Vegas, Nevada.

"With the hecticness of life, stress, et cetera, sadly, it happens more than we would like to admit that parents actually have on occasion lapsed... and they leave their children in the car," said Rudolf Jantos, who works in marketing for Filo. The company's Bluetooth-based system will alert if a child remains in the seat when the driver moves away from the vehicle. Other child-protection devices employ cameras, radars, vibra-

sors, Ramsay said. These new devices have also been boosted by the rise of autonomous driving systems, which employ cameras and radars, said Jacques Aschenbroich, chief executive of Valeo.

"We had been focusing before more on the comfort of the seats and of the heating," he said. "Now our clients also ask for more visual comfort and safety applications" based on these cameras and radars.



The Tata Pad by Filo, a smart baby car seat alarm to alert when a child is left in a vehicle, is displayed during the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) in Las Vegas, Nevada. Air purifiers, sensors to prevent a child from being forgotten in the car, intelligent sun visors: there are more and more tools available to make motorists feel safe in their car.

ed. "The key point is to use technology to really improve the customer experience, not to seem invasive," Bailo said. "There's a fine line between 'we're trying to keep you safe, we're trying to keep you healthy,' and 'we're watching what you're doing.'" — AFP



The Hexagro Living Farming Tree, a soilless indoor garden for vertical aeroponic farming, is displayed during the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) in Las Vegas.



Takuma Iwasa, Shiftall CEO, demonstrates Haritora X, a full body tracking system for VR, at the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) in Las Vegas. A jacket equipped with sensors that let wearers feel hugs or even punches encountered in virtual reality was among the innovations giving the metaverse a more realistic edge at the Consumer Electronics Show. — AFP photos



In this file photo, Kim Kardashian's husband rapper Kanye West performs during his concert in central Yerevan early. The mercurial Kanye West anticipates traveling to Moscow later this year, according to a Billboard article published - a trip that will see him hold a Sunday Service performance and meet with President Vladimir Putin. — AFP

Kanye West planning to perform in Russia, meet Putin

The mercurial Kanye West anticipates traveling to Moscow later this year, according to Billboard, a trip that will see him hold a Sunday Service performance and meet with President Vladimir Putin. West heads to Russia as he works on new business deals with Aras Agalarov - the Azerbaijani-Russian billionaire businessman with ties to Donald Trump - and Agalarov's musician son Emin, the music outlet said, citing West's advisor Ameer Sudan.

"He will be spending a lot of time" in the country, Sudan told Billboard, saying it will

be "a second home" for Ye, who legally changed his name last year. The rapper's Sunday Service shows are church-esque concerts featuring gospel choirs that he began holding in 2019. Ye, 44, is no stranger to questionable forays into the political world, having launched an unsuccessful bid for the American presidency in 2020 as an independent candidate of the Birthday Party.

In 2018 he met with then-president Trump for a surreal tete-a-tete that included a hug between the two and an on-camera rant. Neither the prospect of travel restrictions nor potential criticism over building ties in Russia would deter Ye, according to Sudan. "Kanye knows what's going on more than the average human being, he's well aware of things. And it's nothing against the United States or to cause conflicts, but Ye is Ye - he can't be controlled," Sudan said. — AFP

Sports

Djokovic admits 'errors' as he fights to avoid deportation

Team offers fresh information to Australian government

MELBOURNE: Novak Djokovic yesterday admitted "errors" in his travel papers and for not isolating after a claimed coronavirus infection, as he battled to stay in Australia and fight for a record 21st Grand Slam. The world number one said his team had offered fresh information to the Australian government, which is pondering whether to cancel his visa, again, and throw him out of the country.

"We are living in challenging times in a global pandemic and sometimes these mistakes can occur," the unvaccinated 34-year-old said in a statement released as he practiced on the courts of the Australian Open, which starts Monday. The Serbian star flew into Melbourne a week ago claiming a vaccine exemption because of a positive PCR test result on December 16. Border agents rejected his exemption saying a recent infection did not qualify, tore up his visa and placed him in a detention centre.

But the vaccine-sceptic Djokovic's high-powered legal team dramatically overturned the visa decision in court on Monday on a procedural matter related to his airport interview. Now, Immigration Minister Alex Hawke says he is considering cancelling the visa another time, as fresh doubts emerge. In an update to Australian media, his spokesman acknowledged receiving "lengthy further submissions" from the player's lawyers. "Naturally, this will affect the timeframe for a decision," he said.

