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# Lawmakers urge government to create more jobs for Kuwaitis

Assembly votes to reduce detention, preventive jail; Coronavirus cases nears 5,000

Kuwait Times, Kuwait News' Yasser Al-Zayyat's photo among 'world best'



KUWAIT: Several world news agencies selected a picture by Kuwait Times and Kuwait News photographer Yasser Al-Zayyat among the 'best photos of the week' in yet another achievement in the organization's continued endeavor to reaching excellence in local, regional and international arenas. — (See Page 3)

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: Lawmakers yesterday called on authorities to strictly apply laws and decisions issued to create more jobs for Kuwaitis in the public sector and to reduce the appointment of expats in such jobs. The calls came during a debate on three draft laws that aim to create more jobs for citizens. The bills were however returned to the concerned Assembly panel to include remarks made by MPs.

MP Abdulaziz Al-Saqabi said that unemployment among Kuwaitis rose from 26 percent to 32 percent in the past six months, while MP Osama Al-Shaheen said that Kuwaitis are now coming back to the public sector from the private sector because of the lack of incentives. MP Saleh Al-Mutairi claimed that advertisements for government jobs are "tailored for expats", while MP Muhannad Al-Sayer called for preventing expats from working two jobs.

MP Abdulkarim Al-Kundari said that ministers should not be given the power of exemption in employment, adding that expats are given public sector jobs from "the back door". MP Saifi Al-Saifi said that it is strange that after 80 years, oil companies are still appointing foreigners in the oil sector. "Foreign manpower is milking the country and we need a law to force the private sector to employ Kuwaitis".

During yesterday's special session, the Assembly approved provisional amendments to the procedural law to cut detention at police stations to a maximum of 48 hours from four days and preventive arrest for up to 10 days down from three weeks. Lawmakers charged that the long preventive detention is being misused to punish suspects who are later acquitted in court. One of the amendments scraps detention for people suspected of misdemeanor charges whose penalty is less than three months in jail.

The Assembly also approved amendments to the press and publication law and the audio-visual law to expand freedom of speech and reduce penalties on the freedom of expression charges.

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## Students struggle as Lebanon crisis cripples the sector

BEIRUT: Power shortages and soaring petrol prices mean many Lebanese university students can neither afford to reach their classes nor study from home, a conundrum that is ravaging a generation's future. Agnes, a 22-year-old dentistry student from south Lebanon, is among the few still plodding to class in Beirut four days a week.

The five hours she spends on a bus daily now costs her 1.3 million Lebanese pounds a month—"that's half of my father's salary", she said. Such expenses are now

beyond the reach of most Lebanese students, with their country in the throes of a financial, political and health crisis that has ravaged its economy. The national currency has lost more than 95 percent of its value on the black market, and the minimum wage of 675,000 pounds is worth little more than \$20, which barely pays for a full tank of petrol.

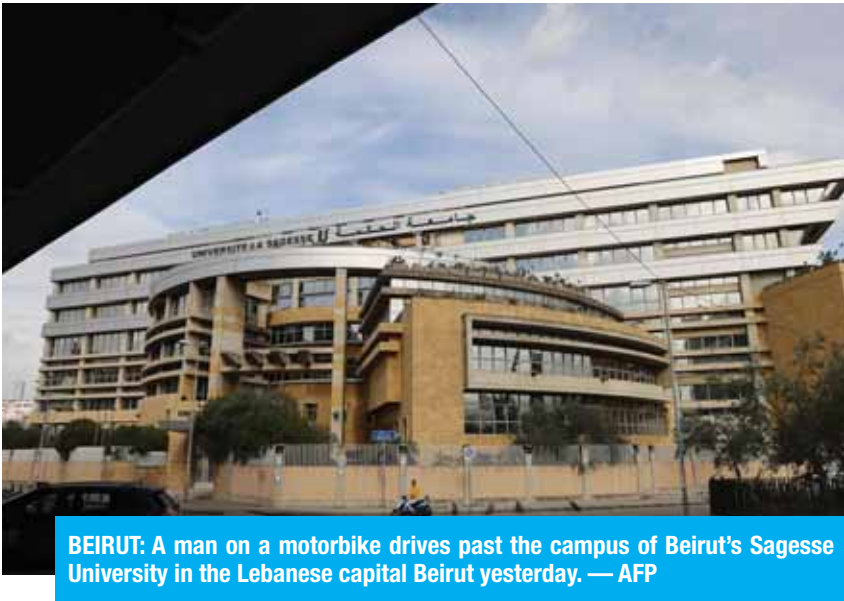
Transport "is becoming more expensive than my semester's tuition fees", said Tarek, a 25-year-old student at the Islamic University of Lebanon who, like the others interviewed, declined to give a family name. As a result, and also because teachers face similar difficulties, many universities continue to offer online classes. But staying connected during state power cuts that often last more than 20 hours a day also comes at a cost.

Amina, 22, a student at the public

Lebanese University, said she has reverted to doing most of her work from books due to the lack of electricity at home. There are "about 75 students in the class, of whom a maximum of five" can attend online, she said, adding that she needed to study around nine hours a day in order not to fall behind. To keep laptops and modems running, families have to pay for expensive private generators, but that option too is unaffordable for many.

Some students are spending their money on mobile phone data so they can connect their computers to an internet hotspot. The spaghetti wiring connecting laptops, routers and phone chargers to all manner of back-up devices from commercial uninterruptible power supplies to homemade contraptions using car batteries—means study areas now often look like the back of an IT workshop.

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BEIRUT: A man on a motorbike drives past the campus of Beirut's Sagesse University in the Lebanese capital Beirut yesterday. — AFP

## UAE condemns ship seizure

DUBAI: The seizure of a UAE-flagged ship by Yemeni rebels is a "dangerous escalation", the United Arab Emirates said yesterday, urging the UN Security Council to adopt a firm position. The UAE's first public condemnation of the hijacking comes 10 days after Houthi rebels captured the Rwabee with 11 crew on board in the Red Sea.

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## What's in Wordle? Five-letter puzzle craze goes global

WASHINGTON: Five letters, six attempts, and just one puzzle to solve per day: the "Wordle" formula couldn't be simpler, but in a matter of weeks the online brain teaser has got millions guessing around the world. "It just grabs you," daily player Susan Drubin told AFP of the code-breaking word challenge — perhaps best described as a cross between the retro board game "Mastermind" and a daily

crossword. "The great thing about it, is it only takes a few minutes, usually, and it's a very nice, tiny distraction," said the 65-year-old from the Washington suburbs. The puzzle's rise has been meteoric: according to The New York Times, 90 people played on November 1. Two months later, on January 2, more than 300,000 tackled the challenge. The Guardian put the daily player count last weekend at two million, and rising...

Wordle's rules are disarmingly simple: find the word of the day in six tries or fewer. Each guess must be a valid five letter word: letters in the correct space turn green, while letters that are part of the answer but in the wrong spot turn yellow. Only one word is offered up per day, and it is the same

Continued on Page 2



WASHINGTON: This photo illustration shows a person playing online word game 'Wordle' on a mobile phone in Washington, DC. — AFP



## Local

# Kuwaiti short film 'The Gift' wins prestigious int'l award

## Only GCC movie to participate in 18th Vesuvius International Film Festival

By Nawara Fattahova

**KUWAIT:** Kuwaiti short film 'The Gift' was awarded the best short drama at the 18th edition of the Vesuvius International Film Festival in Italy (an IMDb qualifier festival) on Dec 31, 2021. This was the only movie from the GCC region participating in the festival. The Gift ranked first among 40 other films in this category. Last Monday, 'The Gift' was also awarded as 'the Best Microfilm' at the independent shorts awards, Los Angeles.

The film is written and directed by Mohammed Al-Hamdi and stars Abdullah Safar, Sara Hashim, Caroline Saeed, Ghala Al-Hamdi and TV presenter Zamzam Salem. Yaqoub Muqadam is the shooting director. Its running time is 4:05 minutes. The plot revolves around the idea of a woman deciding to present her friend an unexpected gift on her birthday.

"As a pet breeder and lover of animals, I'm in contact with various animal rights organizations and volunteer committees. We always face the common problem of people abandoning their pets after adopting them for a short time, especially after they buy a pet as a gift for someone who is not interested in animals in the first place. Also, people buy animals as a trend for a few months and then throw them away," Hamdi told Kuwait Times.

### Animal care

Cats and dogs are most affected by this negligent behavior. "These animals are friends of humans. These animals have needs. They need health, mental and nutritional care. The rising cases of abandoned animals affected me greatly. So my way of support and providing help is through my hobby of directing and producing movies," stressed Hamdi.

From here came the idea of 'The Gift'. "The cast and crew, in addition to my family members, supported my idea. I present workshops as a certified media

trainer, and this movie was a practical application of my last workshop," he explained.

Initially, Hamdi didn't plan to participate in film festivals. "After I posted the movie online, I noticed 32 different accounts on Instagram reposted it. Then some officials from various film festivals contacted me and invited me to participate with this film. I participated in six festivals and even qualified for the finals, but didn't win. Finally, I won at the Vesuvius International Film Festival, which I consider a present for the New Year," he pointed out.

### Bigger role

Zamzam Salem had a bigger role in the movie than the lone scene at the end. "The cat seen at the end of the film was almost impossible to control and shoot. Zamzam controlled it and made the shooting possible," he said. This was the second time Zamzam worked on a film with Hamdi. "We are like one family. We share the same ideas and I trust his work, his choice of characters and his ideas, which encouraged me to participate in this movie. I love pets and the media, and this movie combined these two. The success of this movie is not in its running time, but the idea. The message of 'The Gift' is what matters," said Zamzam.

There are new movies in the pipeline. "I'm preparing short and long films in 2022. I will participate with two new short movies in upcoming film festivals. I'm also preparing to shoot full-length movies in September. This is a part of series of films on animals with the hashtag: We Are Their Voice," said Hamdi.

"In Kuwait we have many talented people in this field. Since they are producing movies, they will definitely improve. Most of the team that worked on this movie did this for the first time, including the cameramen, producers and some actors. The message of this movie is that animals are not random gifts to be discarded, but souls that need our care and love," he concluded.



The film's poster



Mohammed Al-Hamdi



Zamzam Salem

## NBK Academy celebrates 25th batch's graduation

**KUWAIT:** National Bank of Kuwait (NBK) Academy celebrated the graduation of the 25th batch, the 2nd in 2021, of newly hired employees who successfully met admission criteria for this intensive course, specially designed for fresh Kuwaiti university graduates.

The graduation ceremony was attended by Emad Al-Ablani, GM - Group Human Resources and Najla Al-Sager, Head of Talent Management, Group Human Resources at National Bank of Kuwait, subject to all precautionary measures taken by the bank against coronavirus.

The Academy's training program, which lasted for four months, hosted 13 participants and covered various areas of the banking business, such as banking principles, risk management, financial accounting, marketing, negotiation, consumer and commercial lending, as well as training on creativity, innovation and design thinking. Various blend-

ed learning interventions occurred through in-person and virtual courses. Furthermore, their development continues through eLearning after the academy ends.

On this occasion, Najla Al-Sager, Head of Talent Management, Group Human Resources at National Bank of Kuwait, said: "NBK Academy is one of the initiatives we are proud of, aiming to qualify professional national banking leaders."

NBK pays great attention to enhancing the skills of its employees, harnessing all its capabilities to contribute to their career development by providing training and development programs in cooperation with the most prestigious educational institutions, she added.

Sager emphasized that NBK's strategy to develop its human cadres is placed at the heart of its strategic plans, due to its belief that an efficient work team guarantees the provision of high-quality banking services of all kinds, and across the different markets, the bank operates in.

Launched 13 years ago, NBK Academy embodies the bank's strategy to recruit fresh graduate national talents as well as develop and qualify them to work in the banking sector. It is worth mentioning that the program content is regularly enhanced to keep pace with the latest international researches



and studies related to the banking sector and administrative sciences.

The Academy reflects NBK's vision to support sustainable human capital development as one of its top strategic priorities and a shared responsibility between the various governmental institutions and the private sector.

NBK Academy was launched in 2008 with a view to pave the way for fresh Kuwaiti graduates to join the banking services sector. The Academy provides graduates with the best training programs developed in cooperation with leading international institutions and universities to meet the demands of the labor market.

## Students struggle as Lebanon crisis...

Continued from Page 1

"All of this is additional cost," said 22-year-old Ghassan, a student at the Sagesse University.

Several institutions have set up special student funds in an attempt to maintain enrolment levels, said Jean-Noel Baleo, Middle East director of the Francophone University Agency-a network of French-speaking institutions. "Some universities are keeping students who cannot pay, which is a form of hidden bursary," he told AFP. But he said such Band-Aid fixes were barely slowing the decline of a higher education system that was once a source of national pride, and whose multilingual graduates flooded the region's elites.

"It's a collapse we're talking about, and there's more bad news on the way," said Baleo, who predicted the definitive closure of some universities and an

intensifying brain drain. Education Minister Abbas Halabi admitted he was largely powerless to stem the sector's crisis. "I tried to secure subsidies for the Lebanese University from foreign donors but at this stage they have not replied positively," he said. "The Lebanese state does not have the means."

Even as the financial meltdown threatens several pillars of the country's education system, Lebanon's political elite-widely blamed for collapse-have resisted reforms that would open the way for international assistance, and the cabinet has not met in three months. "Today, the easiest option is to set up online classes, even if that remains a difficult option. Rising transport costs make it the least-worst fix," Baleo said.

In the meantime, students like Tarek say the crisis is turning university life into an ordeal. "It's exhausting and depressing," he said. "I am considering quitting university... The wages are so bad that you're not even motivated to graduate to find a job," he said. Student Ghassan said he only wanted to graduate so it could help him leave the country. "All the youth want to leave because there's no clear future here," he said.— AFP

vessel's seizure has raised fears the seven-year war could spill over into the busy Red Sea shipping lane, a vital conduit for Gulf oil and cargo.

It prompted a coalition threat to bomb rebel-held ports including Hodeida, a lifeline for the shattered country where millions are teetering on the brink of famine. Hans Grundberg, the UN's special envoy for Yemen, also said violence was escalating with clashes in Marib and Shabwa provinces, air strikes in Sanaa and Ta'ez and fighting near Hodeida, as well as increasing drone and missile attacks on Saudi Arabia.

"We appear to once more be entering an escalatory cycle with predictable devastating implications for civilians and for the immediate prospects of peace," the Swedish diplomat told the Security Council. "I am worried that battles could intensify along other fronts." Yemen's civil war began in 2014 when the Houthis seized Sanaa, prompting Saudi-led forces to intervene to prop up the government the following year. The UN has estimated the war killed 377,000 people by the end of 2021, both directly and indirectly through hunger and disease. — AFP

## What's in Wordle? Five-letter puzzle...

Continued from Page 1

for everyone. Can't crack today's puzzle? You'll just have to wait until tomorrow for the next one.

Although the game itself is accessed on a website, rather than an app, players can generate a shareable widget, with six lines of colored squares indicating how many tries it took to solve the riddle - without giving away the day's answer, of course. After a couple of weeks, Drubin - like legions of players - took to sharing her results on social media under the hashtag #Wordle. And thus, a viral phenomenon was born.

### 'Just fun'

Part of what makes Wordle special is that it costs nothing to play - and is also, more unusually, ad-free. Its designer Josh Wardle, a software engineer based in Brooklyn but originally from Wales, has decided not to monetize the game. "I think people kind of appreciate that there's this thing online that's just fun," Wardle told The New York Times on Monday. "It's not trying to do anything shady with your data or your eyeballs."

While the game website - "powerlanguage.co.uk/wordle" - is free of ads or pop-ups, it did not take long for enterprising copycats to try to mimic the game concept, devising app store clones for purchase which have since been taken down. The lone app left standing is an unrelated game called "Wordle!" with an exclamation

mark, created by a teenager five years ago. Its developer Steven Cravotta, now 24, says he initially "had no idea what was going on" when his app starting logging more than 40,000 daily downloads. "I didn't know it was a craze," Cravotta told The Wall Street Journal.

### Bragging rights

For Mikael Jakobsson, a research coordinator for the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Game Lab, Wordle falls into the "gap-filler" category, a game "that you can pull out when you're waiting for a friend or... for the bus." He puts its success partly down to how easy it is to share results with friends, either by social media or word-of-mouth.

When you crack the puzzle, "you feel very proud of yourself... You have that share button right there. So then you can brag a little bit about it, which we tend to like doing," Rachel Kowert, a psychologist specializing in video games, also points to the social comparison theory, which holds that everyone wants to evaluate themselves in relation to others. The temptation is such that tongue-in-cheek debates have sprung up online about muting friends who tweet out their "humble-brag" scores.

Another key part of the game's allure, says Kowert, is that being "limited to one a day gives you a sense of psychological scarcity." "You're not overdoing it in any one session, and it keeps you wanting to come back to continue to play day after day," she said. Wordle is already being adapted into other languages, including French, having swiftly conquered the English-speaking world - although, spoiler alert, the Wednesday word's American spelling triggered howls of online player protests from its creator's fellow Britons. — AFP

## Lawmakers urge government to...

Continued from Page 1

Amendments to the press and publications law reduce the capital needed to establish a newspaper from KD 250,000 to just KD

100,000. The amendments to the audio-visual law scrap criminalizing remarks that could undermine relations with Arab countries.

In another development, the Health Ministry yesterday reported 4,883 new coronavirus cases, a new record high, with one death. The number of patients at intensive care units is 17 and those receiving treatment at hospitals increased to 213. The number of active cases climbed to 32,556 cases.

## UAE condemns ship seizure...

Continued from Page 1

The Iran-backed insurgents say the ship was carrying military hardware but the Saudi-led coalition fighting in support of the Yemeni government insists it was medical equipment.

"We condemn, in the strongest terms, the Houthi act of piracy against the civilian cargo vessel Rwabee off the port of Hodeida," Lana Nusseibeh, the UAE's permanent representative to the United Nations, told the Security Council.

"This is a dangerous escalation against the safety of maritime navigation in the Red Sea. It requires the adoption of a firm position by the Security Council," she said, according to a foreign ministry statement. The



## Local

# COVID-19 emergency field teams inspect Assima Mall

## Inspectors check shops, customers' adherence to health protocols



KUWAIT: Public Authority for Manpower and Ministry of Commerce and Industry inspectors participate in an inspection tour at the Assima Mall. — Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat

By Nawara Fattahova

KUWAIT: The COVID-19 Emergency Committee formed by the Council of Ministers includes field inspection teams of the Public Authority for Manpower (PAM) in cooperation with the Ministry of Commerce and Kuwait Municipality, which are in charge of inspecting health requirements in different public places and businesses. As part of their inspections, PAM inspectors along with Ministry of Commerce and Industry inspectors went on an inspection tour at the Assima Mall on Wednesday.

Fatma Abdul Malik, who is in charge of the women inspection team of PAM said that the authority's inspectors carried out more than 63,000 inspections since the beginning of the pandemic, during which they issued about 7,000 warnings and 790 fines. "These included beauty salons and other businesses violating health requirements," she told Kuwait Times.

PAM inspectors go on these tours in teams or individually. "Sometimes we cover one governorate or certain businesses. Currently we are focusing on hotels to make sure no weddings or parties are taking place there. We also focus on salons, health clubs, tailors and medical clinics," she added.

Once inside the shopping mall, the inspectors look for different things when checking adherence to health protocols. "Apart from wearing facemasks, we also check cosmetic stores to make sure they

don't have testers. Fitting rooms are currently available for customers, but we check that the customers are wearing facemasks and that the rooms are frequently disinfected," stressed Abdul Malik.

### Working every day

Jaafar Al-Ramzi, supervising inspector of PAM, said that inspectors have been working every day



63,000+ inspections since start of pandemic

since the beginning of the pandemic. "We check the health requirements and spread awareness among visitors on this issue. We also see that employees and visitors adhere to health requirements," he pointed out.

Food and drinks are not allowed inside the stores, so that customers don't remove their facemasks inside commercial centers, he explained. "At restaurants, we check the social distancing to be at least two meters. Each shop should have sanitizers,



and the contents should not exceed more than 60 percent ethanol. The limit number of customers in each store is still applicable," said Ramzi.

