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Kuwait records new high of 6,454 daily COVID-19 cases

Omicron risk remains very high: WHO • Two-thirds of England cases reinfections



KUWAIT: The health ministry said yesterday 6,454 more people tested positive for COVID-19 over the past 24 hours - an all-time daily high - taking the country's total caseload to 514,826 cases. Some 5,198 more people recovered from the virus, taking total recoveries to 464,853, the ministry's spokesman Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad said, adding the recovery to positive case ratio stands at 90.3 percent.

One fatality linked to the coronavirus raised the country's death toll from the pandemic to 2,489, while 408 people are hospitalized with the virus, 73 of whom are in intensive care units, Dr Sanad told KUNA. Some 31,583 swab tests were conducted over the past day, taking total tests to 6,750,065.

Meanwhile, nearly two-thirds of people in England who tested positive for COVID-19 in January previously had the virus or suspected they had it, a large long-running infection survey revealed yesterday. The finding, in the latest report on coronavirus transmission by Imperial College London, is seen as further evidence of the Omicron variant's ability to dodge the immune systems of those previously infected with the virus.

As part of its regular assessment, Imperial received around 100,000 valid

swab tests self-administered by a random sample of people across England between Jan 5 and 20. Approximately 4,000 showed a positive result, and nearly 3,600 of those individuals specified whether or not they had had COVID before. Around 65 percent of those respondents had previously tested positive, while a further 7.5 percent said they suspected they had caught the virus previously but had not received a confirmatory test.

"Past infection was associated with high risk of reinfection with Omicron," the study's authors noted in its abstract. However Paul Elliott, who directs the Imperial study, noted not all these cases could be confirmed as reinfections because some could be residual illness, meaning a person had tested positive twice for the same infection. But the numbers reporting reinfections in the study are markedly higher than those published by the UK Health Security Agency, a public health protection body.

Its latest figures show 11 percent of all English cases were reinfections. The UKHSA said yesterday it would begin including reinfections data on the government's rolling coronavirus data dashboard from the end of the month. A reinfection is defined as a person testing positive twice at

least 90 days apart. The Imperial survey also confirmed Omicron, which has swept the UK since late November, is now responsible for nearly all new infections in England.

Positive cases among its randomly selected sample were three times higher in the January sampling period than the previous month, it found. "We observed unprecedented levels of infection with SARS-CoV-2 in England in January 2022 and almost complete replacement of Delta by Omicron," the report said. However, the study detected that the prevalence of the virus among adults was starting to decline.

England today will lift the last of various virus curbs reimposed last month as Omicron surged nationwide, including the requirement to wear masks in most settings. A so-called COVID pass system for nightclubs will also be scrapped, as the country returns to its lowest level of restrictions of any stage of the pandemic.

The risk level related to the Omicron variant remains very high, the WHO said late Tuesday, with the numbers of new COVID-19 cases hitting another record high last week. "Over 21 million new cases were reported, representing the highest number of weekly cases recorded since the

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News in brief

Elephant kills Saudi tourist

KAMPALA: A Saudi tourist was trampled to death by an elephant during a game drive at a popular park in Uganda. The attack happened on Tuesday at the Murchison Falls National Park when the man left the vehicle he was travelling in with friends. The victim was identified as Ayman Sayed Al-Shahany. — AFP

Saudi launches esports group

RIYADH: Saudi Arabia has launched a group to develop its video gaming industry. Saudi-backed Savvy Gaming aims to be a "pioneer in the development of the gaming and esports industry locally and internationally", and has acquired esports companies ESL Gaming and FACEIT. — AFP

Djokovic to play in Dubai

DUBAI: Unvaccinated world number one Novak Djokovic has signed up to play at next month's ATP Dubai tennis tournament after his deportation from Australia prevented a tilt at a record 21st Grand Slam. A leaked entry list showed Djokovic named as the top seed for the Feb 21-26 event. — AFP

Lebanon signs power deal

BEIJING: Power-starved Lebanon signed an agreement yesterday to import electricity from Jordan via Syria. The agreement signed by Energy Minister Walid Fayad with his Jordanian and Syrian counterparts is expected to give Lebanon two extra hours of mains electricity a day. — AFP

Iran arrests 17 over pranks

TEHRAN: Iranian police have arrested 17 university graduates on suspicion of filming candid camera horror pranks that boosted their social media followings but "sowed panic" in streets. — AFP

Defense minister survives no-confidence motion

Permission, hijab must for women to join army

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: Defense Minister Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah yesterday survived a no-confidence motion by 23 votes against 18, thanks mainly to 10 MPs who left the opposition ranks to vote in favor of the minister. The minister thanked lawmakers for renewing their trust in him and vowed he will continue to fight corruption.

The no-confidence motion was filed last week by opposition 10 MPs following a grilling by MP Hamdan Al-Azemi over accepting women in the army and over suspected corruption. The motion needed 24 votes to pass and automatically dismiss the minister, a senior member of the ruling Al-Sabah family.

Ten opposition MPs who were among the opposition bloc of 31 lawmakers voted in favor of the minister. Most of them said the charges against the minister did not qualify to vote him out of office. During a brief debate yesterday, two MPs spoke in favor of the minister and two spoke against him.

MP Abdullah Al-Turaiji described the minister as a reformist and charged that "public funds thieves normally target ministers who are members of the ruling family". He said the minister had asked for a fatwa on women joining the military service and referred remarks made by the Audit Bureau on the Eurofighters deal to the Anti-Corruption Authority.

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KUWAIT: Defense Minister Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah reacts during a session at the National Assembly yesterday. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

Societies seek govt intervention, reform to save education

By Nawara Fattahova

KUWAIT: Twenty societies in Kuwait have released a joint statement in which they warn of the deteriorating level of education in the country. They quote an education ministry study carried out recently involving more

than 250 schools that yielded "disappointing results", which they warn could lead to a "national crisis" unless the government intervenes promptly to address the problem.

Nadya Al-Sharrah, founding member of the Solidarity Group for Education Reform, one of the main signatories of the statement and an economist, said education should be a priority. "Education in Kuwait is in danger. Through this statement we are sounding the alarm, so those in charge will join the efforts of both the executive and legislative powers. We need to have an active educational committee in the parliament as well," she told Kuwait Times.

The statement was motivated by the disappointing

results of a pilot study conducted in December that included 267 public and private schools. "This study showed the level of education has deteriorated in basic subjects including languages, mathematics and sciences," Sharrah said. The signatories of the statement also have reservations and objections against the evaluation by the ministry. "The evaluation included in the study should have been done by a neutral institution and not the ministry of education. In fact, the tests were conducted by the research and curriculum department of the ministry of education," said Sharrah.

"The ministry assumed the responsibility of the National Center for Education Development and did

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Local

KRCS, ICRC sign agreement to support Rohingya refugees

Relief aid to benefit thousands of refugees in Bangladesh



KUWAIT: Officials attend the signing ceremony of an agreement between Kuwait Red Crescent Society and the International Committee of the Red Cross. — KUNA photos



KRCS Chairman Dr Hilal Al-Sayer (right) and head of the Kuwait-based regional delegation of ICRC for the GCC countries Omar Odah sign the agreement.

KUWAIT: Kuwait Red Crescent Society (KRCS) signed yesterday a cooperation agreement with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to support and implement a relief medical program for the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. In a statement to the press after signing the agreement, Chairman of KRCS's Board of Directors Dr Hilal Al-Sayer stressed the importance of this step which meets the urgent needs of Rohingya refugees in

Bangladesh during this hard time. This agreement comes within the humanitarian projects of KRCS as it is a continuation of the Kuwaiti humanitarian development mission, added Dr Sayer, which aims to provide relief and health care to the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. Moreover, the agreement with ICRC supports the health, water and sanitation sectors, noted Dr Sayer, indicating that it provides a broader scope for humanitarian and relief work to

ease the burden of refugees.

Meanwhile, head of the Kuwait-based regional delegation of ICRC for the GCC countries Omar Odah said that the signed agreement is evidence of efforts made by the International Committee of the Red Cross, the Kuwait Red Crescent Society and the Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic Development to support humanitarian work in the world. Through these joint efforts, thousands of people will receive

vital humanitarian assistance, added Odah, including health care, clean water and daily necessities to improve their living conditions in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. Odah stated that the agreement also reflects the common aspirations of both the ICRC and the State of Kuwait to enhance humanitarian work around the world, expressing gratitude to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for its pivotal role in achieving this strategic partnership. — KUNA

Indian Embassy celebrates 73rd Republic Day of India

By Sajeev K Peter

KUWAIT: Embassy of India in Kuwait celebrated the 73rd Republic Day of India yesterday. Keeping in view the prevailing circumstances on account of the pandemic, the celebrations were held in consonance with the COVID-19 health and safety guidelines issued by the government.

The official program was held from 9 am at the Embassy of India premises. Ambassador Sibi George paid floral tributes at the statue of Mahatma Gandhi followed by unfurling of the national tricolor and singing of the Indian national anthem and patriotic songs.

On the occasion, President of India's address to the nation was read out by the ambassador who also addressed the participants, including the ones who joined the event on the virtual platform. The ambassador said that this

year's Republic Day is of special significance as it comes during the 75th anniversary of India's independence which is celebrated as 'Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav'. He said that for every Indian it is an occasion to remember and pay home to the freedom fighters who sacrificed their lives to win India's freedom. He recalled that the constitution of India is not just a basic law of the land, but it also serves as a scripture for social and economic transformation of India. "And today after seven decades, India not only continues to be a thriving democratic country but also the fastest growing major economy in the world," he said.

The ambassador highlighted the efforts of the embassy to work with the community in promoting India-Kuwait relations and addressing the issues of concern to the community. He thanked the community associations and groups



KUWAIT: Indian Ambassador Sibi George delivers Republic Day speech.

in Kuwait for joining hands with the embassy in supporting the community to face the challenges posed by the pandemic. Highlighting that the fight against COVID-19 pandemic is far from over, the ambassador urged the community to work together with the embassy to ensure the welfare of the Indians in Kuwait and to help them face the challenges of the new variant. The

ambassador also thanked all Indian associations and groups in Kuwait for participating in various events organized by the embassy to celebrate the 60th anniversary of establishment of diplomatic relations between India and Kuwait and also the 75th anniversary of India's independence. The whole event was live streamed on mission's social media handles.



India's national flag is unfurled on the occasion.