'Error of judgment'

Djokovic, a nine-time Australian Open champion, described reports about his post-infection outings in Serbia as "misinformation". On the day of his claimed positive test in Serbia, he appeared at a ceremony to honor him with stamps bearing his image. The following day he attended a youth tennis event. He appeared at both apparently without a mask. Djokovic, who made no mention of the stamp ceremony, said he only received the PCR test result after attending the children's tennis event. But he admitted that he also went ahead with an interview and photoshoot with French sports newspaper L'Equipe on December 18.

"I felt obliged to go ahead and conduct the L'Equipe interview as I didn't want to let the journalist down but did ensure I socially distanced and wore a mask except when my photograph was being taken," he said. "On reflection, this was an error of judgment and I accept that I should have rescheduled this commitment." The player said he also had two rapid antigen tests, which both returned negative results: one on December 16 when he first suspected being infected and one on December 17 before attending the children's tennis event.

Fresh doubts emerge amid legal tussle

The tennis ace also admitted a mistake on his Australian travel declaration, in which a box was ticked indicating that he had not, or would not, travel in the 14 days before taking his flight to Melbourne. In fact, social media posts and reports show he flew from Serbia to Spain during that period. "This was submitted by my support team on my behalf," Djokovic said. "My agent sincerely apologizes for the administrative mistake in ticking the incorrect box about my previous travel before coming to Australia. This was a human error and certainly not deliberate."

In another twist, Australian media yesterday seized on reporting by Germany's Der Spiegel newspaper that cast doubt over the tennis star's positive test. The newspaper said it had scanned the QR code on Djokovic's Serbian PCR test, which it said delivered a negative result, only to change to a positive result an hour later. It was not possible to



MELBOURNE: Novak Djokovic of Serbia takes a break during a practice session ahead of the Australian Open at the Melbourne Park tennis centre in Melbourne yesterday. —AFP

independently verify the Der Spiegel story, and Djokovic did not refer to those specific issues yesterday.

Appeal options

Djokovic's Instagram post appeared to be aimed at swaying the Australian government to let him stay. Leading immigration lawyer Christopher Levingston said the government could cancel Djokovic's visa on narrow criminal grounds, for example, because the travel declaration was incorrectly completed. But the immigration minister may also annul the visa on broader character grounds. If Djokovic knowingly dodged Serbia's

quarantine requirement for positive cases, he could be judged to be a risk for potentially not complying with public health orders while in Australia, Levingston said.

Various options to appeal would be open for both Djokovic and the government, but at the end of the day, the immigration minister can exercise his personal power to cancel the visa. Many Australians, who have endured nearly two years of travel bans, restrictions and rolling lockdowns, were angered when they learned of Djokovic's vaccine exemption. Prime Minister Scott Morrison's government, which faces a general election by May, has been criticized over its handling of the affair. —AFP

Injury-hit England fighting to turn corner in Ashes climax

HOBART: A patched-up England head to an Ashes finale against Australia under lights in Hobart tomorrow buoyed by a fighting draw in Sydney, but consumed by injury worries and selection dilemmas. The tourists finally stopped the rot on a gruelling tour last week with their nail-biting last-wicket hold-out at the Sydney Cricket Ground to prevent a 5-0 whitewash. But it came at a price with wicketkeeper Jos Buttler sent home with a fractured finger and experienced pair Jonny Bairstow and Ben Stokes racing the clock to be fit.

England captain Joe Root said not losing was "hugely important" and he hoped it had turned the tide after three heavy and humiliating defeats in Brisbane, Adelaide and Melbourne. "It would have been very easy for us to roll over and feel sorry for ourselves," he said, after breaking Alastair Cook's record for most matches in charge when he captained England for the 60th time in Sydney.

"But it was up to the guys to put some pride back into the badge and show how much they care about playing for England." However, it can't disguise their still appalling record in Australia with 12 defeats in 14 Tests, with England reduced to celebrating a draw. Former skipper Michael Atherton said in a column for The Times this week that avoiding a whitewash was "a small mercy".

"Sober assessment of the fourth Test would stress that Australia declared in both innings and that there were two sessions lost to rain," he added. "England were second best by a yawning distance." Hobart's Bellerive Oval will play host to its first Ashes Test after winning the race to replace Perth, which was axed last month over Western Australia state's tough COVID quarantine rules. And it will be day-night pink-ball affair, the second of the series after Adelaide, where Australia crushed England by 275 runs.