The inspectors of the Ministry of Commerce are also focusing on following health requirements during this period. "We focus on wearing facemasks, social distancing, floor signs, temperature checking and the availability of hand sanitizers. The inspectors issue warnings and undertakings, and fine the employee or business owner. Deterrent penalties may be applied on the violators," said inspector Mithkar Fahad.

Faisal Al-Ansari, Director of the Technical Staff to supervise goods at the Ministry of Commerce



and head of the health requirements team, stated that they work on two shifts during the morning and evening periods to support the Ministry of Health in helping decrease possible infections with COVID-19.

"Joining the inspections on health requirements did not affect the work of the other department at the Ministry of Commerce. We have special departments at the ministry for each issue. We still inspect prices, licenses and other violations. We have 21 centers in all governorates, in addition to our hotline: 135 and Whatsapp number: 55135135 to receive any complaint of the consumers," explained Ansari.



KUWAIT: Customers are seen at the main fish market in Sharq. — Photos by Fouad Al-Shaikh

## Weather affects fish prices in Kuwait

By Ben Garcia

KUWAIT: There has been a noticeable spike in the prices of fish at Mubarakia fish market. According to a market official who requested anonymity, the price increase has been due to recent adverse weather conditions, rain, cold and the temperature of the sea. "This is expected, especially in the winter season. The fish go to the bottom of the sea to adapt to the temperature, so the catch is low. But this is compensated by imported fish," he said.

Prices of fish depend on their type and size. The price of hamour for example ranges from KD 3.5 per kilo to KD 3 per kilo. Fish like baloul are KD 5 per kilo, nuwaibi KD 2.500, sha-em KD 3, sheem KD 5, nagrou KD 5, crabs KD 1.500 and the bigger size was at KD 2, biyya KD 2, zubaiti KD 4.500, kanad KD 2.500, sheeri KD 2.500, t'lah KD 3.500, m'zeizei KD 5 and faskar KD 3 per kilo. Kuwaitis' favorite fish zubaiddi is also classified depending on size, with large (700 gm to 1 kg) selling for KD 9 per kilo, medium (400 gm to 600 gm) for KD 6 and small (350 gm and less) for KD 4.5.

Prices of fish is much cheaper at the Souq Mubarakia and Souq Sharq fish markets than at hypermarkets and supermarkets. "If you want cheaper and fresher fish, buy them from the central fish markets. Prices are sometimes double in the malls," the official noted. Fish caught in Kuwaiti waters account for only around 20 percent of fish in the market, with the rest imported from various countries including Saudi Arabia, Iran, Pakistan, India, Indonesia, Thailand and Sri Lanka. Zubaiddi, hamour, nuwaibi and maid are some of the varieties of fish popular in Kuwait. Meanwhile, only half of Mubarakia fish market will be open to the public by the end of January, as the other half will be renovated.



## Kuwait Times, Kuwait News' Yasser Al-Zayyat's photo among 'world best'



KUWAIT: Several world news agencies selected a picture by Kuwait Times and Kuwait News photographer Yasser Al-Zayyat among the best photos of the week in yet another achievement in the organization's continued endeavor to reaching excellence in local, regional and international arenas. AFP, The Guardian,



ABC News, Gulf News among others as well as Kuwaiti dailies Al-Qabas and Al-Rai posted Al-Zayyat's picture - showing Kuwait City under heavy fog, highlighting it among the best pictures taken from around the world this past week. Kuwait TV also featured the photo during its daily broadcast yesterday.



## News in brief

Jahra jewelry store  
thieves arrested

KUWAIT: Police arrested four people who appeared in a video clip that circulated on social media showing them stealing from a jewelry store in Jahra, the interior ministry announced yesterday. Earlier, a video went viral online showing thieves clad in white breaking into a Jahra jewelry store, smashing and grabbing gold before escaping. The crime reportedly happened in the early hours of Wednesday morning.

## Murder in the desert

KUWAIT: Police yesterday arrested a man accused of killing a person during a fight in Julaiah. Police rushed to the scene in response to an emergency call reporting that a man died following a fight in the desert. Police were able to arrest the runaway suspect shortly afterwards. Preliminary investigations indicate that the suspect choked the victim to death during a fight before escaping.

## Kuwait oil price soars

KUWAIT: The price of Kuwaiti crude oil surged by \$2.26 to \$85.04 per barrel (pb) on Wednesday, as opposed to \$82.78 pb the day earlier, Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) announced yesterday. Globally, the Brent crude went up by 95 cents to \$84.67 pb and West Texas Intermediate also rose by \$1.42 to \$82.64 pb.

## Speaker offers condolences

KUWAIT: National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem on Wednesday sent a cable of condolences to European Parliament (EP) President Roberta Metsola over the passing away of former EP president David Sassoli. The Italian politician and journalist was 65. He served as EP President since 2019 until his death on January 11. The cable expressed sorrow over the tragic event, as well as recalling Sassoli's efforts in sustaining cooperation between Arab parliaments and the EP.

## Ambassador meets Turkish minister

ANKARA: Kuwait's Ambassador in Ankara Ghassan Al-Zawawi met with Turkish Interior Minister Suleman Soyulu and discussed issues related to Kuwaiti citizens in Turkey. The Embassy of Kuwait said in a statement the two officials also discussed cooperation between the interior ministries in the two countries. Zawawi and Soyulu also talked about means of cementing bilateral relations and cooperation, said the embassy.

## GCC-EU keen on cooperation

RIYADH: Secretary General of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) is keen on boosting GCC-EU cooperation to achieve mutual interest and seek more development, said Secretary General Dr Nayef Al-Hajraf yesterday. The GCC Secretariat revealed that Hajraf's statement came during his meeting with EU Ambassador to Saudi Arabia Patrick Simonnet and several European Ambassadors at the council's headquarter in Riyadh. Hajraf touched upon the outcome of the 42nd GCC summit, which was held in Riyadh on December 14th, and he also displayed the GCC achievements and future plans during the meeting. The meeting also focused on venues of possible cooperation between the EU and the GCC as well as recent regional and international developments.

Incoming flights diverted  
to nearby airports: DGCA

KUWAIT: Kuwait City skyscrapers engulfed in heavy fog early morning yesterday. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

KUWAIT: Incoming flights were temporarily diverted to nearby airports yesterday morning due to fog and low visibility, Kuwait's Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) said. Aircrafts' take-off and landing resumed later yesterday after weather conditions improved in the country, it added. Kuwait forecasters had warned Wednesday that the country would experience low horizontal visibility due to fog. — KUNA



A traditional blacksmith workshop. — Photos by Sajeev K Peter



A traditional diwaniyah.

Kuwait's heritage  
museum revisited

By Sajeev K Peter

KUWAIT: For a lover of history, a visit to Kuwait's heritage museum is a truly rewarding experience. Offering a peek into the historic past, the Kuwait Heritage Museum veritably delineates Kuwait's culture and history. One of the galleries of Kuwait National Museum, this heritage museum highlights the importance of Kuwait's history from the very first days of its founding. Established in 1983 and designed by architect Michel Ecochard, the Heritage Museum depicts, in intricate details, the life and culture of Kuwait and introduces us to Kuwait's vibrant past.

Some of the wax figures exhibited in this segment appear real. The exhibits detail how people in Kuwait survived harsh weather conditions in the past and what they did for a living, be it fishing, weaving or dhow-making, carpentry etc. Aspects such as traditional education are highlighted in a lifelike remodeling of a "kuttab", a small elementary school – a tradition that lasted till the inauguration of the first school in Kuwait called "Al-Mubarakkiyya" in 1912. Every aspect of traditional Kuwaiti life is covered including domestic architecture such as the model of a "Diwaniyah" (main



A traditional fisherfolk village.

reception room), main cloak shop, gun shop, spice market, and the Safat square. A display of traditional writing tools, musical instruments, weapons, cameras, and traditional games offer a slice of life of Kuwait's rich literary and cultural past.

There are rich depictions of ship-building and seafaring life that have been crucial in the multicultural genesis of Kuwait. The Al-Muhallab, an historic dhow — a huge ship outside the National Museum — is a testament to Kuwait's rich seafaring traditions. The museum also hosts numerous

detailed models on shipbuilding and labor with displays of the tools of the Nokhatha (Sea Captain) such as telescopes (darbeel), bild, adad, firjan, etc.

The museum also houses invaluable statues and inscriptions such as a statue of King Mithridates II from the First Millennium BC and the Ikaros Stone, which contains 45 lines of Greek writing, and a letter from one of the kings of the Seleucid Empire to the leader of the island Ikazarkos. A tour of the gallery is, undoubtedly, a journey through Kuwait's cultural heritage and its legacy.



A visitor reads an inscription.



Old shipping documents.



Photographic equipment.



Traditional gun shop.



Traditional fishermen.



Traditional spice vendor.



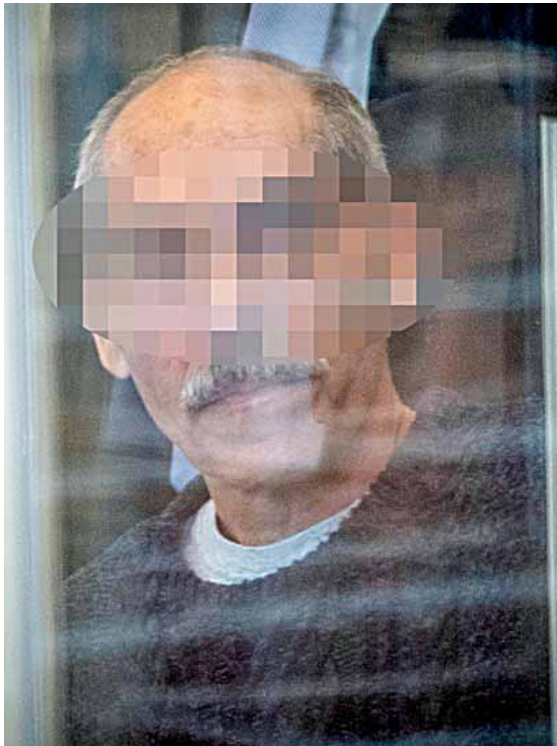


Russia-led troops begin pullback from Kazakhstan

## British PM's lockdown party shame inflames Tory tensions



KOBLENZ, Germany: Women demonstrate outside the courthouse where former Syrian intelligence officer Anwar Raslan (right) stood on trial in Koblenz, western Germany, yesterday as the verdict was spoken on charges for crimes against humanity. —AFP



# Syrian ex-colonel convicted in torture trial

## In a historic verdict, German court sentences Raslan to life in jail

**KOBLENZ, Germany:** A German court yesterday sentenced a former Syrian colonel to life in jail for crimes against humanity in a “historic” verdict marking the end of the first global trial over state-sponsored torture in Syria. Anwar Raslan, 58, was found guilty of overseeing the murder of 27 people at the Al-Khatib detention center in Damascus, also known as “Branch 251”, in 2011 and 2012.

He sought refuge in Germany after deserting the Syrian regime in 2012.

Prosecutors had accused him of overseeing the murder of 58 people and the torture of 4,000 others at the center, but not all of the deaths could be proven. Presiding judge Anne Kerber said the Syrian regime had resorted to “violence” and “the heavy use of munitions” to suppress protests that erupted in March 2011.

Victims held in the regime’s detention centers were not only “tortured but also starved and deprived of air” in unsanitary, crowded cells where they could not sit or lie down, she said.

Kenneth Roth of Human Rights Watch, which provided some of the evidence used in the trial, told reporters in Geneva the verdict was “really historic”.

**‘Systematic torture’**

“The court... clearly and formally established inhumane detention conditions, systematic torture, sexual violence and killings in Syria,” said Markus N. Beeko, head of Amnesty International in Germany. More than 80 witnesses, including 12 regime deserters and many Syrian men and women now living across Europe, took the stand to testify during the trial, with around a dozen also attending the verdict.

Judge Kerber said they deserved “full respect”. Syrian activists gathered outside the court yesterday holding banners and posters with slogans such as “Where are they?” referring to their relatives who have disappeared in Syrian detention centers. Raslan was put on trial in April 2020 along with another lower-ranking defendant, Eyad al-Gharib, who was accused of helping to arrest protesters

and deliver them to the detention center.

Gharib was sentenced to four and a half years in prison last year for complicity in crimes against humanity, in the first verdict worldwide over torture by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s government. The case against the two men was brought using the legal principle of universal jurisdiction, which allows offences to be prosecuted even if they were committed in a different country.

Other such cases have also sprung up in Germany, France and Sweden, as Syrians who have sought refuge in Europe turn to the only legal means currently available to them.

In another prominent case in Germany, the trial of a former Syrian doctor charged with crimes against humanity is due to open next week. Amnesty International’s Beeko said he expected “further trials in Germany and other states to build on these findings in accordance with the principle of universal jurisdiction”. Raslan remained emotionless as his sentence was read out in court, wearing a green winter jacket and listening to the verdict through headphones.

**‘Fists, wires and whips’**

Prosecutors say he oversaw rape and sexual abuse, “electric shocks”, beatings with “fists, wires and whips” and “sleep deprivation” at the prison. Witnesses reported flogging, electric shocks, cigarette burns and blows to the genitals. Some say they were hung by the wrists, with only the tips of their feet still touching the ground.

One man testified about mass graves that he was responsible for cataloguing.

“I hope we were able to give a voice to those who are deprived of it” in Syria, Wassim Mukdad, a former detainee who testified in the trial, told AFP ahead of the verdict.

Images of dead Syrians smuggled out of the country by “Caesar”, a defector who had worked as a photographer for the Syrian military police, were also used as evidence in the trial. Raslan has never attempted to hide his past and told police about his time in Syria in February 2015 when he sought police protection in Berlin. —AFP

## France to ease UK travel restrictions

**PARIS:** France will today ease coronavirus travel restrictions for travellers from Britain, enabling vaccinated tourists to visit if they have a negative test, the government announced. A blanket ban on non-essential travel announced on December 16 caused major disruptions over the Christmas and New Year holidays, but was justified by the French government as needed to keep the spread of the Omicron variant at bay.

“The wide circulation today of the variant in both countries has led the government to make the following changes,” a statement from Jean Castex’s office said. From Friday, all vaccinated travellers entering France from the UK will only have to show a negative PCR or antigen test taken 24 hours before their departure. The unvaccinated will have to provide a “compelling reason” to travel such as a family emergency, however, and have to quarantine for 10 days upon arrival in France at an address that must be registered with security forces.

The opening of the border will allow thousands of winter-sports enthusiasts to head to the French Alps, which are popular with British skiers who had to cancel holidays booked over the Christmas and New Year period. “We’re very relieved and very happy to get operational again, starting this weekend,” Alex Sykes, flight operations manager at the UK-based Mark Warner travel operator, told AFP. “We’re hoping this is the last of the disruptions this winter season.” The curbs over Christmas meant all of the company’s French ski holidays were cancelled and “a big business period was lost,” he added. “It’s been a rollercoaster ride for nearly two years now.”

**‘Excellent news’**

The restrictions also dealt an economic blow to French Alpine ski resorts, which were closed last winter because of COVID restrictions in France. French Tourism Minister Jean-Baptiste Lemoine said last week that stays in the Savoie and Haut-Savoie areas, where most resorts are located, had been down by 10-20 percent over the Christmas and New Year period compared with 2019.

Lemoine said yesterday that Britons accounted for 15 percent of all visitors to French ski resorts, and even more in some of the biggest high-altitude resorts. “The decision this morning will enable them to recoup some of their losses, I hope,” he told the TV5



MARSEILLE: Teachers and schools personnel march during a demonstration called by teachers’ unions to denounce “an indiscreet mess” because of the new government’s measures against COVID-19, in Marseille southern France yesterday. —AFP

Monde channel.

The head of the National Association of Ski Resort Mayors Jean-Luc Boch told the Dauphine Libere newspaper that the changes were “excellent news for sales, for visitor numbers and above all for British people. “They are certainly the most loyal customers in our resorts,” added the mayor of La

Plagne, a large ski station.

The French travel rules came at a time when relations between the British and French governments were at historic lows over a host of disagreements related to Brexit, as well as cross-Channel migration and a poached submarine contract with Australia. —AFP

## Ray of hope peeks through Turkey’s Armenia border

**ANKARA:** The tracks have been abandoned to birds and stray dogs at the last Turkish train stop before the Armenian border, shuttered for three decades by a history of bloody feuds. But a rare ray of hope is shining across the snow-capped mountains towering over Turkey’s northeastern edge. The first direct contacts in years between the rivals’ envoys will take place in Moscow on Friday. For the economically starved locals of the Turkish frontier town of Akyaka, these talks could not have come soon enough.

“Since the border was shut in 1993, our region has become the country’s blind spot, locked on all sides,” said Engin Yildirim, director of the Akyaka traders’ association. “The border is our only window to the world.” The Soviet Union’s chaotic breakup in 1991 set off a wave of regional conflicts, sparking an all-out war between Christian Armenians and Muslim Azerbaijanis over the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Armenia’s victory prompted Turkey – its relations with Yerevan already poisoned by Ankara’s refusal to recognize the genocide of Armenians by the Ottomans during World War I – to seal the border in 1993 in support of its Muslim allies in Baku. Locals now refer to the Akyaka train stop, built out of black basalt, as the “station of nostalgia” – a memory of the days when trains criss-crossed in both directions, bringing the scenic region tourism and trade.

**‘No obstacle’**

“In 1991, people would flock to both sides of the border to meet up,” Vedat Akcayoz, a local historian, recalled of the days the Soviet Union fell. “For two years, it was all the rage.” Since then, a second war over Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020 saw Azerbaijan reverse most of its losses and Armenia agree to a Russian-brokered truce. The mood music has been improving ever since. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said in October last year that he saw “no obstacle” to normalizing ties with Armenia if Yerevan also maintained “good-will” with Baku. Ankara and Armenia then appointed special envoys for the talks. Last month, Yerevan decided to lift an embargo on Turkish goods it imposed over the second Karabakh war. Yildirim said the locals are closely following the diplomatic moves. “Our government is in favor of reopening the border and I believe the Armenians are too,” he said. “We have no problem with the Armenians, and they have no problem with us.”

**‘Time to live in peace’**

The remote region’s shop owners recall a time when Armenians would come across the border and gobble up their goods. “We did a brisk business with the Armenians,” said Hussein Kanik, a shop owner in the nearby province of Kars, which specializes in various types of cheese. In the Soviet era, “they would arrive with furs and samovars and returned with our products... We are soon going back to those days,” he said with joyful hope.

In front of his 19th-century hotel, which once housed the elite of tsarist Russia, Gaffar Demir also bet on peace, saying the current state of affairs made no sense. —AFP

## 6 dead as scaffolding collapses at Iraq pilgrimage site

**HILLA:** Six people were killed as scaffolding collapsed at a Muslim mausoleum near the central Iraqi town of Hilla yesterday, officials said. The accident struck at the shrine of Imam Hamza, connected to the family of the Prophet Mohammed (PBUH). “Scaffolding being used for renovation work collapsed inside the mausoleum, killing six men aged between 20 and 35,” an official of the pilgrimage site said, asking not to be named. Medical and security sources confirmed the toll, with the latter adding that a woman and three-year-old child were injured.

A security source, also on condition of anonymity, said an investigation had been opened and that the accident was suspected to have been “the result of negligence on the part of people in charge of installing the renovation structures”. Corruption and lack of finances in both Iraq’s private and public sectors often lead to the use of and poorly equipped and under-qualified maintenance crews in buildings and on infrastructure used by the general public, with safety procedures flouted. —AFP

## Violence as Sudan coup opponents keep up protests

**KHARTOUM:** Sudanese security forces fired tear gas yesterday at thousands of protesters marching on the presidential palace in Khartoum, witnesses said, the latest in unabated protests since a military coup in October.

The rally which converged from several parts of Khartoum came amid tepid support for a United Nations bid to facilitate talks between rival Sudanese factions. The push was aimed at resolving the crisis since the October 25 military coup led by General Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan, and the resignation of the civilian prime minister Abdalla Hamdok earlier this month.

Demonstrators also took to the streets in the capital’s twin city of Omdurman as well as in Port Sudan in eastern Sudan, according to witnesses. Protesters in Khartoum chanted: “With all our power, we are heading to the palace” as they converged on the city center.