Kuwait records new high of...

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beginning of the pandemic," the World Health Organization said in its weekly epidemiological coronavirus update.

The UN health agency said the number of new infections increased by five percent in the week to Sunday - compared to the 20 percent rise registered the week before. "A slower increase in case incidence was observed at the global level," the WHO said. Nearly 50,000 new deaths were also reported, it added - a similar figure to the week before.

Defense minister survives...

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After the fatwa was issued by the Ministry of

The report said Omicron continued to increase its dominance globally over the other variants of concern. "The current global epidemiology of SARS-CoV-2 is characterized by the dominance of the Omicron variant on a global scale, continued decline in the prevalence of the Delta variant, and very low-level circulation of Alpha, Beta and Gamma variants," the WHO said.

"Countries that experienced a rapid rise in Omicron cases in November and December 2021 have been or are beginning to see declines in cases. However, "based on the currently available evidence, the overall risk related to the Omicron variant remains very high". The WHO said that of samples collected in the last 30 days that have been sequenced and uploaded to the GISAID global science initiative, Omicron accounted for 89.1 percent. Delta - previously the world's dominant variant - now makes up 10.7 percent. — Agencies

Awqaf and Islamic Affairs' fatwa authority, Sheikh Hamad set six conditions women have to meet in order to join the Kuwaiti army. Women must obtain their legal guardian's or husband's permission, must wear the hijab, work only in medical and support positions, avoid military and field training, must not carry weapons and enroll only when necessary to fill required vacancies.

Sharrah warned serious attention should be paid to education. "People should know that well-educated individuals are those who save the country in times of danger. This should be our number one priority. Officials should realize that students are in danger, and they should think how we will work in the next 10 years," she said.

The reasons behind the deterioration of education in Kuwait, according to Sharrah, are mostly administrative. "The government is the base of everything. Ministers are not chosen according to their qualification, but rather by favoritism. Also, the budget for education should be restructured. At present, 70 percent of spending is on administrative expenses and only 30 percent is spent on the education process. The new minister should change this ratio at least a little," she urged.

"The Solidarity Group for Education Reform and other societies that signed the statement will hold further meetings to draw up a roadmap, which we will most probably submit to HH the Crown Prince. It will take some time to put the suggestions together and prepare a study on the procedures that we will follow," concluded Sharrah.

Riyadh, Bangkok restore ties after decades

RIYADH: Saudi Arabia and Thailand have announced the resumption of diplomatic ties, after more than three decades of frozen relations linked to the theft of jewels from a Saudi palace. Thai-born janitor Kriangkrai Techamong stole \$20 million worth of precious gems in 1989 from the home of a Saudi prince, triggering a spate of murders in Bangkok and a feud between the countries dubbed the "Blue Diamond Affair".

The two countries announced in a joint statement late on Tuesday "the full re-establishment of diplomatic relations" during a visit by Thailand's Prime Minister Prayut Chan-O-Cha to Riyadh. "This historic step is the result of long-standing efforts at different levels to re-establish mutual confidence and friendly relations," the joint statement added, following a meeting between the Thai premier and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

The two countries agreed to appoint ambassadors in the near future. Saudi Airlines meanwhile announced that flights to Thailand would resume in May. The Thai

government said the Saudis had flagged that they were seeking eight million skilled workers, including in hotels, healthcare and construction projects. Thailand indicated it had a ready supply of skilled workers to help fill the need, Rachada Dhanadirek, a Thai deputy government spokeswoman, said in a statement.

Thailand had repeatedly sought to restore ties, in part to benefit its crucial tourism industry. Saudi Arabia had long accused Thai police of bungling their investigation into the jewel theft, with allegations that the stolen gems were snapped up by senior officers. Thai police later returned some of the jewels but Saudi officials claimed most were fakes, while the whereabouts of the most precious gem - a rare 50-carat blue diamond - remains unknown.

Riyadh sent a businessman to investigate in 1990 but he disappeared in Bangkok days after three Saudi diplomats were shot dead in the city. In 2014, due to a lack of evidence, a case was dropped against five men, including a senior Thai policeman, accused of involvement in the Saudi businessman's murder. Thai government spokesman Thanakorn Wangboonkongchana said Prayut had expressed regret over the 1989 and 1990 incidents and promised to reopen investigations if any new evidence came to light. Kriangkrai served five years in jail over the jewel theft and sold most of the gems before his arrest. He became a monk in 2016. — AFP

Societies seek govt intervention, reform...

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the evaluation tests. In other GCC countries, for instance, educational councils report to the council of ministers or higher authorities in the country, while here they are under the education minister, which is wrong, as this body has to evaluate the minister's performance and can take sanctions against him," she explained.

According to Sharrah, the Supreme Council for Education in Kuwait is not active. "They usually meet only once a year and make no relevant decisions. It performs the duties of educational district administrations or schools - holding award ceremonies, for example. The supreme council should be an institution for consultation and control that evaluates the performance of the ministry of education," she pointed out.



DIRIYAH, Saudi Arabia: Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman meets Thailand's Prime Minister Prayut Chan-O-Cha on the outskirts of the capital Riyadh on Tuesday. — AFP

Local

Defense Minister says parliament's confidence increases responsibility

Amir sends congratulations; minister vows to fight corruption



KUWAIT: A general view of the parliament in session yesterday. —Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat



Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah receives congratulations after winning the parliament's confidence.



His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah congratulates Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah.



National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem gestures during the session.



Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah speaks during the session.



MP Hamdan Al-Azmi addresses the session.

KUWAIT: The Kuwaiti National Assembly yesterday renewed confidence in the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah and the latter pledged to pursue efforts to eradicate administrative corruption. Voting by acclamation in parliament on a no-confidence vote, filed by MPs against the defense minister, showed that 23 MPs rejected the motion while 18 others supported it — out of the total present legislators, 41.

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah was quick in addressing a cable of congratulations to Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali for surviving the no-confidence vote in parliament. His Highness the Amir, in the cable, lauded the minister for his convincing replies to MPs' queries during the parliamentary grilling session, also praising the high-level democratic practice on part of the MPs during the session, held on January 18. A cable was also addressed to the minister by His Highness the Deputy Amir and Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, congratulating him on winning the legislators' confidence.

Increased responsibility

After surviving the no-confidence vote, the minister expressed confidence in the National Assembly. In a speech he delivered during the special parliamentary, he expressed pride of renewing confidence in him by representatives of the nation and the support presented during the interpellation session. "This confidence increased my sense of trust and responsibility entrusted to me by His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, His Highness the Deputy Amir and Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah," he said.

The minister added that it also boosted his insistence and determination to move forward to conduct administrative reform and fight corruption. He valued the stances of all members of the parliament, for or

against him, within the framework and limits of constitutional practice which he finds appropriate, affirming his permanent position with every effort or direction to "fix any defect." He expressed readiness for all possible forms of cooperation with the Assembly on all issues permitted by the constitution.

Further in this regard, the minister expressed thanks to National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem, members of parliament and the Kuwaiti people for their trust and confidence in him. He also extended his thanks and appreciation to His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah and all ministers for their support, assistance and cooperation. "I would like to confirm to everyone that interrogation and grilling have neither winner nor loser. We are all keen to uphold the constitution to achieve the interests of the people and the country," he noted. "We take into consideration the observations, ideas and proposals made by parliament members that are in the interest of the country and citizens and in line with the directives of the wise leadership," he explained.

MPs' arguments

Members of the Kuwaiti National Assembly addressed yesterday's session dedicated for grilling the Minister of Defense. MP Shuaib Al-Muwaizri charged that "there has been explicit corruption" in the ministry of defense, also sharply criticizing the minister's performance, such as his "purported negligence of replying" to queries by the State Audit Bureau. Moreover, the MP charged that there had been "suspicious com-

missions" in the transaction to purchase Caracal aircraft.

His peer, Abdullah Al-Turaiji, also spoke, expressing opposition to the no-confidence vote noting that the minister had issued a decision regarding women military recruitment in line with the Islamic sharia. Minister Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali, Turaiji added, had also referred two officers, relatives of him, to the public prosecution and the topic of the Eurofighters deal to the Anti-Corruption Authority (Nazaha).

Members of the parliament began earlier yesterday debating the no-confidence motion against the minister. Addressing the session, Ghanem affirmed that during the session held on January 18, following an interpellation of the minister, 10 MPs had submitted a no-

confidence vote against him. Ghanem also affirmed that he would allow MPs, namely two of those who had filed the motion, to address the session.

According to the parliament's bylaw, the speaker, before voting on the motion, will primarily allow MPs, namely those who had submitted the motion, to address the session. Moreover, in line with Kuwait Constitution,

a minister is responsible in front of the parliament and if the legislators vote to strip them of confidence, they will have to resign immediately. The concerned minister, according to the constitution and the assembly's bylaw, is compelled to step down if majority of the MPs vote for stripping them of the confidence. Ministers cannot participate in the voting in such case. The parliament, at a session on January 18, examined an interpellation motion presented by MP Hamdan Al-Azmi against the

We are all keen to uphold the constitution



MP Shuaib Al-Muwaizri makes his address.



MP Abdullah Al-Turaiji speaks against the no-confidence vote.

minister of defense. Also during this session, ten MPs requested no-confidence vote against him. Minister Sheikh Hamad Jaber Al-Ali was grilled over alleged irregularities in his department and the issue of women recruitment in the military.

Local

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Photo of the Day



KUWAIT: Birds are seen at the Abu Al-Hasaniya beach southeast of Kuwait City. —Photo by Fouad Al-Shaikh

News in brief

Lebanese President welcomes Kuwait's initiative

BEIRUT: Lebanese President Michel Aoun on Wednesday welcomed a recent Kuwaiti initiative for rebuilding confidence between Lebanon and Arab countries, particularly Gulf ones. Aoun made the remark during a meeting with United Nations Special Coordinator in Lebanon, Ambassador Joanna Wronecka, saying that Kuwait has always stood side by side with Lebanon. The Lebanese reply to the Kuwaiti initiative is to be conveyed by Lebanese Foreign Minister Abdullah Bou Habib to an Arab ministerial meeting due in Kuwait later this week, it said.