At least the visitors can draw inspiration from a better batting performance in Sydney with Bairstow making England's first century of the series, while Stokes hit a fifty in each innings and opener Zak Crawley scored 77. But fellow opener Haseeb Hameed once more failed, with Rory Burns a potential replacement. With Buttler out, Bairstow could take the gloves, but he is battling a right thumb injury. As a precaution, England have called up Sam Billings, who has been playing for Sydney Thunder in the Big Bash League. —AFP

Vlhova seals slalom title; Shiffrin scores emotional victory

SCHLADMING: Mikaela Shiffrin charged from fifth to first on the second run to win the World Cup slalom in Schladming on Tuesday but could not stop Petra Vlhova clinching the discipline title. Shiffrin, who returned from a bout of Covid-19 on Sunday, was in tears at the finish. "Just crying a lot lately," she said at the start of a brief post-race interview. The American struck a psychological blow in the last slalom before the Beijing Olympic and increased her lead over Slovakian Vlhova in the overall standings and secured the outright record for World Cup victories in a single discipline.



Al-Osaimi commends activation of schedule

By Abdellatif Sharara

KUWAIT: Secretary General of Kuwait and Arab Shooting Federations Obaid Munahi Al-Osaimi commended the activation of the time schedule of the joint cooperation protocol between the National Guard and Kuwait Shooting Sport Club which was signed on January 11, 2011. This was the result of the support of HH the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah when he was Deputy Chief of the National Guard. He ordered the signing of a cooperation proto-

Vlhova, winner of five of the first six World Cup slaloms of the season, set the fastest time in the first run under lights in the Austrian Alps on Tuesday. Shiffrin, the only woman to have beaten Vlhova in the slalom this season was 0.48sec back in fifth. The race had been moved from Flachau because of the high rate of COVID-19 infection in the resort, some 25 kilometers to Schladming, which normally only hosts the men's slaloms.

Shiffrin rose to the challenge of a course that was steeper and longer than the regular stops on the women's circuit. "It's such a privilege to race on this slope. All I wanted to do today was to earn that, to deserve it," said Shiffrin at the finish. "It's iconic. It's Schladming. I was geeking out this morning. I can't believe that we can be here. It's quite special. It feels like it didn't happen." After Shiffrin seized the lead in the second run, the final four skiers struggled to match her.

Neither Canadian Ali Nullmeyer nor Swiss Wendy Holdener, who had been tied for third, fin-

ished. Nullmeyer went flying halfway through her run on a course laid out by her own coach. German Lena Duerr recorded only the 16th best second-run time, more than a second slower than Shiffrin, as she slipped from second to third. Skiing last, Vlhova lost more than half a second to finish 0.15sec behind, but that ensured she would win the small crystal globe for slalom World Cup champion regaining a title she won in 2020.

Vlhova leads Shiffrin by 220 points in the slalom standings with only two World Cup races left. Shiffrin, meanwhile, increased her lead over the Slovakian, the defending champion, to 55 points in the overall standings. For Shiffrin, the victory was her 47th in a World Cup slalom, breaking a tie with the legendary Swede Ingemar Stenmark, who won 46 giant slaloms, for most in a single discipline. Shiffrin said she was not thinking of records. "Maybe I'll be able to answer that in one year or in five years," she said. —AFP



col between the Shooting Club and National Guard to train National Guard men on the Olympic shooting sports including pistol, rifle, shotgun and archery at Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Olympic Shooting Complex.

Al-Osaimi conveyed greetings to the National Guard leadership during his reception of head of the sports branch Colonel Dr Saleh Jamaan Mohammad, Colonel Nawaf Kharsan Ghosn and Major Abdallah Fares Mohammad in the presence of KSSC Deputy General Technical Director for Pistol and Rifle Abdallah Abdeaziz Al-Barakat. He said the cooperation protocol contributed to discovery of several shooting champions who made several international achievements in the name of Kuwait.

Colonel Dr Saleh Jamaan Mohammad thanked the officials of KSSC for their interest in signing the time schedule plan to activate the protocol's items. He also

lauded the role of the shooting club in providing all that necessary to train and develop the technical levels of the National Guard members.