Others hollered: “Burhan is dirty, brought to (power) by the Islamists,” who were dominant under the three-decade rule of general-turned-president Omar al-Bashir, ousted in April 2019 following months of mass protests. Following the same pattern as in the stream of demonstrations over the past two months, security forces fired volleys of tear gas to disperse the protesters in Khartoum and Omdurman, witnesses said.

Online footage of the protests appeared to show demonstrators hurling stones and unexploded canisters of tear gas at security forces near the presidential palace. Pro-democracy activists have organized regular demonstrations against the military takeover, which derailed a transition to civilian



KHARTOUM, Sudan: A Sudanese demonstrator waves a national flag during a protest against the October 2021 military coup, in the capital Khartoum, yesterday. —AFP

rule following Bashir’s ouster. The protests have been met by a bloody crackdown that has left at least 63 people dead and hundreds wounded, according to medics.

**UN push**

On Monday, UN special representative Volker Perthes said he was launching “consultations” with political and social actors along with armed and civil society groups. “We don’t accept this initiative at all,” 62-year-old protester Awad Saleh said. “It’s not clear what points it constitutes and so for us it is deficient.” The latest UN push has received a mixed response. The Sudanese Professionals Association, an independent trade union confederation instrumental in organizing the protests, said it completely rejects the UN initiative. The mainstream faction of the Forces for Freedom and Change, the leading civilian pro-democracy group, said it will “discuss” the invitation internally before announcing its stand. —AFP



## International

# British PM's lockdown party shame inflames Tory tensions

## Johnson gives lackluster apology for a boozy lockdown party

**LONDON:** UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson's Conservatives descended into open political warfare yesterday after he gave a lackluster apology for a boozy lockdown party that has outraged the public.

Most cabinet members rallied round Johnson after his mea culpa-but the backing given by some such as powerful Finance Minister Rishi Sunak was distinctly lukewarm. The prime minister himself went to ground yesterday, cancelling a planned trip to northern England after a close relative came down with COVID, in scrupulous adherence to his government's rules.

While expressing "heartfelt apologies", Johnson on Wednesday sparked ridicule by saying he had believed the May 2020 gathering was a work event and urged all sides to await the findings of an internal inquiry. Douglas Ross, the Conservatives' leader in Scotland, joined at least four Tory backbench MPs in calling for Johnson to quit after he admitted to joining the party in his Downing Street garden, when Britain was under a strict lockdown.

Cabinet member Jacob Rees-Mogg dismissed Ross as a "lightweight figure" in the ruling party, earning a rebuke from senior backbencher Tobias Ellwood, who called the remark "unhelpful". Ellwood welcomed Johnson's apology, while telling Times Radio: "But this is far from over, we need to address the wider issues here. There's understandable, real anger that this has generated."

Northern Ireland Secretary Brandon Lewis insisted Johnson had been "very, very sincere" in his apology, amid warnings that Conservative MPs could be mobilizing for a no-confidence vote. "He

does recognise the anger and upset and frustration that people feel at what they perceive happened at Number 10. He recognizes that and takes responsibility," Lewis told BBC radio.

### 'Come clean'

But Lewis was forced to play down reports that Johnson had told Tory MPs, after his House of Commons apology, that he did not believe he had done anything wrong. For the opposition Labor party, senior MP Lisa Nandy told BBC television that the prime minister's position was "untenable".

"What he's not done is come clean about all the parties (in 2020) that were attended not just by him but by other members of the cabinet—he told us over and over again that no rules had been broken," she said. Relatives left bereaved by COVID and unable to say their final goodbyes felt "appalled, horrified and re-traumatized" by Johnson's attendance at the party. Nandy added on ITV, urging the police to investigate. On Wednesday, Labor leader Keir Starmer for the first time joined other opposition leaders in demanding that Johnson resign.

London's Metropolitan Police have not ruled out a criminal probe into the party, which occurred at a time when Britons were banned from outdoor socializing. But for now Johnson's fate appears to lie in the hands of senior civil servant Sue Gray, whom he has commissioned to look into the May 2020 event and other Downing Street gatherings that year.

Gray's report is not expected to land before next week and in any case it is likely to present a factual summary of events that does not single out individ-



**LONDON:** Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson (center) is driven away from the House of Commons, after attending Prime Minister Questions (PMQs), in central London. —AFP

uals for blame.

Chancellor of the Exchequer Sunak, who was noticeably absent from the House of Commons on Wednesday, said Johnson had been right to apologize and urged "patience" pending Gray's report.

was so in shock, I was walking like a zombie."

### 'Hellish'

The liner, carrying 4,229 people from 70 countries, ran aground while many passengers were at dinner. Schettino, later sentenced to 16 years for the shipwreck, delayed sounding the alarm.

Evacuation began over an hour after the collision, by which point the lifeboats on one side were unusable. "We were saved by a chef," Trotti says. They had been in the blue and gold Ristorante Milano when the ship hit land. Paolo Maspero, still in his chef's hat, "took my six-month old son in his arms. The water was coming in". "If he hadn't come to get us we would have died," said Trotti, who could not swim. Images shot later by the coastguard would show divers in the sunken restaurant, battling through flotsam, searching for victims. People in the Vienna Bar were listening to pianist Antimo Magnotta, who fell off his stool as the ship lurched. He found himself surrounded by terrified passengers demanding answers.

"A woman came up to me carrying two very small children. She was like a tiger, a lion, she almost attacked me. She said 'you have to tell me what to do to save my children'," he told AFP.

Magnotta, who has written a book called "The Pianist of Costa Concordia", said he did as he was trained to do, and reassured passengers the captain would make an announcement. "I promised them. But Schettino never spoke. It was a huge betrayal," he said. The electricity failed and as it became increasingly difficult to walk on the rolling ship, a series of "hellish" blackouts began.

## 10 years on, survivors haunted by Italy cruise ship disaster

**ROME:** On the evening of January 13, 2012, Umberto Trotti heard the terrified cries of his wife and baby in the lifeboat below, and threw himself off the capsizing Italian cruise ship. The Costa Concordia, a vast, luxury liner, had run aground off Italy's Giglio island and was toppling over into freezing waters, in a disaster that would leave 32 people dead.

There had been no room for Trotti in the lifeboat that took his wife Fjorda and two young children, but on hearing their panic as the vessel was lowered into the water, he leaped to join them.

"It was instinct, my family needed me. I jumped, three or four meters (10 or 13 feet). I landed on a big German, poor man," Trotti told AFP. The family were unsure whether to go back to Giglio for a ceremony Thursday and a candle-lit procession marking 10 years since the disaster.

Ship horns will sound and church bells ring at 9:45pm (20:45 GMT) to mark the moment the liner, owned by Costa Crociere, subsidiary of US based giant Carnival, struck an outcrop, after captain Francesco Schettino ordered a sail-by "salute" to the Tuscan island. Trotti, 44, and Fjorda, 33, had been on their honeymoon.

"It was supposed to be the best experience of our lives," he said. "Those not onboard will never understand. I

## US OKs release of five more Gitmo detainees

**HAVANA:** The US government has approved the release of five more prisoners from the Guantanamo Bay military prison, according to documents posted online this week by the Defense Department.

Three of the five detainees were from Yemen, one was from Somalia, and the fifth from Kenya. They have spent a collective 85 years in the prison opened two decades ago for so-called "war on terror" detainees in the wake of the September 11, 2001 Al-Qaeda attack on the United States.

Never charged, detainees now approved for release-decided after case reviews in November and December-total 18 of the 39 men still held in the prison facility at the US Naval Base in Cuba. Those newly approved for release are Somali Guleed Hassan Ahmed (also called Guled Hassan Duran); Kenyan Mohammed Abdul Malik Bajabu; and Omar Muhammad Ali al-Rammah, Moath Hamza

al-Alwi, and Suhayl al-Sharabi of Yemen. The Pentagon's Periodic Review Board found that all did not present, or no longer presented, a threat to the United States.

But like the others approved, their releases could be delayed as Washington seeks arrangements with their own or other countries to accept them.

### Repatriation challenge

Currently the United States will not repatriate Yemenis due to the civil war in the country, or Somalis, whose homeland is also mired by domestic conflict. The release approvals indicated an accelerated effort by the administration of President Joe Biden to resolve the situations of the 39 in Guantanamo, after his predecessor Donald Trump effectively froze action.

Tuesday marked the 20th anniversary of the opening of the Guantanamo prison, and brought calls from international human rights groups to shut it down, accusing the United States of arbitrary detention of hundreds of people and the illegal torture of dozens. On Monday a group of UN human rights experts called for Washington to "close this ugly chapter

into the bush and that was how we escaped."

Local Irigwe community leader Davidson Malison and Auta said 18 people were killed in the attack, though authorities gave no official death toll. "The attack which lasted for over two hours... led to the killing of 18 people with six others injured," Malison said in a statement.

More than 24 households were burned and vehicles, motorcycles and harvested food crops were destroyed, he said. Malison blamed Muslim Fulani herders for the violence. Plateau State Governor Simon Bako Lalong said the attack "left many dead and properties destroyed" but did not give a toll for the attack, calling it part of "unending cycle of violent attacks" in the area. Nigeria's army said troops mobilised to the village, though attackers had fled by the time they arrived.

"Houses were destroyed and some villagers lost their lives," the army statement said.

Authorities did not blame any group for the violence. Muhammad Nuru Abdullah, chairman of a local cattle herders association, condemned the attack on Ancha but dismissed accusations the Fulani community was responsible. —AFP

## Tense Ukraine talks underway in Vienna

**VIENNA:** The world's largest security body met in Vienna yesterday, hoping to push Russia and the West towards dialogue to defuse a mounting crisis on Ukraine's border where Russian troops have massed, sparking fears of war.

The United States and its European allies have accused Russia of deploying tanks, artillery and about 100,000 soldiers on Ukraine's war-torn eastern border in recent weeks, in what NATO says is preparation for an invasion. But Moscow says this is a response to what it sees as the growing presence of NATO in its sphere of influence, where it fiercely opposes the expansion of the Atlantic alliance.

Moscow and Washington have already underlined their "fundamental" differences on European security during tense talks in Geneva and Brussels this week. Helga Schmid, the secretary general of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), said the situation in the region was "perilous", noting "the urgent need to reinvigorate the debate on European security".

"It is imperative we find a way through diplomacy to deescalate and begin rebuilding trust, transparency and cooperation," she said, opening the Vienna-based body's first meeting of its permanent council this year, attended by all 57 member states including Russia and the US. But Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov cast a dampener yesterday, saying: "I do not see reasons to sit down in the coming days, to gather again and start the same discussions".

### 'Risk of war'

Foreign Minister Zbigniew Rau of Poland, which chairs the OSCE this year, said the tensions posed a "challenge" for the organization, a multilateral forum for East-West discussions founded during the Cold War's detente phase. "It seems that the risk of war in the OSCE area is now greater than ever before in the last 30 years," he said. The US has admitted no breakthrough is expected at Thursday's OSCE meeting. "We must decisively reject blackmail and never allow aggression and threats to be rewarded," Michael Carpenter, US ambassador to the OSCE, told the meeting. Earlier Carpenter had told independent Russian TV channel Dozhd that he didn't expect any "concrete results this week". "Our main goal is, in principle, to establish a dialogue... Yes, our positions are polar, but this does not mean that there are no elements and areas on which we cannot agree," he said. The challenge, he said, will be to "determine in what forms it is generally possible to deepen the dialogue on this issue in the next few months or even a year." —AFP

## Gunmen kill villagers, torch homes in volatile Nigeria state

**JOS:** Gunmen attacked a mainly Christian village in a volatile Nigeria state, killing as many as 18 people and burning down two dozen homes, a community leader, a resident and local authorities said on Wednesday. Plateau State has struggled for years with tit-for-tat violence between Muslim herders and Christian farmers though authorities often blame recent attacks on criminal gangs.

Attackers hit the Ancha community in Bassa local government area of Plateau late on Tuesday, residents and authorities said, sending villagers fleeing. "The attackers came shooting sporadically with guns at night... They took long time doing what they did, up till the time when security arrived," Ancha resident Dickson Auta told AFP by telephone.

"Having heard gunshots some of us managed to run

Sunak is a likely contender should Johnson be forced out. Another, Foreign Secretary Liz Truss, also took hours to issue any public backing but said she stood "100 percent" behind the prime minister. —AFP

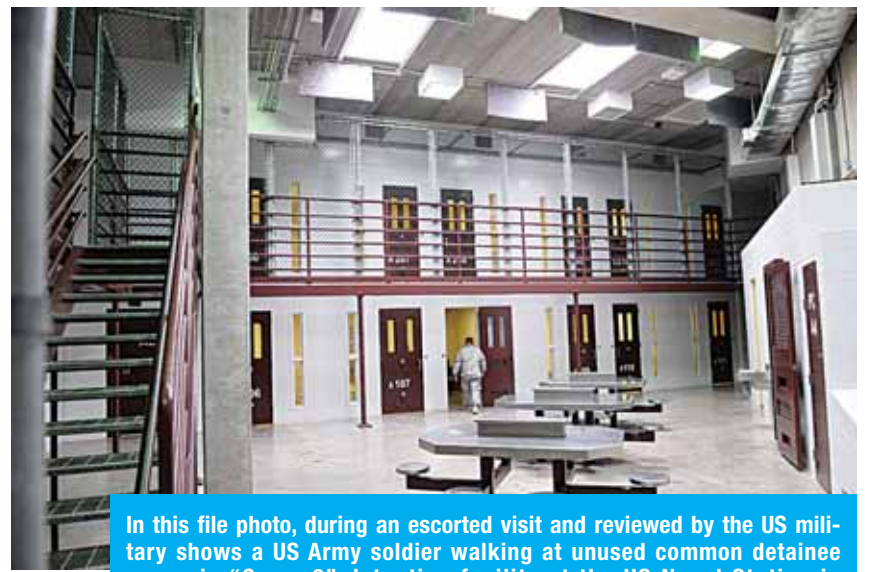


**GIGLIO ISLAND, Italy:** Ester Percossi (center), a survivor of the 2012 Costa Concordia shipwreck, arrives with her sister to attend a memorial service at the Chiesa dei Santi Lorenzo e Mamiliano church in the port of Giglio yesterday. —AFP

### 'Unforgivable'

"People disappeared in the dark, then reappeared again. They cried out 'mum where are you?'. I remember to this day the names people shouted out, looking for each other," said Magnotta, 51. He eventually managed to climb down the side of the ship. Two of his friends died that night.

Suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, the musician moved to London and found work as a waiter at the Victoria and Albert Museum cafe, which by luck had a piano in it. —AFP



**In this file photo, during an escorted visit and reviewed by the US military shows a US Army soldier walking at unused common detainee space in "Camp 6" detention facility at the US Naval Station in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. —AFP**

of unrelenting human rights violations."

Writing on the Lawfare website, US Senator Dianne Feinstein said those detainees facing trial, including September 11th mastermind Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, could be tried in US civilian

courts rather than the secretive and troubled military commissions system.

"Now that the US's war in Afghanistan is over, it's time to shut the doors on Guantanamo once and for all," Feinstein said. —AFP

## US vows action if Somalia misses new poll deadline

**WASHINGTON:** The United States on Wednesday brandished the threat of sanctions if troubled Somalia misses its latest deadline for elections. Somali leaders on Sunday announced that elections that were due to be concluded last year will take place by February 25.

"Somalia's elections are more than a year behind schedule. The US is prepared to take measures against spoilers if the new National Consultative Council timeline is not met," the State Department's Africa bureau said in a Twitter post. The mandate of President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed, better known

as Farmajo, expired in February 2021 and was controversially extended in April, triggering deadly gun battles in the streets of Mogadishu.

World powers have voiced fear that election delays, as well as the ongoing feud between Farmajo and Prime Minister Mohamed Hussein Roble, could set off new troubles for a country that has lacked stable governance for three decades.

Somalia is battling a deadly insurgency by Al-Shabaab jihadists and is in the grip of a drought that has left one in four people facing acute hunger, according to UN estimates. Several people were killed on Wednesday in a suicide car bomb blast in Mogadishu, which was claimed by Al-Shabaab. The government said in a statement on Twitter that the blast killed four people and injured six others, while a local government security officer had earlier told AFP that at least six people were killed. —AFP



## International

# Russia-led troops begin pullback from Kazakhstan

## Almaty returns to normal after unprecedented violence

**ALMATY:** Over 2,000 Russia-led troops began withdrawing from Kazakhstan yesterday after being deployed when peaceful protests over an energy price hike in the Central Asian country turned into unprecedented violence claiming dozens of lives.

The decision to dispatch peacekeepers was a first for the Moscow-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), often touted by Russia as a NATO equivalent. At a ceremony marking the end of the mission, soldiers lined up as anthems from each of the six CSTO member countries were played before official speeches.

"The peacekeeping operation is over ... the tasks have been fulfilled," said Russian General Andrei Serdyukov, commander of the CSTO contingent that included troops from Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. The Russian defense ministry said its forces were loading equipment into military planes as part of the contingent's drawdown.

Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev had hailed the "psychological importance" of the mission during his first visit to the country's main city Almaty since the crisis began. The financial hub of 1.8 million people was devastated during clashes between security forces and government opponents that gave way to a spree of looting.

### Claims of foreign meddling

It has gradually returned to normal, with public transport back on the roads and most restaurants and shops open. One strategic complex the CSTO contingent was guarding was Almaty airport, which was reportedly seized by government opponents last week.

The airport's press service said that it was handling both domestic and international flights again yesterday. AFP correspondents in Almaty earlier yesterday witnessed a funeral for a serviceman killed during the clashes, which was attended by dozens of soldiers and fea-



ALMATY, Kazakhstan: Collective Security Treaty Organization's (CSTO) Belarus' soldiers attend a ceremony marking the end of the CSTO mission in Almaty yesterday. — AFP

tured somber military music. Tokayev has framed the clashes as a coup attempt assisted by local and international terrorists and said that economic damage from the violence "could total \$2-3 billion."

At least 12,000 people have been detained, police said, with at least three journalists reportedly under arrest. Russian President Vladimir Putin hinted that the violence was reminiscent of "color revolutions" instigated with foreign help. Those official narratives-despite lacking in proof-resonated with some residents of Almaty.

road and into a tree. The vehicle then flipped over onto a pile of rocks. Balingasag municipal police chief Major Teodoro De Oro said.

Eleven people were killed, including a three-year-old child, De Oro said, adding police were seeking to confirm another three deaths. Scores of other passengers were injured, including a dozen children. The driver, who was also hurt and tried to hide after receiving medical treatment, was arrested and will face charges. The vehicle was part of a convoy of three trucks but the other two were not involved in the accident, De Oro said.

Deadly road mishaps are common in the Philippines, where drivers frequently flout the rules and vehicles are often poorly maintained or overloaded. In 2019, 19 farmers were killed in the mountainous northern Philippines when a truck carrying them and sacks of rice seeds plunged backwards down a deep ravine. —AFP

## 11 killed in Philippine truck crash

**MANILA:** At least 11 people were killed after a small truck packed with partygoers, including children, overturned in the southern Philippines, police said yesterday. The vehicle was travelling to a beachside resort on Mindanao island for a postponed Christmas party on Wednesday when the driver lost control after the brakes apparently failed on a downhill section of road.

Around 50 people were crammed into the truck, most of them in the open tray, when it veered off the



BALINGASAG, Philippines: This undated handout photo received from the Balingasag police station yesterday shows residents looking at the wreckage of a truck that overturned killing at least 11 people onboard. — AFP

## US lays out case against 'unlawful' China maritime claims

**WASHINGTON:** The United States on Wednesday laid out its most detailed case yet against Beijing's "unlawful" claims in the South China Sea, rejecting both the geographic and historic bases for its vast, divisive map. In a 47-page research paper, the State Department's Bureau of Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs said China had no basis under international law for claims that have put Beijing on a collision course with the Philippines, Vietnam and other Southeast Asian nations.

"The overall effect of these maritime claims is that the PRC unlawfully claims sovereignty or some form of exclusive jurisdiction over most of the South China Sea," the paper said, referring to the People's Republic of China. "These claims gravely undermine the rule of law in the oceans and numerous universally recognized provisions of international law reflected in the Convention," it said, referring to a 1982 UN treaty on the law of the sea ratified by China-but not the United States.

