



3 Kuwait birdwatchers hold annual bird count at Sulaibikhat beach



5 Safer gun?: 'Smart' pistols headed to US market



10 S&P affirms Kuwait credit rating at A+ with negative outlook



16 De Bruyne strike stretches City's Premier League lead



Oil minister orders probe into refinery blaze that killed two

10 others injured in fire at Ahmadi refinery's gas liquefaction unit



KUWAIT: A handout picture provided by KNPC on Friday shows Oil Minister Mohammad Al-Fares with KNPC officials at Mina Al-Ahmadi refinery as firefighting personnel extinguish a fire which broke out during maintenance work. — AFP

KUWAIT: Kuwaiti Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Oil and Minister of Electricity, Water and Sustainable Energy Mohammad Al-Fares ordered a high-level technical probe panel be set up in order to look into the causes of a fire that broke out at Mina Al-Ahmadi oil refinery on Friday that left two workers dead and 10 others injured.

The blaze "erupted during maintenance work" on a gas liquefaction unit at Mina Al-Ahmadi refinery, state-owned Kuwait National Petroleum Company (KNPC) announced on Twitter. Having initially said that 10 people were injured, it later updated its casualty toll, saying two workers "of Asian nationality" had been found dead at the site. Seven of those injured were hospitalized, five of them in "critical condition", KNPC added. Firefighters were mobilized and had extinguished the blaze. Fares later visited the site of the fire.

KNPC said Kuwait's refining operations and exports were unaffected, as the unit had already been out of service. Mina Al-Ahmadi, where another fire last October caused a number of light injuries, is the largest of Kuwait's three refineries and handles some 466,000 barrels of oil per day. A

fourth is under construction with a daily capacity of 615,000 barrels. A key member within the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), Kuwait is currently producing about 2.4 million barrels a day.

Fares said in the press statement yesterday that the probe panel, which should be composed of experts and specialists, has to determine whether the fire was due to negligence, and even explore necessary mechanisms to prevent similar accidents in the future. He emphasized that the ensuing recommendations are to be immediately submitted to him and the board chairman of Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) for necessary action based on the probe findings.

However, the minister highlighted that firemen put out the fire at the refinery's gas liquefaction unit in record time, underlining that the facility has been under maintenance since November. Fares, accompanied by Indian Ambassador to Kuwait Sibi George, also checked on the injured workers at Al-Babtain Center for Burns and Plastic Surgery, where they are being treated, and he was assured of their health, a statement by KNPC said. — Agencies

Boozy Fridays leave UK PM with hangover

LONDON: UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson witnessed weekly drinking sessions by his staff throughout the pandemic, according to a report yesterday that stoked fresh calls from his own party for the embattled leader to quit. Conservative MPs, many of whom were spending the weekend back in their home constituencies, say they are being deluged with messages from voters outraged at accounts of rule-breaking in Downing Street.

Johnson was spending the weekend in self-isolation after a family member tested positive for COVID. The opposition Labour party said he was "literally in hiding" and should resign. Former Conservative minister Tobias Ellwood, an influential backbench MP, told the BBC that Johnson must "lead or step aside". Whether Johnson and his staff knowingly broke the law during COVID lockdowns is the central question being addressed in an inquiry by senior civil servant Sue Gray, who could report back next week.

After weeks of denials and stonewalling, Johnson this week apologized in parliament for at least one boozy event organized by his staff which he attended in May 2020, when Britons were banned from socializing. Two other parties were held in April 2021 as Queen Elizabeth II prepared to bury Prince Philip, her husband of 73 years. Downing Street sent apologies to Buckingham Palace, calling them "deeply regrettable".

But those were not isolated events, according to yesterday's Daily Mirror, which published a photograph of a wine cooler being delivered to a Downing Street back door in Dec 2020. It said staff would stock the fridge with suitcase-loads of alcohol, and Johnson would often drop by to their "Wine time Fridays". "The idea that he didn't know there were drinks is total nonsense," the newspaper quoted one staffer as saying. "If the PM tells you to 'let off steam', he's basically saying this is fine."

In response, a Downing Street spokesperson said the government was awaiting Gray's inquiry "to establish the facts around the nature of gatherings" during the pandemic. But at least five Conservative MPs say publicly that they have already filed letters demanding a vote of no confidence in the prime minister. A total of 54 letters from Tory lawmakers are needed to trigger a vote. The Daily Telegraph newspaper said about 20 have been handed in so far.

Continued on Page 2

Djokovic again detained as public threat

MELBOURNE: Australia returned Novak Djokovic to detention yesterday, saying the tennis star's opposition to vaccination could cause "civil unrest" and triggering a high-profile court showdown. Having once failed to remove the unvaccinated 34-year-old from the country, Australia's conservative government is trying again. And Djokovic is fighting back for the second time, with a new court appeal scheduled for today.

The case will be heard from 9:30 am (2230GMT) by the full Federal Court of three justices, a format that leaves little room to appeal any decision. For now, the Serbian ace is back at a notorious Melbourne immigration detention facility after a few short-lived days of freedom following his first suc-

cessful court appeal. A motorcade was spotted moving from his lawyers' offices - where he had been kept under guard for most of yesterday - to the former Park Hotel facility.

For millions around the world, the Serbian star is best known as a gangly all-conquering tennis champion with a ferocious backhand and his anti-vaccine stance. In court filings, Australia has cast him as a figurehead for anti-vaxxers and a catalyst for potential "civil unrest" who must be removed in the public interest. Djokovic's presence in Australia "may foster anti-vaccination sentiment", immigration minister Alex Hawke argued, justifying his use of broad executive powers to revoke the ace's visa.

Not only could Djokovic encourage people to flout health rules, Hawke said, but his presence could lead to "civil unrest". So with just two days before the Australian Open begins, the defending champion is again focused on law courts rather than center court. After months of speculation about whether Djokovic would get vaccinated to play in Australia, he used a medical exemption to enter the

Continued on Page 2



PARIS: A protester holds a placard with the picture of Serbia's Novak Djokovic reading "Thanks Djoko" during a demonstration against a health pass and COVID-19 vaccines on Trocadero Plaza yesterday. — AFP

Student selfies fetch \$1 million in NFT sales

SEMARANG, Indonesia: An Indonesian college student has become an Internet sensation after trade in the digital rights to his selfies fetched more

than \$1 million on a platform for non-fungible tokens. Sultan Gustaf Al Ghozali, who studies computer science at a university in the central city of Semarang, has taken a picture of himself sitting in front of his computer almost every day for the last five years.

He intended to use the collection of nearly 1,000 selfies to create a timelapse video for his graduation day. But after learning about blockchain technology, the 22-year-old decided to upload the

photos to NFT trading platform OpenSea under the title "Ghozali Everyday". "I was thinking it might be funny if one of the collectors collected my face," Ghozali told reporters at his university's campus. "I never thought anybody would want to buy the selfies, which is why I only priced them at \$3," he said.

But on Friday one selfie was available for 0.247 of the cryptocurrency ether (\$806) after demand shot up.

Continued on Page 2



Sultan Gustaf Al Ghozali

Thieves loot LA freight trains with impunity

LOS ANGELES: Dozens of freight cars are broken into every day on Los Angeles' railways by thieves who take advantage of the trains' stops to loot packages bought online, leaving thousands of gutted boxes and products that will never reach their destinations. According to the tags found Friday by an AFP team on a track near the city center - which was easily accessible from nearby streets - many

major US mail order and courier companies such as Amazon, Target, UPS and FedEx are being hit by the thefts, which have exploded in recent months.

The thieves wait until the long freight trains are immobilized on the tracks, and then climb onto the freight containers, whose locks they easily break with the help of bolt cutters. They then help themselves to parcels, ditching any products that are difficult to move or re-sell, or are too cheap, such as COVID-19 test kits, furniture or medications. Rail operator Union Pacific has seen a 160 percent rise in the thefts in Los Angeles county since Dec 2020.

Continued on Page 2



LOS ANGELES: An aerial image from Friday shows a section of Union Pacific train tracks littered with thousands of opened boxes and packages stolen from cargo shipping containers targeted by thieves. — AFP

Local

Kuwait's real-estate sector saw price hikes in 2021

Govt subsidies encourage citizens to rent out houses in residential areas



KUWAIT: An archive photo showing a general view of residential areas in Kuwait City's suburbs. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

KUWAIT: Prices of housing real-estates rose last year in Kuwait, where investors focused on Kuwaitis' residential areas dealing in uninhabited plots of land, capitalizing on government subsidies and transforming residential units into rental houses. Some residential districts, mainly inhabited by citizens, witnessed more than 35 percent rise in rates of the plots, leading to record growth of property assets in the shadow of scarce offered real-estates.

The former director general of Kuwait Clearing Company, Tareq Al-Atigi, said in an interview that prices in this sector hit unprecedented high level, largely due to robust activities by traders and brokers, purchasing uninhabited plots of land in East Al-Gurain in July 2021 and selling them in November, posting more than 10 percent of profits. Moreover, the investors bought 375-square-meter houses in Kuwait's residential districts such as Al-Khaldiya and Al-Yarmouk in May, at KD 500,000 per unit (\$1.6 million), and sold them at KD 600,000 (\$1.9 million). Value of these units rose by KD 20,000 (\$66,267.36) per month for a five-

month period, Atigi said.

Government subsidies

The dealers focused on the Kuwaitis' residences, buoyed by government subsidies for utilities namely water and power. Such a beneficial privilege does not exist in the investment sector - home to apartment buildings that are largely occupied by non-Kuwaiti residents of the country. Furthermore, the investors have transformed houses in the citizens' residential areas into rental apartments. As to the uninhabited plots, there are no taxes on a citizen who possesses more than one property. In the meantime, some people own dozens of plots but they refrain from developing them, thus contributing to pushing prices high due to low supply.



Investment sector largely hit by expats' exodus

The former director general expressed his belief that "calming the prices" can be attained by imposing added taxes on the citizens' residential areas, in addition to lifting subsidies for water and power for a citizen who owns more than one lot. Proposing other ideas, he has mentioned specializing more housing parcels in new regions and speeding up government housing enterprises. In 2022, the housing rates may drop by five percent if interest rates are increased on assets of local banks, he has opined.

Meanwhile, Chairman of the Kuwaiti Union for Real-Estate brokers Abdulaziz Al-Dghaishem said that the housing sector posted in Q1 and Q2 2021 rises that exceeded KD 1,500 (\$5,000) per square meter particularly in locations in Al-Assima and Hawally. In addition, the units' prices in Sabah Al-Ahmad Sea City rose by

30 percent. Dghaishem has predicted price stability in 2022 unless the market witnesses major events such as promoting new towns, re-activating realty mortgages, also affirming that prices can stabilize in the shadow of higher supply.

Expats' exodus

Chief Executive Officer of Amtar Global Real-Estate Company Ali Al-Kadhemi said in the meantime that other causes of the prices' hike were existence of liquidity, investors and brokers' solvency, noting that the investment sector suffered due to permanent return of many expatriates to their countries in the shadow of the COVID-19 crisis. He proposed engaging the private sector, where citizens can purchase built houses at reasonable prices. Total value of the property transactions in the housing sector, in 2021, amounted to KD three billion (\$10 billion), starkly higher by KD 780 million (\$2.2 billion) invested in the investment sector, according to statistics by the property registration department at the Kuwaiti Ministry of Justice. — KUNA

Djokovic again detained as...

Continued from Page 1

country a week ago, hoping to challenge for a record 21st Grand Slam title at the Open.

Many Australians - who have suffered prolonged lockdowns and border restrictions - believe Djokovic gamed the system to dodge vaccine entry requirements. Amid public outcry, Prime Minister Scott Morrison's government revoked Djokovic's visa on arrival. But the government was humiliated when a judge reinstated Djokovic's visa and allowed him to remain in the country.

This time, the government has invoked exceptional - and difficult to challenge - executive powers to declare him a threat to public health and safety. Experts say the case has taken on significance beyond the fate of one man who happens to be good at tennis. "The case is likely to define how tourists, foreign visitors and even Australian citizens view the nation's immigration policies and 'equality before the law' for years to come," said Sanzhuan Guo, a law lecturer at Flinders University.

Djokovic's lawyers argue the government "cited no evidence" to support their claims. The minister admitted that Djokovic is at "negligible" risk of infecting Australians, but argued his past "disregard" for COVID-19 regulations may pose a risk to public health and encourage people to ignore pandemic rules. The

tennis ace contracted COVID-19 in mid-December and, according to his own account, failed to isolate despite knowing he was positive.

Public records show he attended a stamp unveiling, youth tennis event and granted a media interview around the time he got tested and his latest infection was confirmed. Djokovic is the Australian Open's top seed and a nine-time winner of the tournament. He had been practicing just hours before Hawke's decision was announced. The visa cancellation effectively means Djokovic would be barred from obtaining a new Australian visa for three years, except under exceptional circumstances, ruling him out of one of the four Grand Slam tournaments during that time.

He is currently tied with Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal with 20 Grand Slam titles each. Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic on Friday accused Australia of "mistreating" the country's biggest star, and a national hero. "If you wanted to ban Novak Djokovic from winning the 10th trophy in Melbourne why didn't you return him immediately, why didn't you tell him 'it is impossible to obtain a visa'?" Vucic said on Instagram. "Novak, we stand by you!" Spanish great Nadal took a swipe at his rival yesterday as players complained the scandal was overshadowing the opening Grand Slam of the year. "The Australian Open is much more important than any player," Nadal told reporters at Melbourne Park. "Australian Open will be a great Australian Open with or without him." Defending Australian Open champion Naomi Osaka called the Djokovic saga "unfortunate" and "sad" and said it could be the defining moment of his career. — AFP

and recruited more security staff for its tracks and convoys. Police and security agents have arrested more than 100 people in the last three months of 2021 for "trespassing and vandalizing" Union Pacific trains.

"While criminals are being caught and arrested, charges are reduced to a misdemeanor or petty offense, and the person is back on the streets in less than 24 hours after paying a nominal fine," said a spokesman for the rail operator. "In fact, criminals boast to our officers that there is no consequence," he said. Union Pacific wrote to the Los Angeles County attorney's office at the end of December asking them to reconsider a leniency policy introduced at the end of 2020 for such offenses.

The operator estimates that damages from such thefts in 2021 amounted to some \$5 million, adding that the amount in claims and losses "does not include respective losses to our impacted customers" or the impact on Union Pacific's operations and the entire Los Angeles County supply chain. — AFP

Iran tests solid-fuel satellite carrier rocket

TEHRAN: Iran's Revolutionary Guards tested last week a solid-fuel satellite carrier rocket, state media has reported quoting the force's aerospace commander as saying. Reports carried footage released by the elite force claiming to show the successful test of the rocket's primary propulsion engine. The test marked the first time Iran used a solid-fuel rocket rather than a liquid-fuel one, the Guards' aerospace commander

Brigadier General Amirali Hajizadeh said.

Iran can now send more satellites into space, he said, according to the reports carried by state media. Solid-fuel rockets can be used for mobile launchers while pure solid-fuel rockets are mostly linked to ballistic missiles systems. "The new Iranian satellites are made of non-metallic, composite bodies with non-moving propellants, which will further increase the rocket's energy and save costs," Hajizadeh said, according to state news agency IRNA.

The test came amid the on-going negotiations in Vienna that aim to revive Tehran's 2015 nuclear deal with world powers. Iran successfully put its first military satellite into orbit in April 2020. — AFP

Boozy Fridays leave UK PM...

Continued from Page 1

After the Mirror report, Conservative backbencher Andrew Bridgen said Johnson had "lost the moral authority to lead". He had presided over a staff culture of "one rule for them, and the rest of us do as we're told", Bridgen told BBC television. Most cabinet members have rallied round Johnson but the support of some, including powerful finance minister Rishi Sunak, has been distinctly lukewarm.

Pensions minister Guy Opperman broke ranks to argue that Johnson "needs to change his ways", describing the personal toll inflicted on his family by the COVID rules. "I feel pretty emotional about this because in May 2020 my wife and kids were unwell

and they went to hospital. I was not able to go there to support them," he told the BBC. The Oppermans' newborn twins died in June 2020.

The drip-feed threatens to overshadow a reported Downing Street plan to salvage Johnson's leadership after the Gray report is released. The Independent newspaper said "Operation Save Big Dog" would see a clear-out of top Downing Street aides. The government has already signaled it intends to relax current COVID restrictions in late January and Johnson allies have been touting his achievements in office, including his delivery of Britain's Brexit withdrawal from the European Union.

But the Labour party - which this week surged to a 10-point lead over the Tories in two opinion polls ahead of local elections in May - said Johnson was "not fit for office". "We are witnessing the broken spectacle of a prime minister mired in deceit and deception, unable to lead," Labour leader Keir Starmer said in a speech yesterday. — AFP

Thieves loot LA freight trains...

Continued from Page 1

"In October 2021 alone, the increase was 356 percent compared to October 2020," UP said in a letter to the local authorities, seen by AFP. The explosion in looting has been accompanied by an upsurge in "assaults and armed robberies of UP employees performing their duties moving trains," the letter said. The phenomenon spiked recently with the peak of activity linked to Christmas shopping.

According to figures reported by UP, more than 90 containers were vandalized every day on average in Los Angeles County in the last quarter of 2021. To combat the trend, Union Pacific says it has strengthened surveillance measures - including drones and other detection systems-

Student selfies fetch \$1 million...

Continued from Page 1

NFTs have transformed digital items ranging from illustrations to memes into virtual collectors' items that cannot be duplicated. Ghozali started to upload his selfies in late December but it was not until a celebrity chef snapped some up last week and promoted Ghozali on his social media account that sales took off.

In the next few days more than 400 people bought ownership of his expressionless photos. As

of Friday afternoon, Ghozali's collection had reached a total trade volume of 317 ether, equivalent to more than \$1 million. "To be honest I still haven't got the courage to tell my parents, they would be wondering where I got the money from," Ghozali laughed.

On his Twitter account, where he has more than 16,000 followers, the student often offers updates on his OpenSea statistics. "Today (I) sold more than 230+ (selfies) and until now I don't understand why you want to buy #NFT photos of me !!! but i thank you guys for 5 years of effort paid off," he tweeted. Ghozali, who dreams of opening his own animation studio one day, said he plans to invest the money and will continue to take daily selfies until he finishes college. — AFP

Local

Kuwait birdwatchers hold annual bird count at Sulaibikhat beach

Around 410 types of birds found in Kuwait in this period



KUWAIT: Birds flock at the Sulaibikhat beach yesterday. —Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat



A group photo of participants in the event.



Participants use binoculars to watch birds.

By Nawara Fattahova

KUWAIT: The bird monitoring and protection team of the Kuwait Environment Protection Society (KEPS) held its annual bird count yesterday at Sulaibikhat beach. According to the organizers, the best time to count birds is when migratory birds settle with local birds. "If we do the counting during migration, the number won't be correct. Migratory birds have settled in as winter visitors to Kuwait. The counting in this period is around 85 percent accurate," Mohammed Shah, Head of the Bird Monitoring and Protection Team, told Kuwait Times.

Around 410 types of birds can be found in Kuwait in this period, including migratory and local birds. "The total number of birds here may reach a few thousands during the migration

period. We haven't spotted new species of migratory birds this year, but their number in general is larger," he said. "We have chosen this location for the bird counting as this place has easy access and due to the large variety of birds in this place in this time. The high tide brings the birds closer to the beach, which makes counting easier," explained Shah.

Some migratory birds stay in Kuwait for long periods. "For instance, flamingos stay in Kuwait for most of the year. They only leave for two or three

months during summer to lay eggs in nearby areas. Some birds lay their eggs on Boubyan Island, and these are considered resident birds,"

Flamingos considered resident birds of Kuwait



he pointed out. The migratory birds come to Kuwait from the north, especially Siberia, Russia and Central Asia. "These migratory birds start migrating from the beginning of autumn, in September. Most birds migrating from Scandinavian countries settle in Africa, and only a few species stay in the Arabian Peninsula," concluded Shah.