Chinese cities battle COVID as Winter Olympics loom

BEIJING: China is battling coronavirus outbreaks in several cities, testing the country's strict "zero-COVID" strategy just weeks before Beijing hosts the Winter Olympics. Here's a rundown of the measures in place in key areas of the world's most populous nation.

Tianjin

Fears are growing about China's largest domestic Omicron cluster to date in the northern port city of Tianjin, where two confirmed cases of the highly transmissible variant were discovered over the weekend. Local virus prevention official Zhang

Ying said Saturday that the strain of virus identified had been transmitting for "at least three generations" - indicating weeks of earlier spread - with the source unclear.

Thirty-three new transmissions were reported in the city yesterday, as authorities launched a second round of mass testing for the 14 million population. Local officials said Tuesday that all 80 patients reported up to that point had received at least two doses of a vaccine. "We are highly concerned about whether the virus has spilled over to areas outside Tianjin... especially Beijing," Zhang said in a Monday interview with state broadcaster CCTV, adding that its rapid transmission has brought "unprecedented challenges".

Residents cannot leave the city without official permission, while an entire district and two nearby townships were locked down. Buses and flights out of the city were cancelled Tuesday, and schools and university campuses have been closed. While small, the Tianjin outbreak is noteworthy because of the city's proximity to Beijing just 150 kilometers away. Authorities have stepped up controls over transport links to

Beijing, with trains cancelled and highway checkpoints installed.

Xi'an

The historic city of 13 million people is in its third week of a strict lockdown as it races to stamp out a 2,000-case outbreak, one of the largest in China for months. Residents may not leave their homes or travel out of the city, famed for its Terracotta Warriors. Local authorities have come under fire for their handling of a lockdown that has included supply issues and medical tragedies. A top health official made a public apology last week over the miscarriage of an eight-month pregnant woman, after a viral video of her being refused entry to a hospital without a COVID test prompted outrage on social media.

Henan

Several cities in the central province of Henan - which lies near Xi'an - have strengthened virus controls in response to hundreds of new infections since late December. The province yesterday reported 87 new local cases. It is not clear how many

of these are Omicron cases. Provincial capital Zhengzhou has imposed a partial lockdown and ordered its nearly 13 million residents to get tested. Last week, one million people in Yuzhou city were put under stay-at-home orders. On Monday, the city of Anyang reported 18 local cases, including two Omicron infections linked to the Tianjin cluster. Authorities have since placed five million residents on lockdown, ordering them to stay at home, while transport links have been cut.

Beijing

The capital last week sealed off its Winter Olympics "closed loop", which will cocoon thousands of athletes and Games staff for weeks without direct physical access to the outside world. Anyone entering the bubble must be fully vaccinated or face a 21-day quarantine when they arrive. Everyone inside will be tested daily and must wear face masks at all times. The city has barred entry to people travelling from places that have recorded COVID cases in the last two weeks and requires all arrivals to show a negative test from the past 48 hours. —AFP

Sports

Southampton mark a new era by thrashing Brentford

Southampton pull further clear of relegation zone

SOUTHAMPTON: Southampton got Serbian businessman Dragan Solak's reign as owner off to a flying start with a 4-1 thrashing of Brentford on Tuesday to pull further clear of the relegation zone. Another season in the top-flight looks safe for the Saints as they moved above Brentford into 11th, 13 points clear of the bottom three.

Southampton's new ownership group Sport Republic was founded by Rasmus Ankersen, who recently stepped down as Brentford co-director of football. Ankersen helped lead the Bees back to the top flight for the first time in 74 years. But it in Southampton's first home game since the reported £100 million (\$135 million) takeover went through, it was a night to forget for the Brentford.

"They (the owners) saw a good game today and a deserved three points," said Southampton boss Ralph Hasenhuttl after his side scored four goals at home for the first time in a Premier League game since 2017. "It's not very often that injury time plays out and we feel comfortable because sometimes it's tight here. Today we had a fantastic performance." Jan Bednarek's

header opened the scoring after just five minutes as he got on the end of James Ward-Prowse's corner.

Thomas Frank's men fought back to level on 23 minutes courtesy of a fine volley from Vitaly Janelt. But Southampton quickly restored their advantage when Ibrahima Diallo's fierce shot from the edge of the box came back off the post and rebounded into his own net off Brentford goalkeeper Alvaro Fernandez. Armando Broja made the game safe after the break when the Chelsea loanee raced clear from halfway before calmly slotting into the bottom-right corner.