Releasing the study, a State Department statement called again on Beijing "to cease its unlawful and coercive activities in the South China Sea."

China hit back yesterday, claiming the report "distorts international law and misleads the public." "The US refuses to sign the treaty but portrays itself as a judge and wantonly distorts the treaty," said foreign ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin at a briefing.

"In seeking its own selfish interests it uses multiple standards to carry out political manipulation."

The paper is an update of a 2014 study that similarly disputed the so-called "nine-dash line" that forms the basis for much of Beijing's stance. In 2016, an international court sided with the Philippines in its complaints over China's claims. Beijing replied by offering new justifications, including saying that China had "historic rights" over the area.

The State Department paper said that such historical-based claims had "no legal basis" and that China had not offered specifics. It also took issue with geographic justifications for China's claims, saying that more than 100 features Beijing highlights in the South China Sea are submerged by water during high tide and therefore are "beyond the lawful limits of any state's territorial sea." Beijing cites such geographic features to claim four "island groups," which the State Department study said did not meet criteria for baselines under the UN convention.

The report was issued as the United States increasingly challenges China on the global stage, identifying the rising communist power as its chief long-term threat. The South China Sea is home to valuable oil and gas deposits and shipping lanes, and Beijing's neighbors have frequently voiced concern that their giant neighbor was seeking to expand its reach. —AFP

### 'Provoked by West'

Retired engineer Malik Shaimukhambetov blamed the shootouts in his city on "foreign aggression," which he said had subverted state troops and allowed gangs to seize government buildings.

"I see these events as a kind of Orange Revolution provoked by the West," Shaimukhambetov said, referring to political protests that erupted in Ukraine in 2004. Tokayev, who spoke with Putin yesterday and again thanked him for dispatching troops, said earlier the pull-out would take no more than 10 days.

### News in brief

#### Six charged over Russian prison rape

**MOSCOW:** Russian investigators said yesterday that six people, including two officials, had been charged over the rape and torture of prisoners in an explosive case that drew wide condemnation. A prisoner advocacy group last year published harrowing footage of sexual abuse at a jail in the central city of Saratov. It was leaked by former inmate Sergei Savelyev, who fled Russia and requested asylum in France. In an interview published yesterday, the head of the Investigative Committee, which handles serious crimes, said six people were prosecuted. — AFP

#### Lithuanians sue Gorbachev

**VILNIUS, Lithuania:** Six Lithuanians who lost relatives during Moscow's crackdown on the Baltic state's independence drive filed a lawsuit against former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev yesterday. The group initiated legal action 31 years to the day since the January 1991 assault, which killed 14 civilians and wounded over 700. In 2019, a Lithuanian court convicted dozens of Soviet-era officials of war crimes but the country's prosecutors have refused to investigate Gorbachev, who was in power at the time. The refusal has angered those seeking justice for the crackdown. — AFP

#### Pirate attacks at 27-year low in 2021

**KULA LUMPUR:** Pirate attacks on ships fell to their lowest level in nearly three decades last year, driven by a steep decrease off West Africa, a maritime watchdog said yesterday. A total of 132 incidents of piracy and armed robbery were reported worldwide, the lowest recorded figure since 1994, the International Maritime Bureau (IMB) said in its annual report. There was a marked fall in the Gulf of Guinea off West Africa, with just 34 reported incidents in 2021 compared with 81 the previous year, the watchdog said. — AFP

#### Russian strikes in Syria kill 11

**BEIRUT:** Russian air strikes in desert areas of eastern Syria have killed 11 suspected members of the Islamic State group, a war monitor reported yesterday. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, which monitors casualties of the decade-old conflict, said the overnight strikes focused on an area between Palmyra and Al-Sukhna. "The jihadist organization's members hide in caves in this area," Observatory chief Rami Abdel Rahman said. The strikes killed 11 IS fighters and wounded around 20 others, some of them seriously, he said. — AFP

#### Zionist fire kills own commandos

**JERUSALEM:** Two Zionist state's commandos were killed by friendly fire in the occupied West Bank overnight, the army said yesterday. The two officers were on patrol around their base in the Jordan Valley when they were "misidentified and mistakenly killed" by Zionist army fire, the military said on Twitter. "Immense sorrow this morning with the announcement of the death of two officers of Unit Egoz," said Defense Minister Benny Gantz, adding that an in-depth investigation was already under way. — AFP

There had been concerns that Moscow would leverage the mission to shore up influence in Kazakhstan and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken earlier warned that "once Russians are in your house, it's sometimes very difficult to get them to leave". Last week's violence erupted on the back of rallies over a rise in fuel prices and against a background of deteriorating living standards and endemic corruption. But it has also highlighted infighting at the very top of the hydrocarbon-rich country's elite.

Tokayev this week launched an attack on his long-ruling mentor and predecessor Nazarbayev, 81, who was focal point for protests and was widely viewed as Kazakhstan's main decider prior to the crisis.

Yesterday the national security committee announced that former committee head Karim Masimov and two of his deputies had been arrested and were under investigation for "actions aimed at the forcible seizure of power, and abuse of office". The status of another former deputy head of the committee, Nazarbayev nephew Samat Abish, is so far unclear, despite the presidential press service announcing another official in his place last week. Masimov was a key ally of Nazarbayev and seen as perpetuating the octogenarian's political influence after he stepped down from the presidency in 2019. Neither Nazarbayev or his immediate family have made public appearances since the crisis began, although his press secretary has claimed he was in the capital. His oldest daughter Dariga Nazarbayeva has been absent from parliament where she serves as a lawmaker.

The 58-year-old is at her home in Almaty recovering from the coronavirus, media reported Thursday, citing her assistant. Nazarbayev's youngest daughter Aliya Nazarbayeva, 41, thanked Kazakh citizens for the "moral support" she claimed they had shown her father during the crisis. — AFP

## Superspreader fears at mass holy dip in India

**KOLKATA:** Hundreds of thousands of Indian pilgrims began packing an island in the Ganges yesterday for a vast religious festival as COVID-19 cases surge nationwide, prompting fears of a super-spreader event.

Officials said they expected as many as three million people, including ash-smearing, dreadlocked ascetics, to take a ritual dip in the holy river today, the climax of the annual Gangasagar Mela.

Last April's Kumbh Mela, a similarly colossal religious festival that the government refused to ban, was partly blamed for a devastating spike in cases that killed 200,000, according to official tallies, though some experts fear the actual toll was several times that. With coronavirus case numbers once again ballooning, a Kolkata court last week ruled that the Gangasagar Mela, which takes place on Sagar Island at the mouth of the Ganges in West Bengal, could go ahead.

The state government yesterday appealed to people to get tested for COVID-19, with West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee urging devotees to wear two masks and not "spit on the island, as it spreads the virus". As with 2021's Kumbh Mela, this week's festival is attracting people from across northern India who, after cramming onto trains, buses and boats to reach the island, will then go home-potentially taking the virus's highly transmissible Omicron variant with them.

"It's a big challenge amid the raging surge of the COVID variant to maintain social distancing," local district magistrate P Ulganathan told AFP. "There is no doubt that such a gathering where people are in close proximity will increase the spread. We are continuously appealing to people to follow COVID-appropriate behavior." Amitava Nandy, a virologist from the School of Tropical Medicines in Kolkata, said the government "has neither the facilities nor the manpower" to test everyone attending or impose social-distancing norms. "A stampede-like situation could happen if the police try to enforce social distancing on the river bank," Nandy told AFP, saying the festival "may end up being the superspreader of the virus in India".

Devotee Sarbananda Mishra, 56, who came from the neighboring state of Bihar, told AFP that "faith in God will overcome the fear of COVID. The bathing will cleanse them of all their sins and bring salvation." "Death is the ultimate truth. What is the point of living with fear?" said Mishra, a schoolteacher resting at one of the many camps in nearby Kolkata waiting to go to the festival. — AFP



KOLKATA: Pilgrims perform rituals as they pray at the beach during the religious festival of Gangasagar Mela on Sagar Island, some 150 kilometers south of Kolkata, West Bengal, yesterday. — AFP



# Business

FRIDAY, JANUARY 14, 2022

## Biden points to ‘progress’ as US prices hit record high last year

### Government data underscores the potent inflation wave

**WASHINGTON:** US consumer prices jumped last year at the fastest pace in four decades, the government confirmed Wednesday, underscoring the potent inflation wave that has sapped public support for President Joe Biden even as the economy recovers from the pandemic. The seven percent increase in the Labor Department's consumer price index (CPI) over the 12 months to December was the highest since June 1982, as prices rose for an array of goods, especially housing, cars and food.

Since taking office last January, Biden has presided over an economy that has expanded rapidly and seen millions of people who lost their jobs to the COVID-19 pandemic return to work. But a collision between rebounding demand, labor shortages and global supply chain snarls that made crucial components like computer chips scarce caused prices last year to climb upwards at an ever-faster rate. In a statement, Biden said the latest data contained signs of “progress” as inflation in some key sectors slowed.

“At the same time, this report underscores that we still have more work to do, with price increases still too high and squeezing family budgets,” he said. But if relief is near, economists say it may not come particularly quickly. “The peak is close, but the speed of the coming downshift is uncertain,” said Ian Shepherdson of Pantheon Macroeconomics. For the Republican opposition, the report underscored their belief that the Democratic president has mishandled the recovery.

“This trend isn't ‘transitory,’ and it's all happening under Democrats’ one-party control,” tweeted Kevin McCarthy, the top Republican in the House of Representatives, of which his party is seen as

favorable to win control in elections in November. The White House has attempted to lower prices by sorting out supply chains to relieve shortages and address alleged price fixing in industries like meat-packing, but the most potent actor against inflation is the independent Federal Reserve.

Central bankers already have indicated they are ready to raise interest rates from zero in the coming months, and many observers see the first increase as soon as March. Kathy Bostjancic of Oxford Economics said the Fed now sees getting inflation back towards its two-percent goal as its “top priority,” and could raise rates as many as four times this year.

#### From cars to food

Prices for shelter, including rental properties, have been one of the main contributors to inflation, rising 4.1 percent in the year, while food rose 6.3 percent, the Labor Department said. However, in both cases, the December monthly increase was smaller than in the prior month. After slumping during the economic crisis in 2020, energy prices rebounded strongly last year with a 29.3 percent gain, the report said. But in December, energy costs contracted, falling 0.4 percent from November, indicating Americans may soon see relief at gas stations and on their heating bills.

There was no such respite for used car prices, another main driver of inflation in the year, which jumped 3.5 percent in December and 37.3 percent over the course of 2021, according to the data. Food and energy prices can be volatile, but with those items stripped out, consumer prices rose more than expected with a 0.6 percent gain compared to



**MIAMI:** A man walks through a shopping center in Miami, Florida on Wednesday. The seven percent increase in the Labor Department's consumer price index (CPI) over the 12 months to December was the highest since June 1982. —AFP

November. For the year, they were up 5.5 percent, the highest since February 1991.

#### Approaching peak?

There were indications in the data that the price surge may be ebbing. Overall CPI growth slowed to 0.5 percent in December, less than the 0.8 percent increase in the prior month. The Fed's final Beige Book survey of economic conditions for 2021 released Wednesday said that some businesses “noted that price increases had decelerat-

ed a bit from the robust pace experienced in recent months.”

Some of the major drivers of inflation will ease over the course of this year, Shepherdson predicted, including the shortage of real estate that has pushed home prices and rents upwards, and the scarcity of semiconductors that has crippled automobile assembly lines. While annualized consumer prices may eventually peak at a level higher than in December “the run of big increases is over, and it will start to fall in March,” he said. —AFP

## Soaring US demand for used cars sends prices soaring

**WASHINGTON:** The used car market in the United States is seeing an unprecedented phenomenon: Owners selling vehicles for as much or more than they paid for them.

The strange twist comes as a global shortage of computer chips amid the COVID-19 pandemic has stalled auto manufacturing, fueling a price increase for used vehicles, which in turn helped drive record US inflation last year. It “100 percent is a new trend,” which is unlikely to end soon, said Aurelien Guillaud, owner of Arlington Auto Group (AAG), a car dealership based in Arlington, Virginia, just outside the nation's capital.

Due to the shortage of new vehicles, there has been an influx of demand for used cars, he said. New government data Wednesday showed US consumer prices surged seven percent last year, the biggest increase in nearly four decades, fueled in large part by the dizzying 37.3 percent jump in prices of used cars and trucks.

Given the struggles to get semiconductors from factories in Asia amid the pandemic that has limited new car inventories, rental companies have been hanging on to their fleets, cutting off the usual steady supply of vehicles for the used car market and pushing up prices. And the strict lockdowns in China to contain the Omicron variant could exacerbate the supply issues.

“Compared to a year ago, now you buy that same car for \$20,000 instead of \$16,000,” and sell it for \$24,000, said AAG manager Eddy Malikov.



**ALHAMBRA, US:** A sign advertises cash paid for used cars in Alhambra, California Wednesday. — AFP

The dealership lot has 40 vehicles ready to sell, fewer than its usual pre-pandemic inventory. Last year was strong for AAG, which sold 300 to 400 cars despite the price increases that turned a number of customers away.

#### Coming collapse?

Masaki Kondo, a journalist in Washington, bought his Chevrolet for \$60,000 in 2017. Four years later, he sold it back to his dealership in Gaithersburg, Maryland, just a half-hour drive outside the US capital, for \$62,000. “I kept my car in the garage... so the condition of the car was good. But still, I was shocked when industrial mass production goods were priced at more than that of four years ago,” the Japanese expat told AFP.

Kondo's car dealer said they would easily sell the Chevrolet again for \$74,000. Americans' reluctance to use public transportation amid the pandemic also

is a factor driving high demand for cars.

“There's not much supply, but there's a huge demand,” Guillaud said. He notes that in Europe commuters might opt to use a scooter or a motorcycle, but “over here, it's a car because of the distance that you have to drive.”

Rising prices have been dramatic. Malikov recalled a customer who bought a car for \$21,000 in 2019, “and they ended up trading the car for \$21,000 two years later, with 10,000 more miles (16,100 more kilometers) basically, which was kind of ridiculous.”

In other cases, owners sell their car for even more than they bought it for. In a recent study, analysts at KPMG warned that the used car boom will not last. “History tells us the current frenzy in the used car market will come to an end,” the authors said, noting that chip shortages and supply chain problems eventually will be resolved. Then the “massive auto manufacturing machine will shift back into high gear and the dealer lots will again be full,” after which the used car market will “collapse,” they said, predicting a 30 percent drop in prices.

The analysts acknowledged however that it is difficult to know when this shift will happen and whether the decline could be “sudden or slow.”

But there are signs major manufacturers are banking on the boom continuing for a while longer: General Motors on Tuesday announced plans to launch CarBravo, a new online market for GM brand used vehicles. The venture will compete with successful firms like Carvana and CarMax.

Guillaud said some people are trying to take advantage of the market, and points to online forums where sellers admit to reselling vehicles two weeks after they bought them.

But he warns that Virginia law prohibits individuals from buying and reselling more than five cars a year. —AFP

## ‘Challenges with govt’ delaying Tesla India launch

**CALIFORNIA:** Billionaire entrepreneur Elon Musk said yesterday electric car pioneer Tesla was “working through” a lot of challenges with the Indian government ahead of long-awaited plans to launch in the country. Tesla's hopes to sell its vehicles in one of the world's biggest markets have been stalled by efforts to negotiate lower import duties, which can be as high as 100 percent.

In response to a tweet asking him about a potential India launch date, Musk said his California-based company was “still working through a lot of challenges with the government”, without giving further details. Musk had tweeted last July that Tesla wanted to enter India, home to 1.3 billion people, “but import duties are the highest in the world by far of any large country”. He added that the firm was hoping for temporary tariff relief. India imposes a 100 percent tax on imported electric vehicles worth more than \$40,000, and 60 percent for those costing \$40,000 or less.

Tesla fears the steep duties will price them out of the cost-sensitive Indian market. New Delhi has introduced incentives for foreign carmakers to manufacture their vehicles locally but Musk has said he wants to gauge demand with imports first. Electric cars accounted for only 1.3 percent of all vehicles sold in the country in 2020-21, according to research by digital consultancy Techarc. The government's target is for 30 percent of private cars to be electric by 2030 as part of a wider push to decarbonise the transport sector. —AFP

## UK, EU hold fresh post-Brexit talks

**LONDON:** UK Foreign Secretary Liz Truss yesterday hosted her first face-to-face meeting with European Commission vice president Maros Sefcovic, aiming to break months of deadlock over post-Brexit trade in Northern Ireland. Truss, who was appointed to take over from Brexit minister David Frost after his resignation last month, welcomed Sefcovic at the government country residence Chevening in southeast England.

The two sides are set to focus on Northern Ireland, which has the UK's only land border with the European Union and has been a major stumbling block in the entire Brexit process since the 2016 referendum. The Northern Ireland Protocol was signed separately from the wider 2020 Brexit trade deal between the UK and the EU and aims to avoid a “hard” border on the island of Ireland.

But to keep the border open—a key plank of a 1998 peace agreement that ended decades of violence over British rule in Northern Ireland—the province is effectively still in the European single market. “Glad to meet my counterpart @trussliz to discuss the implementation of the Protocol on

IE/NI,” Sefcovic tweeted as discussions started, sharing photos of the pair greeting each other and walking in Chevening's picturesque grounds.

“My objective: stability, predictability in NI,” he added, noting they had an opportunity to build on “far-reaching proposals” set out last year by Brussels to ease the on-the-ground tensions.

#### ‘Not very helpful’

Checks are required for goods heading east-west from mainland Great Britain (England, Scotland and Wales) to stop unchecked products heading into the single market via Northern Ireland. But London has indefinitely suspended implementing those checks, and wants the protocol renegotiated, including the removal of European judicial oversight on disputes.

Brussels has rejected the UK call for the European Court of Justice to be replaced with an international arbitration panel. Truss' predecessor in the negotiations Frost in December cautiously welcomed the Commission's proposal to reform EU medicine supply rules but poured cold water on hopes that an overall agreement to end the row had been found. A solution needed to be found “urgently early next year”, he said, warning that the UK was “ready to use the Article 16 safeguard mechanism” if necessary, referring to the suspension clause in the agreement.



**CHEVENING, UK:** (Left to right) British Minister of State for Europe Christopher Heaton-Harris, Britain's Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Brandon Lewis, British Foreign Secretary Liz Truss, European Commission vice president Maros Sefcovic and EU ambassador to the UK Joao Vale de Almeida pose during a meeting at Chevening House in Sevenoaks, south of London yesterday. —AFP

In a recent newspaper article Truss said she was also prepared to trigger that clause, which the EU has warned could lead to a wider trade war.

Last weekend, EU ambassador to the UK Joao Vale de Almeida called her threat “not very helpful”. The United States, which helped broker the

Good Friday Agreement, and Irish-American President Joe Biden are watching closely, warning the UK to stick to what it signed. Washington has warned that London can forget about a trade deal if its actions in Northern Ireland threaten the still-fragile peace. —AFP



## Business

# Online universe becomes lab for real-life products

## Merta-works: The barrier between digital and tangible is thinning

NEW YORK: Online platforms that are precursors of the metaverse vision for the internet's future are already serving as workrooms to develop products destined for real-life sale. From sneakers sketched in the virtual world but produced in the real one, to designers who preview clothes on avatars before making them-the barrier between digital and tangible is thinning.

"In real life, it's extremely expensive to make any product," said French couture designer Julien Fournie, who runs his own eponymous fashion house. Online is "a place of openness to test things virtually and recreate an extremely precise connection with the real-life experience," he added.

The clamor over virtual goods comes amid feverish predictions that the metaverse-a virtual reality version of the internet-will eventually replace the web of today. In recent months, a growing number of brands have been trying to establish a presence on buzzed-about platforms from Roblox to Fortnite, for fear of missing a major tech and societal shift.

How users interact with online goods-what they flock to and what they ignore-offers a relatively low-risk and low-cost opportunity for firms to develop products.

This is part of an underlying trend of exploiting data collected online "to develop better collections, to do better forecasting" said Achim Berg, partner at McKinsey & Company consulting.

The coronavirus pandemic has helped shrink the distance between virtual and real by pushing many designers to create in three dimensions, for lack of being able to meet physically, the consultant added.