Dr Wijdan Al-Eqab, President of KEPS, said

holding such events is part of KEPS' participation and support for environmental activities to spread awareness and conserve the birds in the country. "The great number of participants in this event from all ages reflects the interest in the environment among the community, and this is the aim of KEPS," she stated.

Eqab also called upon individuals and institutions to protect migratory and local birds in Kuwait and to defer from hunting them. "Kuwait is considered one of the most important routes for migratory birds during their annual migration from north to south and vice versa. People should protect mud flats and tidal zones, because these areas are habitats for many birds and have components of marine life such as crustaceans, mudhoppers and mollusks," she added.



Photographers participate in the event.



Gray herons chase a seagull holding a fish in its beak along the Sulaibikhat beach.



Gray herons fly along the Sulaibikhat beach.

Kuwait daily COVID cases drop for second straight day

KUWAIT: Kuwait reported 4,517 new COVID-19 cases yesterday in addition to one death and 1,785 recoveries. Kuwait's new daily cases dropped for the second straight day after the country recorded 4,881 new cases on Friday and 4,883 on Thursday. Meanwhile, the number of patients in ICU's rose slightly from 25 Friday to 26 yesterday, while patients hospitalized increased from 222 to 254. Total active cases also jumped from 36,423 to 39,154.

The percentage of daily new cases to new tests increased from 13.7 percent to 14.1 percent while the percentage of recovery dropped slightly from 91.5 percent to 91 percent, according to the health ministry's bulletin. Yesterday's figures brought total infections to 460,828, deaths to 2,475 and recoveries to 419,199 since the start of the pandemic, Health Ministry's Spokesman Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad said.

In the meantime, Head of the Supreme Committee for COVID-19 Dr Khaled Al-Jarallah predicted that the Omicron wave in Gulf countries would reach its peak soon, noting that there is a relative increase in hospitalization among people who are not fully vaccinated against COVID-19. Dr Jarallah added in a statement yesterday that the high vaccination rate in Kuwait "allowed for economic, educational and social openness" despite the increase in daily cases.

Foreign Minister, envoys explore ways to strengthen relations with int'l partners

KUWAIT: Foreign Minister and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah convened on Friday a video-conference with heads of Kuwait's diplomatic missions abroad. At the onset of the virtual meeting, he conveyed to the Kuwaiti Ambassadors the greetings and best wishes of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah. On behalf of the political leadership of the country, Sheikh Dr Ahmad appreciated the efforts of the diplomats in serving the interests of the people. He discussed with them the priorities of the Foreign Ministry and its overseas missions in the coming stage and efforts to upgrade the Ministry's organizational, administrative and technical systems, promote the representation offices abroad, meet the aspirations of the diplomatic staff, and keep abreast with the accelerated developments. The meeting also dealt with the latest developments of the situa-

tions on the regional and international arenas.

Sheikh Dr Ahmad asked the diplomats to do their best to strengthen Kuwait's relations with all friendly countries, and the regional and international organizations in the framework of the country's proactive diplomacy. He stressed the need to cement Kuwait's relationship with international partners and tap into the opportunities for promoting cooperation with them with a view to serving the common interests. He commended the efforts made by the diplomatic missions abroad to address the challenges brought about by the coronavirus pandemic, notably their efforts to help thousands of Kuwaiti nationals go back home in a record time and in a safe and professional way.

Meanwhile, the ambassadors congratulated Sheikh Dr Ahmad, who was reappointed as Foreign Minister and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs late last month, on the trust renewed in him by His Highness the Amir. They praised the improvement in the level of performance of the Ministry on the administrative and diplomatic levels, as well as the



KUWAIT: Kuwait's Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah speaks during a videoconference with heads of Kuwait's diplomatic missions abroad. —KUNA

methodology of Kuwait's foreign policy in expanding the horizons of cooperation with international partners in all areas. —KUNA

Zain shoulders local SMEs, youth startups

KUWAIT: Zain, the leading digital service provider in Kuwait, announced its strategic sponsorship of Bugsha Market, Kuwait's biggest outdoor market for local SMEs. The event, held at Wahran Park in Shamiya throughout the weekend, offered a unique social environment for visitors to socialize, connect, and enjoy the spring and winter seasons while exploring the best of what local talents have to offer.

By partnering with Bugsha Market, Zain continued its ongoing efforts of shouldering local talents as part of its solid and well-focused Corporate Sustainability and Social Responsibility strategy. The company continuously works towards identifying initiatives that empower the next generation of Kuwaiti businesses that are well-capable of contributing to national economy. This event featured a great number of local SMEs that represented many sectors to serve the needs of visitors.

For the second consecutive month, Zain

was present at Bugsha Market in Wahran Park via its dedicated booth, where the company offered many social and entertaining programs to visitors in an open area, sharing the wonderful positive atmosphere that the Kuwaiti community enjoys nowadays as normal life gradually returns after the pandemic. Zain also held exciting competitions at the event and presented valuable prizes to winners.

Last year, Zain premiered the region's first Startup Innovation Digital Video Report, concluding the sixth edition of its renowned digital startups accelerator program: Zain Great Idea (ZGI) in collaboration with Brilliant Lab.

The event gathered Zain's executive management and the region's investment community along with 25 startups who made it to the final phase of Zain Great Idea 6. The Digital Video Report was screened at VOX cinemas in the Avenues mall, and saw the finalists, who represented seven Arab countries, pitch their startups to investors and potential business partners from across MENA.

During 2021, Zain celebrated over 10 years of Zain Great Idea, which has been one of the most successful initiatives the company presented in the Kuwaiti market as part of its innovation and entrepreneur-



KUWAIT: Zain officials in the company's booth at Wahran park.

ship strategy.

Throughout a decade, ZGI has empowered, trained, and invested in over 1,500 passionate Kuwaiti and Arab youth, and the program contributed to creating numerous job opportunities in the regional tech-startups arena by accelerating over 100 businesses.

Digital transformation was the prevailing success story for the vast majority of ZGI's alumni throughout the program's history. At its core, ZGI is a tech-startup accelerator program, and the huge demand for this area of entrepreneurship across

Kuwait and the region only proved that Zain's vision of achieving digital leadership was on the right track.

Bugsha Market offers a unique opportunity for visitors to gather and connect by hosting many social and entertainment activities, including restaurants, cafes, local SMEs, winter market, farmers market, recreational programs, and more. The first edition of the event, held at Adaliya Park, witnessed tremendous success and huge crowds, and the current edition at Wahran Park in Shamiya in an open outdoor setting.

On the occasion of the



Subscribe or renew your subscription
KD 20 instead of KD 30 for 1 year

For individuals only

Tel: 24833199 ext.: 163-325-353-354 or 66500982



kuwaittimes.net

Girl rescued off Salmiya beach; three led to safety

KUWAIT: Firemen rescued a girl who almost drown off the beach in Salmiya, in addition to three persons who were stuck while on a boat cruise during foggy weather over the weekend. In the first incident, Salmiya Sea Rescue firemen responded to a call about a girl who was lost in mid-sea. Divers were able to rescue the girl who was found unconscious. She was handed over to paramedics and was in a stable condition, Kuwait Fire Force said in a statement. In the second incident, Shuwaikh Sea Rescue firemen jumped to help three persons near Jaber Bridge where they were caught in heavy fog while trying to sail their way to shore. The three were led to safety and no injuries were reported, KFF noted.

Separately, a motorist died and two others were injured in an accident reported on Fifth Ring Road yesterday. Firemen, police and paramedics rushed to the scene in response to an emergency call report-



KUWAIT: A Kuwait Fire Force rescue boat during an operation over the weekend.

ing a three-vehicle collision on the highway yesterday morning. Firemen retrieved the body of the dead man from one of the vehicles as the two injured persons were rushed to hospital, KFF said. An investigation was opened to reveal the circumstances behind the accident.



KUWAIT: This handout photo released by Kuwait Red Crescent Society shows KRCS workers distributing aid outside Kuwait. —KUNA

Kuwait aids people suffering from harsh winter

KUWAIT: The State of Kuwait has proceeded with its worldwide humanitarian action in line with its steady policy to relieve people in need wherever possible. Last week, volunteers focused efforts on aiding people suffering from harsh winter weather, adding to their hardship of coping with the coronavirus. Al-Rahma International Charity, in line with the seven-year-long 'Kuwait by Your Side' humanitarian campaign, delivered food and secured dwelling, last week, for more than 20,000 persons in the beleaguered Yemeni province of Marib.

Raed Ibrahim, the head of Al-Tawasol charity, said the Kuwaiti aid included distribution of 1,130 food parcels. Moreover, 115 tents were erected and 2,000 prepared meals were distributed to people

in need there. In Kuwait, Al-Salam Society for Humanitarian and Charitable Action dispatched truckloads of relief supplies, including food, clothes, blankets, wood, coal and heaters, to Syrian and Yemeni who have been relocated or lost their houses due to the internal wars, said the association director general Dhari Al-Buajjan in a press statement.

In Amman, the executive chairperson of Namaa society Saad Al-Otaibi indicated in a statement that the association has been sponsoring orphans and securing dwelling for them. Marking the 56th anniversary of establishing the Kuwait Red Crescent Society (KRCS), the chairman Dr Hilal Al-Sayer affirmed its unwavering policy to pursue relieving people in need in line with the State of Kuwait steady humanitarian policy. The KRCS aid has reached more than 104 countries and organizations throughout the world, he said, noting that the assistance has targeted people suffering from natural catastrophes and armed struggles. Internally, KRCS aids 5,000 families in addition to offering help to inmates at the central prison. —KUNA



Latin American security contractors bitter after serving in US wars

Drones loom large in latest phase of Ethiopia's war



TUNIS: Tunisian demonstrators react after being hit by water from a police water cannon during demonstrations against President Kais Saied on the 11th anniversary of the Tunisian revolution on Friday. — AFP

Tunisians protest against president

Country marks 11 years since late dictator Ben Ali fled into exile

TUNIS: Tunisian police used tear gas and water cannons on Friday to disperse hundreds of demonstrators protesting against President Kais Saied's July power grab, and arrested dozens after they rallied in defiance of a ban on gatherings. As the country marks 11 years since late dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali fled into exile, police deployed heavily in central Tunis to counter rallies calling for an end to Saied's "coup".

The protesters had gathered despite restrictions on gatherings imposed on Thursday as coronavirus cases surge in the North African country, but which Saied's opponents say are politically motivated. AFP reporters saw over 1,000 protesters gathered on Mohamed V Avenue, but they were prevented from reaching the iconic Habib Bourguiba Avenue, epicenter of the vast protests that toppled Ben Ali in 2011.

Some demonstrators broke through a police cordon before police baton charges and tear gas and water cannons pushed them back. AFP reporters saw dozens of arrests. "It's the most violent inter-

vention by security forces we've seen in the past year, both in terms of the methods used and the number of arrests," said Fethi Jarray, president of the independent anti-torture body the INPT.

Some protesters had chanted: "Down with the coup!", a reference to Saied's July 25 moves in which he sacked the government, froze parliament and seized a range of powers. He has since virtually ruled by decree, to the outrage of his opponents, including the powerful Islamist-inspired Ennahdha party. Some Tunisians, tired of the inept and graft-ridden parliamentary system, welcomed his moves.

But for his critics, both in Ennahdha and on the left, they foreshadowed a possible return to the same kind of autocratic practices that were common under Ben Ali. Prominent rights activist Sihem Bensedrine, who headed the now-defunct Truth and Dignity Commission (IVD), accused authorities of taking away Tunisians' right to protest and threatening the country's "hard-won freedom". "We're here to defend the institutions of the republic," she said. "This people, which toppled a

23-year dictatorship, is not going to let another dictator take its place."

One of Saied's moves was to shift the official anniversary of the revolution from the date of Ben Ali's flight to Dec 17, the day in 2010 when vegetable seller Mohamed Bouazizi burned himself alive sparking the first mass protests. The move was seen as symbolizing Saied's view that the revolution had been stolen.

Demonstrator Olfa Laabidi said January 14 remained a symbol. "There were martyrs, blood was spilled, and there are still people who were wounded in the revolution," she said. Saied "should have let the people express themselves and celebrate." Ennahdha supporters have compared Saied to Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi, whose crackdown on Islamist demonstrators in 2013 left hundreds dead.

The protests took place despite a string of measures, including a nighttime curfew and a ban on public gatherings, brought in on Thursday evening purportedly to tackle a steep rise in coronavirus

infections. Amnesty International said the restrictions "effectively impose a blanket ban on public demonstrations, and thus impede people's rights to free expression and peaceful assembly".

The rights group's deputy regional chief, Amna Guellali, said it was "imperative that the COVID-19 health crisis not be used as a pretext to suppress rights". Ennahdha, the biggest party in the suspended parliament, had accused Saied Thursday of "utilizing the coronavirus crisis for political ends, targeting what remains of the margin of freedom" in Tunisia.

The showdown comes amid heightened tensions between the party and Saied after former justice minister Nouredine Bhiri and another senior Ennahdha official were arrested by plainclothes police officers on Dec 31 and later accused of possible "terrorism" offences. Ennahdha MP Yamina Zoghalmi told AFP Tunisia was facing "a major regression in terms of rights". "We're not going to be afraid and we're not retreating," she said. "We believe in freedoms and democracy." — AFP

'Smart' pistols headed to US market

WASHINGTON: "Smart" pistols designed to limit who can shoot them are poised to hit the booming US firearm market this year, taking aim at spiking gun deaths as federal lawmakers remain deadlocked on any new restrictions. Questions over reliability and political fights have bedeviled the technology for decades, but backers say it's a chance to prevent children, criminals or people considering self-harm from pulling the trigger.

Yet whether the deadly weapons will be embraced by buyers, perform as intended in real-life, or deliver on their pledge to increase gun safety are questions that could be years from a definitive answer. "I don't have a crystal ball to know whether it's going to be good on balance, bad on balance or ultimately like other smart guns in the past-kind of a dud," said Adam Skaggs, chief counsel and poli-

cy director at gun control advocacy group Giffords.

The system from entrepreneur Tom Holland's company SmartGunz uses RFID chips - similar to the emitters many people use in their car to pay tolls - installed inside rings. When shooters grip the gun with the hand wearing the special ring, a safety mechanism unlocks, allowing the gun to fire. Holland sees applications in protecting police officers who could have their pistol wrestled away by a suspect; or parents worried their kids could find their firearm.

"This is only about gun safety," he told AFP. "For those consumers that want a 'safer gun'...they can have access to this if they feel they have the need for lethal protection on their property." He expects his pistol, which he said is being tested by some police in the United States, to begin selling to civilians by April or May.

A gun-owning society

Any sales would arrive in an unprecedented context in the United States, where some 40 percent of adult Americans live in a gun-owning household, according to the Pew



BOISE, Idaho: This handout photo released on Jan 13, 2022 by LodeStar Works shows a smart handgun. — AFP

Research Center. Firearms sales set a record in 2020, with nearly 23 million sold, according to the Small Arms Analytics & Forecasting consultancy. Following racial justice protests and the onset of the pandemic, the United States saw in 2020 its biggest rise in homicides since national records began in 1960 - though overall levels of killing remained below the 1990s.

The recurrent horror of America's mass shootings provoke intense bursts of attention, but over half the roughly 40,000 annual firearms deaths are suicides. Ginger Chandler, the co-founder of smart gun maker LodeStar Works, said the user authentication steps are a physical buffer against accidents, suicides and crimes - and a psychological barrier. — AFP

Tongans flee tsunami after volcano erupts

NUKU'ALOFA, Tonga: Frightened Tongans fled to higher ground yesterday after a massive volcanic eruption - triggered tsunami warnings across the South Pacific. "A 1.2 meter tsunami wave has been observed at Nuku'alofa," Australia's Bureau of Meteorology tweeted. The latest eruption of the Hunga Tonga-Hunga Ha'apai volcano came just a few hours after a separate Friday tsunami warning was lifted due to the eruption.

Mere Taufa said she was in her house getting ready for dinner when the volcano erupted. "It was massive, the ground shook, our house was shaking. It came in waves. My younger brother thought bombs were exploding

nearby," Taufa told the Stuff news website. She said water filled their home minutes later and she saw the wall of a neighboring house collapse. "We just knew straight away it was a tsunami. Just water gushing into our home. You could just hear screams everywhere, people screaming for safety, for everyone to get to higher ground."

Tonga's King Tupou VI was reported to have been evacuated from the Royal Palace in Nuku'alofa and taken by a police convoy to a villa well away from the coastline. The initial eruption lasted at least eight minutes and sent plumes of gas, ash and smoke several kilometers into the air. Residents in coastal areas were urged to head for higher ground.

The eruption was so intense it was heard as "loud thunder sounds" in Fiji more than 800 km away, officials in Suva said. Fijian officials warned residents to cover water collection tanks in case of acidic rain fall. Victorina Kioa of the Tonga Public Service Commission said Friday that people



A grab taken from footage by Japan's Himawari-8 satellite and released yesterday shows the volcanic eruption that provoked a tsunami in Tonga. — AFP

should "keep away from areas of warning which are low-lying coastal areas, reefs and beaches".

The head of Tonga Geological Services Taaniela Kula urged people to stay indoors, wear a mask if they were outside and cover rainwater reservoirs

and rainwater harvesting systems. The Pacific Tsunami Warning Centre issued a "tsunami advisory" for American Samoa, saying there was a threat of "sea level fluctuations and strong ocean currents that could be a hazard along beaches". — AFP

China, Iran begin implementation of strategic agreement

BEIJING: China said yesterday it would begin implementing a strategic agreement with Iran, strengthening economic and political cooperation between the two countries as Beijing blasted Washington's sanctions on Tehran. China and Iran signed the agreement last year after years of talks, with the wide-ranging partnership set to span areas including energy, security, infrastructure and communications.

Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi and Iranian counterpart Hossein Amir-Abdollahian announced the start of the partnership's implementation at a meeting in east China's Wuxi on Friday, Beijing's foreign ministry said in a statement. Few details of the secretive deal have been published, but the New York Times reported in 2020 that it would secure a regular supply of oil for China, citing a draft of the agreement leaked to the paper.

China is Iran's leading trade partner and was one of the biggest buyers of the country's oil before then-US president Donald Trump reimposed sweeping unilateral sanctions in 2018. China has officially stopped importing oil from Iran, but analysts say Iranian crude is continuing to enter the country disguised as imports from other countries. Wang told his Iranian counterpart Friday that China would continue to "oppose illegal unilateral sanctions against Iran," the foreign ministry said.

Beijing has long sought to boost ties with Tehran, with Chinese president Xi Jinping describing Iran as "China's major partner in the Middle East" on a rare visit to the country in 2016. Wang and Amir-Abdollahian's meeting comes as talks continue in Vienna over a potential deal to halt Tehran's development of nuclear weapons.

A 2015 deal - agreed by Iran, the US, China, Russia, Britain, France and Germany - offered Tehran sanctions relief in exchange for curbs on its nuclear program. But the US withdrew from the agreement in 2018, reimposing biting sanctions and prompting Tehran to begin rolling back its commitments. Talk to salvage the nuclear deal began in late November, after being suspended when Iran elected a new ultra-conservative government in June. Wang told his Iranian counterpart on Friday that China believes the United States is to blame for the current state of the deal, the foreign ministry said in its statement. — AFP

International

Drones loom large in latest phase of Ethiopia's war

'Turkish, Chinese and Iranian drones have all been deployed'

ADDIS ABABA: One week ago, Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed used his Orthodox Christmas message to call for "national reconciliation", raising hopes of a breakthrough to end his country's grinding 14-month-old war. But the very same day, a drone strike on a displaced persons camp in the conflict-stricken Tigray region killed more than 50 people, according to aid workers citing witness accounts. Subsequent drone attacks on a flour mill and a church in the northernmost region of Ethiopia have left at least 21 others dead, doctors and local officials said.