Kuwaitis nominated for top Arab book award

KUWAIT: Kuwait's Khaled Nasrallah and Mona Al-Shammari are among 16 nominated authors for the International Prize for Arabic Fiction 2022 for their novels 'The White Line of Night' and 'The Maids of the Shrine' respectively. Each shortlisted nominee will receive \$10,000, and the winner will receive an additional \$50,000. All the novels selected for the 2022 longlist were published in Arabic between July 1, 2020 and June 30, 2021.

Kuwait oil drops \$1.77 to \$87.87 pb

KUWAIT: Kuwait oil price dropped \$1.77 per barrel (pb) during Tuesday's trading session to reach \$87.87 pb compared with \$89.64 pb the day before, Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) said yesterday. Benchmark Brent gained \$1.93 to reach \$88.20 pb and West Texas Intermediate surged \$2.29 to \$85.60 pb. The OPEC daily basket price went down by 63 cents to \$87.35 a barrel Tuesday, compared with \$87.98 the previous day, the cartel said yesterday. The annual average of the OPEC's basket price amounted to \$69.89 pb last year, the organization said in its bulletin.

The Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and its allies, known as OPEC+, decided early January to proceed with a production hike of 400,000 barrels per day (bpd), keeping their current policy of slight monthly increases in output. OPEC said that the monthly increase of 400,000 bpd would begin in February as previously agreed on, describing it as a measure aiming to keep the global oil market stable. The conferees had also underlined the paramount significance of utter compliance and compensation mechanism for the alliance's member states.

The OPEC+ alliance also agreed to follow up on the developments of the epidemiological situation, monitor its repercussions on the market, and make immediate adjustments if necessary. The oil-producing countries of OPEC+ are expected to continue changing the production until amending the current level of 5.8 million bpd. They will re-examine



market conditions and performance of the stakeholders at the 25th ministerial meeting, due to be held virtually on February 2, 2022. —KUNA

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Domestic helper jumps to death from Ardiya house blaze

KUWAIT: A domestic helper died while three children and their mother suffered smoke inhalation during a fire in an Ardiya house at dawn yesterday, Kuwait Fire Force said. A call was received about the fire that had trapped a Kuwaiti woman, her three children and the domestic helper. Ardiya and Jleeb firemen responded and found the fire was on the ground floor. The helper jumped from the second floor, suffering critical injuries and died on arrival at the hospital. The trapped family was freed and handed to paramedics as the fire was put out. A fire officer suffered hand burns. Investigation are being carried out to determine the cause of the fire.



Scores arrested in bogus domestic help offices raid



KUWAIT: The interior ministry said yesterday residency detectives busted two bogus domestic help offices and arrested nine people in violation of residency and labor laws. They also responded to a complaint of harboring an absconder and arrested seven violators in the process. Also, information was received about 14 people in violation of residency and labor laws (12 women and two men) involved in making spurious liquor. Two wanted persons who were hotel guests were also arrested. Detectives carried out an inspection campaign targeting public transport in Mahboula, resulting in the arrest of 19 residency violators.





93 potential graves found at Canada school site

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Syria Kurds retake Ghwayran prison

Ending six-day Islamic State attack



HASAKEH, Syria: Displaced Syrians are pictured inside the Mosaab bin Aamir Mosque, in the Ghwayran neighbourhood in the northern city of Hasakeh yesterday. —AFP

HASAKEH, Syria: Kurdish forces yesterday retook full control of a prison in northeast Syria where Islamic State group jihadists had been holed up since attacking it six days earlier. The brazen IS jailbreak attempt and ensuing clashes left more than 180 dead in the jihadists' most high-profile military operation since the loss of their "caliphate" nearly three years ago.

Ghwayran prison in the city of Hasakeh was thought to hold around 3,500 IS inmates when the initial attack was first launched on January 20 with explosives-laden vehicles steered by suicide bombers. The Kurdish authorities have insisted no inmates escaped from the compound but the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights monitoring group has said significant numbers were sprung.

In a statement, Farhad Shami of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) said days of operations had "culminated with our entire control" over the prison after all holdout IS fighters had surrendered. With US and other foreign forces stepping in to support Kurdish elite units, the neighbourhood around the prison was secured and the besieged militants inside the prison started turning themselves in.

The SDF—the semi-autonomous Kurdish administration's de-facto army—had said earlier yesterday that

more than 1,000 IS inmates had surrendered. The Observatory confirmed that the attack was over, after nearly six full days that turned the largest city in northeast Syria into a war zone.

Mass surrender

Thousands of Hasakeh residents were forced to leave their homes after at least 100 IS fighters stormed the facility last Thursday, in their biggest show of force in years. In one mosque located at a safe distance from the chaos, hundreds of women and children were huddled together in the biting winter cold.

"We want to go back home," said Maya, a 38-year-old mother trying in vain to pacify her youngest, adding that "there is no bread, water or sugar here". Fighting in and around the prison since Thursday has killed 181 people, including 124 IS jihadists, 50 Kurdish fighters and seven civilians, according to the Observatory.

There is no bread, water or sugar here

That death toll could rise, however, as Kurdish forces and medical services gain access to all parts of the prison following the end of the attack. A tense standoff has gripped the prison in recent days, with Kurdish forces and their IS foes aware they were facing either a bloodbath or talks to end the fighting.

Kurdish forces had cut off food and water to the jail for two days to pressure holdout jihadists to give themselves up, the Observatory said. The SDF has been reluctant to refer to talks between them and IS fighters, and it remains unclear exactly what led to the end of the attack.

Observatory head Rami Abdel Rahman said a Syrian IS jihadist had negotiated with Kurdish forces to end the standoff and secure medical care for wounded jihadists. Since Monday, Kurdish forces had freed at least 32 prison staff, some of whom appeared in video footage that IS had shared on social media after launching the attack.

'International problem'

Ghwayran is the prison with the largest number of suspected IS members in Syria and many, from Kurdish officials to Western observers, have warned the jailbreak should serve as a wakeup call. Kurdish authorities say more than 50 nationalities are represented in Kurdish-run prisons holding more than 12,000 IS suspects.

The Kurdish administration has long warned it does not have the capacity to hold, let alone put on trial, all the IS fighters captured in years of operations. "This issue is an international problem," the administration's top foreign policy official, Abdulkarim Omar, told AFP on Wednesday. "We cannot face it alone."

He called on the international community to "support the autonomous administration to improve security and humanitarian conditions for inmates in detention centres and for those in overcrowded camps". The proto-state declared by IS in 2014 once straddled large parts of Iraq and Syria. After five years of military operations conducted by local and international forces, its last rump was eventually flushed out on the banks of the Euphrates in eastern Syria in March 2019. —AFP

Abbas rival delivers one million vaccine doses to Gaza

GAZA: One million doses of coronavirus vaccine arrived in Gaza from the United Arab Emirates yesterday, the latest donation facilitated by an exiled rival of Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas.

Mohammed Dahlan, a Gaza native now based in the UAE capital Abu Dhabi, was once a top Palestinian Authority official who served as Abbas's security chief in the territory before its takeover by the Islamist Hamas movement in 2007. Gaza health ministry spokesman Mahmud Hammad told journalists that the consignment of one million doses of the Russian-made Sputnik V vaccine marked the largest single shipment of COVID vaccines to the Israeli-blockaded territory.

The vaccines were delivered through Gaza's Rafah crossing with Egypt, the only one not controlled by Zionists. The same route was used for previous shipments organised by Dahlan, who has increasingly sought to position himself as a benefactor for the Palestinian people.

Dahlan had been expected to emerge as a key player from Palestinian elections scheduled for last year but the polls were postponed indefinitely by Abbas in a move that also infuriated Hamas.

The ministry's head of preventive medicine, Magdy Duhair, warned that Gaza's health system was under increased strain due to the fast-spreading Omicron variant of the coronavirus.

While Gaza's beleaguered medical system has struggled at times during the pandemic, coronavirus transmission has been limited by the tight controls Israel and Egypt enforce on travel in and out of the coastal enclave.

Gaza, which has a population of roughly 2.3 million, has recorded 196,578 COVID cases and 1,744 deaths. So far, 578,000 residents have received two doses of a vaccine. —AFP

NATO finalising written proposals for Russia

BRUSSELS: NATO is close to completing its written proposals for Moscow after Russia issued a raft of security demands, and should deliver them this week, alliance diplomats said yesterday. "Many of the Russian demands are unacceptable or unrealistic, but the response identifies a number of issues on which it is possible to work on their concerns," a Western diplomat told AFP.

"The question is whether this is what the Russians want." Moscow blindsided the West by publishing two draft treaties for the United States and NATO in December that would see Washington's influence rolled back in eastern Europe. The demands were issued as tensions soared after Moscow massed some 100,000 troops on its border with Ukraine in a move the West warns could be the prelude to a large-scale invasion.

The Kremlin wants NATO to guarantee pro-Western Kyiv will never join the military alliance and commit to pulling back forces from its eastern European flank. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg says the alliance is willing to listen to Russian "concerns". But he insists NATO will not compromise on its "core principles"—including the right of its partners to choose their own path.

He has instead laid out a list of areas that the alliance is willing to discuss with Moscow, including arms control, disarmament, transparency on military activities, and risk-reduction mechanisms. Stoltenberg told CNN Tuesday that NATO would deliver its proposals to the Kremlin this week "in parallel" with a separate response being drafted by Washington.

Russia has said it is waiting to see those written responses before deciding whether to proceed with more talks after meetings with US and NATO failed to make a breakthrough. Western allies insist they remain committed to finding a diplomatic solution to the crisis but have threatened Moscow with sweeping sanctions if it stages a fresh incursion into its neighbour.

The Kremlin says it has no intention of sending its troops across the border and has accused the US and NATO of ratcheting up the tensions.

Meanwhile, Russia hit back yesterday at US threats of direct sanctions against President Vladimir Putin, saying moves against the Russian leader would be ineffective and hurt efforts to lower tensions over Ukraine.

Officials from France, Germany, Russia and Ukraine were set for talks in Paris yesterday in

Sudanese rally against UN bid to resolve crisis

KHARTOUM: Thousands of Sudanese pro-military protesters rallied yesterday against a UN bid to resolve a political crisis in the country three months after a coup, an AFP correspondent reported. The demonstrators gathered outside the Khartoum office of the UN Transition Assistance Mission Sudan, or UNTAMS, which had launched talks with Sudanese factions this month.

They held up banners that read "Down, down UN" and others urging UN special representative Volker Perthes to "Go back home". "We don't want external intervention in our country," protester Hamed al-Bashir told AFP outside the UN office. On January 10, Perthes said the consultations aimed "to support the Sudanese to reach an agreement on a way out of the current crisis".