Che Adams then came off the bench to round off a fine night for the hosts as he latched onto a simple long ball and chipped the onrushing Fernandez. A sixth consecutive away league game without a win leaves Brentford still in 13th. "Fair play to Southampton but my job is to look at my team's performance," said Frank. "If we are not playing every second of every Premier League match 100 percent then we are not getting anything out of it." — AFP



SOUTHAMPTON: Southampton's English midfielder Che Adams (right) scores his team's fourth goal during the English Premier League football match between Southampton and Brentford at St Mary's Stadium in Southampton, southern England on January 11, 2022. — AFP



KUWAIT: Kuwait's Dieumerci Mbokani #70 (left) vies for the ball against Al-Arabi's defense in the two teams' Kuwait Premier League match at Kuwait Sports Club Stadium on Tuesday. — KUNA

Arabi stun Kuwait to give league lead back to Kazma

By Ahmad Jabr

KUWAIT: Al-Arabi beat Kuwait on Tuesday to reignite competition at the top of the ladder of Kuwait Premier League as Kazma regained the lead with a win against red-hot Salmiya. Kuwait appeared to be in cruise control after regaining the top spot in the standings last week with three wins in their past four games. The hosts were heavy favorites coming to their match against an Arabi team that had struggled to stay in the top five for most of the season, but Alaa Al-Dali's goal in the 53rd minute was enough for the visitors to emerge victorious. The 1-0 win gives titleholders Al-Arabi 17 points at the end of Week 9 and keeps their hopes for a repeat alive.

In the meantime, Kazma capitalized with a 3-1 victory that put them back on top with 20 points; one point ahead of Kuwait, while Salmiya - whose three-game winning streak was snapped - sank down to fifth place with 17 points and trailing Arabi on goal difference. Ahmad Arsan scored for Kazma in the 30th and 55th minute, while Salmiya's goal came 20 minutes before the final whistle through Fahad Al-Rashidi.

Qadsia meanwhile continued their strong performance following their big win against Kazma last week and climbed back to third place with 19 points after their 1-0 win against Al-Nasr who now sit in sixth place with nine points. Kuwaiti international Bader Al-Mutawaa scored Qadsia's goal in the match held at the team's Mohammad Al-Hamad Stadium on Monday. With this goal, Mutawaa, who celebrated his 37th birthday on the same day, became the highest scorer in Kuwait football competitions' history with 211 goals, breaking Syrian international Feras Al-Khateeb's previous record of 210 goals. Kuwait Football Association is expected to announce the schedule for the second part of the season at a later date.

Fulham hit Reading for seven to reignite promotion push

LONDON: Fulham moved back into second place in the Championship by humiliating relegation-threatened Reading 7-0 on Tuesday. It is the second time this season Marco Silva's men have won 7-0 on the road having inflicted the same scoreline on promotion rivals Blackburn in November. The visitors

led 2-0 at the break through Harry Wilson's strike and an Aleksandar Mitrovic penalty. Fulham proved rampant in the second period, as Reading collapsed, with further goals from Wilson, Kenny Tete, Neeskens Kebano, Tosin Adarabioyo and Mitrovic.

The Cottagers had not won in their five previous league matches to fall out of the top two automatic promotion places. But they leapfrogged Blackburn to move just a point behind leaders Bournemouth and with a game in hand to come. Defeat rounded off a miserable few days for Reading after they were dumped out the FA Cup by non-league Kidderminster Harriers on Saturday. The Royals remain just three points above the relegation zone. — AFP

Football and rugby rejoice as Scotland eases COVID curbs

LONDON: Football, rugby and other outdoor events in Scotland can return to full houses next week after the country's government expressed tentative hope on Tuesday that the worst of the Omicron COVID outbreak had passed. First Minister Nicola Sturgeon said a 500-person cap on outdoor events would be lifted from Monday, but that organizers would have to step up checks of attendants' vaccination status.

The decision clears the way for an Old Firm clash between Celtic and Rangers on February 2 and Scotland's Six Nations clash with England three days later to be played in front of sellout crowds. Sturgeon's pro-independence administration, which sets health policy for Scotland, has consistently taken a much tougher line on COVID restrictions than Prime Minister Boris Johnson's UK government in London.