The bombings highlight the central role that drone warfare has assumed in a conflict that, according to UN estimates, has already killed thousands of people and driven hundreds of thousands to the brink of starvation. They have also renewed concerns over risks for civilians as Addis Ababa - which has not commented on its drone program - appears eager to embrace aerial combat instead of sending ground troops into rebel-controlled Tigray.

Communications blackouts and access restrictions in conflict-hit areas make it difficult to confirm exactly which weapons are being used where, and how frequently. Witness testimony can be unreliable, with the fog of war complicating efforts to distinguish between drones and other aircraft. Yet analysts and diplomats say there is compelling evidence Ethiopia has acquired drones from multiple

sources and is not shy about using them.

Post-strike imagery indicates Turkish, Chinese and Iranian drones have all been deployed in recent months, said Wim Zwijnenburg, a drones expert at Dutch peace organization PAX who has tracked the fighting in Ethiopia. "I think Ethiopia at the moment is indeed the heaviest user of drones on the continent," Zwijnenburg said.

Seesaw struggle

Ethiopia's war broke out in Nov 2020 when Abiy sent troops into Tigray to topple the regional ruling party, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF).

Abiy, the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize winner, said the move came in response to TPLF attacks on federal army camps, following months of mounting rancor between the two sides. The seesaw struggle began with federal and allied forces taking over most of the region before being largely forced out by resurgent rebels last June.

The TPLF then launched an offensive into the neighboring Afar and Amhara regions and in November came within roughly 200 km of Addis Ababa, prompting hasty evacuations as countries including the US and France urged their citizens to get out. But a government counter-offensive - featuring visits by Abiy himself to the conflict zone - has turned the tide yet again.

Last month the TPLF announced it had retreated into Tigray, and for now the army has mostly opted



BISHOFTU, Ethiopia: This handout satellite image taken on Nov 22, 2021 by Planet Labs PBC shows what Dutch peace organization PAX says is two Chinese-origin Wing Loong drones parked at Hara Meda air base. — AFP

not to pursue the rebels on the ground. The International Crisis Group has cited drone assets as a key element behind the government's gains. In addition to their strike capacity, drones provide a huge boon to military surveillance.

While the conflict-prevention organization has said the current state of play offers a "chance for peace", the TPLF claims persistent drone strikes make that unlikely. "Drones continue to attack civilians and infrastructure," TPLF spokesman Kindeya

Gebrehiwot told AFP last week, accusing Abiy of wanting "to undermine any peace initiative".

Abiy's government has floated the idea of a "national dialogue" to ease tensions in Africa's second-most-populous country. However it is far from clear that the TPLF - officially branded a terrorist organization - would be eligible to participate. In the meantime Abiy's supporters, and some critics, maintain the lethal use of drones is perfectly legitimate as fighting continues. — AFP

Epstein-Barr virus leading cause of multiple sclerosis

WASHINGTON: Multiple sclerosis, a neurodegenerative disease that has no cure and affects some 2.8 million people in the world, is largely driven by infection with the Epstein-Barr virus, according to a new paper by Harvard researchers. Their findings, published in the journal *Science* this week, appear to settle a long-standing but hard to prove hypothesis, and were welcomed by outside experts who said attention should now turn to preventions and cures.

"This is the first study providing compelling evidence of causality," said Alberto Ascherio, a professor of epidemiology and nutrition at Harvard Chan School and senior author of the study, in a statement. "This is a big step because it suggests that most MS cases could be prevented by stopping EBV infection, and that targeting EBV could lead to the discovery of a cure for MS."

EBV is a herpes virus that can cause infectious mononucleosis - sometimes called kissing disease - and stays in the host for their whole life. MS is a chronic inflammatory disease that destroys the myelin sheaths protecting neurons in the brain and spinal cord, causing problems with vision, balance and mobility. The idea of a link between the two had been explored for years, but it was difficult to establish definitively, partly because EBV is extremely common, reaching around 95 percent of adults, and MS symptoms begin to develop a decade after infection. — AFP

Team carries out first spinal cord stem cell trial

TOKYO: A Japanese university said Friday it has successfully transplanted stem cells into a patient with a spinal cord injury, in the first clinical trial of its kind. There is currently no effective treatment for paralysis caused by serious spinal cord injuries, believed to affect more than 100,000 people in Japan alone. Surgeons at Tokyo's Keio University want to study whether induced pluripotent stem (iPS) cells can be used to treat the injuries.

iPS cells are created by stimulating mature, already specialized, cells back into a juvenile state. They can then be prompted to mature into different kinds of cells, with the Keio University study using iPS-derived cells of the neural stem. The first step in the trial involved implanting more than two million iPS-derived cells into a patient's spinal cord in an operation last month. "This is definitely a huge step forward," Masaya Nakamura, a Keio University professor who heads the research, told reporters. But there remains "lots of work to be done" before the treatment can be put to use, he added.

The initial stage of the study aims to confirm the safety of the transplant method, the researchers said. The patient will be monitored by an independent committee for up to three months to decide whether the study can safely continue and others can receive transplants. The team also hopes to see whether the stem cell implants will improve neurological function and quality of life. The university received government approval for the trial in 2019, but recruitment was temporarily put on hold because of the COVID-19 pandemic. — AFP

Protests after white officer kills black man

WASHINGTON: The fatal shooting of an unarmed African American man by an off-duty white police officer under mysterious circumstances has fueled outrage in a North Carolina town, where residents and relatives of the victim protested Thursday night. The death of Jason Walker threatens to catapult racism back into the spotlight as Black Americans demand justice over several killings that have highlighted the United States's struggles with gun laws, police impunity, and racial inequality.

Fist raised, prominent civil rights lawyer Benjamin Crump led a "rally for justice" where the crowd chanted "Jason Walker matters," a WRAL TV live feed from Fayetteville showed. "Just like the truth was revealed" for George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor, "the truth will be revealed for Jason Walker," said Crump, referencing three high-profile killings of Black Americans by active

or former police officers over the past two years.

Crump represented the families in all three cases, which sparked nationwide protests over police violence against minorities. "My prayer is there will be peace," said Walker's mother at the rally. Earlier in the week, small clusters of residents marched through the city, demanding the arrest of Jeffrey Hash, the off-duty police officer who shot Walker on Saturday.

The officer, who had been employed by the city since 2005, was driving his vehicle with his wife and daughter when they neared Walker, an unarmed 37-year-old Black man crossing the street near his parents' house. Moments later, Hash opened fire, and soon Walker lay dead of gunshot wounds. Exactly what transpired is in dispute.

In an amateur video, filmed just after the shooting and posted online, the police officer explains to colleagues called to the scene that Walker jumped into the middle of the street and that he braked to avoid him. According to Hash, Walker then threw himself on the vehicle, tore off a windshield wiper, and used it to hit the windshield, prompting Hash to draw his weapon to protect his family.



FAYETTEVILLE, North Carolina: This screengrab made from bodycam footage of Fayetteville police officers shows emergency personnel attending to Jason Walker after he was shot and killed by an off-duty sheriff's deputy on Jan 8, 2022. — AFP

Administrative leave

But witnesses said Hash hit the pedestrian before stopping. "I saw him brake, completely stop, and then keep going," Elizabeth Ricks told an ABC station. "I saw him hit Jason... then his body was slammed into the windshield." Ricks said she then heard shots fired. "I think he fired the first shot through the windshield and three more times outside the vehicle," she added.

According to police, Hash's black

pickup truck had no visible dents and Walker's body did not show any signs of impact other than bullet wounds. The officer was placed on administrative leave but has not been arrested or charged with a crime. State investigators have begun a probe into the killing. Crump said the family and the broader Fayetteville community were demanding to know why Walker was "senselessly shot and killed" by an off-duty officer. — AFP

Andrew forces Queen to defend Crown 'at all costs'

LONDON: Long described as her favorite son, Prince Andrew gave his mother Queen Elizabeth II little choice but to inflict the humiliation of stripping him of his honorary military titles as his US civil trial for sexual assault looms. The decision, announced by Buckingham Palace on Thursday in a terse statement, dominated UK newspapers Friday, with many seeing it as a sign of the 95-year-old Queen's desire to "distance herself" from her son.

"It's survival of the royal institution at all costs - and it always will be," wrote the *Daily Mail*. "It's probably over for him" now he has lost his royal patronages and will no longer use the title "His Royal Highness", said royal historian Bob Morris. "The time had come to push him further back out of the limelight," he told AFP.

The situation became untenable after a New York judge on Wednesday refused to dismiss a civil suit accusing the prince of sexually assaulting Virginia Giuffre when she was 17. She claims she was offered to the prince by his friend Jeffrey

Has diplomacy on Ukraine reached a dead end?

PARIS: The failure of the United States and Russia this week to find a diplomatic solution to fizzing tensions over Eastern European security has increased the chance of a new Russian attack on Ukraine even if full-scale war is far from inevitable, analysts say. Russia stands accused of having massed some 100,000 troops close to the Ukrainian border, as it seeks a commitment from the West that the pro-EU former Soviet state will never join NATO.

Senior Russian and US officials this week held talks in Geneva but there was no hint of any break-

through, with Washington warning by the end of the week Moscow could stage a false flag operation within weeks to precipitate an invasion. "We have information that indicates Russia has already prepositioned a group of operatives to conduct a false-flag operation in eastern Ukraine," said Jen Psaki, the White House press secretary. "The operatives are trained in urban warfare and in using explosives to carry out acts of sabotage against Russia's own proxy forces."

Ukraine was meanwhile hit by a blistering cyberattack in the early hours of Friday blamed by the West on Russia and which some analysts feared could be the prelude to an attack. Moscow responded to the ousting of Ukraine's former pro-Russia president in 2014 by seizing in a lightning military operation the Ukrainian Black Sea peninsula of Crimea, an annexation never recognized by the international community. It then backed separatists who took control of two

'Black sheep'

Morris said that "the moment had come really to execute a Plan B to protect the monarchy and to protect, in particular, the Platinum Jubilee". Four days of festivities are planned across the country at the beginning of June, including a military parade, a large concert in London and a pudding competition. The Queen, whose public appearances are increasingly rare, is said to have made her decision after discussions with Charles, heir to the crown, and her grandson Prince William, second in line to the throne, British media said.

Andrew, was reportedly summoned to Windsor



Prince Andrew

Castle and drove there with his lawyer. He lives three miles from the castle at Royal Lodge, the former home of the Queen's mother. On Friday, he faced calls to "relinquish his title as Duke of York" because of the negative impact of the case with the northern English city. Whatever the outcome of the civil trial in New York - where an out-of-court financial settlement remains an option - anger will be directed at Andrew, rather than at the monarchy, Morris predicted. — AFP

eastern Ukrainian regions in an unsolved conflict that has left over 13,000 dead.

NATO has made clear that it will never rule out the possibility that Ukraine could join the alliance, even if analysts see this as a very remote chance for now. "Regrettably war is more likely. We've reached a real impasse," said Melinda Haring, deputy director of the US-based Atlantic Council's Eurasia Center. "As things stand, the Russian and US positions are irreconcilable." Dmitry Trenin, director of the Carnegie Moscow Center, added: "The absence of a diplomatic solution logically leads to a further exacerbation of this crisis with a military solution already seen as a way out." Samuel Charap, senior political scientist at the RAND Corporation, noted that NATO had not even offered Ukraine a membership action plan let alone membership. "Finding a way to say that, that is politically viable, is going to be very difficult, of course, but so will a war," he said. — AFP

International

Latin American security contractors bitter after serving in US wars

Veterans claim they were used as 'cannon fodder'

BOGOTA: Peruvian Vladimir Florez was guarding the US consulate in Afghanistan when a suicide bomber blew up a truck outside the gates, killing eight Afghans and sparking a firefight that lasted hours. Like many Latin-American former soldiers, Florez feels bitter at the conditions he endured then and his treatment since. Others say they were used as "cannon fodder".



Many reject the term mercenary

It was Sept 13, 2013 when the then 32-year-old Florez was on duty at the US diplomatic complex in the north-western city of Herat alongside Colombians and Salvadorans. He says he was hired to provide security - not to fight as a soldier. The truck explosion, which was caught on camera, was so powerful "it sent me flying, I fell to the ground," said Florez. "It took me two minutes to react. When I got up I saw everything was burning, people were screaming." He then spent two hours battling Taliban fighters before US troops arrived. "They never gave me one single (extra) dollar for having saved the Americans," Florez told AFP.

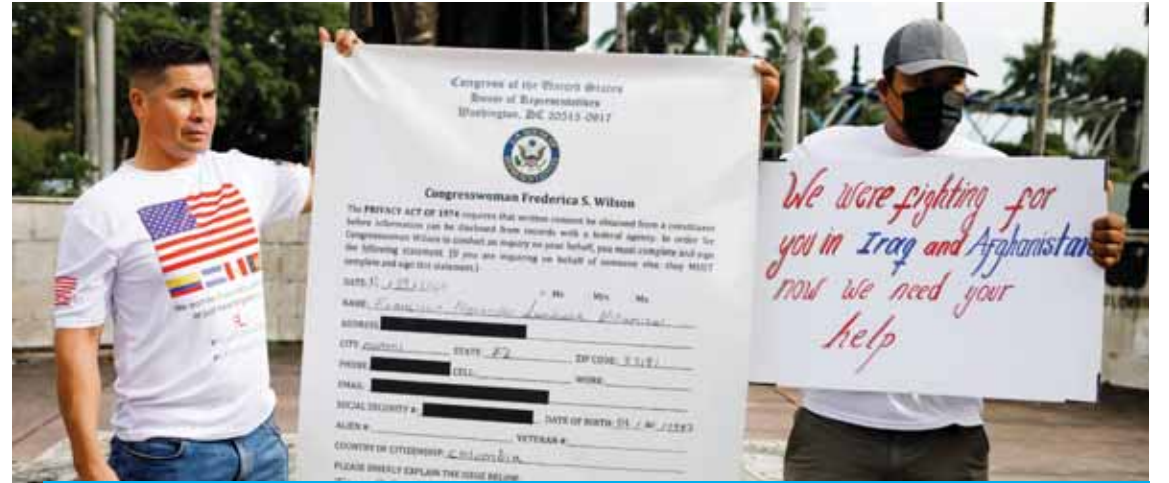
'Without adequate weapons'
Colombian Francisco Landinez says Latin Americans were left to fight for the United States "without any protection or adequate weapons". He says they were at "a complete disadvantage against a much better armed enemy". Essentially, they were used as "cannon fodder" by the United States, he said. A retired soldier, Landinez

runs the Oppressed Veterans Foundation from Miami, where the group is fighting for the rights of non-American security contractors hired to protect US interests in Afghanistan and Iraq. They are seeking the same pensions as US veterans, as well as the right of residence. A study by Brown University estimated that more than 3,900 security contractors died in Afghanistan, most of whom were citizens of other countries. "Many of these deaths were not reported," said the study's authors. The US State Department declined to comment on the veterans' campaign.

Post-traumatic stress
Colombian former army sergeant, who uses the pseudonym Jorge Estevez, has kept several military souvenirs, including a black badge that says "Afghanistan 2013" and photographs of him holding an M4 assault rifle. Estevez was paid \$1,400 a month by a private security firm to patrol in Kabul, Mazar-i-Sharif and Herat. That is a considerably more than the Colombian military pension of around \$350. But it is still less than the pay for a US army conscript: \$1,600 to \$8,700 a month, according to official data.

Estevez returned home to his family in Bogota in 2015 after five years of service but still carries the scars of war. He suffers frequent nightmares, takes anti-depressant medicine for post-traumatic stress disorder and says he has no social life. "We're anonymous, forgotten, we were used," he said bitterly.

'Coveted' but paid less
Colombian mercenaries made headlines last year after around two dozen were implicated in the assassination of Haiti President Jovenel Moise. Three were killed in the assault with another 19 arrested. But many Colombians reject the term mercenary - an illegal activity according to the United Nations. They are security



MIAMI: Members of the Oppressed Veterans Foundation hold banners during a gathering on Nov 20, 2021. — AFP

contractors working in a legal industry "that moves around the world", said Colonel John Marulanda, president of the Colombian association for retired military officials. He says they work mostly in countries "with critical security situations" providing a vital service. Colombians, he added, are "coveted" because they are cheap, and have had tough experience fighting leftwing guerrillas. They are easy to attract as 10,000 leave the Colombian military every year and abandoned to their fate, says Marulanda.

'Front line' surprise
Another Colombian ex-soldier, using the pseudonym Fredy, fought rebels in his homeland before battling the Taliban in Afghanistan and Al-Qaeda in Iraq. "I never thought I was going to fight on the front line, I went there believing I was going to protect installa-

tions like security guards," said the 49-year-old, who covered his face for fear of never again being contracted. He wore a shirt emblazoned with the US flag and the words: "We wonder if you really care about us or just have forgotten us?"

Security contractors have already held protests in Bogota, Lima, Miami and Washington, holding up pictures of their missions and written acknowledgements from the Department of State. They keep copies of their contracts - some with International Development Solutions, which Foreign Policy magazine says is a "subsidiary" of the formerly-named Blackwater, a notorious US company that has undergone several rebrandings since a 2007 massacre of Iraqi civilians. In 2018, the UN advocated for more effective regulation of military and private security firms through an international legal framework. — AFP

Omicron detected in Beijing as China battles clusters

BEIJING: An Omicron case has been detected in Beijing, officials in the Chinese capital said yesterday, as the country battles multiple outbreaks of the highly transmissible coronavirus variant ahead of the Winter Olympics. The announcement comes a day after the southern city of Zhuhai imposed travel restrictions on residents as a mass testing drive uncovered seven infections.

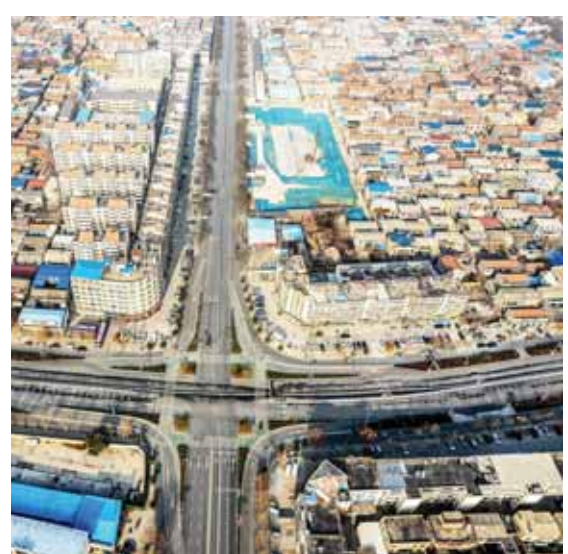
Millions of people across the country have been ordered to stay home in recent weeks, with scores of domestic flights cancelled and factories shut down, as the country attempts to control a spate of small coronavirus outbreaks, including several from the Omicron variant, ahead of next month's Beijing Olympics.

One locally transmitted Omicron case was discovered in the capital's Haidian district, home to many tech company headquarters, city official Pang Xinghuo said at a press conference, a rare breach of Beijing's tightly-guarded COVID-19 defenses. Authorities are testing the other occupants of the patient's residential compound and office building, and have restricted access to 17 locations linked to infected person, Pang said.

Beijing has long barred people from parts of the country that have reported cases, while requiring all arrivals to provide recent COVID-19 tests. Residents have also been urged in recent weeks not to leave the city for the upcoming Spring Festival holiday. On Friday, the coastal city of Zhuhai, which borders the gambling hub Macau, said Omicron had been detected in one mildly ill and six asymptomatic patients. Zhuhai officials have asked residents to avoid leaving the city "unless necessary", with those who are required to show negative COVID test results within the past 24 hours. The city had launched mass testing for its population of 2.4 million people on Friday after a COVID case was detected in neighboring Zhongshan earlier in the week.