But he also noted that "the UN is not coming up with any project, draft or vision for a solution". Sudan has been rocked by deadly protests calling for civilian

rule since an October 25 military coup led by general Abdel Fattah al-Burhan.

The military takeover derailed a power-sharing transition between the military and civilians that had been painstakingly negotiated after the 2019 ouster of longtime autocrat Omar al-Bashir. The ruling Sovereign Council-formed by Burhan after the coup with himself as chairman—has welcomed the UN-led dialogue, as have the United States, Britain, neighbouring Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia.

The Forces for Freedom and Change, Sudan's main civilian bloc, has also said it would join consultations "to restore the democratic transition". "Our role at this stage of consultations for a political process for #Sudan is to hear Sudanese stakeholders; ensure we actively listen to their views, document their visions & suggestions," Stephanie Khoury, UNITAMS director of political affairs office, said Wednesday on Twitter.

Yesterday, an 18-year-old protester died after suffering from bullet wound to the head during protests last month, according to Central Committee of Sudan Doctors. His death brought the number of people killed in the crackdown on anti-coup demonstrations to 77, it said.

Sudan's authorities have repeatedly denied using live ammunition against demonstrators, and insist



BRUSSELS: File photo shows, US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman addresses a press conference following a meeting of the NATO-Russia Council at the NATO headquarters in Brussels. —AFP

the latest bid to ease a crisis sparked by fears that Moscow is preparing an invasion of its pro-Western neighbour.

The West has warned Russia of severe consequences if it does invade, and on Tuesday, Washington said there could be sanctions personally targeting Putin.

Reacting to the news, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov dismissed the threats as worthless because senior Russian officials are barred from holding assets abroad. —AFP



KHARTOUM: Sudanese pro-military protesters chant slogans as they demonstrate against a UN bid to resolve a political crisis outside the Khartoum office of the UN Transition Assistance Mission Sudan in the Sudanese capital yesterday. —AFP

scores of security personnel have been wounded during the protests. A police general was stabbed to death during the unrest this month. Meanwhile, shops and stores were largely shuttered and streets were empty in the city of Wad Madani, south of Khartoum, according to witnesses. Sport clubs in the city had also suspended all activists until further notice "in tribute to the martyrs killed". —AFP

International

French politicians worry about surge in pre-election violence

France less than 3 months from first round of presidential elections

PARIS: French ruling party lawmaker Pascal Bois was at home asleep a few days after Christmas when fire-fighters banged on his front door to tell him his garage was in flames. Startled by the noise in the early hours of the morning, Bois stumbled out of bed and went to inspect the damage, seeing the outside structure consumed by fire with his electric vehicle inside.

"I realised very quickly that it was a deliberate act," said the married father of two, who had been on alert after receiving a bullet in the post in November. "There's a moment of shock, of course, but I got over it fairly quickly and did my best to keep calm."

As well as the fire, graffiti had been daubed on the outside wall of his home in Chambly, 35 kilometres (21 miles) from Paris, saying: "No to the pass" and "It's going to explode".

The attack came as parliament was debating legislation to create a mandatory "vaccine pass" that meant only people jabbed against COVID-19 could enter bars and restaurants. Bois, along with other members of parliament from President Emmanuel Macron's Republic on the Move party, was in favour.

With France less than three months from the first round of presidential elections, to be followed by parliamentary polls in June, concern is growing about an increase in attacks against elected figures, particularly ruling party lawmakers. Explanations range from the radicalisation of the anti-vax movement and a long-term trend of declining faith in the French democratic system to Macron's policies and personality.

Increased protection

Since the attack on Bois' home and a separate assault on an overseas island lawmaker who was pelted with seaweed on his doorstep, Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin has ordered greater police protection for parliamentarians.

In addition to the physical attacks, anonymous death threats in writing or over social media have exploded in numbers.

In the first 11 months of 2021, a total of 1,186 elect-

ed figures including 162 lawmakers lodged complaints for threats made against them, a rise of 47 percent compared with 2020, interior ministry figures show.

"Unfortunately over the last few years, there has been an increase in offences against elected figures," Darmanin told RTL radio, adding that anti-vaxxers were lately responsible for "huge numbers of complaints about threats".

A recent survey showed that, for a significant minority of French people, such offences were justified. In a poll published by the Jean-Jaures Foundation think-tank in November, more than one



Interior minister orders police protection

in ten people said they approved of "violent behaviour towards lawmakers and their staff, at their offices or homes".

A total of 40 percent of people thought that the directly elected lower house of parliament was of "little use" or "no use at all" — a huge increase from a comparable study in 1985 that showed only 13 percent felt this way.

Last Tuesday, all the heads of the main political parties in parliament entered together along with the speaker Richard Ferrand in a rare show of unity to denounce what they called "the rise in hatred."

"When it comes to representatives of the people being assaulted on the basis of their opinions or their votes, it is the heart of democracy that is attacked," they wrote in a public letter.



UZERCHE, France: Ile-de-France region President and candidate for the Les Republicains (LR) right-wing party for the 2022 French presidential election Valerie Pécresse (R) poses before answering questions of TV host and journalist Jean-Jacques Bourdin on the set of political TV show "La France dans les yeux" in Uzerche, central France. —AFP

'Yellow Vest' movement

Isabelle Sommier, a specialist in political violence at Paris' Sorbonne University, says attacks against elected figures have increased significantly since the election of Macron in 2017. Some parliamentarians have had their office windows smashed, others have been victims of arson. In certain cases, they have arrived at work to find that protesters have bricked up their doors overnight.

Attacks on homes, like the one experienced by Pascal Bois on the morning of December 30, are still rare. "We're seeing an increase in the phenomenon in terms of absolute numbers but above all in the level of violence," said Sommier, who co-authored the book "Political Violence in France" earlier this year.

"Over the last few months and weeks, it's been

accelerating." Part of the explanation can be found in the so-called "Yellow Vest" anti-government movement, composed mostly of protesters from rural areas and small towns, whose often violent demonstrations shook the country from 2018.

The anti-vax movement appears to overlap with the "Yellow Vests" in many respects, geographically and socio-economically, Sommier notes. Sommier said that Macron had radicalised this fringe of the French population through his pro-business policies, as well as his highly centralised way of governing, and his abrasive personal style.

The 44-year-old leader, who was slapped in the face during an impromptu walkabout in southeast France in June, declared earlier this month that he wanted to "piss off" the unvaccinated. —AFP

Iraq's battle against IS cells grinds on in the desert

HAWI AL-AZIM, Iraq: Bullet holes riddle the concrete watchtower of a remote Iraqi army outpost north of Baghdad, a sign of the Islamic State group's night-time attack that killed 11 soldiers. The small riverside base is ringed by sand berms, a shallow moat and coils of razor wire, and three soldiers in mismatched uniforms are busy strengthening it with cement and cinder blocks.

It has been almost three years since the extremist Sunni group lost its self-proclaimed "caliphate" stretching across much of Iraq and Syria after long and gruelling battles. But IS fighters remain active in a low-level insurgency and have recently stepped up their hit-and-run attacks against anyone in uniform, or anyone else who dares to stand up to them.

"They hide in holes dug into the ground or in abandoned houses," said a senior Iraqi army officer during a visit Monday to the dusty outpost in the eastern province of Diyala. "This is also where they hide their explosives and weapons," he told AFP during the trip, asking not to be identified.

The unenviable task of Iraq's security forces is to hunt IS cells in a vast territory that stretches from Baghdad to Kirkuk, nearly 250 kilometres (about 150 miles) to the north, straddling three provinces. At this outpost, one of a string of bases along the banks of the Adhaim river, IS fighters struck in a bitterly cold night, last Friday at 2:30 am, killing the 11 soldiers.

The ambush came as, across the border in Syria, more than 100 IS fighters launched their biggest attack in years, on a prison in the northeastern city of Hasakeh, attempting to free fellow fighters. The fierce battle there has raged on, with the death toll topping 160 on Tuesday, as US-backed Kurdish forces surrounded the prison, while IS fighters remained holed up inside with thousands of detainees.

Bloody cat-and-mouse game

In Iraq, troops and police have been sweeping the area along the Adhaim river since the attack last week, in the latest chapter of a bloody cat-and-mouse game with the jihadists. "We have been in this area for four days," said Captain Azhar al-Juburi of the Federal Police Rapid Response Force as he returned from a patrol.

"We haven't had any direct confrontation, but we have arrested terrorists." The local soldiers were not allowed to speak with visiting press, but the senior army officer explained that the jihadists "took advantage of the bad weather and the early hour to attack".

It was "the first time that IS has attacked us directly", he said. "They did not have the means until now. They were limited to planting improvised explosive devices and sniper fire." Diyala's provincial governor Muthanna al-Tamimi had another explanation, blaming "the negligence of the soldiers". "The base is fortified," he said after the attack. "There is a thermal camera, night vision goggles and a concrete watchtower." —AFP

Domestic violence prompts young mum's flight to Europe

BAYONNE, France: Forced to marry as a teenager, Merline fled Cameroon to escape, embarking on a years-long journey blighted by sexual violence across deserts and the Atlantic in a desperate bid to reach France. Travelling as a woman on her own for most of the journey, it took her four years to do it, finally reaching France pregnant and with a toddler in tow.

Merline was one of at least 37,385 migrants who arrived in Spain by sea last year, with arrivals rising significantly over the past two years, particularly in the Canary Islands after an increase of patrols in the Mediterranean. After years in a violent and abusive marriage, Merline said she wasn't thinking about going to Europe when she left.

"I just ran," she told AFP after crossing from Spain into France, her head covered with black, gold and burgundy braids. She was just 15 when she was "forced to marry a man who was 45". Beaten and abused, she became pregnant and had her first child with him but says she was "destroyed" by the marriage.

When he died in 2016, she had to marry his brother, according to Merline who only gave her first name in order to protect her family. By the end of 2017, she couldn't carry on and fled, taking the heartbreaking decision to leave her son behind.

Initially she stayed with her mum, but then left when her husband's family started issuing threats. Then she went to a friend who gave her 40,000 CFA francs (60 euros) to pay smugglers to take her into neighbouring Nigeria.