But addressing members of the Scottish parliament in Edinburgh, Sturgeon said: "Living with the virus is what we all desperately want to do. We know that we cannot continually rely on restrictive measures to manage the virus," she said. "But equally we cannot be indifferent to the continued risks the virus poses to health and wellbeing." The Edinburgh government is still urging Scots to work from home and to limit contacts outside their households, Sturgeon said.

Along with Wales, Scotland late last month ordered sports fixtures to be played largely behind closed doors in response to a surge in infections of the new Omicron variant. Johnson's government imposed no such restriction in England, and Sturgeon said there were signs that Scotland was "starting to turn the corner" on the Omicron spike. The news has been warmly welcomed by sports authorities who feared another financial hit after the entire 2020/2021 Scottish football season and Six Nations were played without fans in the stadiums.

Scottish Premiership clubs brought forward a planned winter break by a week to minimize the disruption caused by the restrictions. "Football is not the same without supporters, and I know how much it will mean to them to be back in stadiums watching matches again," said Neil Doncaster, chief executive of the Scottish Professional Football League. "This news will also be a real financial boost for our 42 member clubs, who have faced an incredibly challenging set of circumstances since the pandemic began."

Scotland will also host France at Murrayfield in the Six Nations on February 26. The Scottish Rugby Union (SRU) had reportedly considered moving those matches to England unless the restrictions were eased. "Scottish Rugby has welcomed today's confirmation from the Scottish Government that attendance limits on outdoor events will be lifted from next week," the SRU said in a statement. "This will enable the forthcoming Guinness Six Nations matches to go ahead and we continue, as planned, to host England and France at BT Murrayfield, starting with the Calcutta Cup on Saturday 5 February." —AFP

NFL's sack spree continues; Giants fire head coach

NEW YORK: The New York Giants fired head coach Joe Judge on Tuesday, the fourth sacking of an NFL head coach since the end of the regular season last weekend. Judge was relieved of his duties after just two seasons in charge at the Giants, who finished bottom of the NFC East this season with a 4-13 record. Team president John Mara said in a statement that the Giants ownership had axed Judge after deciding the franchise needed to "move in another direction." "I said before the season started that I wanted to feel good about the direction we were headed when we played our last game of the season," Mara said.

"Unfortunately, I cannot make that statement, which is why we have made this decision." Judge, 40, was hired as Giants head coach in 2020 after stints as an assistant coach with the New England Patriots. He led the Giants to a 6-10 record in his first season, but was unable to build on that during the 2021 campaign, with his team finishing the season with six straight losses, including a 22-7 home defeat to Washington on Sunday.

Judge's dismissal comes after a round of sackings rocked the NFL on Monday, with the Miami Dolphins, Minnesota Vikings and Chicago Bears all firing their head coaches.

The Dolphins pulled the biggest surprise in sacking Brian Flores, while the Vikings dispensed with veteran coach Mike Zimmer. The Bears, meanwhile, fired Matt Nagy after the team failed to reach the playoffs once more. The Giants had signaled their readiness to wield the axe on Monday with the dismissal of general manager Dave Gettleman. — AFP

Classifieds

Hospitals & Clinics

Sabah Hospital	24812000	Kaizen center	25716707
Amiri Hospital	22450005	Rawda	22517733
Maternity Hospital	24843100	Adaliya	22517144
Mubarak Al-Kabir Hospital	25312700	Khalidiya	24848075
Chest Hospital	24849400	Kaifan	24849807
Farwaniya Hospital	24892010	Shamiya	24848913
Adan Hospital	23940620	Shuwaikh	24814507
Ibn Sina Hospital	24840300	Abdullah Salem	22549134
Al-Razi Hospital	24846000	Nuzha	22526804
Physiotherapy Hospital	24874330/9	Industrial Shuwaikh	24814764
		Qadsiya	22515088
		Dasmah	22532265
		Bneid Al-Gar	22531908

Clinics

CHANGE OF NAME

I, Satvinder Singh s/o Gurcharan Singh R/o st. no. 1-A, Near Poly Technical College W.No. 08, New Gobind Nagar Hoshiarpur Punjab have changed my name from Satvinder Singh to Satwinder Singh. Concerned Note. (C 1403) 10-1-2022

I, Ifran 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 Ifran to Irfan Khan in all my dealings and documents, I will be known by name of Irfan (Given Name) and Khan (Surname). (C 1000).