### Opportunity for young designers

At the end of February 2021,



Online platforms that are precursors of the metaverse vision for the internet's future are already serving as workrooms to develop products destined for real-life sale.



RTFKT studio, together with Seattle artist FEWOCiOUS, launched a limited edition of 621 pairs of virtual sneakers via their NFT-digital items that can be bought and sold using blockchain technology. One aspect of the operation was to match each digital pair sold that day with tangible shoes, which each buyer could pick up six weeks later.

"We think that emotional bond to physical objects is still important and can increase the attachment" to digital products, Benoit Pagotto, one of the founders of RTFKT, which was acquired by giant Nike in December, told The Wall Street Journal. The Aglet app, which mixes virtual sneakers and augmented reality, has created its Telga shoes, similarly to heavyweights Adidas or Reebok.

Now it plans to make real sneakers, said the company's CEO Ryan David Mullins, who noted the first batch of 500 has already been sold before

production even began.

"Once you can quantify the demand within these platforms, it makes it much easier to build the channel into the physical world to manufacture them," he added.

Aglet noted the firm is starting to work with younger designers, for whom the cost of entry to building their own physical brand can be a little bit too steep.

"But starting to design it virtually is much easier," he said. Another variation of the growth online, is the high-end fashion platform Farfetch, which in August launched a formula that allows people to pre-order Balenciaga, Off-White or Dolce & Gabbana items that are only digital.

The site has collaborated with the studio DressX, which designs virtual clothes, to achieve a rendering that is as convincing as possible. The pieces are then manufactured in the workshop only according to the pre-

orders, a set-up that is especially attractive for high-end brands rather than for ready-to-wear behemoths.

That way of working can also help avoid overproduction and unsold goods, which have become a concern for the environmental costs associated with them.

Not all, however, are convinced by the vision of making the digital into the tangible.

"Digital pieces can be worn, collected and traded in the metaverse so there's no need for physical counterparts," said The Fabricant, a virtual fashion house. The Dutch company still sees the permeability between the two worlds as a good thing when people choose "to bring the aesthetic of the virtual world into their physical lives."

"In the end, it's about desirability," said Berg, the consultant. "If it is desirable in that (virtual) space, why wouldn't it be desirable in another space?" —AFP

## Nord Stream 2 'unrelated' to Ukraine conflict

BERLIN: Germany's defense minister warned yesterday against using the controversial Nord Stream 2 pipeline as a bargaining chip in a bid to solve the conflict between Ukraine and Russia, calling it "unrelated".

The pipeline "should not be dragged into this conflict," Defense Minister Christine Lambrecht told broadcaster Inforadio, adding that the dispute can only be solved "through talks". Referring to Wednesday's talks between Russia and NATO, as well as Thursday's meeting of security body the OSCE, the minister said "this is the best opportunity now".

"We must use it and not try to solve conflicts using unrelated projects," said the minister of the center-left Social Democratic Party. Germany has always had an ambivalent stance on the pipeline. Chancellor Olaf Scholz, also of the Social Democrats, had on his first day in office warned of consequences for Nord Stream 2 if Russia were to invade Ukraine. But he has also said that it is a purely commercial project.

Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock of the Greens had said that the gas pipeline will not be allowed to operate if there were any new escalation in the Ukraine crisis. Nord Stream 2 is set to double supplies of cheap natural gas from Russia to Germany, which the EU's top economy says is needed to help it transition away from coal and nuclear energy.

But the 10-billion-euro (\$12 billion) project has for years been dogged by delays and drawn fierce criticism from Germany's eastern European Union allies such as Poland, as well as the United States. It was completed in September but Germany's energy regulator BNetzA has said the approval process for the pipeline is likely to drag into the second half of 2022. —AFP



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## KUWAIT BOURSA WEEKLY REPORT

WEEK ENDED ON 13 JANUARY 2022

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| No. | Ticker                    | Sector             | Price Movement & Performance |             |           |          |       |             |            |       |        |               |                  | Valuation Multiples * |      |       |      |
|-----|---------------------------|--------------------|------------------------------|-------------|-----------|----------|-------|-------------|------------|-------|--------|---------------|------------------|-----------------------|------|-------|------|
|     |                           |                    | Open Price                   | Close Price | Week High | Week Low | Range | Volume      | WTD Change | WTD % | YTD %  | Support Level | Resistance Level | P/E                   | P/B  | Yield | Beta |
| 101 | National Bank of Kuwait   | Banking            | 1019                         | 1052        | 1052      | 1012     | 40    | 21,039,654  | 38         | 3.75% | 5.52%  | 1044          | 1057             | 22.8                  | 2.20 | 1.8%  | 1.26 |
| 102 | Gulf Bank                 | Banking            | 282                          | 306         | 315       | 282      | 33    | 38,139,580  | 23         | 8.13% | 9.68%  | 285           | 315              | 24.6                  | 1.43 | 1.6%  | 1.13 |
| 106 | Kuwait International Bank | Banking            | 218                          | 226         | 227       | 218      | 9     | 37,898,564  | 8          | 3.67% | 3.67%  | 226           | 230              | 79.5                  | 0.98 | 0.0%  | 1.01 |
| 107 | Burgan Bank               | Banking            | 267                          | 271         | 275       | 266      | 9     | 23,851,608  | 4          | 1.50% | 7.97%  | 266           | 274              | 20.5                  | 1.23 | 1.5%  | 1.05 |
| 108 | Kuwait Finance House      | Banking            | 837                          | 899         | 900       | 837      | 63    | 57,015,513  | 63         | 7.54% | 8.05%  | 849           | 900              | 35.3                  | 3.93 | 1.0%  | 1.40 |
| 109 | Boubyan Bank              | Banking            | 812                          | 832         | 833       | 809      | 24    | 7,111,350   | 19         | 2.34% | 5.32%  | 826           | 835              | 61.4                  | 4.80 | 0.0%  | 1.05 |
| 204 | National Investments      | Financial Services | 233                          | 245         | 247       | 232      | 15    | 25,087,515  | 13         | 5.60% | 11.87% | 237           | 248              | 7.8                   | 1.03 | 4.1%  | 1.25 |
| 205 | Kuwait Projects           | Financial Services | 143                          | 155         | 157       | 142      | 15    | 72,768,486  | 12         | 8.39% | 9.15%  | 153           | 159              | 35.3                  | 1.92 | 2.4%  | 0.59 |
| 252 | Al Imtiaz Investment      | Financial Services | 119                          | 123         | 127       | 118      | 9     | 32,125,397  | 5          | 4.24% | 4.24%  | 123           | 131              | NM                    | 0.75 | 0.0%  | 1.00 |
| 401 | Kuwait Real Estate        | Real Estate        | 183                          | 185         | 186       | 180      | 6     | 60,860,186  | 3          | 1.65% | 3.35%  | 181           | 187              | 28.5                  | 1.34 | 0.0%  | 0.97 |
| 413 | Mabaneer                  | Real Estate        | 799                          | 827         | 831       | 799      | 32    | 4,751,298   | 29         | 3.63% | 4.29%  | 825           | 841              | 18.4                  | 1.88 | 0.7%  | 1.10 |
| 501 | National Industries       | Financial Services | 285                          | 309         | 309       | 285      | 24    | 36,155,967  | 24         | 8.42% | 9.19%  | 295           | 312              | 6.1                   | 1.11 | 0.0%  | 1.44 |
| 505 | Gulf Cable                | Industrials        | 865                          | 881         | 894       | 862      | 32    | 3,072,263   | 17         | 1.97% | 1.15%  | 870           | 886              | 31.1                  | 0.89 | 5.7%  | 0.93 |
| 514 | Boubyan Petrochemical     | Basic Materials    | 847                          | 884         | 890       | 846      | 44    | 2,651,985   | 38         | 4.49% | 3.76%  | 880           | 900              | 25.1                  | 2.08 | 6.1%  | 0.73 |
| 526 | Al Qurain                 | Basic Materials    | 353                          | 375         | 375       | 350      | 25    | 7,514,101   | 23         | 6.53% | 8.07%  | 374           | 382              | NM                    | 1.02 | 4.0%  | 0.76 |
| 603 | Agility                   | Industrials        | 953                          | 1008        | 1,008     | 952      | 56    | 13,558,698  | 58         | 6.11% | 6.67%  | 1005          | 1016             | 2.3                   | 1.09 | 0.9%  | 1.48 |
| 605 | Zain                      | Telecommunications | 598                          | 603         | 603       | 597      | 6     | 15,568,102  | 6          | 1.01% | 1.34%  | 602           | 605              | 13.8                  | 2.20 | 3.3%  | 1.34 |
| 623 | Human Soft Holding        | Industrials        | 3,200                        | 3,249       | 3,250     | 3,200    | 50    | 1,242,552   | 49         | 1.53% | 0.78%  | 3229          | 3250             | 7.1                   | 3.55 | 12.3% | 0.49 |
| 642 | ALAFCO                    | Industrials        | 214                          | 223         | 225       | 212      | 13    | 8,256,145   | 9          | 4.21% | 2.29%  | 222           | 226              | NM                    | 0.71 | 0.0%  | 0.88 |
| 818 | Ahli United Bank          | Banking            | 272                          | 285         | 286       | 272      | 14    | 134,282,483 | 12         | 4.40% | 2.52%  | 282           | 287              | 19.6                  | 2.20 | 1.3%  | 1.15 |
| 821 | Warba Bank                | Banking            | 270                          | 286         | 286       | 269      | 17    | 16,239,277  | 15         | 5.54% | 4.38%  | 278           | 286              | 21.8                  | 2.83 | 0.0%  | 1.00 |
| 823 | Mezzan Holding            | Consumer Staples   | 586                          | 592         | 595       | 586      | 9     | 2,303,452   | 7          | 1.20% | 0.51%  | 590           | 596              | 18.4                  | 1.67 | 2.9%  | 0.43 |
| 824 | Integrated Holding        | Industrials        | 369                          | 376         | 377       | 369      | 8     | 2,728,699   | 7          | 1.90% | 1.62%  | 375           | 378              | NM                    | 1.57 | 0.0%  | 0.48 |
| 826 | Shamal Az-Zour            | Utilities          | 224                          | 228         | 228       | 223      | 5     | 7,825,174   | 3          | 1.33% | 0.00%  | 227           | 231              | 19.4                  | 4.04 | 3.9%  | 0.63 |
| 827 | Boursa Kuwait             | Financial Services | 1,994                        | 2,026       | 2,045     | 1,993    | 52    | 1,030,185   | 26         | 1.30% | 0.30%  | 2020          | 2032             | 25.9                  | 7.21 | 2.0%  | 0.63 |

\* As of end of week closing



## Business

# Twitter back in Nigeria after seven-month ban

## Applause and backlash as Twitter is restored

**ABUJA:** Twitter was accessible in Nigeria yesterday after the government lifted a seven-month ban on the social media giant for deleting a tweet by President Muhammadu Buhari.

Nigeria halted Twitter operations in June, provoking an international outcry over freedom of expression. The government and Twitter had been in negotiations over restoring the service based on a set of conditions, including Twitter registering its operations in Nigeria.

Twitter was accessible in the main metropolis and economic hub of Lagos as of 0600 GMT, an AFP journalist said. "We are pleased that Twitter has been restored for everyone in Nigeria. Our mission in Nigeria-and everywhere in the world-is to serve the public conversation," a Twitter spokesperson told AFP.

"We are deeply committed to Nigeria, where Twitter is used by people for commerce, cultural engagement, and civic participation." In Africa's largest economy, three quarters of the population of 200 million are younger than 24 — a generation that is also hyper-connected to social media.

The ban shocked many in Nigeria, where Twitter has had a major role in political discourse, with the hashtags #BringBackOurGirls after Boko Haram kidnapped nearly 300 school-

girls in 2014.

Young activists turned to Twitter last year to organize the #EndSARS protests against police brutality that eventually grew into the largest demonstrations in Nigeria's modern history before they were repressed. National Information Technology Development Agency (NIT-DA) director general Kashifu Inuwa Abdullahi, who had been part of the negotiations, said on Wednesday Buhari had approved the lifting of the ban from midnight.

He said the social media giant had agreed to regulations to restore service, included establishing a legal entity in Nigeria, appointing a country representative and complying with tax obligations.

### Elections and lawsuits

The United States, European Union and Canada were among those who joined rights groups in condemning the ban as damaging to freedom of expression in Africa's most populous country. Many Nigerians immediately took to Twitter to celebrate the platform's return, including the country's presidential spokesman who tweeted "Welcome back".

But others criticized the ban's curtailing of basic rights and pointed out the

Twitter had returned as Nigeria's political space heats up before the 2023 presidential election. "Lifting the ban will not make Nigeria's forget Buhari's intolerance of democratic freedoms," the civil rights group Concerned Nigerians said in a Twitter message.

The court of the regional bloc Economic Community of West African States or ECOWAS is also due to make a ruling on January 20 on four lawsuits brought by rights groups and lawyers challenging the Twitter ban. "The Twitter ban was illegal in the first place-and an attack on freedom of expression, including online, access to information and media freedom," Amnesty International said on its Twitter account. Nigerian officials had criticized Twitter for deleting Buhari's comment while accusing the platform of allowing activities that threatened the country's existence.

That was a reference to social media remarks by separatist agitators from the country's southeast, where a civil war five decades ago killed one million people. "The immediate and remote cause of the suspension was the unceasing use of the platform by some unscrupulous elements for subversive purposes and criminal activities, propagating fake news, and polarizing Nigerians," Abdullahi said.



Nigeria has lifted its ban on Twitter - seven months after clamping down on the social networking site.

Twitter deleted the comment for violating its policies when Buhari had referenced Nigeria's civil war, in the context of a warning to those responsible for recent unrest in the country's southeast.

After the ban, officials also referenced then Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey's

support for the #EndSARS protests last year in Nigeria against police brutality. About 40 million people or around 20 percent of Nigeria's population have a Twitter account, according to local researchers, and many used the platform for business. —AFP

## Indonesia to allow some operators to resume coal exports

**JAKARTA:** Indonesia, the world's largest thermal coal exporter, said it will allow some operators to resume shipping out the commodity, a senior minister said yesterday, pointing to a relaxation of a ban decreed on January 1.

Thirty-seven vessels loaded with coal have already been released for export as of Wednesday, according to a statement by coordinating Minister Luhut Pandjaitan. Indonesia's export ban was imposed after coal miners failed to meet their obligations towards the domestic market and state electricity company PLN warned of looming blackouts. The minister said companies that have met the requirements to sell a portion of their 2021 output to the state electricity company for domestic power generation would be allowed to resume exporting.

But fines will be imposed against operators who had failed to meet their contractual obligation to PLN.

The relaxation was allowed after the domestic coal reserve for power supply reached a safe level, he said. The ministry said it is currently making an assessment of companies' contractual obligations fulfilment and would announce soon which will be allowed to resume exports. No indication was given about the time the process will take.

"I demand that this should be supervised closely so this could serve as a momentum for all of us to fix the governance in our country, so things like this won't happen again," Pandjaitan said in a statement.

Indonesia announced it would ban shipments of coal used in power generation for a month starting from January 1, sending markets into panic. The decision was imposed after coal miners failed to meet their obligation to set aside 25 percent of output for the domestic market, putting some 10 million customers at risk of widespread blackouts. Coal producers have little incentive to sell coal on the domestic market where the price is capped at \$70 a metric ton-far below global prices.

The ban sent the market price soaring and several countries depending on Indonesia's coal urged the government to reconsider its decision. Japan and the Philippines warned the ban would seriously affect their economies. —AFP

## Markets mostly retreat as focus firmly on inflation

**LONDON:** Leading European and Asian stock markets largely retreated along with the dollar yesterday as investors tracked developments surrounding decades-high inflation.

US consumer prices rose seven percent on-year in December, the fastest rate since 1982, as supply snarls and energy costs were compounded by surging demand from Americans returning to normal life. However, Wednesday's highly-anticipated reading was in line with expectations and analysts pointed out that the increase from the previous month had slowed and was below forecasts, indicating that the rally may have peaked or was close to topping out.

"Supercharged US inflation figures dampened risk appetite, resulting in a mixed picture overnight in Asia and softer trade across Europe," noted

Victoria Scholar, head of investment at Interactive Investor.

There remains much debate on how many times the Federal Reserve will hike US interest rates to fight strong inflation and when it will begin to cut back on the holdings of bonds it purchased as part of its vast stimulus program.

"March has all but made a rate (hike) by the Fed a foregone conclusion. June is not far behind either," predicted Jack Janasiewicz at Natixis Investment Managers Solutions. Traders are fearful that markets will not have an easy ride this year as the Fed removes the massive support that has helped drive a two-year rally and saw the economy through the pandemic.

"Inflation is going to be with us no matter if they increase rates, and the challenges (to) the economy here are just going to build on that," Shana Sissel, of Strategic Wealth Partners, told Bloomberg Television.

"I am concerned that there is going to be quite a bit of volatility in the market and our economy is going to



TOKYO: A man wearing facemask is reflected on the stock monitor at Tokyo Stock Exchange. —AFP

slow down considerably."

Elsewhere, oil prices steadied following gains Wednesday on data showing US crude stockpiles last week fell to the lowest level since 2018, lifting hopes for demand in the world's top economy.

"Supply disruptions, uncertainty over OPEC spare capacity and waning concerns over Omicron have all proved bullish for prices. (The stockpile) numbers provided a further boost," said Warren Patterson of ING Groep NV. —AFP

## Draghi's presidential ambitions worry markets

**ROME:** Italy's economy has turned a corner under Prime Minister Mario Draghi but a possible move to the presidency is sparking concern among analysts that the post-pandemic recovery might come to an abrupt halt.

The former European Central Bank chief, hailed for his work to protect the eurozone during the debt crisis a decade ago, is the favorite to be elected head of state later this month — but many economists are hoping he stays where he is.

Since being brought in by outgoing president Sergio Mattarella in February 2021, Draghi has led a remarkably united government, comprising almost all Italy's political parties. But fractures are appearing, notably over coronavirus rules, raising doubts as to whether it can last until 2023 elections.

Draghi's departure presents "a big risk, at least in the short term", notes Jesus Castillo, economist at Natixis. "It is Mario Draghi who has maintained the unity of the government, and there is nobody in Italy's political landscape today who could follow him in guaranteeing such cohesion," he told AFP.

"If he becomes president, very quickly we will see a political stalemate and probably early elections." Such elections would come at a bad time, as Italy "must keep

to a very tight program of reforms to receive funds" from the European Union's post-pandemic recovery scheme, of which Rome is the main beneficiary, to the tune of almost 200 billion euros.

### Instability factor

Draghi's departure would "bring instability and would have serious repercussions on the implementation of the recovery plan, with a loss of credibility of the government, and on investor confidence", said Giuliano Noci, professor of strategy at Milan's Polytechnic business school.

He said it would likely significantly increase the spread — the gap between German and Italian bond yields watched as a sign of market confidence, which shrank after Draghi's arrival. US investment bank Goldman Sachs — where Draghi worked between 2002 and 2005 — has warned "the presidential election could have significant market implications".

In a recent note, it said negotiations to find a new premier, or hold elections, could delay the implementation of the EU-mandated reforms.

"Any implementation delays following Draghi's resignation from the premiership could reduce the actual take-up of recovery fund grants by between 50 percent and 75 percent", with a knock-on effect on economic growth, it said. The Italian economy, the third largest in the eurozone, was expected to grow by more than six percent in 2021, after contracting by 8.9 per-

cent in 2020 when coronavirus first hit.

Italy has a reputation for wasting EU funds, but Draghi insisted last month it had met all 51 objectives agreed with Brussels for 2021.

In a press conference, Draghi intimated he was open to the presidency, saying he was a "grandfather at the service of the institutions". He added that path was set regardless of who led the government, as long as it had the largest possible support in parliament. But therein lies the challenge. —AFP



ROME: In this file photo taken on October 29, 2021 Italy's Prime Minister, Mario Draghi stands at attention as he welcomes the Indian Prime Minister upon his arrival for their meeting at the Chigi palace in Rome. —AFP

## Bangarraju X Kalyan Jewellers limited edition harams released

**KUWAIT:** Kalyan Jewellers, one of India's leading and most-trusted jewelry brand has partnered with Annapurna Studios to launch the 'Bangarraju' Men's Jewelry Collection, ahead of the much-awaited Sankranti release of the Akkineni Nagarjuna and Naga Chaitanya movie.