Businesses including beauty salons, cardrooms, gyms and cinemas were ordered to close on Thursday, with officials announcing the suspension of public bus routes in parts of the city. China has kept COVID-19 cases relatively low throughout the pandemic with its zero-tolerance strategy of immediately ordering mass testing and strict lockdowns when infections are detected.

Harsher lockdowns have been imposed on China's smaller cities where millions of people have been ordered to stay home and get tested, while economic hubs such as Shanghai and Beijing have locked down and tested only specific neighborhoods in more targeted efforts. But the fast-spreading Omicron variant has tested that strategy in recent weeks, appearing in the port city of Tianjin close to Beijing before spreading to the central city of Anyang. — AFP



ANYANG, China: This aerial photo taken on Friday shows nearly empty roads in an area closed off and restricted due to an outbreak of COVID-19. — AFP

Three stabbed outside top Tokyo university

TOKYO: Three people were stabbed outside the prestigious University of Tokyo ahead of nationwide college entrance exams yesterday, with police saying they had arrested a high-schooler for allegedly carrying out the attack. The victims included an 18-year-old boy, a 17-year-old girl and a 72-year-old man, police said. "We arrested a 17-year-old male student for allegedly slashing in the back (of the three) with the intent to kill," a Tokyo police spokesman told AFP.



TOKYO: Police officers investigate at the entrance gate of the University of Tokyo after two students and a 72-year-old were stabbed yesterday. — AFP

Suu Kyi hit with 5 new charges over copter purchase

YANGON: A Myanmar junta court has hit ousted civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi with five new corruption charges related to the alleged hiring and purchase of a helicopter, sources close to the case told AFP. The Nobel laureate, 76, has been detained since the Feb 1 coup last year which triggered mass protests and a bloody crackdown on dissent with more than 1,400 civilians killed, according to a local monitoring group.

Suu Kyi is facing a raft of criminal and corruption charges - including violating the country's official secrets laws - and if convicted of all of them could face sentences tallying more than 100 years of prison. The charges were levelled against Suu Kyi on Friday afternoon and related to the hire, maintenance and purchase of a helicopter, the sources said. Former Myanmar president U Win Myint was also hit with the same charges, they said.

In December, state newspaper Global New Light of Myanmar said the pair would be prosecuted for not following financial regulations and causing a loss to the state over the rent and purchase of a helicopter for

The student was seized by police at the gate of the University of Tokyo after the early morning attack, they added. He was not taking the exams and was not acquainted with the three victims, but told police he "wanted to die after causing an incident as I didn't do well in my studies," public broadcaster NHK reported. The two teenagers did not sustain life-threatening injuries but the 72-year-old is severely wounded, according to local media.

NHK said the university, where 3,700 students were scheduled to take the tests, went ahead with the exams as planned. Violent crime is rare but stabbings do occasionally happen in Japan, where gun possession is strictly controlled. A 24-year-old man was arrested in Tokyo on Halloween last year for attempted murder after he allegedly stabbed a passenger and started a fire inside a moving train while wearing an outfit reminiscent of comic villain the Joker. — AFP

News in brief

Philippines to buy India missiles

MANILA: The Philippines has agreed to buy an anti-ship missile system from India, the defense minister said Friday, shoring up its security in the face of growing Chinese aggression in the South China Sea. Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana offered few details about the nearly \$375 million contract awarded to BrahMos Aerospace to supply an onshore anti-ship missile system to the Philippine Navy. BrahMos - a joint venture between India and Russia - has developed a cruise missile that the Indian defense ministry says is the fastest in the world. The Philippines would be the first country to purchase it. — AFP

Bishop acquitted of raping nun

NEW DELHI: A Roman Catholic bishop in India was acquitted Friday of raping a nun multiple times over two years. While the Catholic church has been embroiled in a series of sexual abuse scandals around the world, Franco Mulakkal was his first Indian priest to go on trial. A court in the southern state of Kerala pronounced a single line verdict saying that it had found Mulakkal not guilty of the charges. He had been accused of repeatedly raping the nun between 2014 and 2016 in Kerala while he was head of the Missionaries of Jesus order. He denied all the accusations. — AFP

DPRK fires railway-borne missiles

SEOUL: North Korea fired two railway-borne tactical guided missiles, state media reported yesterday, the country's third weapons test this month despite a volley of new United States sanctions. South Korea's military said it had detected the launch of two short-range ballistic missiles Friday afternoon, just hours after Pyongyang accused the United States of "provocation" over fresh sanctions. The tests were held to "check and judge the proficiency in the action procedures of the railway-borne regiment," Pyongyang's official KCNA news agency said. — AFP

UK man had chef's knife for hit

KINGSTON UPON THAMES: A British man accused of attempting to carry out a contract killing of a prominent Pakistani blogger spent days watching his home and bought a chef's knife, a court was told Friday. Muhammed Gohir Khan, 31, is standing trial for conspiracy to murder the liberal activist Ahmad Waqass Goraya, who lives in self-imposed exile in the Netherlands. According to prosecutor Alison Morgan, Khan twice travelled to the Netherlands under strict pandemic measures last year, after being offered up to £100,000 to act as a hitman. — AFP

Pilot 'disoriented by weather'

NEW DELHI: A pilot disoriented by a sudden change in weather conditions crashed the helicopter carrying India's defense chief General Bipin Rawat last month, killing all 14 people on board, an official inquiry found Friday. The 63-year-old Rawat was travelling with his wife and other senior officers in the Russian-made Mi-17 chopper, which crashed near its destination in southern Tamil Nadu state. "The court of inquiry has ruled out mechanical failure, sabotage or negligence as a cause of the accident," India's defense ministry said in a statement. — AFP

Business

SUNDAY, JANUARY 16, 2022

China's economy grew 8% in 2021 but property, virus threats loom

Stay-at-home orders in industrial hub disrupts manufacturing activities

BEIJING: China's economy expanded at its fastest pace for 10 years in 2021, according to an AFP poll of analysts, but its strong recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic is threatened by Omicron and a property sector slowdown.

The eight percent growth would be well above the government's target of more than six percent, and comes on the back of a strong start to the year as a "zero-COVID" policy allowed the country to lead the global economic recovery. China's exports surged nearly 30 percent last year on solid global demand as countries reopened from pandemic lockdowns, boosting its stuttering economy.

But the country's recovery in the second half of 2021 was hobbled by a series of outbreaks—with officials reimposing strict containment measures—as well as power outages caused by an emissions-reduction drive, supply chain problems and surging energy costs. While the forecast marks a healthy annual tick-up from 2.3 percent in 2020 — those issues put a dampener on factory activity and led to businesses shuttering. They were compounded by a crackdown on debt in the property sector, which accounts for a huge part of the economy. "Key factors... were the impact of power shortages, the residential construction sector slowdown and moderating retail sales," said Rajiv Biswas, Asia-Pacific chief economist at IHS Markit.

The analysts tipped growth of just 3.5 percent on-year for the fourth quarter, down from 4.9 percent the previous three months and 7.9 percent from April-June. And headwinds from the construction sector slowdown, as well as the impact of COVID measures on consumer spending, will likely pose a "significant drag" on growth this year, Biswas added.

Beijing has been on high alert as it prepares to

host the Winter Olympics next month, with its zero-COVID policy powering lockdowns, border restrictions and lengthy quarantines. "The current coronavirus resurgence presents large downside risks to China's economic recovery... amid the government's zero-tolerance approach," said ANZ Research's chief economist for Greater China Raymond Yeung.

Delays and backlogs

Yeung noted that Ningbo port, the world's third-busiest, faced disruptions as cases led to truck entry restrictions, suspended container freight operations and roadblocks. "These delays and backlogs could exacerbate the inflation in shipping costs as well as exert pressure on export volumes," he told AFP. Another major port city—Tianjin—was hit by an Omicron cluster in January, the first time the virus strain was found in the community in China. Analysts expect that China will not ease up on its policy until after the Games conclude.

Stay-at-home orders in industrial hub Xi'an likely disrupted manufacturing activities too, said Citibank, with the city of 13 million placed under a harsh lockdown in December. Uncertainties surrounding the property sector have also accelerated cooling in fixed-asset investment, said DBS Bank economists, adding that "strain will linger in the face of mounting financial stress".

Already, two-thirds of the top 30 property firms by sales have breached one of "three red lines" set by regulators, said DBS analysts Nathan Chow and Eugene Leow in a recent report, referring to different debt ratios aimed at curbing leverage.

The clampdown that started in late 2020 has dealt a severe blow as developers—most prominently Evergrande—plunged into liquidity crises, sparking investor and homebuyer concerns. "Reports about



HAIAN, China: File photo shows workers producing solar photovoltaic modules used for small solar panels at a factory in Haiyan in China's eastern Jiangsu province. China's economy expanded at its fastest pace for 10 years in 2021. —AFP

developers' heightened liquidity issues and building or delivery delays will only sap confidence further," the DBS analysts said. This year, authorities have hit some of the country's biggest companies with new restrictions and regulations, targeting concerns including national security and monopolistic behaviour claims.

But Macquarie economists expect authorities to

pivot back to "supporting growth" this year, with some signs that shifting priorities will take some pressure off the real estate sector. "It doesn't mean that regulation has come to an end, but it does mean that peak regulation, peak property tightening and peak decarbonization are behind us," said economists Larry Hu and Xinyu Ji. —AFP

'Drivers of inflation' in eurozone to ease this year: Lagarde

PARIS: The forces pushing inflation in the eurozone to record highs in recent months are expected to ease over the course of 2022, European Central Bank President Christine Lagarde said on Friday. "We expect the drivers of inflation to ease over the course of this year," Lagarde told European parliamentarians in a speech at the French senate.

Eurozone inflation reached an all-time peak in December at five percent, driven by soaring prices for energy. "We will take any measures necessary to ensure that we deliver on our inflation target of two-percent over the medium term," Lagarde said, reiterating comments made after the last meeting of the ECB's governing council in December. In the meeting, policymakers agreed a "step-by-step" reduction in the size of the bank's bond-buying programme, as it seeks to take inflation off the boil. The massive asset-purchase programme has been the Frankfurt-based institution's main crisis-fighting tool, aimed at keeping borrowing costs low to stoke economic growth.

"The rapid reopening of the economy has led to steep rises in the prices of fuel, gas and electricity," Lagarde, a former French finance minister, said in her speech in Paris. Pressure on energy prices has been supplemented by geopolitical tensions surrounding Russia, which supplies one third of Europe's gas. "We understand that rising prices are a concern for many people, and we take that concern very seriously," added Lagarde. The ECB said in its December forecasts that inflation is expected to soar past three percent in 2022 before falling back under the bank's two-percent target in 2023. As European countries seek to convert themselves to carbon-neutral economies, Lagarde highlighted the risk around the transition, saying that "if supply capacity cannot adjust quickly enough, the transition could be bumpy." One possible consequence was "greater volatility in energy prices, as bridge technologies like natural gas have to be used to fill gaps in energy production", she said. —AFP

Google buys London office complex for \$1bn

LONDON: Google on Friday agreed to buy a central London building complex for \$1 billion, but stressed it remained committed to new hybrid working patterns in the wake of COVID. The tech titan will purchase the Central St Giles office site, where it is a tenant, for the equivalent of 872 million euros.

Google said it would give the site a multi-million-pound overhaul for flexible working patterns, including outdoor work spaces. "This investment represents Google's continued confidence in the office as a place for in-person collaboration and connection," the group said in a statement.

The company expects about one fifth of its work-

force to continue working remotely as a result of pandemic-induced changes to work. "We have been privileged to operate in the UK for nearly 20 years, and our purchase of the Central St Giles development reflects our continued commitment to the country's growth and success," said Ruth Porat, chief financial officer of Google parent group Alphabet.

"Our focus remains on creating flexible workspaces that foster innovation, creativity and inclusivity." The purchase is part of Google's broader expansion in central London, where it is also building a large development. Google will eventually have capacity for 10,000 staff in the UK, up from 6,400. The British government meanwhile welcomed Google's latest expansion as the UK looks to retain heavyweight companies in the wake of Brexit. "This investment in jobs from Google is a big vote of confidence in the UK as a world-leading tech hub," said finance minister Rishi Sunak.

"It is also proof that this country continues to be one of the most attractive places in the world for leading firms to grow their business." It comes after



LONDON: File photo shows a Google's logo is pictured above the entrance to the offices of Google in London. —AFP

Google last year announced plans to buy a New York City office building for \$2.1 billion. —AFP

Top Fed official sees US inflation slowing, supply issues resolve

WASHINGTON: The wave of US price increases that have battered consumers in recent months should slow this year, as supply and transportation issues are resolved, a top Federal Reserve official said Friday. New York Federal Reserve Bank President John Williams said he sees inflation falling to 2.5 percent this year, but cautioned that the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic means any forecast faces high uncertainty.

Given the rapid recovery, improving labor market and high inflation, he said the Fed is "approaching a decision" on raising lending rates. Inflation in 2021 hit its highest rate in nearly 40 years, and the Fed already has begun to remove the massive stimulus pumped into the world's largest economy during the pandemic to aid in the recovery.

Many economists now expect the Fed's policy-setting Federal Open Market Committee to raise the benchmark interest rate off zero in March, with three or even four hikes possible this year. Williams called the inflation spike "a major shock" to the global economy, which makes it appropriate for policy to "evolve" to changing conditions.

However, the date for the liftoff and the number of rate increases this year will depend on how the recovery progresses. "With growth slowing and supply constraints gradually being resolved, I expect inflation to drop to around 2.5 percent this year, much closer to the FOMC's two percent longer-run goal," he said in a speech to the Council on Foreign Relations.

And he said he expects the rate "to get close to two percent in 2023." The comments come after data released this week showed the consumer price index surged seven percent last year. With "the clear signs of a very strong labor market," including the rapid drop in the unemployment rate, the Fed is nearing the time to start moving the policy interest rate "back to more normal levels," Williams said.

However, "the timing of such decisions will be based on a careful consideration of a wide range of data and information." The main factors behind rising prices are high demand and supply chain snarls that are due in part to coronavirus-induced lockdowns in Asia that have hampered production of key materials.

Williams acknowledged that "elevated prices have real life consequences for so



NEW YORK: Prices are displayed outside of a Manhattan business in New York City. Newly released data shows that inflation grew at its fastest 12-month pace in nearly 40 years during the month of December. —AFP

many, particularly for people who are struggling to cover the rising costs of food, housing and transportation." Raising interest rates will remove the "very strong support for aggregate demand," to get it back in line with supply, Williams said in response to a question from AFP.

He noted that it will be especially effective in "more interest sensitive sectors, which includes durable goods and

housing," where prices have risen sharply. While he expects the supply snags to gradually resolve, the Fed official cautioned that the pandemic is unprecedented and the Omicron variant wave continues to pose challenges to businesses and households. "As we turn a page on the new year, it's clear that we have not yet reached the end of this pandemic story." —AFP

Google, Facebook chiefs approved market pact

SAN FRANCISCO: Top bosses of Google and Facebook were directly involved in approving an allegedly illegal 2018 deal to cement their dominance of the online advertising market, US court documents

revealed Friday. The records, part of an anti-trust lawsuit by a coalition of US states targeting Google, make serious allegations against Big Tech giants long accused of holding monopolies.

According to the states' accusations, the online search colossus sought to oust competition by manipulating ad auctions—the ultra-sophisticated system that determines which ads appear on web pages based on the anonymized profiles of internet users.

The legal documents filed in a New York court clearly refer to Sundar Pichai, chief of Google's parent firm Alphabet, as well as Facebook executive Sheryl Sandberg and CEO Mark Zuckerberg—even if their

names were redacted.

"Google CEO Sundar Pichai also personally signed off on the terms of the deal," the suit said. The documents note that the economic terms were emailed to Facebook's CEO and he was advised: "We're nearly ready to sign and need your approval to move forward."

Google did not respond to a request for comment Friday, but has adamantly denied manipulating the digital ad market. It was the third time the suit was amended, and did not list Facebook or its parent company Meta as defendants.

"Meta's non-exclusive bidding agreement with

Google and the similar agreements we have with other bidding platforms, have helped to increase competition for ad placements," a spokesperson said in reply to an AFP inquiry.

"These business relationships enable Meta to deliver more value to advertisers while fairly compensating publishers, resulting in better outcomes for all."

Google referred to the agreement internally as "Jedi Blue," the color being a reference to Facebook's logo, according to the filing.

"No rational developer would choose to have its auctions rigged by the market's two largest buyers," the suit said. —AFP

Business

'Gulf Bank' ... a model for sustainability in 2021

Distinguished programs and events in the service of society, environment and economy



KUWAIT: Proceeding from its motto "With you Always" and in line with its five-year strategy, Gulf Bank presented a distinguished model of sustainability in 2021, within the framework of the Bank's keenness to support sustainability at the societal, economic and environmental levels, through carefully selected and identified initiatives that benefit the community.

Deputy General Manager for Corporate Communications at Gulf Bank, Ahmad Al-Amir, said that social responsibility is one of the main pillars of Gulf Bank's strategy that aims to support the community, promote awareness, culture and actively contribute to finding solutions to societal and environmental problems.

He noted that the bank recorded a rapid response to the repercussions imposed by the conditions of the corona crisis, through selected programs covering all segments of society, ranging between sports and health events, sponsoring student activities, supporting youth and entrepreneurs, and other social programs.

On her part, Manager of Sustainability and Corporate Communications, Lujain Al-Qenaei, indicated that the Bank's launch of its first sustainability report for the year 2020, reflects its values, in accordance with the foundations of the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI), and the guidelines for the Kuwait Stock Exchange, in addition to the United Nations sustainable development goals, and Kuwait Vision 2035 and the "Gulf Bank" strategy for the year 2025.

Hamad Al Wazzan, Management Associate of Corporate Communications at Gulf Bank, said: "We realize the importance of our role and our effective contribution to consolidating sustainability in the society, by adopting responsible practices with a proactive sustainable approach, using effective leadership and governance, through the provision of financial and banking services, innovative digital solutions, talent acquisition, and youth empowerment. In addition to other practices that ensure the comprehensive inclusion of environmental, community and governance elements within the work pillars of Gulf Bank."

Assistant Manager of Corporate Communications at Gulf Bank, Hamza Al Tailji, added that Gulf Bank's accounts on various social media witnessed a steady increase in the number of active customers during 2021, compared to the growth rates recorded in previous years.

Social Sustainability Sponsoring Youth and Students

Gulf Bank has sponsored the conference of the National Union of Kuwaiti Students (NUKS) in the United States of America, which was launched as part of the Bank's Social Sustainability Program that focuses on supporting Kuwaiti youth.

Gulf Bank participated in the conference, which was held in Chicago, from 25 to 28 November, in several activities for Kuwaiti expatriate students. The bank's participation included many entertainment sessions and activities for the students present at the conference.

Gulf Bank also participated in the national awareness campaign "Safe Education", in which several ministries cooperated with the private sector, to facilitate the return of students to school after more than a year and a half of hiatus. The campaign was launched in conjunction with the beginning of the school year at the beginning of the month, with the aim of educating and encouraging all members of society and inviting them to support government efforts and initiatives related to preparing for the return of students.

Gulf Bank 642 Marathon

The Gulf Bank 642 Marathon, one of the biggest social and sporting events in Kuwait, was held with more than 7000 participants at the starting line, from 93 nationalities, and with 350 organizing volunteers on the exciting sports and family day.