'Rapes just happen'

She worked in a restaurant there for three months to try and save 345 euros to pay smugglers to take her across the desert in Niger and get her to Algeria. "That's when the most difficult part began," says Merline, now 30, sitting in the Bayonne offices of La Cimade, a French NGO that is helping her make her asylum claim.

Once you're in the desert "there's nowhere to run... the rapes just happen", she says. The desert route to Algeria brings back memories "of death" and "water reeking of petrol" that was shared around in jerrycans, she says. After arriving at Tamanrasset, a desert city in southern Algeria, she spent several days without going out for fear of being caught by the police.

There the smugglers would take any newly-arrived woman to small bars where they would be "forced" to prostitute themselves to pay for the leg of their journey to Europe. But she narrowly escaped that fate thanks to another migrant from



BAYONNE: Cameroonian migrant Merline, 30 years old, speaks during an interview with AFP in the French Basque city of Bayonne. —AFP

Cameroon, with whom she had a child, now a lively two-year-old who clammers all over her lap as she talks. She's also five-months pregnant with his second child.

She had initially wanted to work in Morocco but couldn't make any money, so she travelled to Western Sahara with the aim of getting the boat to the Canary Islands. Her partner didn't go with her because he couldn't afford to go as well but he hopes to eventually join her and their two children.

Travelling with a toddler

In the Atlantic town of Dakhla, she was charged 2,500 euros by hooded smugglers for her and her son to take the boat to the Canary Islands. In September, she boarded the wooden

fishing boat with another 60 or so people, a third of them women along with a dozen children. "There, only God has your fate in his hands because just the slightest thing can leave you in the water and no one is going to risk their own life to save you," she says.

After two days at sea, the boat reached the island of Gran Canaria, where she stayed for two months before being sent to a reception centre in Seville, in southern Spain. Struggling with the language, she finally decided to go to France "to educate my son in French", eventually saving up enough money to reach Spain's border with France and pay the "taxi-mafia" 100 euros to get her across. She thinks she may one day end up working with "elderly people or children". —AFP

At Spain border, migrants' holy grail is France

IRUN, Spain: "Guys, we've got to get out of here!" urges Junior, a 20-year-old migrant from Ivory Coast, breaking the tense silence inside the train crossing the Spanish border into France. Crossing from Irun in Spain to the French border town of Hendaye is the last obstacle for young migrants desperate to reach France, their desired destination whatever the cost.

Many come from former French colonies in West Africa where France is widely spoken and want to join family members living and working in France. But at the station in Hendaye, French police are on patrol. With Junior are five other migrants from Mali, Guinea and Ivory Coast. But only he dares get off the train.

"You don't have a visa, you can't come here," one of the police officers tells him after glancing through his passport. When they think the coast is clear, the other five quickly drop down onto the tracks. "Stay where you are!" bellows a policeman, prompting one of the young migrants

to race for a two-metre fence which he scrambles over, disappearing off into the streets. But the others freeze as the police approach and give them forms marked "entry refused". They are then put back on the train to the Spanish border town of Irun, an AFP correspondent said.

Increasingly dangerous

To get here, many of these migrants have already made the perilous journey between the African coast and Spain's Canary Islands, braving the Atlantic in barely seaworthy ramshackle boats. Last year, 13,164 people were turned away at the French-Spanish border in the Pyrenees-Atlantiques region of France, which Hendaye is part of, more than twice that of 2020, French interior ministry figures show.

The figures are higher due to increased vigilance and more migrants travelling given the easing of COVID travel restrictions put in place at the start of the pandemic. With increased patrols on both sides of the border, migrants are taking ever more risks, according to researchers, NGOs and local officials.

Last year, two Ivorians and a Guinean migrant drowned while trying to swim the Bidassoa River which marks the border. And in October,



HENDAYE, France: A migrant escapes running after crossing the border between Irun (Spain) and Hendaye (France) in the French Basque city of Hendaye. —AFP

three Algerians who managed to cross into France died after being hit by a train. On Santiago Bridge, which crosses the Bidassoa, French police carry out periodic checks on vehicles, while the adjacent pedestrian bridge has been closed off with huge metal fences nearly three metres (10 foot) high.

In Irun, 20-year-old Yakuba steps out from the Red Cross migrant reception centre to smoke a cigarette. Along his nose runs a large scar he got scaling the huge spike-topped metal

fence separating Spain's Melilla enclave from Morocco in June. "I've got one on my foot too, there was a lot of blood," shrugs Yakuba, who says he left Mali "because of the war".

After several unsuccessful attempts to cross into France over the Pyrenees, by train and finally on the Santiago Bridge, Yakuba is considering the "taxi mafia"-smugglers who charge 150 euros (\$170) to cross the border. But in the end, he manages to cross the bridge on his second attempt. —AFP

International

Jihadist threat stirs anti-Fulani hostility in northern Ivory Coast

People stopped going into the fields or fishing

KAFOLO, Ivory Coast: Jihadist attacks in northern Ivory Coast have ramped up hostility towards the Fulani, a mainly Muslim ethnic group that some accuse of providing the bulk of the raiders.

Friction and suspicion are almost palpable in Kafolo, a small town near the border with Burkina Faso where jihadists have struck twice in less than 18 months, killing 16 soldiers. The army has established a large camp at the entrance to Kafolo and the few visitors are greeted by a watchtower overlooking the dusty trail leading to the town.

In the shade of a great tree, the air fresh and dry in the harmattan wind of the morning, village chief Bamba Tiemoko said the first attack in June 2020 had had dramatic repercussions.

"People were frightened — it was the first time that this had happened to us. People stopped going into the fields or fishing," he said.

Some villagers said they were still afraid. "We are always scared but we deal with it," said Lamissa Traore, president of the region's youth association. "We try not to stay in the fields too long, to come back before noon." "I no longer go into the fields, I'm afraid to come across Peuls," added Clarisse Siphoho, secretary of a local women's association, referring to a name by which the Fulani are commonly known. "Most of those who came and carried out the attacks are Peul. We are wary now."

'We are very suspicious'

In the absence of claims of responsibility for the Kafolo attacks, the Ivorian authorities have said they were the work of foreign nationals.

More locally the language is veiled, but the finger usually gets pointed at Fulani — semi-

nomadic herders who are scattered across several countries in West Africa and often cross the porous border with Burkina Faso to graze their oxen in Ivory Coast.

"We have our eyes on them," acknowledged a regional official who said the public were being urged to alert the authorities if they spotted anything untoward.

"We are very suspicious when a foreigner arrives in the village. We ask questions about his purpose of travel, his destination and we can take him to the soldiers," Tiemoko, the village chief, confirmed.

After the June 2020 attack, many Fulani who had been part of the community left overnight. "There used to be a great brotherhood. But after the attack, there were arrests and the Peuls left," said Tiemoko. "If they leave, it's because they blame themselves for something," he insisted. "Because of the attacks, they were afraid of reprisals and left the village," said Siphoho.

There is mistrust regarding Peuls

'The jihadists have won'

One Fulani in Kafolo, going by the pseudonym of Amadou, said he had spent three and a half months in prison in Korhogo, the main city in northern Ivory Coast, because he was suspected of having a link with the attackers. After being released, he returned to live in the area.

"Here, when people see a Peul passing by on a motorbike in the village, they are afraid and see him as a jihadist," Amadou said.

He said he was married to an Ivorian woman and did not feel sidelined by the community, although he wondered about the sudden departure of other Fulani.

Were they driven out by the townsfolk? All



KAFOLO, Ivory Coast: A photograph shows Ivorian soldiers at the entrance of an Ivorian army camp in the region of Kafolo, Northern Ivory Coast. Recent jihadist attacks have exacerbated hostilities against the Fulani community accused of constituting the bulk of armed groups. —AFP

those interviewed by AFP in Kafolo insisted that this was not the case, and their version of events was supported by municipal sub-prefect Issouf Dao.

"We welcome the Fulani, they have been here for a very long time," Dao said. "There's no problem — but there is mistrust regarding Peuls who we do not know." While the strong military presence reassured local people, many deplored the consequences of the attacks, notably for tourism in the region, which has been classified in the red zone by most Western countries, restricting travel to neces-

sary business trips.

In the Sahel to the north of Ivory Coast, years of jihadist attacks have ravaged the economies of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger.

The Kafolo Safari Lodge, with its 40 rooms and safari opportunities in the nearby Comoé National Park, one of the largest and oldest in the country, has been closed for months.

"People no longer invest, no one sleeps here, not even civil servants passing through the village," said Paterné Diabate, a villager. "The jihadists have won this battle," he complained. —AFP

Pope prevented from pressing the flesh

VATICAN CITY: Pope Francis complained yesterday of a knee problem that prevented him from personally greeting the faithful following his weekly general audience. "I won't be able to come among you today to greet you, because I have a problem with my right leg, a ligament in my knee is inflamed," the 85-year-old pontiff said in a rare public comment on his health.

"It's temporary, I hear it happens to old people, I don't know why it happens to me," he joked, drawing laughter from the audience gathered in the Vatican's Paul VI Audience Hall. The Argentine pope usually descends a series of stairs from the stage of the hall following the weekly audience to shake hands and meet people in the front row.

Francis suffers from chronic hip pain that makes

him limp and in July, he underwent an operation on his colon. The pontiff's health is regularly the subject of rumours within the Vatican, particularly among his critics. In impromptu remarks during the audience, Francis called on parents never to condemn their children for whatever reason, including over their sexual orientation—advice he has imparted in the past.

"I think of parents with children with illnesses, even permanent illnesses—how much pain. Parents who see different sexual orientations in their children—how to deal with this, how to be on their side and not hide in a condemnatory attitude," he said. "Parents who see their children not going to school—so many parents' problems, we think how to help them. To them I say: don't be afraid... Never condemn a child."

He recounted how, in Buenos Aires, he felt moved seeing a line of mothers outside a prison, waiting to see their sons "who had made a mistake". "They showed their faces, they didn't hide and they supported him, always. What courage," Francis has frequently defended the rights of gay people and argued they should be accepted in their



VATICAN CITY: Pope Francis, escorted by his butler Sandro Mariotti, is helped walk during the weekly general audience at Paul-VI Hall in the Vatican yesterday. —AFP

parishes, while urging parents not to reject their gay children. He has always, however, voiced opposition to marriage among single-sex couples. —AFP

Russia issues arrest warrant for Navalny's brother

MOSCOW: Russia issued an arrest warrant for the brother of jailed Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny yesterday, part of ongoing efforts to silence opposition voices critical of the Kremlin. The interior ministry said Oleg Navalny, 38, is wanted on criminal charges, without providing further details and his name appeared on the ministry's wanted list, an AFP journalist confirmed yesterday.