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Mali beat title hopefuls Tunisia

Tale of two penalties as Mali stun Tunisia at Cup of Nations



LIMBE: Tunisia's midfielder Hannibal Mejri (left) fights for the ball with Mali's midfielder Diadie Samassekou during the Group F Africa Cup of Nations (CAN) 2021 football match between Tunisia and Mali at Limbe Omnispport Stadium yesterday. — AFP

LIMBE: Mali beat title hopefuls Tunisia 1-0 in a match that was a tale of two penalties yesterday as the Africa Cup of Nations moved to Limbe in Cameroon's southwest, a region on edge due to the conflict led by anglophone separatists. Ibrahima Kone's spot-kick shortly after half-time proved the different for Mali in the Group F game, but Tunisia could have earned a draw only for Wahbi Khazri to have his late penalty saved at the other end.

Mali held on despite having substitute El Bilal Toure sent off late on, and the result is a setback for Tunisia, the 2004 continental champions, as another of the tournament's leading contenders struggled in

the heat and humidity of a mid-afternoon kick-off in Cameroon.

On Tuesday it was Algeria, the title-holders, who were held by Sierra Leone in Douala, while 24 hours before that Senegal needed a last-gasp penalty to edge Zimbabwe. After an average of a goal a game in the first nine matches at the tournament, here was another encounter lacking in goal-mouth excitement, although the Malian supporters who comfortably outnumbered their Tunisian counterparts enjoyed their afternoon.

From the stands in the coastal town of Limbe the eye was regularly drawn to the stunning view down

the hill to the Gulf of Guinea rather than the action on the pitch, although just staging matches here at all is an achievement. Separate unrest in the anglophone region means the road from economic capital Douala to Limbe is lined with patrolling members of the armed forces, and there are checkpoints at the entrance to the town itself.

Mauritania and Gambia, also based here, were due to meet in the other Group F game later. A strong and athletic Mali side, whose line-up included six players based in Europe's big five leagues, were the better team on balance, coming closest in the first half from a Massadio Haidara shot that fizzed just past. They

were awarded a spot-kick for handball just after the restart and Kone, of Norwegian club Sarspborg, finished emphatically.

Khazri, the Tunisia captain, had a free-kick tipped over shortly after as they pushed for an equalizer, and their big chance finally came as the game entered the last quarter of an hour. The Zambian referee Janny Sikazwe initially waved away appeals for handball in the Malian box before changing his mind after a VAR review, but Khazri's penalty was superbly saved by goalkeeper Ibrahim Mounkoro. Toure was sent off for a reckless late challenge not long after coming on, but the 10 men held out. — AFP

'Mr Dakar' strikes as title beckons for Al-Attiyah

BISHA: The Dakar Rally's record 14-time champion Stephane Peterhansel powered to stage 10 success yesterday as only a mechanical meltdown appears now to stand between Nasser Al-Attiyah and the 2022 title. The Qatari three-time winner heads into today's penultimate stage 32min 40sec clear of France's nine-time world rally champion Sebastien Loeb.

"The gap is too big and the race is no longer in our hands, but we're still hanging in there," shrugged Loeb after the 375km drive from Wadi ad-Dawasir to Bisha. Despite his runaway lead Al-Attiyah was retaining the caution required for an event where victory can disappear as easily as a mirage in the Saudi Arabian desert.

"We're getting there, little by little," said the multi-faceted sportsman who took skeet shooting bronze at the 2012 London Olympics. "It's not over yet, there are still two days to go and even a podium spot will be hard to get." Peterhansel, known as 'Mr Dakar', won last year, three decades after his first victory on two wheels in 1991. The only competitor to win the famed rally in Africa, South America and Asia, Peterhansel was thrilled to land a stage in his Audi hybrid.

"I'm not necessarily a stage hunter, but each Audi driver has now won a stage, and that's fantastic," the Frenchman said. "When Carlos (Sainz) became the first driver to win a Dakar stage in an electric car, it was a milestone, now we confirmed that performance." With Sainz taking second there was double reason for Audi

to celebrate. "This is good for morale, not least because it comes after a complicated start to the rally," said Peterhansel. "We need to win in 2023. Failure is not an option."

Brothers-in-law

In the bike category France's Adrien Van Beveren moved to the top of the rankings after a day marked by the premature end of Kevin Benavides' title defense. Argentina's 2021 champion came unstuck 133km into the stage when his KTM suffered a terminal breakdown. Benavides had started the day in fifth, 10min22sec adrift.