The Gulf Bank 642 Marathon is distinguished by its Bronze Label from World Athletics, which is only given to only 128 marathons globally. The Gulf Bank 642 Marathon is the only marathon in Kuwait that has the Bronze accreditation. The

- Ahmad Al-Amir: Focused initiatives and programs for sustainability within the Bank's strategy 2025
- Full support for youth through the "Company Program" and a "Jahez" forum... in partnership with "INJAZ"
- Let's Talk Business podcast to support small and medium enterprises
- The Gulf Bank's 642 Marathon won the Best Sustainability Initiative Award, for promoting healthier lifestyles through sport.
- Lujain Al-Qenaei: We participated in the Eco-Summit to highlight the challenges facing Kuwait and discuss possible solutions
- Two initiatives to reduce the use of plastic and paper printing in order to reach environmental sustainability

- Gulf Bank is the first entity in Kuwait to organize a padel tournament for women... with the participation of 16 teams
- Supporting the talk show "Lei Wa Lakom" to highlight the success stories of women leaders
- Hamad Al Wazzan: A distinguished community interaction through "GB COMMUNITY" to support local business
- A busy season of social initiatives and charitable activities during the month of Ramadan
- Participation in the national awareness campaign "Safe Education", to facilitate the return of students to schools
- Hamza Al Tailji: a significant increase in the number of active customers on "Gulf Bank" accounts in social media
- Active participation in the "Diraya" campaign to educate customers about their rights and help them protect their data

cooperation with the international environmental organization, Trash Hero, and as part of its commitment to preserving the environment.

Chalet owners, beachgoers and Gulf Bank volunteers took part in an eventful community clean-up day that included family members, adults and children.

Economic Sustainability Supporting SMEs

Driven by its commitment to economic sustainability, and in recognition of the importance of the small and medium enterprises sector, Gulf Bank launched a new initiative to provide comprehensive support to small and medium enterprises, through offering business services from specialized agencies.

Let's Talk Business

Gulf Bank's new podcast highlights the little-known origin stories behind some of our favorite local brands

The program, hosted by Tareq Al-Saleh, Deputy General Manager of the Economic Research Unit at Gulf Bank, presents entrepreneurial stories within a simplified economic framework, targeting budding entrepreneurs who are considering starting businesses of their own. The Bank's new podcast is part of its overarching strategy of fostering economic and community sustainability in Kuwait.

Partnering with INJAZ

Gulf Bank sponsored INJAZ Kuwait's annual "Company Program" competition was held virtually through video communications app, Zoom. The Bank also participated in the JAHEZ career forum, which was launched by INJAZ Kuwait for high school and university students, in addition to recent graduates. The program showcases local and international community leaders' work experiences to the local youth, with the aim of educating them on the requirements for the modern day workforce.

Gulf Bank participated in the "Head Start" training program launched by INJAZ Kuwait. The program targets undergraduate college students and aims to train them in building their CVs and preparing for job interviews.

Social Events and Activities

Gulf Bank surprises customers at 360 Mall during the weekend with discounts and activities in collaboration with V-Thru and restaurants available at the mall. This participation took place to show our commitment in promoting economic sustainability and in support of local businesses.

Gulf Bank employees encouraged customers to participate in the video competition where the winner was given a cash prize, credited to their V-Thru account, to be used when paying to the participating cafes and restaurants, as part of Gulf Bank's "GB Community" initiatives.

The Central Bank of Kuwait Honors & Awards Gulf Bank in Recognition of "Diraya" Campaign Support

As part of its commitment to educating customers about their banking rights and raising awareness about cyber security, Gulf Bank participated in the Diraya campaign, an awareness campaign initiated by the Central Bank of Kuwait and the Kuwait Banking Association.

The Diraya campaign spans several topics, including the borrowing process, bank cards, cyber security, security tips, and services for customers with special needs. The campaign also aims to clarify the mechanisms for raising official complaints in an effort to protect customers' rights, and also aims to highlight the banking sector's tasks and roles in stimulating and developing the economy.

As part of its commitment to promoting financial inclusion, and its continuous support for the "Diraya" campaign, Gulf Bank is keen to provide its services to customers with special needs through a number of branches located in all governorates of the country.

The Central Bank of Kuwait honored Gulf Bank with the prestigious "Outstanding Awareness and Education Award," in recognition of the Bank's role in supporting the Diraya awareness campaign.



Ahmad Al-Amir



marathon is also recognized by The Abbott WMM Wanda Age Group World Rankings, which is a global age group marathon ranking system.

Gulf Bank won four awards in the 9th edition of the Kuwait Innovation Award. The award ceremony, which was organized by the Arab Media Forum and sponsored by the Ministry of Information and League of Arab States, recognized Gulf Bank's 642 Marathon as the Best Sustainability Initiative, promoting healthier lifestyles through sport.

Padel Tournament

Gulf Bank has sponsored a padel tournament at the Oasis Courts in Bneid Al-Gar for a group of young male and female fans of the sport which has quickly gained worldwide popularity. The Bank padel tournament launched with the participation of 16 female teams, for the first time in Kuwait.

Women Empowerment

Gulf Bank is participating in "Orange the World," a global initiative launched by the United Nations to eliminate violence against women. The event took place on 25 November 2020, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, kicking off 16 days of activism that will conclude on 10 December 2020, which is International Human Rights Day. Throughout the campaign, Gulf Bank is illuminating its main building orange in support of efforts to eliminate violence against women and champion broader human rights efforts.

Lei Wa Lakom

Gulf Bank has announced it is sponsoring "Lei Wa Lakom," a digital talk show highlighting women's voices and female success stories. The program is dedicated to providing insightful content directed primarily to working women who seek to develop and improve their society and environment. The show targets a wide range of audiences, including both young women who are at the start of their careers, and female success stories and role models from the local community.

Health and Wellness

As part of its keenness on public health,

at the end of October, Breast Cancer Awareness Month, the Bank organized a wellness day with various activities in Al Shaheed Park, which included a "walkathon" and a discussion panel that focused on the importance of psychological and mental health.

Ramadan

In Ramadan, Gulf Bank had a multitude of community activities and charity initiatives organized and spearheaded by the Bank. Throughout the holy month, the Gulf Bank team has been hard at work organizing multiple efforts to engage various groups of society, in an effort to encourage sustainability and give back to the community at large.

As part of Gulf Bank's ongoing commitment to sustainability and its dedication to impacting the local community, Gulf Bank participated in a humanitarian campaign led by the Kuwait Red Crescent Society (KRCS) to distribute electrical devices to disadvantaged families in Kuwait. As part of the initiative, several Gulf Bank employees volunteered to support the KRCS team's efforts to distribute the appliances to local families residing in Kuwait.

In keeping with international efforts towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals set by the United Nations, Gulf Bank contributed its support to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). During the month of Ramadan, Gulf Bank's efforts included providing humanitarian aid and basic daily needs to refugees. Gulf Bank's support covered basic costs for refugee families, including housing rent, food, and health services, in addition to debt repayment.

Stories with Hamad

Gulf Bank was the title sponsor of "Stories With Hamad," the latest show hosted by social media influencer and personality, Hamad Alali. The new show is an audio and video storytelling podcast that aims to highlight a true story or event told by those who lived it over the course of 15-minute daily segments.

Giirgean Activities

This year, Gulf Bank celebrated giirgean with several initiatives, with employees dis-

tributing treats to frontline workers, and handing out giirgean to passersby in the walking paths in residential neighborhoods - all while being mindful of health and safety precautions.

In recognition of the continuous efforts of frontline workers throughout the past year, Gulf Bank was also keen to have them join in its giirgean celebration, distributing baskets of various sweets and treats to frontline workers.

In appreciation of its customers and in support of local brands, Gulf Bank teamed up with a number of local outlets to present Ramadan gifts to the Bank's customers. Every Thursday throughout the holy month of Ramadan, customers received a free gift upon visiting any Gulf Bank branch and presenting their Gulf Bank bank card.

Environmental Sustainability

The Scientific Center's Eco-Summit

Gulf Bank participated in The Scientific Center's Eco-Summit, and highlighted the pivotal role that the banking sector plays in achieving sustainability. Gulf Bank highlighted its various sustainability initiatives at the environmental, community, and economic levels, which include partnering with national firms to recycle paper and plastic.

Reducing Plastic Waste

As part of its commitment to environmental sustainability and preservation, Gulf Bank distributed high quality reusable water bottles to all employees across the Bank's various branches and departments. The initiative aims to reduce the use of single-use plastic and paper cups, encouraging employees to opt for reusable water bottles instead.

Reducing Wasteful Printing

As part of its ongoing efforts to support sustainability, Gulf Bank spearheaded a new initiative to more effectively address internal printing requirements, consolidating printers to support the existing print volume and current business needs.

Beach Cleanups

Gulf Bank led an extensive community and environmental clean-up campaign to clean up Bnaider Beach in Kuwait, in

Business

Kuwait ratings affirmed at 'A+', outlook remains negative

Kuwait plans to return to foreign market funding

KUWAIT: Kuwait is a major oil exporter and currently benefits from the upswing in oil prices from lows at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Brent oil prices averaged \$71 per barrel (bbl) in 2021, compared with \$44/bbl in 2020, and we expect an average price of \$65/bbl for 2022 and \$55/bbl from 2023 ("S&P Global Ratings Revises Oil And Natural Gas Price Decks", on Ratings Direct).

Meanwhile, the OPEC+ group of oil-producing nations has agreed to ease previous cuts, leading to higher production. Higher oil prices and production volumes support Kuwait's fiscal and balance-of-payments accounts.

Nevertheless, even against this more favorable background we still project that Kuwait will run central government deficits averaging 12% of GDP over the medium term—among the highest of all rated sovereigns. Based on current public spending, we estimate a breakeven oil price that balances the central government's fiscal accounts at \$85/bbl-\$90/bbl.

Following the expiry of the debt law in 2017, the government has been unable to borrow, relying solely on funding from the main liquidity buffer, the General Reserve Fund (GRF), which has consequently diminished substantially. Meanwhile, persistent parliamentary opposition and the generally confrontational relations between the government and the legislature prevented adoption of a new debt law, implementation of a fiscal reform plan, or authorization of a withdrawal from the much larger portion of the sovereign wealth fund primarily earmarked for the future when oil runs out—the FGE.

Positively, the relationship between the executive and the legislature appears on the mend following the conclusion of the so-called National Dialogue, under which the Amir pardoned several political dissidents—one of the key demands of the opposition. In addition, the new government appointed at the beginning of January 2022 includes three opposition members of parliament (MPs).

In our view, these recent reconciliatory moves have the potential to improve previously tense

relations between the government and parliament. This increases the likelihood that the two sides can reach an agreement on key structural reforms, including the debt law and fiscal consolidation plan. That said, a comprehensive fiscal funding strategy has still not been adopted. In our view, this presents downside funding risks, particularly if oil prices are weaker than anticipated.

If the GRF runs completely dry, Kuwait could face hard budgetary constraints requiring a rapid and sizable expenditure adjustment. However, even under such an extreme scenario, we would not expect debt service to be affected, primarily because the amounts involved are small. We estimate Kuwait's gross general government debt at 8% of GDP, while interest expenditure is equivalent to only about 1% of total spending. Nevertheless, a potential abrupt spending adjustment could weaken the economy and dent foreign investor confidence. The latter could be particularly important as Kuwait plans to return to foreign market funding in the coming years.

Our ratings on Kuwait remain supported by the country's high accumulated fiscal and external buffers, which mitigate the undiversified nature of the economy. In our baseline scenario, we still assume that the government will overcome previous parliamentary opposition and enact the debt law or tap the FGF if other options are unavailable. The latter could happen if parliament supports the so-called FGF contribution law, which would authorize limited withdrawals from the fund when needed, or if the emir authorizes such withdrawals by direct decree. However, in our view, the decree route appears a less likely outcome because it could further increase political confrontation.

The ratings are constrained by the relatively weak institutional settings compared with those of non regional peers in the same rating category. Alongside the fact that the relationship between the government and parliament often results in policy stalemates, there are information gaps regarding the size and composition of the GRF and the FGE.

NBK KWT Visa infinite credit card provide rewards

KUWAIT: National Bank of Kuwait (NBK) is always committed to reward its customers and ensure providing them with the most up-to-date top-notch services and enriching their banking experience. In this context, the bank announced providing its customers with an exclusive package of rewards catering to their needs and fitting their different lifestyles when using NBK KWT Visa Infinite Credit Card featuring a totally unique design.

The new NBK Visa card comes in two unique vertical designs - for him and her, with a luxurious metal finish and a QR code incorporated in the card design allowing customers to always be update to date with the latest offers.

For the first time in Kuwait, customers can activate the card using NFC Card activation service, simply by tapping the card on the smartphone to direct to the Activation page on NBK mobile application, without the need to visit an ATM or calling the contact center.

The NBK Visa card gives customers the flexibility to choose the way they want to earn rewards based on their lifestyle; either the Spend Tier or Merchant Category option.

Customer can earn NBK KWT points on all their spends made using NBK KWT Visa Infinite Credit Card when choosing the spends tier earning option, based on their monthly spends with up to 5% on digital payment, up to 5% on International POS and up to 3% on all other spends.

On the other hand, when choosing the merchant category, it allows customers to earn NBK KWT Points on all payments made using NBK KWT Visa Infinite Credit Card at the selected categories, with 10% on dining and Telecom, 5% on fitness, beauty and jewelry and 3% on clothing, grocery and education.

In addition, customers will enjoy flat 10% NBK KWT Points when using their card at Ikea, Eureka, Farfetch, and booking.com. The earned NBK KWT points can be redeemed through NBK online or mobile banking whether as cash back directly to the card, travel booking at more than 800 airlines and 150,000 hotels, e-Vouchers from over 190 merchants, and points exchange with most preferred airlines...

Customers can earn NBK KWT points up to KD 1,000 every month. In addition, NBK KWT Visa Infinite Credit Cardholders can earn NBK rewards points at over 900 participating outlets.

On this occasion, Mohammed Al-Othman, GM-Consumer Banking Group at National Bank of Kuwait said: "The new NBK Visa card combines an exclusive package of exceptional rewards with a design inspiring national pride making it a card like no other."

NBK KWT Visa Infinite Credit Card gives its holders a unique lifestyle thanks to the included benefits and offers that are tailored to fit customers' needs and meet their expectations, he added.

Al-Othman noted NBK is keen to stay closer to its customers and to identify all their banking needs, stressing that he fully trusts that this card will be the apt option for them during travel and shopping.

On his part, Shashank Singh, Visa's General Manager for Kuwait and Qatar, said: "We are pleased to cooperate with the NBK in providing NBK KWT Visa Infinite credit card to consumers in Kuwait. The design and benefits of the card are truly an embodiment of how Visa brings unmatched experiences to a select group of customers whose lives are defined by distinction.

NBK has also partnered with Emirates Skywards, the award-winning loyalty programme of Emirates and flydubai, offering customers a chance to convert NBK KWT points to Skywards Miles. Customers can redeem miles on a wide-range of benefits and privileges, including flight rewards with Emirates and partner airlines, upgrades, hotel stays and money-can't-buy experiences. Dr Nejjib Ben Khedher, Divisional Senior Vice President Emirates Skywards said: "We're very happy to be partnering with a leading financial institution, National Bank of Kuwait, to offer customers a chance to convert Points into Skywards Miles, and access incredible rewards and privileges the award-winning loyalty programme is famed for.

Venezuela creeps out of hyperinflation, but no one feels it

CARACAS: Economists say Venezuela has come out of a four-year cycle of hyperinflation, but citizens like pensioner Humberto Reco are still waiting to see the evidence. The crisis-wracked South American country ended 2021 with inflation of 686 percent, according to the central bank, meaning the end of a period of hyperinflation that began in 2017. Walking through the popular Chacao market in Caracas, Reco does not see any positive effect on prices. "They say hyperinflation is over, but where I am, it's still there," said Reco, 75. "Honestly, I don't see any improvement."

Venezuela's inflation remains the highest in the world, and prices are continuing to rise uncontrollably. According to a widely accepted definition of hyperinflation from 1956 by late US economics professor Philip Cagan, it begins when monthly inflation rises by more than 50 percent.

To come out of it, a country needs to keep monthly inflation increases under 50 percent for an entire year, Cagan proposed. "According to Cagan's figures, we're already getting out of hyperinflation," Hermes Perez, a professor of economics at the Metropolitan University in Caracas, told AFP.

However, US economists Carmen Reinhart and Kenneth Rogoff proposed a different hyperinflation parameter of 500 percent a year. According to them, "there's a little more to go," said Perez.

'Highest in the world'

What is clear, though, is that Venezuela's official inflation figures are heading in the right direction. The country ended 2017 with 862 percent inflation before it spiraled out of control in 2018, reaching a mind-blowing 130,000 percent.

Higher costs hit JPMorgan Chase, reports profits

NEW YORK: Higher labor costs bit into JPMorgan Chase's fourth-quarter results, but the US bank on Friday still reported record annual profits of \$48.3 billion.

The financial giant pointed to a broadly solid US economy that allowed it to release reserves it had set earlier in the COVID-19 pandemic in case of defaults, which boosted profits.

It also has seen an uptick in overall lending, another sign of increasing economic activity. Two other large banks, Citigroup and Wells Fargo, also released reserves, pointing to the healthy state of consumers and businesses that translates to low delinquencies and charge-offs.

But shares of both JPMorgan and Citigroup fell as executives acknowledged an economic outlook clouded somewhat by rising inflation and lingering COVID-19 uncertainty. "The economy continues to do quite well despite headwinds related to the Omicron variant, inflation and supply chain bottlenecks," said JPMorgan Chief Executive Jamie Dimon. "We remain optimistic on US economic

Russia dismantles REvil hacker group at US request

MOSCOW: Russia Friday said it had dismantled the prominent hacking group REvil, which carried out a high-profile attack last year on US software firm Kaseya, following a request from Washington. The announcement came on the same day that Ukrainian government sites were hit by hackers in an attack that Kyiv linked to Moscow, which has amassed tens of thousands of troops on the border.

Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) said in a statement that it had "suppressed the illegal activities" of members of the group during raids on 25 addresses that swept up 14 people. The searches



CARACAS: A customer carries plastic bags with groceries at the Mercado Municipal de Chacao in Caracas. Despite the fact that the country is emerging -after four years- from an uncontrolled era of inflation, Venezuelans consider there is not a change in the prices increase. —AFP

In 2019, that was down to 9,500 percent, and then around 3,000 percent in 2020. "It's still the highest in the world," said Perez, pointing to the fact that nowhere else in Latin America has posted more than double digit figures. Venezuelans have turned to using the US dollar as much as possible to mitigate the effects of galloping price increases, shunning the national bolivar, a move that has helped slow inflation.

The populist-socialist government, which blames its woes on US sanctions, has even authorized use of the dollar, viewed as a potent symbol of the hated American imperialism. Authorities also tried to reduce the budget deficit in 2018 by relaxing the iron-fisted exchange controls, almost entirely eliminating the gulf between official and black market exchange rates.

growth as business sentiment is upbeat and consumers are benefiting from job and wage growth."

Citigroup Chief Financial Officer Mark Mason said it was still "early days" on the latest coronavirus variant, but the bank is watching Omicron "and how that may impact sentiment."

On inflation, Citi's business clients are mostly able to pass on higher costs and "not really yet feeling a pinch," he said. "But again we're watching it closely and it's kind of early days to call."

Unexpectedly high costs

At JPMorgan, fourth quarter earnings came in at \$10.4 billion, down 14 percent from the year-ago period. Revenues were flat at \$29.3 billion.

The quarterly results included \$1.8 billion in net reserve releases from funds that were set aside earlier in the pandemic in case of bad loans.

Strong points in the report included higher investment banking fees tied to what Dimon called "unprecedented" merger and acquisition activity offset somewhat by a drop in trading revenues in some businesses. But the bank saw an 11 percent jump in fourth-quarter expenses, with much of it due to higher labor costs. Chief Financial Officer Jeremy Barnum pointed to "somehow elevated attrition" in the workforce that has resulted in wage hikes.

JPMorgan Chase also signaled spending would remain elevated, projecting 2022 expenses of \$77 billion, up from \$70.9 billion last year.

were carried out following an "appeal from the relevant US authorities".

Cybersecurity was one of the main issues on the agenda of a summit meeting between Russian President Vladimir Putin and US President Joe Biden last June. In Washington, a US official praised the arrests, saying that one suspect was behind the disruptive hack of the Colonial Pipeline, but separated the issue from tensions on Ukraine.