The move comes one day after Russia's prison authority requested courts to convert a suspended sentence he is serving into real jail time for violating coronavirus regulations. Lawyer Nikos Paraskevov

told the Interfax news agency Wednesday that the arrest warrant was issued when police were unable to locate Oleg Navalny at his residence.

Paraskevov said it was not clear whether the 38-year-old had left the country. Almost all of Alexei Navalny's most prominent allies have fled Russia after he was jailed and his organisations were outlawed.

Last August, Oleg Navalny was handed a one-year suspended sentence for breaking pandemic restrictions during protests demanding his brother's release. He was accused of calling for Russians to attend an unsanctioned rally in January 2021 in support of his brother, who had returned to Russia after being treated in Germany for a near-fatal poisoning attack.

A Moscow court announced Monday it will consider the request to jail Navalny on February 18. In 2014, Alexei and Oleg Navalny were convicted in a fraud trial, which Kremlin critics say was politically

motivated, related to their work for French cosmetics company Yves Rocher.

Oleg served three-and-a-half years in prison and was released in 2018, while Alexei received a three-and-a-half-year suspended sentence. After returning to Russia last year, Alexei had his suspended sentence converted to jail time, which he is serving in a penal colony outside Moscow. President Vladimir Putin's most vocal domestic opponent spent months in Germany recovering from a poisoning attack that he and the West blame on the Kremlin. —AFP



Oleg Navalny

COVID-hit Australian aid ship to dock in virus-free Tonga

NUKU'ALOFA, Tonga: A coronavirus-hit Australian warship will dock in Tonga yesterday, delivering desperately needed aid to the volcano-and-tsunami-struck nation under strict "no-contact" protocols. Tonga's Health Minister Saia Piukala said the crew of the HMAS Adelaide would follow drastic health rules to ensure the remote Pacific kingdom remains one of the few places on the world still free of coronavirus.

"The ship will berth and no contacts will be made. Australians from the ship will unload their cargoes and sail from port," he told reporters. The Adelaide was deployed as part of an international aid effort after the January 15 eruption that generated huge tsunami waves and blanketed the island nation in toxic ash. The warship is carrying about 80 tonnes of relief supplies, including water, medical kits and engineering equipment.

Despite all crew members testing negative before departure from Brisbane, officials in Canberra on Tuesday said 23 COVID-19 cases had been detected on the vessel. Piukala said the number had increased to 29 by Wednesday. The ship's 600-plus crew are fully vaccinated and the Australian Defence Force said Tuesday that the initial 23 patients were asymptomatic or only mildly affected.

from Blackburn, was shot dead by the FBI after a 10-hour siege in the small town of Colleyville in mid-January. His four hostages, including a rabbi, were all freed unharmed. "As part of the local investigation, two men have been arrested this morning in Manchester," the Counter Terrorism Policing force for northwest England said in a statement. "They remain in custody for questioning." Police have also questioned three other men in Manchester, and another in the central English city of Birmingham.

Akram had planned the attack for at least two years, wanting to die as a "martyr", according to

audio of the last phone call with his brother released by the London-based Jewish Chronicle newspaper. The attack was staged in an apparent bid to win the release of Pakistani woman Aafia Siddiqui, known as "Lady Al-Qaeda", who has been jailed for the attempted murder of US soldiers in Afghanistan.

Akram was reportedly investigated in 2020 by Britain's domestic security agency MI5 after he spent six months in Pakistan. But the probe was shut down after just over a month due to lack of evidence that he was a threat, and he was able to travel to the United States without being flagged as a risk. —AFP

93 potential graves found at Canada school site

MONTREAL: An Indigenous community in Canada has identified nearly 100 "potential" graves at a residential school site, months after the discovery of hundreds of children's remains at former boarding schools rocked the country. The Williams Lake First Nation (WLFN) community said on Tuesday that a geophysical survey revealed "93 reflections" with characteristics "indicative of potential human burials" at the former St. Joseph's Mission residential school in British Columbia.

Investigators "surveyed approximately 14 hectares of the broader 480-hectare site", which is about 300 kilometers (186 miles) north of Kamloops—where the remains of 215 children were found in May. Since May, more than 1,000 anonymous graves have been found near former "Indian residential schools" run by religious groups, shedding light on a dark chapter in Canadian history and its policy of forced assimilation of First Nations people.

Thousands of Indigenous children attended St. Joseph's Mission between 1886 and 1981 when it operated as a residential school run by various religious sects as part of a Canadian government system, according to WLFN, a community of around 800 people. "There is much more work to do on the St. Joseph's site, and we have every intention of continuing with this work," WLFN Chief Willie Sellars said in a statement.

In early January, Ottawa announced \$1.9 million Canadian dollars (\$1.5 million) in funding for the investigation at St. Joseph's mission. "To date, \$116.8 million has been committed to support First Nation, Inuit and Metis Survivors, their families and communities and go toward locating and commemorating missing children who attended residential schools," the government said in a statement at the time.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said Tuesday that the news of the potential graves "brings a lot of distressing emotions to the surface." "My heart breaks for the members of the community, and for those whose loved ones never came home."

Numerous investigations into former residential schools are underway across the country, with between 4,000 and 6,000 children believed to be missing, according to authorities. In total, about 150,000 Indigenous children were enrolled from the late 1800s to the 1990s in 139 of the residential schools across Canada, spending months or years isolated from their families, language and culture.

A truth and reconciliation commission concluded in 2015 the failed government policy amounted to "cultural genocide." —AFP

International

India showcases military might in Republic Day parade

Ceremony featured mobile parade floats highlighting country's history and cultural diversity



NEW DELHI: Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi (front) and President Ram Nath Kovind (R) leave after attending India's 73rd Republic Day parade at the Rajpath in New Delhi yesterday.



NEW DELHI: Border Security Force (BSF) personnel ride on motorbikes as they perform during India's 73rd Republic Day parade at the Rajpath in New Delhi yesterday. —AFP photos

NEW DELHI: Lumbering tanks and the deafening roar of fighter planes echoed through New Delhi yesterday as India's military showcased its might on Republic Day. The annual January 26 event marks the adoption of India's constitution with missile launchers, jet flyovers, motorcycle stunts and the brass band of the camel-mounted Border Security Force.

Military and police battalions marched down a boulevard past Prime Minister Narendra Modi but without the customary foreign dignitary guests of honour, as India battles a resurgence of COVID-19 infections. Audience numbers along the usually crowded sidelines of the procession were capped at 4,000 people and eminent spectators sat spaced far apart, with authorities announcing overnight

that India had surpassed 40 million coronavirus cases since the pandemic began.

Yesterday's ceremony also featured mobile parade floats highlighting the country's history and cultural diversity alongside traditional dancers. India is preparing to commemorate 75 years since the end of British colonial rule and several of the displays dramatised events from the nation's long independence struggle in the first half of the 20th century.

Modi's government announced it would posthumously award former

defence chief General Bipin Rawat with India's second-highest civilian honour, the Padma Vibhushan.

Rawat was seen as close to the Hindu nationalist prime minister and supportive of his political agenda but died in a helicopter accident in November.

Modi also paid tribute to fallen soldiers before the parade began, just days after his government provoked a minor storm by extinguishing

the nearby "eternal flame" that served to commemorate Indians who died on the battlefield.

The flame had been burning for 50 years but has now been merged with a new war memorial, inaugurated in 2019. Modi's government has embarked on an extensive remodelling of key sites in New Delhi and has been accused of seeking to stamp its own identity on the city.

A heavy security presence ringed yesterday's official programme after the government was embarrassed on last year's Republic Day by chaotic protests in the capital. Farmers protesting agricultural reform bills, since abandoned by the government, ran riot on tractors through the city's streets and hoisted a flag at the historic Red Fort, while hundreds of police officers were injured. —AFP



India commemorate 75 years since the end of British colonial rule

News in brief

Austria to end lockdown

VIENNA: Austria yesterday announced it was ending a lockdown for those unvaccinated as it prepares to become the first EU country to make COVID-19 jabs mandatory from next week. The government last November ordered those not vaccinated or recently recovered from coronavirus to stay at home with limited exceptions, such as going to work, as the country battled a surge in cases. But with intensive care units no longer at capacity, Chancellor Karl Nehammer said the general order to stay at home would be lifted from next Monday. The unvaccinated will still face restrictions, however. Restaurants, hotels, culture and sports venues all require guests to be inoculated or recently recovered. "Our top priority is to keep the restrictions as low as possible and only for as long as absolutely necessary," Nehammer told reporters. —AFP

Third Libya minister detained

TRIPOLI: Libya's health minister and his deputy have been detained as part of a corruption probe, prosecutors said yesterday, the third detention of a cabinet member in recent weeks. Ali Zenati and his deputy were held for questioning over suspected "imports of oxygen concentrators at 10 times the market value", which may amount to "non-compliance with regulations related to public contracts", said a prosecution statement. The ministry had signed contracts with a company founded in August last year "despite it lacking... the necessary experience to carry out the agreed tasks", it added. The government of interim prime minister Abdelhamid Dbeibah did not immediately comment on the detentions. Libya has been mired in perpetual crisis since the 2011 revolt that toppled dictator Muammar Gaddafi, and corruption is rife throughout state institutions. Zenati's detention comes after prosecutors questioned Culture Minister Mabrouka Touki in late December over a contract for maintenance works on ministry buildings which had already been refurbished. That came a week and a half after Libya's Education Minister Moussa al-Megarief was arrested as part of an inquiry into a lack of schoolbooks. —AFP

Guinea sentences 17 to life

CONAKRY: A court in Guinea has handed life terms to 17 fugitives accused of taking part in ethnic clashes in December 2020 that claimed at least 11 lives, a defence attorney said. Violence in the southern city of Macenta pitched members of the Toma community, who are mainly animists, against the Toma Mania ethnicity, who are predominantly Muslim. The 17 men were convicted in absentia on Tuesday for "murder, criminal association, taking part in an insurrection, unlawful assembly and arson," said lawyer Salifou Beavogui, who is representing some of the defendants. The court, which had been relocated to the regional capital of Nzerekore from Macenta for security reasons, also gave one-year sentences to four individuals accused of unlawful assembly, violence and illegal possession of weapons. Ten-month terms were handed to two others for illegal detention and weapons, while 32 accused were released. —AFP

HK ex-lawmaker jailed for revealing police graft probe

HONG KONG: A former Hong Kong lawmaker was jailed yesterday for exposing an anti-graft probe into a senior police officer's handling of a mob attack on democracy protesters in 2019. Lam Cheuk-ting was found guilty of three counts of revealing that Superintendent Yau Nai-keung was being investigated by the Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC).