The long Navaratna haram and the iconic Puligoru haram worn by the father-son duo, in 'Bangarraju', is from the personal collection of the legend Akkineni Nageswara Rao, or ANR as he is lovingly known in the region. Through the Bangarraju movie, 'The King of Style' Nagarjuna, has brought into vogue the Panche Kattu (dhoti drape), Puligoru & Navaratna Haram - style that once defined the timeless ANR look.

Puligoru, which means tiger claw, is a traditional masculine design signifying courage, and is part of

the cultural ethos and legacy of this region. The nine precious gemstones in the Navaratna haram on the other hand, symbolizes purity, humility, awakening, contentment, courage, love, wisdom, compassion and health. Kalyan Jewellers has recreated these two iconic pieces from the Akkineni family collection, giving fans a chance to recreate and embrace the iconic look.

Talking about this association, Kalyan Jewellers brand ambassador & 'Bangarraju' lead, Akkineni Nagarjuna said in a video message, "My father has always been my inspiration, and this traditional look that I have recreated for the movie Bangarraju is a tribute to him - even the jewellery that I wear in the movie, is originally his. Ahead of the release of the film, this traditional look seems to have appealed to the audiences, and that is how Kalyan Jewellers

came on board to recreate Nana Garu's haram designs."

Talking about the announcement, Ramesh Kalyanaraman, Executive Director - Kalyan Jewellers said, "We consider it an honor to be able to reproduce the iconic jewellery pieces that once belonged to Nageshwara Garu. As a brand, we have always followed a hyper-local product and outreach strategy. We have encouraged our patrons to not only take pride in their traditional designs, but also to embrace them in style - and when it comes to style, there is none that does it as wonderfully as The King (Akkineni Nagarjuna) himself. This is our special Sankranti offering to our customers."





## Lifestyle | Features



Jury members talk around a table on which are displayed Epiphany cakes (galette des rois) during the 'Best epiphany cakes' contest.



Photo shows Epiphany cakes (galette des rois) displayed during the 'Best epiphany cakes' contest organized by the Vaucluse's association of bakers and pastry chefs in Apt. — AFP photos



Epiphany cakes (galette des rois) is displayed during the 'Best epiphany cakes' contest.

# French bakers fume at cut-price supermarket baguettes

**F**rench bakers have taken aim at a major supermarket chain that is offering inflation-busting low prices for baguettes, saying the move would undermine competition in one of the country's prized industries. The Leclerc group said in newspaper ads on Tuesday that "because of inflation, the average price of baguettes could increase significantly. That's unthinkable," vowing to cut into its profit margins to cap the cost of the signature French loaf at 29 euro cents (\$0.33). But bakers, farmers and millers came together the following day to attack Leclerc for its campaign.

In a joint statement, industry organizations said the average price for a baguette, an everyday staple in French households, had reached 90 cents, driven by rising costs for flour, electricity and labor. "Just when the government and all our professions are working to pay farmers fairly, Leclerc launches this



A jury member cuts Epiphany cakes (galette des rois) during the 'Best epiphany cakes' contest.

campaign that destroys values," they said, accusing the supermarket of "demagoguery." Competitors "are asking themselves... who can live with dignity

from these prices?" the statement continued, also noting that traditional baguette-making is in the running for UNESCO cultural heritage recognition.

"We're trying to keep up jobs and quality, there's a price for that," the head of the ANMF millers' association, Jean-Francois Loiseau, told AFP. "We

have to pay people properly, those who plant, harvest, who gather the grain and make flour, those who make the bread. What Leclerc is doing is shameful," he said. Christiane Lambert, head of the FNSEA farmers' union, said that "Monsieur Leclerc will have to explain to us how and how much he pays his bakers" given the rock-bottom prices.

Leclerc boss Michel-Edouard Leclerc told business magazine Capital that prices for baguettes in his shops has been around 30 cents "for at least a year." "In an environment where (prices for) everything are going up and will keep going up, we wanted to send a signal that Leclerc will keep prices accessible for consumers," he said. "Players in this sector have to accept that Leclerc shops have control over their relationship with consumers," he added.— AFP

## 'Power of the Dog,' 'House of Gucci' top SAG nominations

**J**ane Campion's gothic Western "The Power of the Dog" and campy true-crime drama "House of Gucci" on Wednesday jointly topped the film nominations from Hollywood's Screen Actors Guild - usually a key indicator in the race to the Oscars. Days after "The Power of the Dog" won the Golden Globe for best drama, the film's stars Benedict Cumberbatch, Kirsten Dunst and Kodi Smith-McPhee each received nods from the actors' union, tying the film with Ridley Scott's "House of Gucci" on three.



English actor Benedict Cumberbatch

But offering hope to its rivals, Campion's presumed frontrunner failed to land a nomination for best cast - the top prize at the SAG ceremony on February 27. "The Power of the Dog," a tale of two feuding brothers in 1920s Montana, first screened at September's prestigious Venice film festival, where Campion won the best director award. It has since drawn rave reviews, and was released by Netflix with a limited theatrical run.

SAG overlooked widespread mockery of Jared Leto's exuberant Italian accent to nominate him for best supporting actor in "House of Gucci," alongside Lady Gaga and the ensemble cast, which also

includes Adam Driver and Al Pacino. Also nominated for best cast — the SAG equivalent of the best picture Oscar - were "Belfast," "CODA," "Don't Look Up" and "King Richard." But Kenneth Branagh's "Belfast" - which depicts the violence of late-1960s Northern Ireland from a child's view and had been seen by pundits as a strong awards contender - landed only one individual nod, for Caitriona Balfe.

Other surprising snubs included Kristen Stewart's much-touted portrayal of Princess Diana in "Spencer," and "West Side Story" Golden Globe-winning star Rachel Zegler. Voted for by actors, the SAG awards are seen as a strong indicator of Oscars glory, since actors represent the largest branch of the roughly 10,000 Oscar voters in the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. The SAG awards will be unveiled in Santa Monica, California exactly one month before the Oscars.

'Succession' and 'Ted Lasso' top TV noms - On the television side, SAG handed five nominations apiece to "Succession" and "Ted Lasso." Netflix's South Korean smash hit "Squid Game" became the first non-English-language series nominated by SAG for best cast in a TV drama. Stars Jung Ho-Yeon and Lee Jung-Jae also earned individual nominations. It comes two years after "Parasite" - also from South Korea - became the first non-English-language winner of SAG's best cast film prize, a key step on its way to Oscars success.

"Yellowstone," the hugely popular cable series about a wealthy ranch-owning family in Montana which has been largely overlooked by tastemakers on the US coasts, finally earned its first SAG nomination for best cast. Starring Kevin Costner, its fourth season finale was watched by more than 11 million people earlier this month - numbers comparable to "Game of Thrones" in its heyday. And Cynthia Erivo was nominated for her portrayal of Aretha Franklin in the limited TV series "Genius: Aretha" — on the same day that SAG recognized Jennifer Hudson for playing the Queen of Soul in the film "Respect." — AFP

## 'Rust' armorer sues film ammunition supplier over death on set

**T**he armorer on the set of "Rust" sued the film's ammunition supplier Wednesday, accusing him of leaving real bullets among the dummy cartridges, resulting in the fatal shooting of a cinematographer. Hannah Gutierrez-Reed was the armorer in charge of weapons on the Western movie set in New Mexico, where actor Alec Baldwin fatally shot Halyna Hutchins in October after being told his firearm was safe.

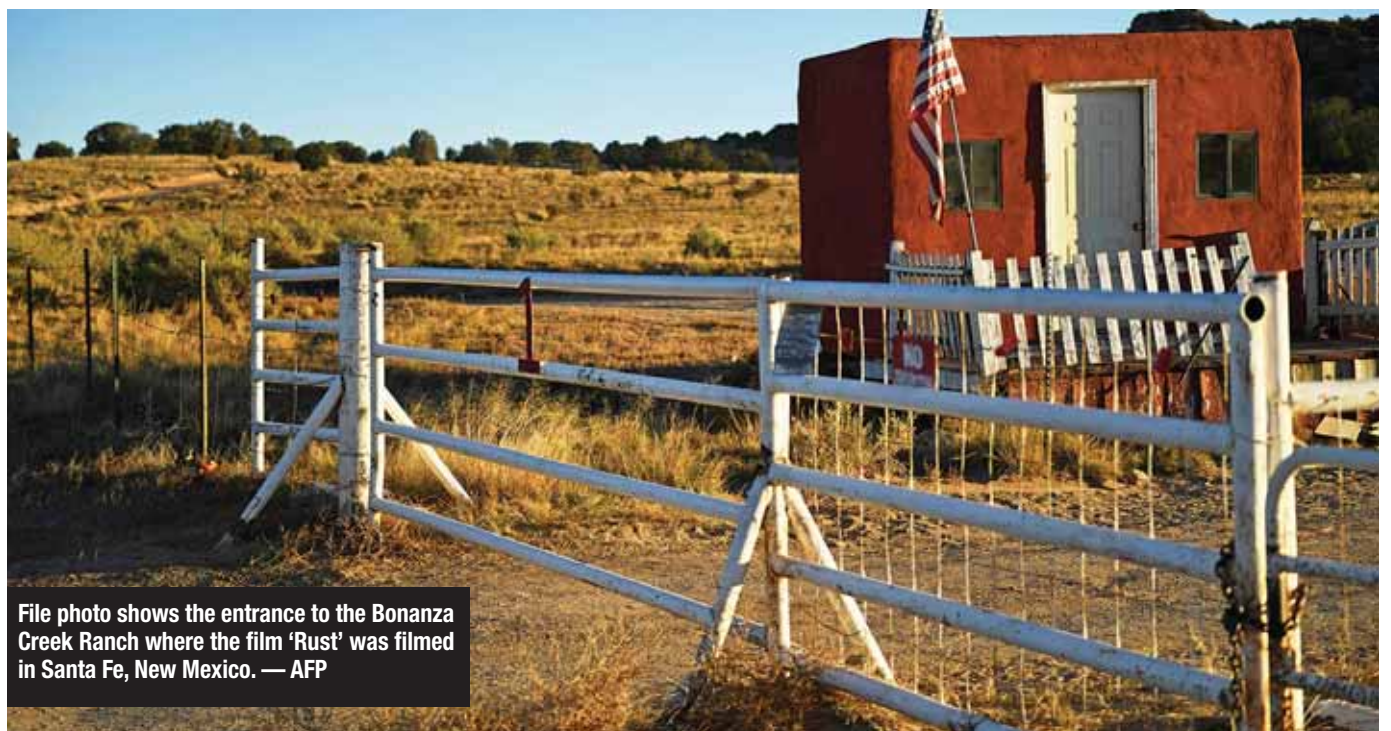
Film industry safety rules completely prohibit live ammunition on sets, precisely to avoid such an accident. In her civil suit filed Wednesday in a New Mexico court, Gutierrez-Reed accused supplier Seth Kenney of providing the production of "Rust" with ammunition that was "misrepresented as only dummy ammunition," meaning it had no gunpowder and was inert, "when it contained both dummy and live ammunition."

According to the case documents, Gutierrez-Reed said police had discovered seven bullets suspected of being live after the tragedy. They were distributed among a box of cartridges, a cart with other ammunition and cartridge belts intended for the actors to use as accessories. The armorer and her lawyers believe that Kenney and his company "created a dangerous condition on the movie set, unbeknownst to Hannah Gutierrez Reed."

Their negligence "caused live rounds to be introduced on set, resulting in a foreseeably catastrophic outcome," the lawsuit said, seeking damages but without specifying the amount. Kenney told investigators he could have potentially sold the film production homemade ammunition, possibly made from recycled components, marked with a logo that matched the one on the fatal round. But he later ruled out that possibility during an inter-

view with ABC. Baldwin was brandishing a Colt gun during a rehearsal for the film when it discharged a live round, killing Hutchins.

Investigators have not yet filed criminal charges over the tragedy, and have refused to rule out charges against anyone involved, including Baldwin. In his first major interview since the shooting, Baldwin said in December he had been told the gun contained no live ammunition, and had been instructed by Hutchins to point the gun in her direction as she prepared to film the scene. Baldwin told ABC he does not feel guilty for Hutchins' death, adding that he had started cocking the gun when the bullet fired, but did not pull the trigger.— AFP



File photo shows the entrance to the Bonanza Creek Ranch where the film 'Rust' was filmed in Santa Fe, New Mexico. — AFP



## Lifestyle | Features

On a gusty mountain crest, the Jama brothers weave between wind turbines that stretch as far as the eye can see, on what used to be their animals' winter pasture. Climate emergency or not for these reindeer herders, the turbines have to go. "Before, the area was perfect for our reindeer. The place was pristine, unspoiled by human activity. Now, everything has been ruined for years to come," laments Leif Arne, the younger of the brothers, at the wheel of his 4x4.

On both sides of the Arctic polar circle, members of Northern Europe's Sami minority are vehemently opposing large-scale wind farms and other "green" infrastructure projects, which they say are threatening their livelihoods and encroaching on their ancestral traditions.

A classic tale of David and Goliath-and the Sami may end up winning. In a groundbreaking verdict in October, Norway's Supreme Court ruled that two wind farms erected on the Fosen peninsula, in western Norway, violated the rights of six Sami families-including the Jamas-to practice their culture, breaching the UN's International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

With four smaller, neighboring installations, the two wind farms-Storheia and Roan-make up Europe's biggest land-based wind park, with a total capacity of 1,057 MW, or enough energy to supply more than 170,000 households. While the 11 Supreme Court judges unanimously declared invalid the operating permits and expropriation authorizations that paved the way for the construction of the 151 wind turbines, they didn't say anything about what should happen to the structures now.

For the Jama brothers, whose family has been reindeer herding for generations, there is no doubt about the matter. "These turbines have to be dismantled," they insist. They say the Storheia wind park, completed in 2020, deprives them of the best of their three winter grazing grounds, which they use alternately. Reindeer are nomads that roam, depend-



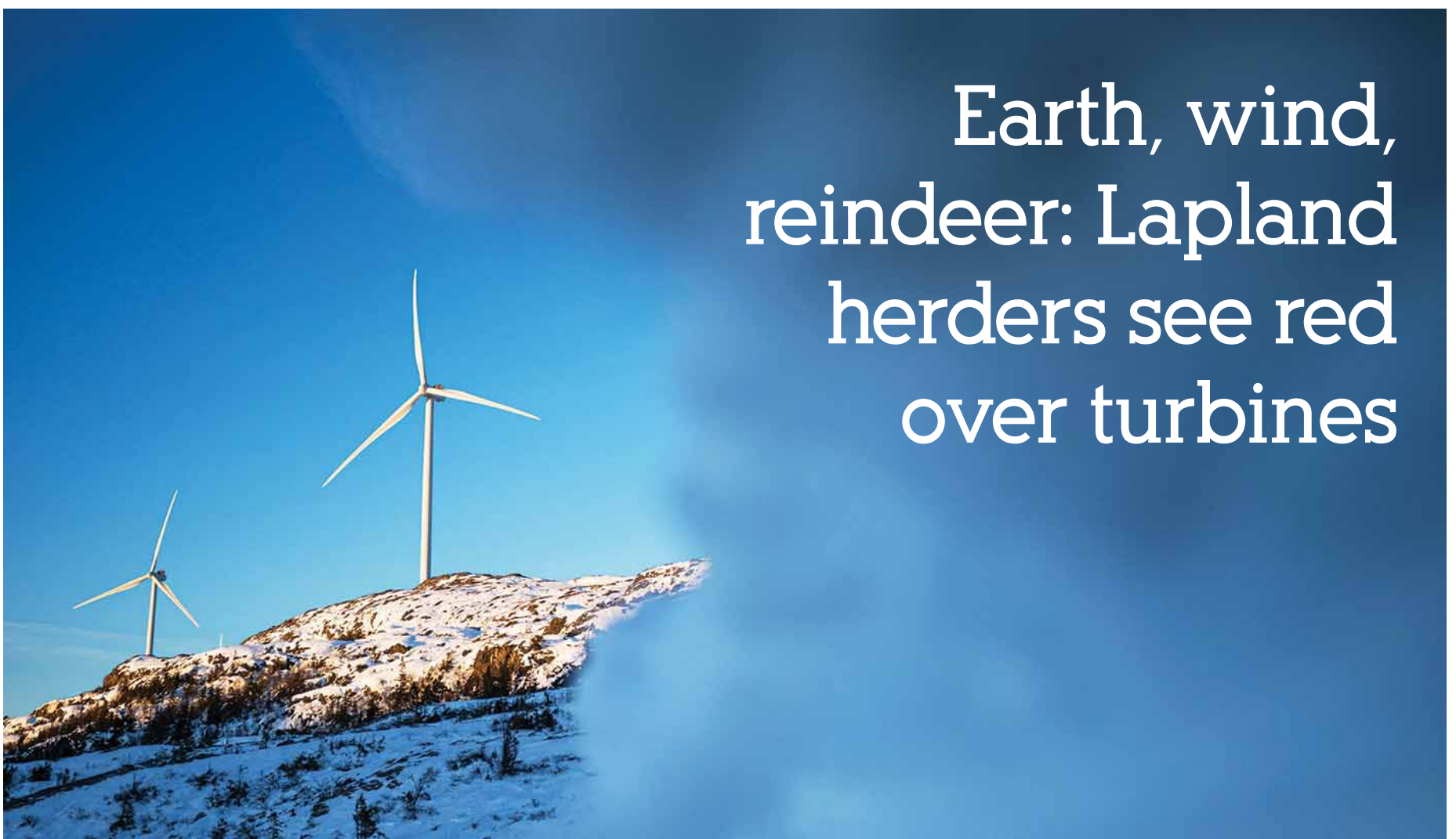
Sissel Stormo Holtan poses next to a reindeer outside her home in Namdalseid, part of Trøndelag county, Norway.

ing on the season, to find lichen, their main source of nourishment, especially in winter. If they're disturbed by the wind turbines, they'll look elsewhere.

#### Not a reindeer in sight

With his lasso strapped to his shoulder, elder brother John Kristian scans the vast, snow-blanketed horizon with his binoculars. "It's impossible for the reindeer to come here now, with all the enormous disruptions caused by the turning and turning of the turbines, which scare them. And they make so much noise," he says. "There are also car parks, roads, crossings... Nature has been completely destroyed here. There's nothing left but rocks and pebbles," he adds. Before the Supreme Court ruling, a lower court had recommended that the loss of the land be compensated financially, to allow herders to buy fodder for their animals. They rejected that option outright. "The reindeer have to find their own food. If we give them feed, it's not traditional herding anymore," Leif Arne says.

If nothing is done, the lack of grazing grounds means the Jamas will have to reduce their herd size-the number of which they don't disclose publicly because "that would be like broadcasting how much money you have in the bank." At 55, Leif Arne is already struggling to make ends meet. He told the courts that his business turned a profit of less than



# Earth, wind, reindeer: Lapland herders see red over turbines

300,000 kroner (30,000 euros, \$34,000) in 2018. Reducing his herd would threaten the viability of his operation.

Meanwhile, the turbines continue to spin, despite the court ruling. "We take the Supreme Court ruling very seriously... We, of course, want to rectify the situation," insists Torbjørn Steen, spokesman for Fosen Vind, the consortium that operates most of the wind farm. "The next step is to define operating conditions that guarantee we're able to operate the wind turbines

parliament. "And concrete actions have to follow: the operating permit has to be cancelled, the turbines have to be fully dismantled, and the area has to be restored, replanted and returned to the herders," she told AFP. With every day that passes, Sissel Stormo Holtan, a 40-year-old herder, loses a little more faith in the legal system. She fought against the Roan wind farm and won-or so she thought.

"Well, nothing has happened even though we won. It feels kind of weird, just starting a new fight all over again and it feels... unfair," she says, as she feeds fistfuls of lichen to a young orphaned reindeer, now domesticated. Smiling but annoyed at the same time, she says she's sick of hearing the authorities talk of a time-consuming "process". "The sooner they take them down, the sooner we can use the area again," she says, before quickly adding: "I don't see myself using the area. Maybe my daughter or my grandchildren may be able to use it."