"I want to be very clear - in our mind, this is not related to what's happening with Russia and Ukraine," the official told reporters on condition of anonymity. "I don't speak for the Kremlin's motives, but we're pleased with these initial actions," she said.

"We've also been very clear-if Russia further invades Ukraine... we will impose a severe cost on Russia in coordination with our allies." The FSB said members of the group had "developed malware, organised the embezzlement of funds from

Most experts, though, say there needs to be much deeper reforms to solve Venezuela's economic crisis. Perez, the former head of the exchange office at the central bank, believes the bank must stop printing money to finance the state oil company PDVSA following a dramatic fall in oil production from a high of 3.2 million barrels a day in 2008 to as little as 500,000 13 years later. Several experts believe Venezuela could lower inflation to as little as 120-300 percent this year.

But for citizens, that macroeconomic improvement has yet to filter down to their personal disposable income. "People say things are getting harder every day, I say: 'No, it's every minute,'" said Manuel Quijada, 67, a vegetable seller who says prices rise every week. Others claim it is daily. Even the dollar is affected by inflation. — AFP



NEW YORK: File photo shows, the JPMorgan Chase & Co. World headquarters in New York City. —AFP

Dimon said the current uptick in inflation includes elements that are "not transitory," such as housing, oil prices and wages. "They're elevated for a while," Dimon said on a conference call with journalists. "And the Fed really needs to thread the needle... to slow down the growth in inflation a little bit without stopping the growth." Eric Compton, senior equity analyst Morningstar, said in a note he was "a bit surprised" by the extent of the spending increases, as well as by JPMorgan's forecast on the benefit of higher Federal Reserve interest rates on net interest income. — AFP

The unprecedented attack targeting the US software firm Kaseya affected an estimated 1,500 businesses. The Kaseya attack, which was reported on July 2, shut down a major Swedish supermarket chain and ricocheted around the world, impacting businesses in at least 17 countries, from pharmacies to gas stations, as well as dozens of New Zealand kindergartens. Shortly after the attack, the "dark web" page of REvil went offline, sparking speculation about whether the move was the result of a government-led action. — AFP



A guest poses while arriving to attend the presentation of Zegna's Men's Fall/Winter 2022/2023 fashion collection in Milan. — AFP photos



A guest poses while arriving to attend the presentation of Zegna's Men's Fall/Winter 2022/2023 fashion collection in Milan.



Guests check their smartphone as they arrive to attend the presentation of Zegna's Men's Fall/Winter 2022/2023 fashion collection on January 14, 2022.



A guest holds a bag while arriving to attend the presentation of Zegna's Men's Fall/Winter 2022/2023 fashion collection in Milan.

COVID-19 bites but fashion keeps men warm in Milan

Armani has cancelled but Fendi, Dolce & Gabbana and Prada have opted for live shows at Men's Fashion Week in Milan, which kicks off Friday amid a fresh wave of coronavirus. Despite hopes of a return to normal after two years of the pandemic, the northern Italian city has been forced to adopt a "phygital" program this weekend, with some houses showing off their collections in person and others going digital. Giant

Giorgio Armani's decision last week to cancel its shows in Milan and Paris sparked gloom.

But 16 brands including some of the biggest will have live shows - with guests wearing an FFP2 mask and showing proof of vaccination - while 18 others are keeping it virtual. The rest will present their fall-winter 2022-2023 collections by appointment only. Instead of the lazy clothes loved in the pandemic, when mil-

lions worked from home, designers are focusing on the return to the outdoors world, according to trends watcher Federica Trotta Mureau.

For many fashion houses "the new elegant look is 'overshirts', very loose and flowing sweaters that perfectly replace shirts", the editor-in-chief of the Italian fashion magazine Mia Le Journal told AFP. "The stars of the new collections are oversized down jackets that protect

against the cold, as well as padded nylon pants." Bright colors and patterns are in, perhaps to cheer wearers after months of pandemic adversity, but also monochromatic outfits "with touches of terracotta".

After the woes of 2020, when Italy grappled with a punishing pandemic and virus restrictions, Italian fashion revenue is expected to have grown by 20.5 percent to nearly 83 billion euros (\$95 billion) in 2021. The shows open with

Ermenegildo Zegna, which in December made its debut on Wall Street, becoming the first Italian fashion house to be listed in New York. "The world is changing and so is the way people dress. Formal is becoming informal, high end," CEO Gildo Zegna said at the time. "We have given our brand a new direction, based on 'luxury leisurewear', which generates good results." — AFP



French actor and director of the state theatre Comedie-Francaise Eric Ruf poses during a photo session. La Comedie-Francaise is the oldest theatre company in the world. Called the 'house of Moliere' even though he never went there, the theatre has been haunted by Moliere for almost 400 years. — AFP

France marks 400 years of Moliere, master of stage and satire

France yesterday launched a year of events to mark the 400th anniversary of Moliere, the nation's most illustrious and ever popular master of the stage and satire. Baptized on January 15, 1622, and probably born a day or two before, Moliere - real name Jean-Baptiste Poquelin - remains as central to French culture as Shakespeare to the English-speaking world.

When the French refer to their native tongue, it is as the "language of Moliere". Many of the celebrations will be staged in places that marked his life as an actor, company director and playwright, but above all at the Comedie-Francaise, created by King Louis XIV in 1680, seven years after Moliere's death.

His plays alone will be performed at the Paris monument to Moliere until July, starting from yesterday with the original censored version of "Tartuffe", which will be shown live in cinemas too. The play is considered to have practically invented the "comedy of manners" satirising the moral hypocrisies of high society. "The Imaginary Invalid", "The Miser" and "The Bourgeois Gentleman" will follow at the Comedie-Francaise, the longest-running theatre company in the world, performing his work every single year since it opened.

'He's everywhere in the air'

The theatre near the Louvre museum, "is anchored in the quarter where he lived and where he died and he's everywhere in the air," Comedie-Francaise actress Dominique Blanc told AFP. "I have a relationship with him like a friend," she said. Actor Denis Podalydes said he was not "superstitious" about any presence of Moliere's spirit at the theatre. "He sleeps in his works until we play them (and then) there's something very lively," he said.

In Versailles, where Moliere enjoyed Louis XIV's patronage, several of the best known plays will be performed in their original versions as "comedies-ballets", collaborations with Baroque composer Jean-

Baptiste Lully. The town on the western edge of Paris holds a Moliere month every summer and a statue by Xavier Veilhan will be unveiled in May following a Moliere exhibition opening.

Moliere fled Paris at 23, spending the next 13 years with a travelling troupe and anniversary events will be held up and down the country. Yesterday saw another statue unveiled at Pezenas, in the southwest, where Moliere stayed repeatedly in those early years. The historic heart of the town will be taken over by scenes from the plays and his life. An official Moliere stamp will be offered as a pre-issue. The CNCS national centre for theatre costume at Moulin, in central France, will open a "Moliere in costume" exhibition, at the end of May. The Paris Opera will celebrate the anniversary with "Moliere in Music" from September. The playwright left little trace of his personal life and the only one of his four children to survive to adulthood, lost his manuscripts. Despite the myth, Moliere did not die on stage, but shortly after a performance - as the hypochondriac Argan - at home on the Rue de Richelieu on February 17, 1673. —AFP

on the Cote d'Azur in southern France, got high and knocked out arguably their last truly great album. It is notable for lacking any standout pop hits - instead of serving as a love letter to US gospel and blues, with an astonishingly consistent set of 18 songs including "Sweet Virginia" and "Tumbling Dice" that became fan favorites. Rock critic Yves Bigot was there. "I wasn't one of the dealers," he told AFP, laughing. "I



US rock singer Lou Reed

Classic rock albums turning 50

There must have been something in the water in 1972 - there almost certainly was for these guys. It was a year that spawned several instant Americana classics - and one that was seemingly beamed down from outer space - that came to define rock music and set the template for the sexy, seedy decade to come.

'Exile On Main St' by The Rolling Stones

For guitarist Keith Richards, it was the definitive Stones record. Fleeing the British tax authorities, the group settled into the rambling Nellcote villa

was a kid from the region and we would sneak in with the food delivery guys in the morning when no one was awake. I stayed in the corner, and can confirm that the Stones were indeed alien creatures."

'Honky Ch,teau' by Elton John

Elton John was also sojourning in style in France, in the Herouville chateau outside Paris that had been turned into a recording studio. The reportedly haunted pile was popular with other 70s luminaries including David Bowie and Iggy Pop. "Elton was in his imperial period, with some incredible tunes like 'Honky Cat' and 'Rocket Man'," said Bigot. It underlined John's star status in his native Britain, and "laid down the foundations for '70s soft-rock as a whole," in the words of music bible NME.

'The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust'

Bowie found his most perfect avatar in

'Be My Baby' singer Spector dies at 78

Ronnie Spector - the cat-eyed rock 'n' roll singer who fronted the 1960s group the Ronettes, whose era-defining hits included the classic "Be My Baby" - died Wednesday. She was 78 years old. "Our beloved earth angel, Ronnie, peacefully left this world today after a brief battle with cancer," read a family statement. "Ronnie lived her life with a twinkle in her eye, a spunky attitude, a wicked sense of humor and a smile on her face," the statement continued. "She was filled with love and gratitude." "Her joyful sound, playful nature and magical presence will live on in all who knew, heard or saw her." Born Veronica Greenfield in New York's Spanish Harlem on August 10, 1943, Spector was the daughter of an African-American and Cherokee mother and Irish-American father.

She formed the musical group that became known as the Ronettes with her sister Estelle Bennett and cousin Nedra Talley. They gained traction in the New York area with their soulful songs of young love, before signing in 1963 with the then-legendary producer Phil Spector - whom she later married. With their vamped, heavily lidded eyes, sky-high beehive hairstyles and skirts cut above the knee, the Ronettes skyrocketed to global fame, redefining girl group glamor with a seductive edge.

They delivered a string of hits during their early-1960s heyday, including "Baby, I Love You" and "(The Best Part of) Breakin' Up", along with the beloved "Be My Baby" that in 1999 was inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame. "Be My Baby" is oft-cited as emblematic of Phil Spector's dense, dramatic "Wall of Sound" production style, a technique that backed pop music with multiple tracks of lush instrumentation includ-

ing brass and strings, giving rock songs the air of symphonies.

The iconic song soundtracked the title sequence of the revered 1987 film "Dirty Dancing," and Martin Scorsese also used it to open his 1973 film "Mean Streets." For Beach Boy Brian Wilson, "Be My Baby" was an obsession. "I was driving and I had to pull over to the side of the road - it blew my mind," went Wilson's story of his first listen, according to The New York Times. "It was a shock." "I started analyzing all the guitars, pianos, bass, drums and percussion," he said. "Once I got all those learned, I knew how to produce records."



Ronnie Spector

Influence 'indelible'

Along with the Supremes, the Ronettes were among the period's quintessential acts, and the only girl group to tour with the Beatles. Inducting the trio into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2007, Keith Richards of The Rolling Stones recalled opening for the Ronettes in the 1960s. "They could sing all their way right through a wall of sound," Richards said. "They didn't need anything. They touched my heart right there and then they touch it still." The Ronettes broke up in 1967 following a European concert tour. In 1968, Ronnie married Phil Spector, who in 2009 was jailed for murder. The pair divorced in 1974, and in her autobiography, the singer chronicled years of horrifically abusive behavior perpetrated by her ex, who died in 2021. —AFP

album in "Transformer". "Walk on the Wild Side" is now a rock standard, while "Perfect Day" gained a second lease of life two decades later on the soundtrack to "Trainspotting".

'Harvest' by Neil Young

"Harvest" was Young's fourth album but his mainstream breakthrough, unexpectedly selling millions around the world, propelled by singles "Heart of Gold" and "Old Man". After years on the freakier fringes of folk-pop, the success worried Young: he later said that he purposefully "headed for the ditch" on his next albums to escape the middle of the road. But there was darkness on "Harvest", too, especially in the form of "The Needle and the Damage Done", a harrowing song about drug addiction that foreshadowed the imminent death of two close friends. — AFP



Vendors of religious items wait for customers as pilgrims gather at the confluence of the Ganges River and the Bay of Bengal to take a holy dip during the Gangasagar Mela Hindu festival at Sagar Island yesterday. — AFP photos



Hindu pilgrims perform rituals after taking a holy dip at the confluence of Ganges and the Bay of Bengal during the Gangasagar Mela on the occasion of Makar Sankranti.



A Hindu pilgrim takes a holy dip at the confluence of Ganges and the Bay of Bengal during the Gangasagar Mela on the occasion of Makar Sankranti.

DRONES SPRAY HOLY WATER AT HINDU FESTIVAL; CROWDS DEFY COVID RULES

Drones sprayed holy water from the Ganges on thousands of Hindu pilgrims on Friday to reduce crowding during a massive festival being held despite soaring COVID cases in India. The Gangasagar Mela in the east of the country has drawn comparisons with another "superspreader" Hindu gathering last year that the Hindu nationalist government refused to ban. It was blamed in part for a devastating COVID surge.

Officials had said they expected around three million people - including ash-smearing, dreadlocked ascetics - to attend the festival's climax on Sagar Island, where the Ganges meets the Bay of Bengal. "At the crack of dawn, there was a sea of people," local official Bankim Hazra told AFP by telephone. "Holy water from the river Ganges was sprayed from drones on pilgrims... to prevent crowding," he said. "But the saints and a large number of people were bent on taking the dip... Pilgrims, most of them without masks, outnumbered the security personnel."

An AFP photographer said that there were fewer people than in recent years and that rain put off some pilgrims from making the journey. But there were still huge crowds, mostly without masks, taking a holy dip in the river.

A police official on duty at the event said that it was "impossible" to enforce COVID restrictions. "Most pilgrims are bent on defying the rules," he said. "They believe that God will save them and bathing at the confluence will cleanse all their sins and even the virus if they are infected."

No lockdown

Fatalities from India's current wave of infections remain a fraction of what they were during the surge in April and May last year, with 315 deaths recorded Thursday compared with as many as 4,000 per day at the peak. Infections are rising fast, however, with almost 265,000 new cases on Thursday. Some models predict India could experience as many as 800,000 cases per day in a few



Hindu Devotees take a holy dip on the occasion of the Makar Sankranti during the annual Hindu 'Magh Mela' festival at the Sangam.

weeks, twice the rate seen nine months ago. Keen to avoid another painful lockdown for millions of workers reliant on a few dollars in daily wages, authorities in different parts of India have sought to restrict gatherings.

In New Delhi, all bars, restaurants and private offices are shut and the capital is set to go into its second weekend curfew on Friday night. In the financial capital Mumbai, gatherings of more than four people are banned. But in West Bengal

state, the Calcutta High Court on Friday allowed the Gangasagar Mela to proceed. As with 2021's Kumbh Mela, it has attracted people from across northern India who, after cramming onto trains, buses and boats to reach the island, will then go home - potentially taking the highly transmissible Omicron virus variant with them.

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. "A stampede-like situation could happen if the police try to enforce social distancing on the river bank," Nandy said. Devotee Sarbananda Mishra, a 56-year-old school teacher from the neighboring state of Bihar said: "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?" — AFP



(From left) Actors Denzel Washington, Frances McDormand, Alex Hassell, Corey Hawkins and Sean Patrick Thomas attend the Los Angeles Premiere of 'The Tragedy of Macbeth' at the Directors Guild of America Theatre in Los Angeles, California. — AFP

Age and race no factor for Denzel's Macbeth

In the four centuries since Shakespeare wrote the Scottish Play, there has never been a Macbeth quite like Denzel Washington. A double-Oscar winner, he is regularly named the greatest actor of his era, and has already received every nomination going for new film "The Tragedy of Macbeth," out Friday on Apple TV+.

He is also 67 - and his Lady Macbeth played by 64-year-old Frances McDormand - meaning their ruthless couple would be most unlikely to create an heir to their ill-gotten crown. "They're tired, they're older," Washington told AFP, explaining that the passage of time gave their characters a different but equally malevolent motivation. "They're like, 'Look, this is our shot. We're due. Give it to us.' 'Drastic times make for drastic measures. And the clock is ticking.'"

How would Washington, who clashes swords with foes in multiple strenuous encounters towards the film's finale, have played the role differently 20 or 30 years ago? "Probably more physical. Not giving into the reality of where my knees are at this point in my life!" he says. And then, of course, Washington is Black. So is actor Corey Hawkins, 33, who plays his nemesis and eventual vanquisher Macduff. This detail - while a historical anachronism for 11th-century Scotland - is far from new ground. Orson Welles directed an all-Black stage version of Macbeth back in 1936.

"Obviously, we are diverse, so I think that's a great thing," said Washington, at a virtual roundtable interview with journalists. "In my humble opinion, we ought to be at a place where diversity shouldn't even be mentioned like it's something special. 'These young kids - black, white, blue, green or whatever - are highly talented and qualified, so that's why they're

there." Hawkins added: "I can't change this skin. I can't change this hair. I can't change that. 'But what I can do is be excellent at the thing that people may not expect... We weren't thinking about black and white.'"

'Fresh eyes'

Ironically, the film itself is shot in black-and-white, and a narrow aspect ratio, with its elegant, minimalist soundstage sets evoking the early days of Hollywood. "Macbeth" has been attempted before in various forms on the silver screen by influential directors, including Welles, Akira Kurosawa and Roman Polanski. But Washington said he had not seen any previous performances of Macbeth, and chose not to seek them out once director Joel Coen had cast the film. "I don't want to see anybody and go, 'Shoot, how the heck am I gonna be better than that?'" said Washington, whose Macbeth is initially restrained and subtle, before his rage, ambition and madness boil over.

"I didn't want that to affect whatever it was I was going to come up with. So I was coming to it with fresh eyes and ears and imagination." Still, Washington has plenty of pedigree when it comes to Shakespeare. He starred in a Broadway revival of "Julius Caesar," and Kenneth Branagh's film of "Much Ado About Nothing." Hawkins said he hoped that seeing Washington, himself and other Black cast members - including Washington's daughter Olivia, in a minor role - could inspire young children from minority backgrounds to give Shakespeare a go.

"If there's some little boy or some little girl, who's gonna watch this film... they could get curious about it," he said. "Yes, Black folks do love Shakespeare. We probably love Shakespeare without even knowing that we love Shakespeare, because there's so many references in songs and in the culture that we love. 'It's an honor to be able to do this, and to be side-by-side with these actors, these Black actors, up here doing this,' Hawkins said. "Because we have just as much ownership of it as anyone else." — AFP

Birdwatchers flock for glimpse of rare snowy owl in US capital

The white dome of the US Capitol shines through the night, illuminating a small group huddled down the hill, bundled tightly against the winter cold and carrying long-lens cameras and binoculars. The motley crew are not there to photograph Washington's famous monuments - they have their sights set on a rare creature that flew in from the Arctic: a snowy owl. "There he is!" shouts one of the birdwatchers. The crowd shifts positions to get a better angle. "It's amazing," says an enthused Meleia Rose, 41. "I've been a birder a long time and this is my first time every seeing a snowy owl."

Birdwatching, or birding as it is also known, is a popular pastime in the United States, with hobbyists typically hiking through forests or camping in rural areas to spot different species of birds. So the majestic owl's appearance a week ago in the city, much further south than its usual habitat, has proven a magnet. "You can see the Capitol," said Rose, wrapped in a big winter coat and accompanied by her partner. "It's arresting to have the contrast, the wildness with the city - but especially DC where it's so ... monumental and iconic."

The couple, who hired a baby-sitter for the special occasion, got a good look at the rare bird, allowing them to mark "snowy owl" off their "life list" - a catalogue of every bird they've seen. Like others staring up at the young female owl, identified by its grey and white plumage, Rosa was alerted to its arrival by eBird, a network used by birdwatchers to signal particularly interesting finds, which logged 200 million observations last year by 290,000 enthusiasts worldwide.