Hong Kong law forbids revealing the identity of anyone being probed by the anti-corruption watchdog. Magistrate Jacky Ip handed Lam four months in jail, ruling that he jeopardised an investigation and public security. Lam, who pleaded not guilty, said he would appeal and told the court he had "no regret about going on trial", according to local media.

Afghan women rally at Taliban approved protest

KABUL: Scores of Afghan women rallied in Kabul yesterday in a Taliban sanctioned protest endorsing their regime and calling on the West to unfreeze the nation's assets as its humanitarian crisis deepens. Since taking power in August the Taliban have come down hard on dissenting demonstrations while shepherding protests endorsing their austere brand of Islamic rule.

Yesterday, Taliban fighters looked on as around 100 women—many wearing all-covering burqas—gathered in front of the abandoned US embassy in the Afghan capital. Some wielded placards reading: "We Afghan women support the Islamic Emirate," referring to the name given by the Taliban for its regime.

Banners also called on Washington to open access to \$9.5 billion in Afghanistan central bank assets, which it froze when the hardliners seized power following a hasty withdrawal of US-led forces last year.

Mobs burn Indian train carriages in rail jobs protest

PATNA, India: Angry mobs in eastern India set fire to train carriages yesterday in protests over access to railway jobs that have seen police violently disperse crowds with tear gas and baton charges. Bihar state has been on edge since the start of the

Yau was a police commander in Yuen Long—an area bordering mainland China—when a group of men attacked democracy protesters returning from rallies. Live footage of the white t-shirt dressed mob beating people in a train station—combined with the police's response—became a watershed moment during the 2019 protests.

Lam was among those wounded in the bloody chaos. Yau led a team of police officers into a village next to the train station where many of the white-clad men were filmed retreating. After a search, Yau told reporters that no arrest was made and that he saw no one carrying weapons.

The police's response further hammered public trust in the force and fuelled accusations of police-triad collusion. Police said their officers were busy dealing with large-scale protests elsewhere and denied any suggestion of collusion. They have since recast that night's incident as a fight between evenly matched opposing sides.

Three months after the Yuen Long attack, Yau was assigned to lead the police's investigation into the incident. In response, Lam disclosed the ICAC

Since the Taliban returned to office they have grappled with a rising humanitarian crisis. Foreign aid representing about 80 percent of the country's budget stopped overnight and more than half of the population faces hunger this winter, according to the United Nations.

"The US should immediately release the money of Afghanistan," said Basri Deedar, a principal of a girls' school and an organiser of the rally. Yesterday's demonstration was held the day after a Taliban delegation wrapped up a landmark visit to Norway, seeking aid to tackle the humanitarian crisis.

It was the first visit the Taliban made to a European country since seizing power. During discussions in Oslo, Western officials clearly linked the resumption of aid to the Taliban's treatment of women. Women's rights were trampled during the Islamists' first regime from 1996 to 2001, and while promising a softer brand of rule this time they have introduced tightening restrictions on travel, work and education.

Meanwhile its fighters have forcefully dispersed protests by women demanding equal treatment. "The international community should not

week over claims by young job applicants that an entrance exam for the government-run rail sector was being conducted unfairly.

Protests began on a small scale on Monday but have since spread, with crowds pelting stones at train cars, blocking tracks and burning effigies of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. More than a dozen people have been arrested for participating in the demonstrations, which have broken out at railway stations across Bihar and neighbouring Uttar Pradesh.

Police have been criticised for a heavy-handed crackdown, with social media footage showing offi-

cial investigation into Yau "out of consideration of public interest". "I would rather ring the bell too loud than to leave it inaudible to anyone," he told the court.

Before he became an opposition lawmaker, Lam used to be an ICAC investigator himself. An ICAC officer summoned to the witness stand during the trial confirmed there had been an investigation. But Yau has never been arrested or charged and it is unclear whether the probe is ongoing.

Critics and rights groups said Hong Kong police routinely used excessive force during the 2019 protests. Hong Kong's police watchdog exonerated the force and no officers have lost their jobs over the handling of the unrest.

In July last year, a Hong Kong court jailed seven government supporters for their involvement in the attack. Like most of Hong Kong's prominent democracy activists, Lam is facing multiple prosecutions but yesterday's verdict was his first jailing.

He was detained last year and charged along with 46 others under a sweeping national security law Beijing imposed on Hong Kong to stamp out dissent. —AFP



KABUL: Burqa-clad women hold banners during a women protest in support of the Taliban in front of the US embassy in Kabul yesterday. —AFP

use women's rights as an excuse to harass Afghans," claimed Deedar.

"Those who act against the Islamic and national values of the country are not representatives of Afghan

women." Last week two women activists who had been protesting against the Taliban went missing from their homes. The Taliban have denied detaining them. —AFP

cers barging into the homes of suspected demonstrators and flogging them. "The youth have the right to talk about unemployment," senior opposition lawmaker Priyanka Gandhi said in a Twitter post condemning the attack.

Joblessness has long been a millstone around the Indian economy's neck, with unemployment figures at their worst since the 1970s even before the COVID-19 pandemic wrought havoc on local commerce. More than 10 million people were participating in the current railway employment exams in competition for just 35,000 vacancies, according to local media. —AFP

THURSDAY, JANUARY 27, 2022

Business

NBK reports net profit of KD 362.2m for FY 2021

Al-Sayer: NBK delivered strong results despite continued pandemic challenges

KUWAIT: National Bank of Kuwait ("NBK", the "Bank" or the "Group") has announced its financial results for the 12-month period ended 31 December 2021. NBK reported a net profit of KD 362.2 million (\$1.2 billion), compared to KD 246.3 million (\$814.4 million), improving by 47.1 percent year-on-year.

As of end of December 2021, NBK's total assets grew by 11.9 percent on annual basis, to reach KD 33.3 billion (\$109.9 billion), while customers' deposits grew by 6.9 percent to reach KD 18.3 billion (\$60.4 billion). Customer loans and advances on the other hand grew by 12.7 percent compared to the same period last year, to reach KD 19.7 billion (\$65.2 billion) while total shareholders' equity stood at KD 3.3 billion (\$11.0 billion) by end of year 2021.

NBK's Board of Directors has proposed the distribution of a cash dividend of 30 fils per share, representing 59.6 percent of net profit, in addition to 5 percent bonus shares (5 shares for every 100 shares). The cash dividend and bonus shares, if approved by the shareholders' general assembly, shall be payable to the shareholders after obtaining the necessary regulatory approvals.

Earnings per share (EPS) stood at 47 fils, as compared to 31 fils in 2020.

Commenting on the results, NBK Group Chairman, Nasser Al-Sayer, said: "NBK delivered strong financial results despite the continued challenges posed by the pandemic on the operating environment and the global economy."

"NBK's performance affirmed the flexibility and diversity of the Bank's business model in 2021 through achieving superior returns for its shareholders. The Bank demonstrated its unique ability to overcome the disruptive operating environment whilst persisting to



Nasser Al-Sayer



Issam J Al-Sager

invest in human resources and in our digital agenda to secure future growth," he noted.

Al-Sayer added: "The bank enjoys a solid financial position alongside a strong and stable capital base; which supports our ability in meeting the growing needs of clients. Throughout the year, the Bank invested heavily in its strategic digital infrastructure in order to position NBK to grow and prosper over the long term."

"Despite the continued state of uncertainty stemming from the repercussions of the pandemic, the Bank maintained its commitment towards rewarding and adding value to shareholders through strong cash dividends and bonus shares distributions," he elaborated.

"The operational environment in Kuwait is promising in 2022 and we are optimistic with regards to the opportunities embedded in light of the high vaccination rates which would eventually enhance business sentiment and contribute positively to economic growth alongside the support to the state's fiscal standing from the recovery in oil

prices," he mentioned.

"We take pride in the progress that we achieved in implementing the highest standards of corporate governance whilst embedding sustainability as an integral part of our corporate culture and operations. Furthermore, we will continue our promises in achieving responsible and sustainable growth and to sharing our successes with the communities in which we operate," Al-Sayer stated.

Al-Sayer affirmed that: "NBK will continue in its responsible role in supporting the global objective of low-carbon emissions and mitigating the risks of climate change whilst delivering strides across other sustainability initiatives. In this regard, we have set specific goals for sustainable business, and are keen on embedding climate-related considerations as part of our business model in the future."

"We will continue to place considerable value on the health and safety of our employees and customers while ensuring the delivery of world class products and highest service quality. Moreover, the Bank will remain com-

mitted into supporting and contributing to the recovery of Kuwait's economy," he concluded.

On his part, NBK Group Chief Executive Officer, Issam J Al-Sager, commented: "Despite the resurgence of COVID-19 cases and the uncertainty around economic outlook during 2021, NBK succeeded in recording solid profits and exceeded strategic targets set for the year. The operating environment in Kuwait witnessed a moderate rebound that was characterized by higher consumer spending, improvement in business activity and volumes as well as gradual recovery in government spending and project awarding, which reached KD 1.5 billion in 2021."

"NBK delivered robust growth and strong financial performance across business lines. Regardless of the continued low interest rate environment, the Bank's resilient loans and deposits growth contributed positively and supported in maintaining stable margins," he added. "Thanks to the proactive and conservative approach that NBK adopted since the beginning of the pandemic, we now bear the fruits of recording lower cost of risk levels which contributed positively in growing our bottom line profits. Our operating income for the year increased by 7.6 percent to reach KD 906.3 million; driven by a robust growth in core banking income," he mentioned.

Al-Sager noted: "The Group continued towards achieving its strategic objectives with wealth management and Islamic banking conveying decent growth and further endorsed its financing dominance and capabilities across retail and corporate segments. Moreover, our non-interest income continues to grow, taking advantage of the different markets where we operate and the strong relationships the Bank has established

with its customers over many years."