#### Veto right?

The Sami-formerly known as Lapps, a term now considered pejorative-are an indigenous minority of around 100,000 people that have traditionally lived off reindeer herding and fishing. Spread out over the northern parts of Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia, the community has a painful past. They were subjected to brutal assimilation efforts in the 20th century, and the land they have relied on for generations is today pockmarked by energy, mining and tourism projects.

Before Storheia and Roan, other wind parks were erected on "their" land and some are under construction or set to go up. Like modern-day Don Quixotes, the Sami are now standing up against windmills. The Sami Parliamentary Council, a

cooperation body uniting the community's parliaments in Norway, Sweden and Finland, demands a form of veto right for future projects. Any wind farm plan must be approved by local Sami populations and their elected officials, or be suspended, it said in a declaration adopted in January last year.



Sissel Stormo Holtan feeds a reindeer outside her home in Namdalseid.

While it "recognizes that climate change is a serious issue that impacts the Sami society", the Council stressed that "the measures taken to limit climate change must not bear a negative impact on the culture and living conditions of indigenous people." According to many observers, the Norwegian Supreme Court ruling could constitute a legal precedent that may affect other infrastructure projects on Sami-populated lands in Norway and neighbouring countries.

"Other companies will have to think twice before starting up a project without having its legality tested first in the

courts," predicted Susanne Normann, a researcher at the Centre for Development and the Environment at the University of Oslo. The issue is problematic across the Nordic region. In Finland, which aims to become a world leader in electric battery production, mining projects are causing anguish for the Sami.

In their sights currently are two prospecting permits granted in the tundra near the northwestern village of Enontekiö, a region known for its breathtaking vistas and believed to be home to vast mineral deposits. Alarmed by the environmental harm that mining activities have caused in other parts of Finland, the Sami collected more than 37,000 signatures for a 2020 petition protesting against authorities' failure to consult local inhabitants or carry out impact studies on how the projects would affect reindeer herding.

#### 'Double punishment'

Living mainly in the Arctic, a region warming three times faster than the rest of the planet, the Sami are witnessing climate change first-hand. "For those of us who have lived and worked here all of our lives, we see how the vegetation is changing, the tree line is moving, the permafrost is thawing, we see new species of insects and other plants," says Matti Blind Berg, a reindeer herder near Kiruna in northern Sweden. Temperatures fluctuate wildly nowadays, with alternating periods of cold and thaw at times building thick layers of ice on the ground, preventing the reindeer from reaching the lichen they usually dig up under the snow with their hooves.

That has also fuelled fierce competition between herders over grazing grounds. In this occasionally explosive context, wind parks, copper deposits and rare earth minerals-all highly prized as the global economy turns to electric power-as well as forests planted for biofuels are all putting added pressure on land use. "I fully understand that we need a green transition, I'm the first to sign on to that," insists Blind Berg. "But I find it odd, to say the least, that a green transition should be done at the cost of nature."

For Susanne Normann, of the Centre for Development and the Environment, climate change is "a double punishment for indigenous people". "Not only are they among the people most exposed to climate change, but they also have to pay the price in the form of wind farms and hydroelectric dams built on their territories in the name of the fight against global warming," she said. "Where is the justice, when we know that they contribute very little to the problem?" — AFP



Sissel Stormo Holtan poses outside her home in Namdalseid, part of Trøndelag county, Norway.

A car drives past wind turbines of the Storheia wind farm, one of Europe's largest land-based wind parks, in Affjord municipality, Norway.







## On the prowl: Mali child cat hunters honor age-old tradition

A corpse of a cat, thrown by youths, hang over power lines in the city of Timbuktu, Mali. As part of an age-old tradition in the city, in the desert north of the troubled Sahel state, youth hit the streets after dark in order to trap, skin and then cook cats.

Fifteen-year-old Kadi Ben Wahab puffs out his chest and poses for a photo with several friends, before setting off to hunt cats in northern Mali's Timbuktu. As part of an age-old tradition in the city, in the desert north of the troubled Sahel state, Kadi and his band of hunters hit the streets after dark in order to trap, skin and cook cats. They dance and sing after a successful hunt, throwing the skins of their prey over the electric cables that hang over the alleyways. "I killed this one a few days ago," says Kadi, pointing to a cat skin hanging nearby - not an uncommon sight in Timbuktu. The boy says he is the best cat hunter in his neighborhood and, as such, is the leader of his gang.

The children standing beside him are

between six and 12 years old. Despite their nighttime escapades, they lead otherwise ordinary lives: going to school during the day and eating dinner with their families in the evening. But after dinner they often sneak out to hunt cats - always targeting neighborhoods other than their own. Their weapon of choice is a crate-like wooden trap, which contains a piece of mutton as bait and can be pulled closed with a piece of string.

But Timbuktu children also use torches so they can hunt and kill their feline prey with clubs. Others use dogs. Bemused adults allow the children to use cooking utensils so that they can cook their kill. The unusual pastime offers children an escape in an otherwise tough environment: landlocked and

conflict-torn Mali is one of the poorest nations in the world. Compounding the shortage of distractions from the daily grind, Timbuktu is in Mali's volatile north, where a jihadist insurgency has raged since 2012.

### 'The best hunter'

None of the Timbuktu residents interviewed by AFP were able to date the origin of the city's cat-hunting tradition, although several cast it as a rite of passage for boys. The practice nonetheless appears to be older than living memory. Timbuktu poet Sane Chirfi said that after one of his octogenarian relatives had died, an old cat trap was found in his possession. "It goes back a very, very long time," he said. "It's impossible to

find anyone in town who didn't hunt cats as a child."

Another Timbuktu writer, Salem Ould El Hadj, told AFP that he ate cats as a child "like any other Timbuktu citizen". However, poet Chirfi said that aspects of the tradition are being lost. Once, only runaways or strays were hunted. Nowadays, hunters target domestic pets too. Abdoulaye Sow, a man in his twenties who is from the same neighborhood as Kadi, said that he had lost his own pet cat Pipo to the hunters two months ago.

"It didn't stand a chance", he said,

adding that his pet was likely hard to kill. Despite the violent loss of his feline companion, there appeared to be no hard feelings. "It's just the way it is," said Sow, shrugging his shoulders, before pointing out that kids from his own neighborhood killed cats belonging to others. One need only look up, he said, to see the dozen or so cats that Kadi's gang had hung on the nearby cables in recent weeks. "He's the best hunter". — AFP



A young boy carrying a cat he has just captured in a homemade trap on a street in the city of Timbuktu, Mali.



A cat tries to escape from a trap it was caught in, on a street in the city of Timbuktu. — AFP photos



## Russian baby tiger fights for life after frostbite, surgery

Russian animal rescuers said Wednesday they were fighting for the life of an Amur tiger cub who had been found dying from exhaustion and frostbite in the country's far east. An emaciated female tiger cub aged around four or five months and suffering from severe frostbite and injuries was found by a local fisherman on a river bank in the south of the Primorye region late last year. The fisherman reported the find to wildlife carers who evacuated the cub to a rehabilitation centre, said Amur Tiger Centre.

"External examination showed that she was severely exhausted as a result of which the tip of her tail was frostbitten," the centre said, adding that the cub's lower jaw also became necrotic after an injury. The tiger, who weighed just around 20 kilograms - roughly half the norm - when she was found, underwent an intense rehabilitation course and

gained about 10 kilograms in preparation for surgery. The dead tip of her tail was also cut off. Late last week the cub underwent a 2.5-hour operation, with doctors transplanting healthy tissue to repair her jaw.

The surgery was successful but it is too early to make any predictions and say if it will be possible to release the cub back into the wild, said Amur Tiger Centre. "The most important thing right now is to halt the tissue necrosis and save the tiger's life," said Sergei Aramilev, the centre's head. "People are doing their best." Russia and China are home to the big cats which are also known as Siberian tigers and are listed as "endangered" by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature's Red List.

There are around 600 tigers in Russia, said Pyotr Osipov, head of the Amur branch at WWF. "Heavy snowfall and changes in temperature have significantly complicated tigers' life this winter," Osipov told AFP, adding that two tiger cubs had recently been found frozen to death. President Vladimir Putin has personally championed the protection of the Amur tiger. In 2010, Putin, then the country's prime minister, hosted an unprecedented 13-state summit that aimed at doubling the big cat's population. — AFP



This picture released by the Amur Tiger Center shows a Siberian tiger cub receiving treatment from Russian veterinary doctors at the Center for Rehabilitation and Reintroduction of Tigers and Other Rare Animals in the village of Alekseevka in the Russian Far East. — AFP

## 'Scream' returns to satirize new 'golden era' of horror

Twenty-five years ago, "Scream" - starring Neve Campbell and Courtney Cox - revitalized horror with its highly self-aware take on the increasingly stale and formulaic slasher genre. This Friday, a film again entitled "Scream" - again starring Campbell and Cox - returns to breathe new life into the... you get the idea. "Thank God we are working in a franchise, and in a universe, where it's okay for a movie to be wildly self-reflexive," co-director Tyler Gillett told AFP. "There were more instances of that meta experience than we can count when we were making the movie."

Just like in the 1996 original, characters in the new "Scream" spend much of the plot debating the tropes of horror movies in order to guess which one of them - female? Black? virgin? - will be killed off next. They realize that the latest swathe of attacks in their bafflingly violent California hometown are targeting people related to the killers from 25 years before. Handily, one character explains horror audiences' new fondness for "requels" - films that follow chronologically from previous movies, but reboot the franchise with younger characters related to the original cast.

"There are certain rules to surviving - believe me, I know," a returning David Arquette tells his younger, new co-stars. The film also revisits several locations and scenarios. It starts with a scene that evokes Drew Barrymore's infamous and shocking death in the original, when she ill-advisedly answered her landline, with the killer on the other end, before the opening credits have even rolled.

In the new film's opener, a Gen-Z teen is so baffled to find that her parents' old landline still functions that she initially does not even answer. "The disregard we all have for landlines... for us, it's fun," said co-director Matt Bettinelli-Olpin. "Placed at the beginning of the movie, it just lets you know we're aware of it, the movie's aware of it, we're going to move forward with that awareness together. "One of the things that 'Scream' does so well is it never underestimates its audience."

### Whodunit?

While the filmmakers wanted to make a "love letter" to the late Wes Craven - who directed all four previous "Scream" films - Gillett said the movie could never just be "pure nostalgia." Unlike the original, which emerged when the slasher horror genre was floundering, the new "Scream" arrives in an era of critically

"Regardless of what you want to call it in order to feel good about watching a horror movie, for us it's all gravy. As long as people are excited about the stories... that's all upside to us."

One thing that has not changed is the "Scream" franchise's "whodunit" element, with the identity of the killer hidden behind a distinctive "Ghostface" mask. Keeping the plot's twists from leaking



In this file photo, actors Neve Campbell, Courtney Cox, and David Arquette arrive at the premiere of The Weinstein Company's 'Scream 4' held at Grauman's Chinese Theatre in Hollywood, California. — AFP

acclaimed, socially aware arthouse horror from the likes of Jordan Peele.

Characters in the film pompously discuss their love for "elevated horror," referencing films like "The Babadook" and "Hereditary" as well as Peele's "Get Out" and "Us." "We're in the middle of a golden era. And so we're hoping that this movie introduces people to some of those movies that they aren't familiar with," said Bettinelli-Olpin. "We're obviously playing with and poking fun at this idea of 'elevated horror,'" added Gillett.

was vital to the filmmakers. During the audition stages, actors were only shown scenes from the film's first two acts. "Even when the cast members got there, we only gave them pages up until where their characters were," said executive producer Chad Villella, who worked on 2019 hit "Ready or Not" with the two directors. "They really embraced the secrecy of it all." — AFP



## Sports

# Chelsea 'play with fire' to reach League Cup final

## Rudiger's goal enough to steer Blues past Tottenham

**LONDON:** Thomas Tuchel said Chelsea reached the League Cup final despite "playing with fire" as Antonio Rudiger's goal and three VAR decisions helped the Blues seal a 1-0 win at Tottenham on Wednesday. Rudiger's first half header ensured Chelsea pressed home the advantage they had earned with a 2-0 win in the semi-final first leg last week. Tuchel's team also had VAR official Mike Dean on their side as Tottenham were given two penalties by Andre Marriner, only for reviews to overturn both, while Harry Kane saw a goal disallowed for offside.

"We started good. We had big chances and controlled the match, but I had the feeling we played with fire," Tuchel said. "We allowed chances from sloppy mistakes and were lucky. We almost gave a penalty away for no reason, for a bit of over-confidence. We needed luck to not give away another penalty, to have an offside VAR decision."

Tuchel is the first manager in Chelsea's history to lead the club to the Champions League, FA Cup and League Cup finals, a feat he has achieved just 350 days after his first game in charge in January 2020. It is Chelsea's first League Cup final appearance since 2019 as they aim to win the competition for the first time since 2015. "We need to play better if we're going to really deserve results like this. We have to meet the standards," Tuchel said.

Tottenham have not won a major trophy since lifting the League Cup in 2008 and their options for ending that drought this season are dwindling. Antonio Conte had conceded it would be hard to overturn the deficit against a team of Chelsea's quality.

And the Tottenham manager's pessimism proved well founded as Chelsea quickly put a stranglehold on the tie in north London. "At the end of the two

games Chelsea deserved to reach the final in this competition, we have to be honest," Conte said.

"In the second half we created many chances to score and we deserved a result better than losing 1-0 but if you have a judgement over the two games Chelsea deserved to win." Tottenham's bid to become just the second team to reach the League Cup final after losing the first leg by more than one goal was shattered in the 18th minute.

### VAR drama

Pierluigi Gollini was a surprise starter for Tottenham instead of Hugo Lloris, a Conte gamble



### Chelsea's first League Cup final since 2019

that backfired as the keeper was at fault for Chelsea's opener. It was a shambolic goal to concede as Gollini came off his line in a failed attempt to punch clear from Mason Mount's inswinging corner, allowing the unmarked Rudiger to guide his header into the top corner via the underside of the bar.

Rudiger had already scored in Chelsea's Premier League win at Tottenham this term and once again the German defender's aggression was too much for the north Londoners to handle. Tottenham thought they had won a penalty when Rudiger sent Hojbjerg



**LONDON:** Chelsea's German defender Antonio Rudiger (center) celebrates scoring his team's first goal during the second leg of the English League Cup semifinal football match between Tottenham Hotspur and Chelsea at the Tottenham Hotspur Stadium, in London on Wednesday. — AFP

tumbling with a sliding tackle on the Dane, but VAR changed Marriner's decision to a free-kick as the tackle was clearly made outside the area. Marriner's poor decisions were only adding to Tottenham's frustration and the referee was forced to deny the hosts another penalty in the second half.

Kane's pass sent Lucas Moura through on goal, but Chelsea keeper Kepa Arrizabalaga made a well-

timed block with his legs and, after Marriner errantly pointed to the spot, VAR intervened to change the decision. Kepa made another important save moments later, leaping to his left to claw away Emerson Royal's header. Incredibly, Tottenham endured a third VAR reversal when Kane swept his shot into the far corner in the 63rd minute, only for the review to show he was inches offside. — AFP



**MANCHESTER:** Manchester United's Portuguese striker Cristiano Ronaldo makes a rare appearance as captain during the English Premier League football match between Manchester United and Wolverhampton Wanderers at Old Trafford in Manchester, north west England, on January 3, 2022. — AFP

## Man Utd must finish in top three, says Ronaldo

**LONDON:** Cristiano Ronaldo says finishing outside the top three in the Premier League would be unacceptable for Manchester United as Ralf Rangnick struggles to turn around his under-performing team. The German interim boss has steadied the ship since taking over from the sacked Ole Gunnar Solskjaer but United are languishing in seventh place, 22 points behind leaders Manchester City.

The five-time world player of the year has called for a change of mindset within the dressing room to address United's poor form, which resulted in a 1-0 defeat at the hands of Wolves in their most recent league outing.

"Manchester United should win the league or be second or third," Ronaldo told Sky Sports. "I don't see any other position for Manchester United. In my heart, I don't accept that our mentality be less than being in the top three in the Premier League, in my opinion."

"I think to build up good things sometimes you have to destroy a few things. New year, new life, I hope that Manchester can be at the level people want, especially the fans. We are capable of changing things now. We can do it better, all of us. I don't want to be here in the club to fight to be in sixth or seventh place. I am here to try to win, to compete. I believe if we change our mind we can achieve big things."

Rangnick was brought in until the end of the season after Solskjaer was dismissed in November following a run of heavy defeats. The German has won four of his seven games in charge in all competitions but the team's style of football has still attracted criticism and there have been reports of disquiet within the squad.

United produced another disjointed display in their FA Cup third-round tie against Aston Villa on Monday but managed to scrape through 1-0. Ronaldo backed Rangnick to turn things around but pleaded for patience ahead of tomorrow's league trip to Villa Park.

"He arrived here five weeks ago," said the Portuguese superstar. "He changed many things but he needs time to put his ideas through the players and on the pitch. "It takes time but I believe that he is going to do a good job. We know we don't play the best football, as we should do, but we have many games to improve. Since he arrived I think in some points we are better, but he needs time." — AFP

## Bowen at the double as West Ham return to top four

**LONDON:** Jarrod Bowen scored twice as West Ham returned to the top four of the Premier League with a 2-0 win at home to basement club Norwich on Wednesday. Bowen's double, which took him to eight goals for the season, saw the Hammers go two points clear of London rivals Arsenal as David Moyes's men posted their third straight league win.

"We have to try and keep it going," West Ham manager Moyes told the BBC of his side's climb up the table. "As long as we are around the mix and European places, that will be really good but if we can hang on the coat tails of teams above...that is what we will try and do." Reflecting on the match, Moyes said: "We thoroughly deserved the victory but it wasn't easy."

Norwich manager Dean Smith was "disappointed" with the manner of this latest defeat but insisted all was far from lost for the Canaries in their fight against relegation. "We get bat-

tered from pillar to post from people outside that we're not fit to grace the Premier League," he said. "But we're still only three points from safety. I have got a committed and honest bunch of players."

In a match re-arranged from December because of a COVID-19 outbreak in the Canaries' camp, Bowen almost put West Ham ahead inside two minutes at the London Stadium found by Manuel Lanzini's ball into the box, but his shot was too near goalkeeper Tim Krul. Lanzini went close moments later and Krul was fortunate to avoid conceding a penalty when he clashed with Nikola Vlasic on the goal-line, shoving the forward to the turf by his face.

West Ham had the ball in the net in the 35th minute when Bowen's cross went straight in but that effort was disallowed given Vlasic was offside. Their dominance, however, was rewarded three minutes before the



**LONDON:** West Ham United's English striker Jarrod Bowen scores his team's first goal during the English Premier League football match between West Ham and Norwich at the London Stadium, in London on Wednesday. — AFP

break when Bowen got ahead of Ben Gibson to head in a cross from Vladimir Coufal.

Michail Antonio should have made it 2-0 early in the second half but shot over the crossbar from six yards out. Bowen then saw a chip over Krul come back off the crossbar before his deflected shot hit a post. At 1-0 down,

Norwich still had hope and they almost equalized when Adam Idah's shot was pushed onto the post by Hammers goalkeeper Lukasz Fabianski. But the second goal West Ham had long threatened came seven minutes from time when Bowen turned in Arthur Masuaku's cross, with VAR overturning an offside decision. — AFP

## Zain main supporter of equestrian sports and athletes

**KUWAIT:** Zain, the leading digital service provider in Kuwait, took part in recognizing the winners of the fourth round in the Kuwait Equestrian Federation's Showjumping Tour. The competition, held for the first time by KEF, features over 300 showjumpers from across the nation's equestrian clubs.

The award ceremony was held after the conclusion of the fourth round at Messilah Equestrian Club, and witnessed the attendance of Kuwait Equestrian Federation Chairman Masoud Johar Hayat, Zain Kuwait's Chief Corporate Communications and Relations Officer Waleed Al-Khashti, Zain and KEF officials, as well as huge crowds of equestrian enthusiasts.

Zain is proud in sponsoring this unique local sporting event in collaboration with the Kuwait Equestrian

Federation. The company's support springs from its corporate sustainability strategy towards supporting Kuwaiti sports and youth. Zain is a strong believer in the talents and capabilities of the nation's young athletes, especially those who are passionate about equestrian sports, which are deep rooted in Kuwaiti, Arab, and Islamic identity.