Users had pinpointed the snowy owl near Union Station, a bustling transportation hub just down the road from the Capitol, where a line of taxis curls around a grassy park, criss-crossed with walkways and spotted with tents set up by the homeless. At the center of the park, on top of a marble fountain, a pair of yellow eyes peer out, searching for an evening snack - most likely one of the capital's countless rats.



A snowy owl flies above Union Station in Washington, DC. — AFP photos



A rare snowy owl sits on an eagle-topped flag pole outside Union Station in Washington DC.

An 'Arctic visitor'

One recent visitor was none other than Jacques Pitteloud, Switzerland's ambassador to the United States and a passionate birdwatcher. "The snowy owl has been on my list a long time," Pitteloud told AFP, "but it's truly extraordinary to see it in the middle of Washington DC." "She was truly the superstar of Union Station!" With broad white wings, these "birds of snow and ice" are "like a creature from another world," explained Kevin McGowan, a professor with Cornell University's Lab of Ornithology.

Snowy owls live a good part of the year near the Arctic Circle, but most migrate south for the winter - usually stopping near the US border with Canada. Its visit so far south to Washington is "like having a polar bear coming by your neighborhood," said McGowan. "Snowy owls are such a charismatic bird," noted Scott Weidensaul, the co-leader of Project SNOWstorm, a group that researches and tracks snowy owls. "And particularly for birdwatchers in the Washington DC area where it is an unusual event to see one down there. You know, that's a big deal."

In a black down jacket, Edward Eder is

setting up his camera for a second night in a row. It's equipped with an ultra long lens for him to see the bird up close. "A lot of people have taken up or become more enthusiastic birders during the pandemic," explains the 71-year-old retiree, attributing the trend in part to the ability to easily social distance. With their parents pointing the way, a small group of children attempt to catch a glimpse of the bird - which some may even recognize as kin to "Hedwig," the snowy owl companion to Harry Potter in the cult book and movie series. — AFP



A rare snowy owl sits on an eagle-topped flag pole near a US flag outside Union Station in Washington DC.

Belgium 'ghost town' fights to return to life

Doel has a reputation as Belgium's best-known ghost town. But its few inhabitants—today numbering just 21—now see a glimmer of hope of their village bouncing back to life. If it does, it would be a remarkable change of fortune for a place that has been steadily emptying out since the late 1970s when its population was 60 times bigger, leaving behind silent streets of crumbling, sealed-up homes covered in graffiti.

Squeezed between Antwerp's ever-expanding port—the second-biggest in Europe—and a nuclear power plant, Doel has become a morbid attraction for curious tourists and "urban explorers" who film themselves daringly traipsing around inside ruined buildings. Police patrol regularly to prevent vandals and squatters moving in.

Only two cafes—one attached to a 17th-century windmill—and an immaculate parish church remind visitors that the village still holds out against oblivion. "It's not a ghost town... But if you come here on a Sunday, or especially in the evenings, of course you see the empty houses and that's what triggers people the most" to think that it looks like one, resident Liese Stuer told AFP. "I think it's very important that people know that it's not a ghost town, that they know



there's still people trying to live here and trying to set up life," she said.

Expanding port

Stuer, a 37-year-old teacher of Flemish to foreigners and freelance graphic artist, moved to Doel five years ago when she partnered with a local. But she used to visit as a child with her grandparents, who lived nearby, and remembered it as a swanky town. But Doel's fate hit the skids in the late 1990s when Belgian authorities decided to expropriate and bulldoze villages around Antwerp's port to build a new container dock. While most inhabitants left, a

hardcore stayed and put up a fight in the courts, through fierce lobbying and by promoting street art to give color to the empty houses.

Given the importance of the port to Belgium's economy, it looked like a campaign doomed to failure. The regional Flemish government prohibited people moving there and vandalism made the place increasingly insecure for the shrinking population. But in 2016, Belgium's Supreme Court shot down the expansion plan, after the European Court of Justice ruled that it threatened Doel's marshland surroundings and the ecology of the

Scheldt river that runs alongside it.

The nature, and the solidarity that binds Doel's residents together, are what made Stuer stay. "The green that we see in the summer: it's really nice to live here. It's the place where I want my child to grow up in—the people and environment that I find very warm and welcoming," she said. "For me, it doesn't feel as if I'm isolated. Not at all. It's a very connected village." But it's still not clear what's in store, exactly, for Doel.



Liese Stuer, a resident of the Belgian village of Doel, collects firewood in Doel near the city of Antwerp.

A town with 'scars'

Discussions are ongoing between authorities and residents. In December, municipal officials outlined a plan to slowly allow in new inhabitants and renovate a grounded old ship, while building a dock right up to Doel's perimeter. The Flemish government, which is now the landlord of all but one of the houses in Doel, is reluctant to see the town return to a population anywhere close to the 1,300 it had in the 1970s. "We know that the village will not disappear... It indeed has the image of a ghost town, but that's not how it should be," the Flemish finance, heritage and housing minister, Matthias Diependaele, told AFP.

But, he said, "we have to look what we can do with it today," adding: "The most dif-

ficult point is the fact that we know for a fact that right next door to it there will be 24/7 harbour activity." There is no firm timeline for decisions on Doel's future, only talk of firming up plans in the weeks or months ahead. "I really hope they evolve in the direction that Doel becomes a normal village, together with its scars, of course—they will always be visible, the scars of this recent past," Stuer said, standing in the garden of her house a short distance from the nuclear plant. — AFP



Photo shows abandoned house daubed with graffiti in Doel near the city of Antwerp. The village of Doel is facing its final battle for survival against plans to expand the adjacent port of Antwerp that will erase it from the map to make way for a new dock in Doel near the port city of Antwerp.



This photograph shows abandoned house daubed with graffiti in Doel near the city of Antwerp.



Abandoned houses are seen in Doel near the city of Antwerp. — AFP photos

Spider-Man comic book page leaps to record \$3.36 million

A single page of original artwork from an acclaimed 1984 comic featuring Spider-Man sold for a record \$3.36 million in the United States — making the webslinger the world's mightiest auction superhero. The page

features the first appearance of Spidey's black symbiote suit that would later lead to the creation of anti-hero Venom in artwork by Mike Zeck from Marvel Super Heroes Secret Wars no. 8. "This page was the big reveal teased on the cover! This is where Peter Parker actually got his spiffy new black costume," Heritage Auctions said in its description of the artwork for page 25 of the issue.

"But... it's a costume with a secret! Because it very soon turns out to be alive and have its own agenda. This is the origin of the character Venom!" Bidding for the artwork started at \$330,000. The previous record for a single page of artwork from the interior of an American comic book was a frame

showing the first image of Wolverine in a 1974 issue of "The Incredible Hulk". The page sold for \$657,250.

A copy of 1938's Action Comics no. 1, the first appearance of Superman, sold for \$3.18 million on the first day of Heritage Auctions' four-day comic event in Dallas, Texas, the auction house said on Twitter. The copy was graded 6.0 by comic book grading authority CGC. Two other copies of the world's most famous comic book issue with a higher grade have previously sold for more at auction, according to The Hollywood Reporter. — AFP

Ecuador expands sea life protections around Galapagos

Ecuador created a massive new marine reserve Friday north of its Galapagos islands, forming a Pacific corridor up to Costa Rica's Cocos Island National Park to preserve species of migratory fauna, such as sharks. President Guillermo Lasso, on board a scientific vessel from the Galapagos National Park (PNG) anchored in the bay of Puerto Ayora off Santa Cruz Island, signed the decree creating the new reserve called "Hermandad" (Brotherhood). To mark the opening of the marine reserve, he then cut a ribbon made out of materials collected during coastal cleanups conducted in the Galapagos.

The new reserve is incorporated into the 138,000 square kilometers of reserve that have existed since March 1998. So the archipelago that inspired English naturalist Charles Darwin has now expanded to an impressive 198,000 square kilometers of protected marine area. The Galapagos marine reserve, in which industrial fishing is prohibited, is the second-largest in the world. More than 2,900 marine species have been reported within the archipelago, which is a Natural World Heritage Site.

Authorities are planning for protected areas in adjacent Colombia and Panama to join later, creating an international marine biosphere reserve. The leaders of those two countries also signed the decree along with Lasso. Lasso announced the expansion of the Galapagos marine reserve, which has unique flora and fauna and fragile ecosystems, in November in Glasgow,

on the occasion of the COP 26 climate summit. The project was in exchange for a reduction in Ecuador's international debt.

A 'clear message'

The creation of the "Brotherhood" reserve is a "clear message for the world," said Lasso Friday, describing it as a "new relationship with the Earth, a new understanding of what constitutes progress for humanity." Colombian President Ivan Duque and former US president Bill Clinton attended the event, together with government officials from Costa Rica and Panama.

Duque said that eventually adding Colombia's Malpelo islands and Panama's Coiba islands to the vast marine reserve will allow for the migration of species such as sea turtles, whales, sharks and manta rays. This new reserve "will guarantee the survival of 40 percent of the world's marine species," Duque said.

"We may be a small territory... but the planet is also ours," said Lasso. "The seas are great regulators of the global climate," he said, adding that "taking care of them is not naive idealism, it is a vital necessity." Located in the Pacific some 1,000 kilometers off the coast of Ecuador, the Galapagos Islands are a protected wildlife area and home to unique species of flora and fauna. The archipelago was made famous by British geologist and naturalist Charles Darwin's observations on evolution there. — AFP



Ecuador's President Guillermo Lasso (center) is pictured during the signing of the decree for the expansion of the Galapagos marine reserve, onboard the Sierra Negra research/survey vessel on Santa Cruz Island, in the Galapagos, an archipelago located 1,000 km off the coast of Ecuador in the Pacific Ocean. — AFP

The Continent: Africa's ambitious newspaper, designed for WhatsApp

Late one night, South African journalist Simon Allison woke up his wife with an idea: a weekly African newspaper for Africans, distributed via WhatsApp. She told him to go back to sleep, and "keep it for the morning". But that was the birth of The Continent, in the middle of the pandemic. Even though it's published as a PDF file and distributed on a messaging platform, The Continent feels like an old-fashioned newspaper: Catchy headlines, short stories, reported pieces and interviews.

Not to mention the eagerly awaited quiz, to test how much readers know their continent. And it's free, available only via WhatsApp, the most widely used messaging system in Africa. A Zimbabwean daily, 263Chat, was the trendsetter in sharing newspapers on WhatsApp, recalled Allison during an interview in the tranquil garden of his suburban Johannesburg house.

"We wanted to create a newspaper, not a website," he said, birds chirping away, while a cat roamed around and a lawnmower buzzed in the distance. Kiri Rupiah, 34, the team's distributor and "geek" said the paper has helped to filter the deluge of information that came with



Simon Allison, editor of the South African newspaper 'The Continent', poses for a portrait in his home, in Johannesburg, South Africa. — AFP photos

the uncertainties of the coronavirus pandemic. "Our families started using us as informal fact-checkers. 'Is this true about COVID?' And all these exchanges were happening on WhatsApp," said the Rupiah, with trendy glasses and a smile brightened by dimples.

"We are different than most newsrooms who want lots of subscribers," she said. "I want 10 people who are engaged, that are going to share with six or seven people they know." "They also have access to us," she added. "It creates community and trust." A university professor was one of their first fans. "He shares the newspaper every week with 50 people," said Rupiah and because he recommends it, they are likely to read it. She has cellphone numbers of all of the nearly 17,000 subscribers, even receiving "a nude by mistake" from one over-eager subscriber. "He was super apologetic," said Rupiah.

No censorship

Barely two weeks passed from that first, late-night idea and the first issue in April 2020, said the bespectacled Allison, who converted his guest room into the newspaper office. Things moved fast. He

got help from three journalism students, who were happy to keep busy during the pandemic, and hired a few freelancers, paying them from his own pocket for the first few months. The debut edition went out to friends and family, but "after 48 hours, we had 1,000 subscribers. We achieved virality in a week," said Allison. At the time he was the Africa editor of the Mail and Guardian, a dynamic South African weekly.

With his co-founder Siphos Kings, they went fundraising, with pro-democracy charities chipping in. "Funders see us as a weapon against disinformation, an innovative way to combat it," he said. For now they have secured funding for their tightly budgeted operating costs over the next two years. The energetic team of journalists in their 30s — based mostly in South Africa, but also in Uganda and the UK — is teeming with story ideas. "If we had more funding we could do more fun things," said Allison, who has his eyes set on launching a French or even a Kiswahili edition. — AFP



A photograph shows the South African newspaper 'The Continent' displayed on the screen of a mobile phone, in Johannesburg, South Africa.

Sports

Australian Open players tired of Djokovic's saga

'No one' is bigger than the tournament

MELBOURNE: Players at the Australian Open were yesterday growing tired of the Novak Djokovic visa saga overshadowing the opening Grand Slam of the year with Rafael Nadal declaring no one was bigger than the tournament. World number one Djokovic has again been detained in Australia after authorities ripped up his visa for a second time and declared he was a threat to the public. He is facing deportation with his chances of defending his men's title at Melbourne Park looking increasingly slim.

His lawyers are battling to keep him in the country in a controversy that has dragged on for over a week. Nadal stands to benefit if Djokovic is kicked out with both players striving to become the first to win an unprecedented 21 Grand Slams. While he stressed that he respected the Serb as a person and player, Nadal made it clear no one was bigger than the sport. "I tell you one thing, it's very clear that Novak Djokovic is one of the best players of the history, without a doubt. But there is no one player in history that's more important than an event, no?" he said.

"The players stay and then go, and other players are coming. No one, even Roger (Federer), Novak, myself, Bjorn Borg who was amazing at his times, tennis keep going. "The Australian Open is much more important than any player," he added. "If he's playing finally, okay. If he's not playing, Australian Open will be great Australian Open with or without him." Nadal added that the saga had gone "too far" and he was "a little bit tired of the situation because I just believe that it's important to talk about our sport, about tennis". Defending Australian Open champion

Naomi Osaka said she didn't know the Serbian well, but was sad that he might now be remembered more for his anti-vaccination stance than his exploits on the court.

'Australians have gone through a lot'

"I think it's an unfortunate situation. He's such a great player and it's kind of sad that some people might remember (him) in this way," she said, two days before the start of the tournament. World number four Stefanos Tsitsipas criticized the 20-time Grand Slam winner earlier this week, saying he was "playing by his own rules". But he was reluctant to get involved again yesterday. "I'm here to talk about tennis, not Novak Djokovic," said the Greek 23-year-old. "I won't lie. It has been pretty much on every news outlet the last couple of weeks. It has received a lot of attention. A lot of people are obviously talking about it.

"That's why I'm here to talk about tennis. Not enough tennis has been talked about in the last couple of weeks, which is a shame." But Djokovic did win cautious support from world number three Alexander Zverev, who suggested Djokovic was being made an example of. "I think Novak is a very big name, a global superstar. I think that he is someone that maybe people think they can make a big deal out of it just because it's Novak," he said.

"I don't know enough of the situation, but I do think if it would not be Novak Djokovic, world number one, with 20 Grand Slams, all that, then it would not be as big of a drama. That I do believe," he added. But Australia's main men's hope Alex de



MELBOURNE: Two Australian Border Force vehicles leave a car park reportedly taking Serbia's Novak Djokovic back to a Melbourne Detention Centre hotel ahead of his deportation before the Australian Open tennis tournament in Melbourne yesterday. —AFP

Minaur was fed up, saying it was detracting from the tournament and other players. "First of all, this whole situation has taken a lot of spotlight away from us competitors. We're here to play the Australian Open. "It feels like it's taking away from us competitors who just want to start."

Pressed on whether Djokovic had been the author of his own demise, he replied: "Look, Australians have gone through a lot. There's no secret about that.

They've had it very tough. "They've done a lot of work to protect themselves and their borders. When you're coming in, as well as every other tennis player, if you wanted to come into the country, you had to be double-vaccinated." Former world number one Andy Murray, who will play at the Open, said he hoped Djokovic's status would be cleared up, but he added: "I'm not going to sit here and start kicking Novak whilst he's down." —AFP



Djokovic detained again in Australia

Henley soars to three-shot Sony Open lead

LOS ANGELES: Russell Henley fired two eagles in a seven-under-par 63 on Friday to seize a three-shot lead over China's Li Haotong through two rounds of the US PGA Tour Sony Open in Hawaii. Henley, who started the day tied for second behind defending champion Kevin Na, opened with a birdie on the 10th hole at Waialae Country Club in Honolulu, and after a bogey at the 16th he kicked-started his round at 18, where he holed out from a greenside bunker for eagle.

He gave back a stroke with a bogey at the first, then picked up six strokes in his last six holes - a storming finish capped by a 29-foot eagle at the par-five ninth. "Nice to finish like that," Henley said. "I don't remember the last time I had two eagles in the same round, but it's definitely exciting." Henley rolled in birdie putts of about nine feet at the fourth, fifth and seventh holes and an 11-footer at the eighth.

"The front I started hitting a few more fairways and giving myself some good looks and executing there

from 10 to 15 feet or less," added the American, who is chasing a fourth US PGA Tour title on the same course where he won his first as a tour rookie in 2013. Li had six birdies and a bogey in his five-under-par 65 for a 12-under total of 128. "First few holes (my game wasn't) quite on, especially on my tee shot, but I played great on my back nine holes, a lot of putts and played super-solid," said Li, who has one OneAsia tour title and two European Tour titles on his resume but is still seeking a first US tour crown.

American veteran Matt Kuchar, whose nine PGA Tour titles include the 2019 Sony Open, was a further stroke back on 11-under 129 after his second straight bogey-free round, a five-under 65 that included five birdies. "Fortunately I was finding a bunch of fairways today," Kuchar said. "If you're in the fairway you can make birdies. If you're not in the fairway, you're hoping to make pars."

Na falls back

Na's second round showed just how important finding the fairways could be with the rough at Waialae particularly dense and deep this year. The South Korean-born American hit all 14 fairways in regulation on Thursday on the way to a nine-under par 61. On Friday Na hit just four fair-



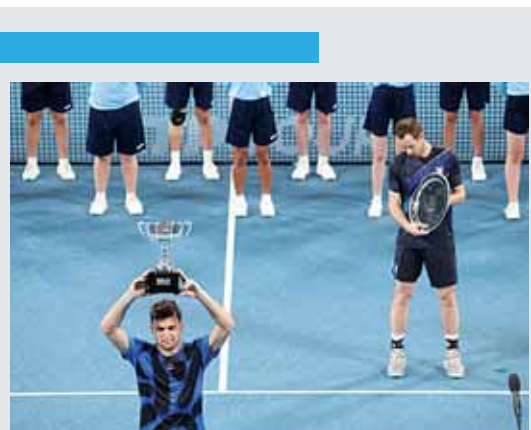
HONOLULU: Russell Henley of the United States plays an approach shot on the 16th hole during the second round of the Sony Open in Hawaii on January 14, 2022 in Honolulu, Hawaii. —AFP

ways in regulation and carded a one-over 71 that left him seven shots off the pace.

American Michael Thompson was alone in fourth after a 67 for 130. Masters champion Hideki Matsuyama headlined a group of 11 players sharing fifth on 131. Japan's Matsuyama had seven birdies and two bogeys in his five-under effort and was joined on nine-under by 21-year-old compatriot Keita Nakajima, the top-ranked amateur in the world

who carded a 64.

Matsuyama admitted it was a bit demoralizing to see Henley's 15-under score on the board as he was grinding through his round. "That's a tough row to hoe when you're that far back," he said, adding that the way he was playing he wasn't focused on what number he might need to post to stay in touch. "I was all over the place the front nine, couldn't keep the driver in the fairway," Matsuyama said. "So I'm happy with how I finished." —AFP



SYDNEY: Aslan Karatsev of Russia (left) celebrates with the trophy after winning against Andy Murray of Britain (right) in the men's singles final match at the Sydney Classic tennis tournament yesterday. —AFP

Red-hot Karatsev overpowers Murray to win Sydney title

SYDNEY: World number 20 Aslan Karatsev produced a masterclass yesterday to power past Andy Murray in the Sydney Classic final, signaling his intent of making another deep run at the Australian Open. The No. 1 seed won 6-3, 6-3 in one hour and 31 minutes, hitting 29 winners in a near-flawless performance that left the three-time Grand Slam champion out of answers.