Another KTM rider, Matthias Walkner, also had a difficult day, losing the overall lead after going off course with a navigational error to finish quarter of an hour behind Australian stage winner Toby Price. Van Beveren, on a Yamaha, gave his chances of succeeding Benavides a massive boost by finishing fourth, at three and a half minutes, to reclaim the bike rankings' summit after briefly holding sway at the weekend.

With only two days to go he is almost six minutes clear of Briton's 2017 champion Sam Sunderland, his brother-in-law. Sunderland reflected: "All in all, I'm happy, I prepared well this year and I think it shows. I've led the race for seven days. Now we just need to go flat out again tomorrow." Today's 11th stage is a 346km special and the last day in the dunes ahead of the closing short drive to the finish in Jeddah tomorrow. — AFP

Grizzlies win 10th straight; Clippers stun Nuggets

LOS ANGELES: Ja Morant scored 29 points as the red-hot Memphis Grizzlies won their 10th-straight game with a 116-108 victory over the Golden State Warriors on Tuesday night. Morant seized control in the late stages of the fourth quarter, scoring five points in the final minute as the third-place Grizzlies closed the gap on the second-place Warriors in the Western Conference standings. "I felt like I was aggressive. I got going very early," said Morant. "I made them change their scheme up. If you blitz me I feel like I have a lot of guys who can score the basketball."

"Pretty much cat and mouse, we just had to take what their defense gave us." The Grizzlies are now within 2 1/2 games of the Warriors after having been eight games back on November 29. Ziaire Williams and Tyus Jones had 17 points each for Memphis in front of a crowd of 17,800 at FedExForum arena. Jones keyed a fourth-quarter rally that put the Grizzlies ahead for good. He connected on all five of his three-point attempts.

Stephen Curry led the Warriors with 27 points, while Klay Thompson finished with 14 points. Andrew Wiggins and Gary Payton II scored 13 each. Morant, the 2020 rookie of the year, is just a week removed from a sprained knee that sidelined him for 12 games. He has consistently been able to elevate his game against the best teams in the league, scoring 30 or more points against the Phoenix Suns, Brooklyn Nets, and Los Angeles Lakers during the 10-game streak. The Warriors were missing Draymond Green, who was out with a sore left calf.

In Los Angeles, Amir Coffey scored 18



MEMPHIS: Stephen Curry #30 of the Golden State Warriors goes to the basket against Ja Morant #12 of the Memphis Grizzlies during the first half at FedExForum on January 11, 2022 in Memphis, Tennessee. — AFP

points as the Los Angeles Clippers rallied from a 25-point second half deficit for a stunning 87-85 victory over the Denver Nuggets. The Clippers scored just 28 points in the first half before finding themselves down by 25 in the third quarter. They scratched and clawed their way back to take an 83-81 lead on Coffey's three-pointer with 2:30 remaining. Coffey also had seven assists and four steals.

Reggie Jackson and Terance Mann added 13 points apiece for Los Angeles. Marcus Morris had 12 points and Eric Bledsoe tallied 11 as the Clippers won for just the fifth time in the past 14 games. Aaron Gordon scored a season-high 30 points and 12 rebounds and Nikola Jokic added 21 points, 13 rebounds in the loss. Jeff Green had 12 points and Monte Morris tallied 11 for the Nuggets.

Elsewhere, Jae Crowder scored 19 points and Chris Paul finished with 15 points and 12 assists as the Phoenix

snapped Toronto's six-game winning streak with a 99-95 victory in Toronto. Devin Booker provided the late-game heroics for the Suns, nailing the go-ahead jump shot with 62 seconds remaining and then adding two free throws with six seconds left before fouling out. Booker finished with 16 points. Booker shot four for 13 from the field and two of seven from three-point range.

"It was a fight all night," he said. "They beat us up a little bit, but down the stretch we picked it up a little bit and did what we had to do." Deandre Ayton and Mikal Bridges scored 12 points in the win at Scotiabank Arena. "That's one of those games you've got to put your hard hat on," Paul said. In Chicago, Nikola Vucevic scored 22 points and DeMar DeRozan delivered 20 points and 12 rebounds as the Chicago Bulls clobbered the Detroit Pistons 133-87 to win their 10th game in the last 11. — AFP