The first edition of the Kuwait Equestrian Federation's Showjumping Tour (2021-2022 season) witnesses the participation of over 300 showjumpers who represent public and private equestrian clubs from across the nation. The tour features eight competitions held across three clubs: Hunting and Equestrian Club, Kuwait Riding Center, and Messilah Equestrian Club.

Zain is always keen on supporting



**KUWAIT:** Masoud Hayat and Waleed Al-Khashti with the winners of the 4th round.

the various sports programs and official competitions hosted in Kuwait with the aim of elevating the Kuwaiti sports scene. The company strongly believes that the private sector has a vital role in progressing sports and youth initiatives, and it makes this belief a reality by shouldering similar events.

As a leading private sector company in Kuwait, Zain is constantly looking to identify and support excellence across the sports sector. The company will continue to put Kuwaiti sports and athletes at the forefront of its priorities and pledges to continue motivating them to achieve all the recognition and support they deserve.

## Al-Attayah and Sunderland scent Dakar glory

**BISHA:** Qatari driver Nasser Al-Attayah and British rider Sam Sunderland are just one safely-navigated stage away from celebrating victory in the Dakar Rally following yesterday's penultimate day of action. Three-time champion Attayah holds a 28-minute advantage over France's nine-time world rally champion Sebastien Loeb ahead of Friday's 164-kilometre special.

Loeb reduced 51-year-old Attayah's lead by four minutes on Thursday in a 346km stage won by Spanish veteran Carlos Sainz in his Audi hybrid. It was the 41st career Dakar stage success for the 59-year-old, who is a three-time winner of the race.

Sunderland may be tossing and turning in his

tent as he is tantalizingly close to winning the motorbike title for a second time. In 2017 he became the first Briton to win either category of the grueling rally. The 32-year-old Dubai-based KTM rider holds a lead of almost seven minutes over Chile's Pablo Quintanilla after he finished runner-up in Thursday's stage behind 2021 champion Kevin Benavides of Argentina.

It is the sixth time that Sunderland has assumed the overall lead in this year's event and he is an experienced enough to not assume he already has the race won ahead of Friday's stage. The Briton only needs overnight leader Adrien van Beveren as a reference point of what can go wrong — the Frenchman got lost four kilometers into the stage and is now over 15 minutes off the pace.

"I'm feeling really good and looking forward to tomorrow," said Sunderland. "The race is not done until you pass that chequered flag on the last stage. "As we know, the navigation on this race is really difficult. It's been really difficult this race because, as



**BISHA:** Toyota's driver Nasser Al-Attayah of Qatar and his co-driver Mathieu Baumel of France compete during the Stage 11 of the Dakar 2022 around Bisha, Saudi Arabia, yesterday. — AFP

you saw, the times are so close every day. I'll just try and have a clean stage tomorrow and hopefully we can get it done." — AFP



## Sports

# Real Madrid down Barcelona to reach Spanish Super Cup final

## Madrid triumphant for fifth straight Clasico against Barca

RIYADH: Real Madrid struck a fifth Clasico victory in a row on Wednesday to advance to the Spanish Super Cup final but Barcelona's young guns showed why there is belief the club's recovery has begun. At the end of a pulsating contest in Saudi Arabia, Madrid scraped through 3-2 after extra-time. As expected, Madrid triumphed to make it a quintet of consecutive Clasico victories, the first time either side has enjoyed such dominance since Pep Guardiola's Barcelona won 5-0 at Camp Nou in 2010.

That Vinicius Junior and Karim Benzema, Madrid's deadly attacking duo, both scored again was not a shock either, nor even that the brilliant Ansu Fati came off the bench to head home in his first appearance in two months.

The surprise was that a youthful Barcelona side, that sits 17 points behind Real Madrid in La Liga, pushed Madrid all the way at the King Fahd Stadium and for 10 minutes after Fati's late equalizer looked the more likely to reach the final.

Xavi Hernandez said this game would be an "exam" for his team and while they lost the game, it would be harsh not to conclude they passed. By the end, Barcelona's 11 included Pedri, 19, Ez Abde, 20, Fati, 19, Nico Gonzalez, 20, and Ronald Araujo, 22. Gavi, 17, and Ferran Torres, 21, had gone off.

Madrid's own young gem, Vinicius, might prove to be the best of the lot, the Brazilian almost unstoppable again. Luuk de Jong, though, equalized for Barcelona and after Fati cancelled out Benzema's strike, it needed Fede Valverde to score the winner in extra-time.

Barcelona were almost unrecognizable from the start, boosted by the return of several key players. Fati, Pedri, Frenkie de Jong and Araujo were all back after injury. Torres also made his debut, 15 days after completing his move from Manchester City. He tested negative for Covid and was finally registered by La Liga, Barca making space in their budget by extending the contract of Samuel Umtiti.

Real Madrid were the better side early on, slicker through midfield and more meaningful in attack. Yet when the goal came, it was via an error from Sergio Busquets, the veteran robbed of the ball in the center circle. Benzema caught him napping, received it back from Luka Modric and sent the ball into the path of Vinicius. With three perfect touches, he controlled, pushed away from Ronald Araujo and lifted the ball into the net.

### Match held at Saudi's King Fahd Stadium

#### Menacing

There was little to forecast Barcelona's equalizer, which arrived four minutes before half-time. Ousmane Dembele's cross to the near post was met by Eder Militao but his clearance cannoned off the outstretched foot of De Jong, the ball rebounding in off the post. Pedri and Abde came on at half-time and Barca quickened the pace, Pedri firing wide shortly after the restart. Fati came on for De Jong, the team suddenly looking more menacing.

But it was Benzema who went closest, teed up by Vinicius. He skillfully made just enough space in the penalty area to crack a left-footed shot against the post. Madrid were gaining again now



RIYADH: Real Madrid's French forward Karim Benzema (center) reacts after scoring during the Spanish Super Cup semi-final football match between Barcelona and Real Madrid at the King Fahad International stadium in the Saudi capital Riyadh on Wednesday. —AFP

and in the 72nd minute, they struck. Ferland Mendy skipped past Alves and cut back for Benzema, whose effort was pushed left by Marc-Andre ter Stegen.

Dani Carvajal was there to drive the ball back in and while Ter Stegen again made the block, this time it fell to Benzema, who adjusted and finished. With seven minutes left, Madrid were closing in but Fati intervened. Memphis Depay played the corner short and Jordi Alba's cross found a space

in the box, where Fati jumped, stretched and headed into the corner.

For the remaining minutes, it was Barcelona on top, Dembele racing through and Pedri denied by Nacho Fernandez. They started better in extra-time too but perhaps over-exerted because suddenly Madrid were five against three. Vinicius ran over Rodrygo's pull-back and Valverde, with Benzema and Casemiro next to him, rolled in. —AFP

## 'Caged lion' Sanchez strikes late to sink Juve, win Super Cup

MILAN: Alexis Sanchez said he felt like a "caged lion" after his last-gasp striker won the Italian Super Cup for Inter Milan in Wednesday's dramatic 2-1 extra-time triumph over old rivals Juventus. With penalties looming at the San Siro Sanchez poked home from close range in the 121st minute of a grueling contest to hand Simone Inzaghi his first trophy since arriving at Inter to replace Antonio Conte in the summer.

Chile forward Sanchez, who has started just four matches this season, was submerged by celebrating teammates as he charged to the sidelines to celebrate his winner, which came after Lautaro Martinez's first-half penalty had levelled Weston McKennie's opener for Juve. "That's what great players are like, the more we play, the better we feel," Sanchez told Mediaset. "I feel like a caged lion, if they let me play I'm a beast."

The win continues Inter's sparkling form, with eight wins from their last eight matches in Serie A, which they lead by a point from city rivals AC Milan. For Juve meanwhile it was another disappointment in a season which had looked like it was getting on track in recent months after an inconsistent opening.

Martinez could have put Inter ahead within eight minutes when, completely unmarked, he somehow didn't meet Stefan De Vrij's header from a corner, and seconds later flashed a first-time effort wide when laid on by Nicolò Barella.

McKennie silenced the Inter fans in the 25th minute when after Alvaro Morata collected on the edge of the area the Spain forward clipped over a cross which was deflected straight into his American teammate's path.

However Inter were level 10 minutes later thanks to Martinez, who rifled home a precision spot-kick



MILAN: Inter Milan's Slovenian goalkeeper Samir Handanovic (top center) and Inter Milan's players celebrate with the winner's trophy after winning the Italian Super Cup (Supercoppa italiana) football match between Inter and Juventus on Wednesday at the San Siro stadium in Milan. —AFP

after Edin Dzeko was taken out by Mattia De Sciglio. Juve started the second half with their tails up but apart from two efforts from Federico Bernardeschi it was Inter who were the dominant team after the break.

They had the best chance to break the deadlock in normal time when Mattia Perin pushed Denzel Dumfries' close-range header onto the bar just before the hour mark but struggled to create much more

danger despite being clearly the better team.

Inter went close again five minutes into extra-time and again it was Martinez who should have done better, this time heading narrowly wide from Hakan Calhanoglu's corner. However with Juve preparing to send on Leonardo Bonucci ahead of spot-kicks, Alex Sandro miscontrolled a cross, allowing Matteo Darmian to nip in and push the ball to Sanchez, who sent the Inter fans into raptures with his simple finish. —AFP

## Xavi says Barca 'heads held high' after Super Cup Clasico defeat

RIYADH: Xavi Hernandez said his young Barcelona team could leave with their "heads held high", despite losing to Real Madrid in the semi-final of the Spanish Super Cup on Wednesday. Barca were beaten 3-2 after extra-time in Saudi Arabia to make it five consecutive Real Madrid victories in Clasico games. But Xavi's side, who sit 17 points behind the La Liga leaders, were far from outclassed and instead showed why there is great hope at the club for the future.

"It was clear that it was a day when we showed courage and took responsibility with the ball. Today was a day to go out with your head held high despite the defeat," said Xavi afterwards. "We were superior to Madrid in many moments," he added.

Vinicius Junior and Karim Benzema twice gave Real Madrid the lead but both times Barcelona pegged them back, with Luuk de Jong equalizing before half-time and then Ansu Fati heading in to force extra-time. Fede Valverde scored the winner to send Madrid through to Sunday's final. "It's two different feelings," said Xavi. "A very bad feeling of defeat but on the other hand we can feel very proud of the game. We need a little more patience."

Real Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti was pleased with his team's ruthlessness on the break. "The game was even, they had more possession, we had more counter-attacks," Ancelotti said. Gerard Pique said Barcelona are getting closer to being a team that can challenge for trophies again. "I think playing like this we are going to start winning and start competing for lots of titles," Pique said. —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

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Gafoor.

I Shaik Abdul Gaffaar S/o Shaik Dastageer (old name), R/o. D.No. 4-10, Rayavaram (V&Post), T.Sundupal (Mdl), Y.S.R. District, A.P, have changed my name as Shaik Reddy Gafoor S/o Shaik Dastageer (new name) (C 1404)

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## Nets send a message with rout of Bulls

Brooklyn's "Big Three" shine in second game together of season



CHICAGO: James Harden (center left), Kyrie Irving (center) and Kevin Durant (center right) of the Brooklyn Nets smile on the bench during the game against the Chicago Bulls on Wednesday 2022 at United Center in Chicago, Illinois. — AFP

**LOS ANGELES:** Brooklyn showed just how dangerous they can be with their "Big Three" on Wednesday, manhandling the Bulls 138-112 in Chicago in a clash of the top teams in the NBA Eastern Conference. The Nets had Kevin Durant, James Harden and Kyrie Irving on the floor for just the second game this season and the superstar trio didn't disappoint.

Durant scored 27 points, Harden added 25 points and a season-high 16 assists and Irving chipped in with nine points in his third game of the season. Irving made his debut in January after the Nets decided they would let the unvaccinated player join the team for road trips even though New York's vaccine mandate means he can't play home games in Brooklyn.

While Irving may still be finding his feet, Durant delivered another dominant performance, scoring 17 points in the third quarter. The Bulls, trailing by two at halftime, pulled level at 71-71 early in the third, but the Nets outscored them 39-19 in the frame to take a 101-79 lead into the fourth.

Harden, back after missing one game with a hyper-extended knee, drained five three-pointers.

Patty Mills made six from beyond the arc on the way to 21 points as the Nets — beaten twice already this season by Chicago — edged closer to the Bulls atop the East.

"These last 10 games we've been up and down, so we wanted to come out against a really good team who've been playing very, very good basketball and execute and play really good on both ends of the ball," Harden said. "I think we did that."

Miami, who went into the day third in the East, just a half-game behind the Nets, kept the pressure on with a 115-91 victory over the Hawks in Atlanta. With stars Bam Adebayo and Jimmy Butler still sidelined, Tyler Herro led the Heat with 21 points — one of seven Miami players to score in double figures. Herro added 11 assists and nine rebounds, and the Heat held Hawks star Trae Young to 15 points on four-of-15 shooting.

In the West, the Sacramento Kings put up 40 points in the third quarter on the way to a 125-116 victory over LeBron James and the Los Angeles Lakers. All five Kings starters scored in double figures, led by De'Aaron Fox's 29 points. Sacramento connected on 55.1 percent of their shots from the field and out-scored the Lakers 70-42 in the paint.

The Lakers led 67-61 at halftime and were up 76-68 early in the third before the Kings rallied. James scored 34 points, Malik Monk added 22 and Austin Reaves contributed 19 off the bench for the Lakers, but Russell Westbrook connected on just two of 14 shots from the field on the way to eight points.

### Knicks halt Mavs

Knicks forward RJ Barrett starred again, scoring 32 points to lead New York to a 108-85 victory

over Dallas that halted the Mavericks' six-game winning streak. The 21-year-old Barrett posted his second straight 30-point game, after scoring 31 in a rout of San Antonio on Monday. Mitchell Robinson added a season-high 19 points as all five Knicks starters scored in double figures.

Luka Doncic led the Mavs with 21 points and 11 rebounds. But Dallas — who halted the Chicago Bulls' nine-game winning streak on Sunday — struggled offensively. Doncic connected on just eight of 23 shots from the field, and the Mavericks as a whole shot 41 percent overall. They made only eight of 37 three-point attempts, a dismal 21.6 percent success rate.

The Boston Celtics shrugged off their recent road woes with a 119-100 victory over the Pacers in Indianapolis. Jaylen Brown scored 34 points and pulled down seven rebounds, and Jayson Tatum contributed 33 points for the Celtics, who had lost their last six games on the road. Charlotte, led by 30 points from Gordon Hayward, beat the 76ers 109-98, ending a 16-game losing streak against Philadelphia that had stretched back to November 2016. — AFP



## Heat beat Hawks; Lakers woes continue

## Muguruza upset, Jabeur suffers injury scare before Australian Open

**SYDNEY:** World number three Garbine Muguruza was sent packing from the Sydney Classic in the quarter-finals yesterday by clinical Russian Daria Kasatkina, who continued her strong start to the season ahead of the Australian Open. Muguruza had a first-round bye then had to battle hard to topple 40th-ranked Ekaterina Alexandrova, before crashing to Kasatkina 6-4, 6-4.

It was the second semi-final in as many weeks the Russian has reached after losing in the last four of the Melbourne Summer Set to eventual champion Amanda Anisimova. Kasatkina is a former world number 10 who bounced back up the rankings to 26 last year after winning two titles and reaching a further two finals.

"It's very good preparation before a Slam," she said. "At the beginning I was a bit over-excited but in the end I was able to control myself and make a few good decisions." She will meet ninth-ranked Paula Badosa for the place in tomorrow's final after the Spaniard fought past Tokyo Olympics gold medalist Belinda Bencic 7-6 (8/6), 3-6, 6-3.

### Kontaveit through

In-form world number seven Anett Kontaveit also made the last four after Ons Jabeur, ranked three places below her, retired hurt. The Estonian won a

tight first set 6-4 before the Tunisian called for a medical timeout. After lengthy treatment on her lower back, Jabeur forfeited the match.

It is a big setback for Jabeur, with the opening Grand Slam of the year starting on Monday. She had a breakthrough 2021, when she won her maiden WTA singles title and surged into the top 10 for the first time. Kontaveit will now play world number four and French Open champion Barbora Krejickova, with the Czech crushing France's Caroline Garcia 6-0, 6-2.

"It's never the way you want to win and I really hope Ons is going to be fine for next week and that it's nothing too serious," said the Estonian. "The first set was really competitive and we've had some tough matches before and she's always come out on top, so it was good to get the set and that I was playing the way I was playing."

The understated Kontaveit is shaping up as a serious contender at Melbourne Park after her electric form in the second half of last season, capturing four titles in two months before ending runner-up at the WTA Finals to Garbine Muguruza. Krejickova also raced through the rankings last year, winning at Roland Garros, Strasbourg and Prague. "I'm glad to be putting myself in these situations and getting good matches and getting quality time on court," she said. — AFP

## Djokovic drawn to play Australian Open as deportation threat looms

**MELBOURNE:** Novak Djokovic drew a first-round clash against a fellow Serb in the Australian Open yesterday, taking a step closer to his dream of a record 21st Grand Slam despite a looming decision on his deportation. The unvaccinated world number one, top seed and defending champion is looking to clinch a 10th title at Melbourne Park.

The 34-year-old tennis superstar was drawn to play Serb Miomir Kecmanovic in the first round. But the openly vaccine-sceptic Djokovic's championship hopes were in peril as Australia's Immigration Minister Alex Hawke pondered whether to revoke his visa for a second time and throw him out of the country.

Hawke is considering using his powers to annul the visa, his spokesman has said, although "lengthy further submissions" from Djokovic's legal team have delayed a decision. In a lengthy press conference, Prime Minister Scott Morrison said no decision had yet been taken.

Djokovic flew into Melbourne airport on January 5 carrying a vaccine exemption because of a claimed positive PCR test result on December 16. Border agents rejected his exemption, saying a recent infection was an insufficient justification, tore up his visa and placed him in a detention center.

But Djokovic's high-powered legal team overturned the visa decision in court on Monday on a procedural matter related to his airport interview. Melbourne's Herald Sun newspaper quoted an unnamed government source as saying that allowing Djokovic to stay in Australia without a COVID-19 vaccine would set a dangerous precedent.

The source was quoted as saying

Morrison's government was expected to act despite any international "backlash" because cancelling the visa would be line with Australia's efforts to control the fast-spreading virus.

### 'Drift on and on'

The government's legal battle with Djokovic is politically charged in a country that has endured nearly two years of some of the toughest COVID-19 restrictions in the world, and in the run-up to May general elections.

"Australia has a policy of not allowing unvaccinated people into Australia. It is beyond my comprehension how we have got to this point," Labor Party opposition leader Anthony Albanese said in an interview yesterday. "How is it that Novak Djokovic was able to come here?"

As COVID-related hospitalizations rise in Melbourne, the Victorian state government said Thursday it would cap capacity at the Australian Open at 50 percent. Spectators must be vaccinated or have a medical exemption. Face masks will also be mandatory at the opening Grand Slam of the year except when eating or drinking, and those watching must socially distance while indoors. The tournament starts Monday.

As the Omicron variant races through Australia's population, Djokovic's anti-vaccine stance has come under scrutiny. The tennis ace described reports about his post-infection outings in Serbia as "misinformation" in an Instagram post Wednesday.

On the day of his claimed positive test in Serbia, he appeared at a ceremony to honour him with stamps bearing his image. The follow-



MELBOURNE: Novak Djokovic of Serbia takes part in a practice session ahead of the Australian Open tennis tournament in Melbourne yesterday. — AFP

ing day he attended a youth tennis event. He appeared at both apparently without a mask.

Djokovic said he only received the PCR test result after attending the children's tennis event on December 17. But he admitted that he also went ahead with an interview with French sports daily L'Equipe on December 18.

"On reflection, this was an error of judgement and I accept that I should have rescheduled this commitment," Djokovic said. The journalist who carried out the L'Equipe interview, Franck Ramella, said Djokovic's representatives had told him not to ask about COVID-19 vaccinations. The reporter said he had been unaware at the time of the interview that Djokovic was COVID-positive.

The tennis star also admitted to 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 flying to Melbourne. In fact, social media posts and reports show he flew from Serbia to Spain during that period. — AFP