"Thanks to my team we are doing an amazing job," Karatsev said during the awards presentation. Karatsev created history at last year's Australian Open after becoming the first Grand Slam debutant to reach a semi-final since the Open era began in 1968. After his emphatic victory, the 28-year-old will be confident entering Melbourne Park having stymied Murray's bid to win a title for the first time since 2019. "First time back in a final for three years, it's been a long road," an emotional Murray said at the presentation.

Murray, who has been given a wildcard into next week's Australian Open, had been encouraged by his play heading into a Grand Slam where he has finished as runner-up five times. But Murray, who had undergone career-saving hip surgery, was blown off the court by the red-hot Russian. His serve was under immediate pressure as Karatsev muscled him around the court to gain the break in the opening game. Karatsev continued to stand and deliver, piercing the lines to run Murray ragged.

A double fault from the Scot handed Karatsev the first set and the Russian then stormed to a 3-0 lead. Murray showed trademark trademark fight and had opportunities to break in an epic fifth game but Karatsev held on and then motored to victory. Karatsev, who had knocked out Murray's British compatriot Dan Evans in a three-set semi-final thriller on Friday, plays world number 72 Jaume Munar of Spain in the first round of the Australian Open. Murray has an intriguing opener against 21st seed Nikoloz Basilashvili who he beat in three sets in the round of 16 in Sydney. —AFP



Kuwait, Bahrain Special Olympics sign MoU

By Abdelatif Sharaa

KUWAIT: Kuwait Special Olympics signed a memorandum of understanding with Bahrain Special Olympics for joint cooperation to develop services, activities and programs for those with mental and growth disabilities in both countries. National Director for Special Olympics and Chairwoman of Al-Tumouh Sports Club Rihab Bouresli signed the MoU on behalf of Kuwait while Wafiq Jamal signed it on behalf of Bahrain.

Bouresli said the signing of the memorandum comes as an actual interpretation of the partnership to achieve the goals of sustainable development 2030 that was issued by the United Nations which reflects the international nature of

the entire human rights and basic indivisible liberties and the guarantee that disable individuals fully enjoy their rights without discrimination.

She said the memo dealt with the mechanism of cooperation in training and approved sports competition by special Olympics at the local, regional and international levels; implement training programs for coaches, referees and administrators as well as provide technical support for volunteers. She said there will be mutual cooperation to form joint teams and develop parallel programs for the sports programs.

Meanwhile the National Director of Bahrain Special Olympics Wafiq Jamal said she was happy for signing the MoU which will strengthen cooperation between the two sides. It is worth mentioning that the Special Olympics that was established in 1968 is a sports program that cares for persons with mental disability and it is an international movement that concentrates on enabling the special Olympics players in the society



through sports. It is the only organization authorized by the International Olympic Committee to use the 'Olympics' word worldwide.

Sports

Ghana rage after controversial goal earns Gabon AFCON draw

Mhango's double keeps Malawi in hunt for historic second-round

YAOUNDE: Ghana captain Andre Ayew dismissed Gabon as a "small team" after Jim Allevinah's late goal saw Friday's Africa Cup of Nations clash between the teams in Yaounde finish in a 1-1 draw. Ayew's fine early strike had the four-time champions on course to claim their first win in Group C only for Allevinah to blast in a superb 88th-minute equaliser that puts Gabon on the brink of the last 16 but leaves Ghana's hopes on a knife-edge.

The Black Stars were furious that Gabon scored after opting not to return the ball when Ghana put it out of play after their midfielder Daniel-Kofi Kyereh went down injured. "It was very small of them, but then that is how it is with small teams," Ayew said. "We put the ball out of play, and it is fair play in football to give the ball back. Had they done that they would not have scored. They didn't have any chances."

After a shoving match broke out on the pitch at full-time, the referee summoned a Ghanaian back out from the dressing room to brandish a red card. The player in question appeared to be Benjamin Tetteh, with television pictures showing that he punched Gabon's Aaron Boupendza during the melee. The result leaves Ghana with just one point in Group C, with Gabon on four and Morocco—who secured qualification after beating the Comoros 2-0 earlier—now certain to advance as one of the top two.

"We will swallow the pill and try to win the next game, and hopefully four points will be enough to go through," said Ayew. It was a fine result for Gabon who were again without star striker Pierre-Emerick

Aubameyang and midfielder Mario Lemina. The duo missed the team's opening win over the Comoros after testing positive for Covid-19 and sat out this match after some residue from their infection was detected in their negative test on the eve of the game.

Malawi beat Zimbabwe

Frank Mhango scored twice as Malawi came from behind to defeat Zimbabwe 2-1 on Friday in the Africa Cup of Nations and keep alive their hopes of reaching the second round for the first time. The forward from South African club Orlando Pirates netted in each half after Ishmael Wadi had put Zimbabwe ahead in a lively Group B match in Bafoussam. Mhango recently returned to action after a lengthy injury layoff and became only the third player after Cameroonians Vincent Aboubakar (twice) and Karl Toko Ekambi to bag a brace so far in this Cup of Nations. Guinea and Senegal share the Group B lead with four points each

after two rounds of matches, Malawi have three and Zimbabwe are pointless. Group winners and runners-up qualify automatically for the round of 16, along with the best four third-placed teams.

On Tuesday, Malawi face 2019 runners-up Senegal in Bafoussam while Guinea meet Zimbabwe in the Cameroonian capital, Yaounde. "Congratulations to my boys, who deserved to win because they worked so hard," said Malawi coach Meck Mwase as the country celebrated only their second Cup of Nations win after beating Algeria 12 years ago. Zimbabwe coach Norman Mapeza admit-



YAOUNDE: Gabon's midfielder Andre Biyogo Poko (left) fights for the ball with Ghana's midfielder Daniel-Kofi Kyereh (center) during the Group C Africa Cup of Nations (CAN) 2021 football match between Gabon and Ghana on January 14, 2022. — AFP

ted their chances of making the last 16 were slim, saying "our only hope is to qualify as a third-placed team and to do so we must beat a good Guinean team convincingly".

Burst into life

After the presence of Liverpool duo Sadio Mane and Naby Keita in the first half of a double-header—a 0-0 draw between Senegal and Guinea—there were no instantly recognizable Malawi or Zimbabwe stars. Malawi began with five local players, five based in South Africa and one in Mozambique while Zimbabwe had in forward Tino Kadewere from

French club Lyon the only starter from a top-five European league.

After a slow start at the 20,000-capacity Stade Omnisport in the western Cameroon highlands, the game burst into life as half-time approached. Zimbabwe went ahead on 38 minutes when an Onismor Bhasera cross allowed Wadi to score with a perfectly placed looping header that just eluded the outstretched hand of goalkeeper Ernest Kakhobwe. The advantage lasted just five minutes, however, before another cross from the left flank, this time by Francisco Madinga, produced a goal with Mhango poking the ball into the net from close range. — AFP

Haaland's double sees Dortmund rout Freiburg to trim Bayern's lead

BERLIN: Erling Haaland netted twice Friday as second-placed Borussia Dortmund trimmed Bayern Munich's lead at the top of the Bundesliga to three points with a 5-1 romp at home to Freiburg. Bayern were away to Cologne yesterday and Dortmund took the chance to make up ground in the table as the Bavarians remain on course for a tenth straight German league title. "Last year there was still talk about the Bundesliga becoming boring - and rightly so, because we weren't on the same level (as Bayern). Now we're within three points," said Dortmund coach Marco Rose.

"We always say that we'd like to bring

the (league) trophy to Dortmund, but Bayern are having an excellent season and giving very little away. "It's about us focusing on ourselves." However, with a release clause in his contract now active, speculation is rife that Haaland will leave Dortmund at the end of this season with Manchester City and Real Madrid reportedly among the top clubs eager to sign him. Haaland, 21, showed why he is rated one of the world's best young strikers with clinical finishing for his goals either side of half-time.

Thomas Meunier scored with two headers before Haaland scored just before the break as Dortmund charged into a 3-0 half-time lead at Signal Iduna Park. Ermedin

Demirovic pulled a goal back for Freiburg, but Haaland, who had failed to score in his two previous games, made sure of the three points by firing in his second goal with 16 minutes left. Having played a supporting role in both of Haaland's goals, Dortmund midfielder Mahmoud Dahoud was rewarded with one of his own late on.

With the visitors' defence focused on marking Haaland at corners, Meunier took advantage by twice outfoxing his marker to head the ball into the net. Dortmund needed late goals by Jude Bellingham and Dahoud to win at Eintracht Frankfurt last Saturday and the pair combined to create the third goal for Haaland just before half time. Dahoud poked the ball away from Freiburg's Nicolas Hofler and Bellingham charged clear, slipping the ball to Haaland who flicked his shot past Freiburg goalkeeper Benjamin Uphoff. — AFP

did secure several stage wins.

'My head can explode'

Sunderland, who in 2017 became the first British champion in either car or bike category, finished 3min 27sec ahead of Chile's Pablo Quintanilla and Austrian Matthias Walkner to take the chequered flag in Jeddah. Sunderland, 32, dominated the first week but had to battle for the overall lead over the final days and surrendered it several times before finally coming out on top. He said it had not been all plain sailing on the final stage which he entered with a healthy lead. "I honestly can't be happier," said Sunderland. "This last stage was so difficult and so much stress... A lot of navigation, a lot of tricky notes, a few times a bit confusing and not sure I was going the right way. "Phew. Honestly, my head can explode. The last ten minutes, I was not sure whether I'd won, now they've told me and, wow, dream come true. — AFP

Al-Attiyah claims 4th crown, Sunderland wins bike title

JEDDAH: Qatari driver Nasser Al-Attiyah won the Dakar Rally for a fourth time after the gruelling two-week trek through the Saudi Arabian desert came to a climax on Friday. Al-Attiyah, already champion in 2011, 2015 and 2019, took the overall honors by almost half an hour from France's nine-time world rally champion Sebastien Loeb. British motorbike rider Sam Sunderland claimed his second Dakar Rally crown earlier in the day.

The final stage was marred by tragedy as 20-year-old French mechanic Quentin

Lavallee was killed in a car accident. Al-Attiyah—also a bronze medalist in skeet shooting at the 2012 London Olympics—led from start to finish to secure his first win in Saudi Arabia after two runners-up spots. "It was an incredible Dakar for us," said the 51-year-old Toyota driver. "We hadn't won since 2019. There were three solid teams capable of winning. Matthieu (Baumel his French co-driver) and I, the team, we all did a good job to win."

"We had finished second every time since we came to Saudi Arabia two years ago, now we're really happy to achieve our goal. "The whole race went without a hitch." The final stage of the car race was won by South Africa's Henk Lategan with the overall Dakar recordholder Stephane Peterhansel second in his electric hybrid Audi. The German manufacturer had said prior to the race they had no aspirations of winning the overall title in what was its first entry with a hybrid model but they



KUWAIT: Chairman of Warba Disabled Sports Club Jamal Al-Mishal received a delegation from the USA military in Kuwait - reflecting the friendship and partnership that is lasting forever between the people of Kuwait and US. The guests toured the club and joined the players in some games. The delegation exchanged gifts and mementos, and they plan to organize joint sports activities with the club in March.

Classifieds

Hospitals & Clinics

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

Clinics

CHANGE OF NAME

I Jafar Ali Syeed S/o Syeed Abdulla holder of Indian passport No.U0197067 issued at Kuwait on 06/10/2020 & civil ID No. 278091202586 has changed my name from Jafar Ali Syeed to Shaik Mohammed Rafi in all my dealings and documents, I will be known by name of Mohammed Rafi (given name) and Shaik (surname) (C 1404) 16-1-2022

I Shaik Shahida Banu W/o

Shaik Reddy Gafoor (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 Shahidun W/o Shaik Reddy 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) 12-1-2022

Automated enquiry about the Civil ID card is **1889988**

Read Kuwait Times now on your phone **FREE**

Send Subscribe to **+965 944 88888**

Enjoy the first daily paper in Kuwait on your phone

P.O. Box 1301 Safat, 13014 Kuwait
Tel: 24833199 - 24833356 - 24835616 / 7 Fax: 24835620 - 24835621
E: info@kuwaittimes.net

Manchester City thump Chelsea

De Bruyne strike stretches Man City's Premier League lead



MANCHESTER: Manchester City's English midfielder Jack Grealish (right) falls to the ground after a challenge by Chelsea's Spanish defender Cesar Azpilicueta during the English Premier League football match between Manchester City and Chelsea yesterday. — AFP

MANCHESTER: Manchester City took another huge step towards retaining the Premier League title as one moment of inspiration from Kevin De Bruyne saw off Chelsea 1-0 to open up a 13-point lead at the top of the table. A game of few chances was brought to life by the Belgian 20 minutes from time as he curled home the only goal from outside the box to seal a 12th consecutive league win for the champions.

Chelsea got the better of Pep Guardiola's men in last season's Champions League final, but securing their place in Europe's top club competition next season now looks like the height of their ambitions for the rest of the Premier League season. The Blues remain second but have won just one of their last six league games. Four of the five meetings between the

sides since Thomas Tuchel took charge of Chelsea have been won by a single goal and another cagey encounter ensued.

City dominated possession but struggled to open up a makeshift Chelsea defense featuring second-choice goalkeeper Kepa Arrizabalaga and Malang Sarr on just his second Premier League appearance. Indeed City's one clear chance before the break came from a Chelsea mistake. Mateo Kovacic's pass deflected off De Bruyne into the path of Jack Grealish, but the most expensive English player of all-time missed the chance to mark his biggest moment yet as a City player as his shot was turned behind by Arrizabalaga.

Chelsea's own record signing Romelu Lukaku

has had a similar underwhelming impact to Grealish. The Belgian started for the fourth consecutive game since being dropped for a crucial clash against Liverpool earlier in the month for voicing his unhappiness at Stamford Bridge to Italian media. Lukaku also had a huge chance to silence his critics early in the second half when he was picked out by Kovacic, but Ederson raced from his goal and made a fine save to low to his right.

Chelsea's title challenge has faltered since losing the threat of wing-backs Ben Chilwell and Reece James to long-term injuries. Chilwell's understudy Marcos Alonso was given a torrid time by Raheem Sterling, but the England international lacked the finishing touch as he pulled a shot just wide after jinking

past the Spaniard. A top-of-the-table clash lacked the accompanying atmosphere for most of the match at a subdued Etihad.

However, the crowd were brought to their feet by the game's outstanding moment as De Bruyne delivered what could be the knock out blow in the title race. He held off the challenge of N'Golo Kante to spin onto Joao Cancelo's pass before picking out the bottom left-hand corner of Arrizabalaga's net. Chelsea were unable to offer any response as they chased City shadows and could have lost by a more comprehensive scoreline. Phil Foden shot over from Sterling's cut-back, but one goal was all they needed to tighten their grip on a fourth league title in five years. — AFP

India's Kohli quits as Test captain

NEW DELHI: India's Virat Kohli quit as Test captain yesterday, bringing to an end a controversy-laden seven-year stint in one of the highest-profile, highest-pressure positions in sport. "Everything has to come to a halt at some stage and for me as Test captain of India, it's now," he posted on Twitter, a day after his side lost a three-match series to South Africa. The 33-year-old Kohli, who stepped down as Twenty20 skipper after a debacle at the World Cup and then lost the one-day job, took over the India leadership across formats from MS Dhoni in 2017.

"There have been many ups and also some downs along the journey, but never has there been a lack of effort or lack of belief," Kohli said. "I have always believed in giving my 120 percent in everything I do, and if I can't do that, I know it's not the right thing to do. I have absolute clarity in my heart and I cannot be dishonest to my team," he added. India lost the final match in Cape Town by seven wickets on Friday to go down 2-1, with Kohli blaming the team's poor batting for the defeat.

Batting star Kohli took over the Test captaincy in 2014, when India were ranked a lowly seventh in the five-day format, and he took them to number one, a position they held for nearly three years. But in a nation of more than 1.3 billion people and obsessed by cricket, the actions of the national captain are probably scrutinized more closely than anyone's except the prime minister. And critics always pointed to



India's Virat Kohli

his failure to land a World Cup triumph in either T20 or ODI cricket.

Never afraid of speaking his mind, Kohli recently courted controversy when he said he was informed of his ODI sacking 90 minutes before the team announcement for the South Africa series and was never encouraged to stay on as T20 skipper, as claimed by the Board of Control for Cricket in India president Sourav Ganguly. "I've done the job with absolute honesty and left nothing out there," Kohli said in his statement. Tributes poured in for the batting star.

"Many Congratulations #ViratKohli on an outstanding career as India's Test Captain," former opener Virender Sehwag tweeted. "Stats don't lie & he was not only the most successful Indian Test Captain but one of the most successful in the world. Can be very proud @imVkohli & looking forward to watch u dominate with the bat." — AFP

Warriors bust out of slump as Mavs roll over Grizzlies

LOS ANGELES: Golden State busted out of a slump with their most lopsided victory of the NBA season on Friday, the Warriors continuing their mastery over Chicago by clobbering the Bulls 138-96 at the United Center. Andrew Wiggins finished with a team-high 21 points and Stephen Curry delivered 19 as the Warriors rebounded from a 118-99 loss to the defending champion Milwaukee Bucks on Thursday. The loss to the Bucks was the Warriors' fourth in their last five games. "If you're a good team, good things usually happen and you can usually bounce back," Curry said. "I just like the way we responded."

Rookie Jonathan Kuminga finished with 25 points and Jordan Poole scored 22 for the Warriors, who pulled away early to win their 10th consecutive game over the Bulls, including five straight in Chicago. "We came out pretty determined," Warriors coach Steve Kerr said. "Obviously, they were behind the eight-ball almost immediately when Zach (LaVine) got injured." The Bulls' problems mounted Friday after being blown out by the Brooklyn Nets two nights earlier.

Already down a starting forward with Derrick Jones sidelined with a hyper-extended right knee, Chicago lost All-Star LaVine early in the game after he injured his right knee. LaVine pulled himself from the game by committing an intentional



CHICAGO: Andrew Wiggins #22 of the Golden State Warriors is defended by DeMar DeRozan #11 and Alfonzo McKinnie #28 of the Chicago Bulls on January 14, 2022. — AFP

foul. He appeared to injure the knee moments earlier while going for a rebound. Nikola Vucevic had 19 points and 14 rebounds, Coby White added 20 points, and DeMar DeRozan scored 17 for the Bulls, who were booed off the court Friday trailing 78-47 at the half. They suffered their worst loss of the season.

The Warriors played without Klay Thompson, who was resting. Thompson is returning from a serious injury so coach Steve Kerr doesn't want to use him in back-to-back games. Thompson has played in three games after returning from a 2 1/2-year absence with a torn ACL and an injury to his Achilles tendon. In Memphis, Luka Doncic recorded his fourth triple double of the season as the Dallas Mavericks stopped the Memphis

Grizzlies franchise-record win streak at 11 games with a 112-85 victory. Doncic posted 27 points, 12 rebounds and 10 assists for his 40th career triple-double.

Tim Hardaway Jr. scored 16 points, Jalen Brunson contributed 15 points, nine assists for Dallas, who won for the seventh time in its past eight games. The Mavericks outscored Memphis 62-30 in the second half. Ja Morant poured in 19 points and dished out eight assists as Memphis lost for the first time since falling 113-104 to the Golden State Warriors on December 23. Elsewhere, Joel Embiid carried the load offensively for Philadelphia, scoring 25 points and grabbing 13 rebounds as the 76ers beat the Boston Celtics 111-99 for their eighth win in nine games. — AFP