"Our digital transformation continued to accelerate this year, driving efficiency and enhanced customer experience, while we also laid the foundation for future growth by launching Weyay, Kuwait's first digital bank, to better attract and serve the needs of the youth," he highlighted.

Al-Sager mentioned that "During 2021, NBK added a pool of prestigious awards in recognition of the quality of services and products delivered to clients. Likewise, the Bank asserted itself as a leading global financial institution issuer in the region as we succeeded in issuing two bonds to further enhance its capitalization & liquidity levels and to diversify the Group's funding profile. The issuances marked a milestone for the Bank and further endorsed investors' continuous confidence in the Bank's prudent management and confidence in overcoming crises."

"In 2022, we will intensify our focus in constantly designing and delivering innovative propositions to our clients. We will also upgrade our digital infrastructure foundations to enrich customers' experience and to serve as a springboard for regional growth and expansion; as well as investing heavily in our people - who represent the engine of our growth and success," he promised.

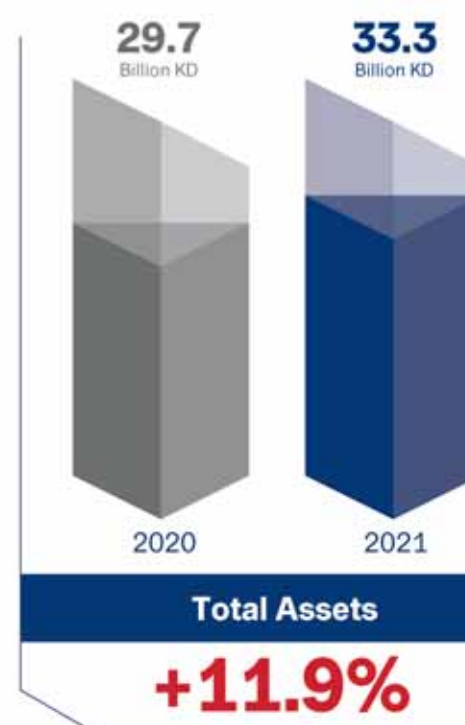
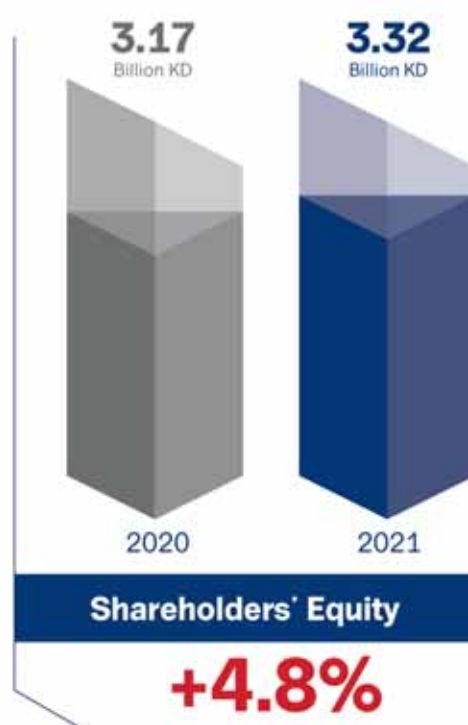
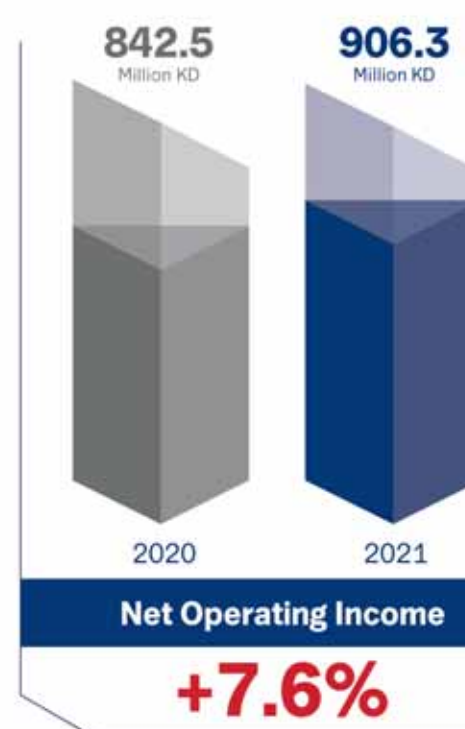
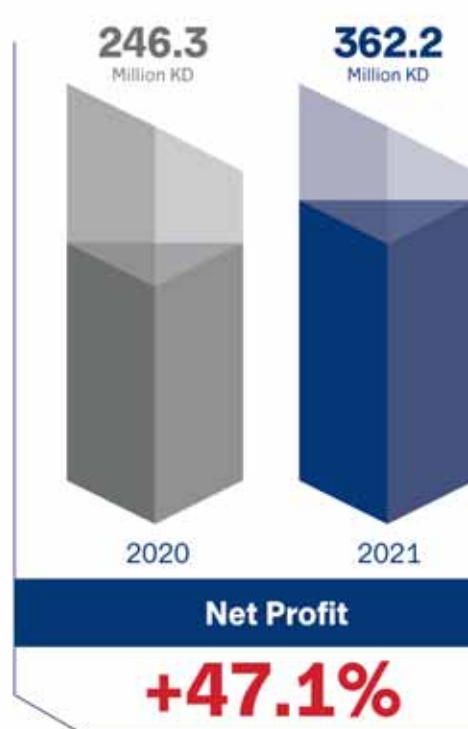
"NBK will remain agile in positioning and endorsing ESG as a core principle to the way we conduct and operate our business, with initiatives in relation to identifying and quantifying ESG already in place. Our commitment is ongoing, with special focus on assessing the direct and indirect environmental impact of our operations, especially as the risks of climate change continue to emerge."

362.2

Million KD

Net Profit

for Year 2021



Business

China shrugs off IMF warnings on zero-tolerance COVID approach

Gopinath says time to 'recalibrate' China restrictions

BEIJING: Beijing shrugged off IMF warnings about the economic impact of its aggressive anti-COVID policy, saying yesterday that China has achieved "significant results" and is a key driver of global growth.

The International Monetary Fund lowered its growth outlook for China and the rest of the world on Tuesday and said Beijing's zero-COVID policy—which has seen entire cities locked down over a handful of cases—has spurred a slowdown in the world's second-largest economy.

It might be time for Beijing to "recalibrate" its stance in order to ease pressure on global supply chains and economic growth, the fund's newly-installed first deputy managing director Gita Gopinath told AFP. But Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian said the country's "status as an important engine of global economic growth has not changed," adding that Beijing has achieved "significant results" in its economic rebound and boosting global economic recovery.

"China has always adopted scientific, comprehensive and effective prevention and control measures," he told reporters. The IMF cut 0.8 points off China's expected growth this year, forecasting it at 4.8 percent in the quarterly update to its World Economic Outlook. Global growth was reduced by half a point from the Fund's October estimate.

Although the Chinese economy made a quick bounceback after the virus first emerged in central Wuhan city, growth in the final three months last year slowed to four percent with the economy shaken by a series of shocks towards the end of 2021.

Economists have cautioned that growth is under pressure in the country, partly because of renewed COVID outbreaks and restrictions. China reported

24 domestic coronavirus cases yesterday, more than half in the capital Beijing.

Although numbers are low compared with those in other countries, Beijing's zero-COVID approach has seen harsh local lockdowns imposed over handfuls of cases. Many restrictions have hit port cities, manufacturing centers or financial hubs, clogging crucial points in China's supply and production chains.

China should begin to "recalibrate" its aggressive anti-COVID policy as other countries are doing, to try to ease the negative impact the pandemic continues to have on global supply chains and economic growth, a senior IMF official said on Tuesday. Speaking in an interview with AFP, Gita Gopinath, the newly-installed number two official at the global crisis lender, said with vaccines and treatments countries should be able to get back to more normal activity.

Is it time for China time to ease its zero tolerance policy?

"Firstly, I would like to recognize that the zero COVID strategy for China has worked very well in 2020 and 2021. They've had very low cases, very few deaths, and the economy has been recovering. So it's a strategy that has worked well..."

"Like all countries, they will indeed need to recalibrate because what we are seeing is with more frequent outbreaks, and therefore more lockdowns, even though they're very targeted, we're certainly seeing that having a negative impact on activity. And if that becomes much more serious, it will not just slow down growth even more but also have very important consequences for global supply chains."

"So we are moving I would say gradually to that

recognition, that because of the vaccines that we have, the tests, the therapeutics, we can get back to much more normalcy."

How do you view the inflation risk in the US economy?

"Inflation has become elevated pretty much across the globe. And especially if you look at headline inflation, that's been very high in many countries, because we've seen a big increase in energy prices and food prices. "The US is an example of that, where inflation is quite a bit broad-based, and you're seeing it including in wages rising."

"Our projection is that inflation in most countries will decline through this year, especially in the second half of this year. And then into 2023 is when we will see it subsiding. But we should recognize for several countries, that inflation even though it's declining, it will be high. It will be above their targets. "I would just recognize the high level of uncertainty around inflation projections. Because inflation this time round is not just a simple macro story, but has all very pandemic specific elements to it..."

"From our perspective, the more likely scenario is that it will not be down to two percent (in the United States) by the end of this year, in fact, it will be quite a bit above it ... It will take going into 2023 for that to come down further."

What is the risk of higher interest rates?

"This is going to be a challenge for central bankers this year to be able to communicate the transition to tighter monetary policy. And they should handle that with care. Because we are in a world with very high levels of debt (and) if interest rates really jump up in an unexpected way, then that



WASHINGTON: Gita Gopinath, First Deputy Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund, outside the IMF's headquarters in Washington, DC, on Tuesday. —AFP

can hit several countries quite negatively. "We are concerned about the high debt levels, and importantly, the high levels of debt servicing costs many low income countries have to pay. We have 60 percent of low income countries that we assessed to be either already in debt distress or in high risk of being in debt distress. "So these are very difficult times. And as global interest rates are going up, it's going to be a big fiscal cost of them." — AFP



NEW YORK: Traders work on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange at the opening bell on Tuesday. —AFP

European stocks rally before key Fed update

LONDON: European stock markets powered higher yesterday, recovering further from recent sharp losses, as traders await the outcome of a key Federal Reserve policy meeting.

After weeks of uncertainty, the US central bank was expected to deliver its views later on the state of the world's top economy and how officials plan to tackle decades-high inflation without knocking its recovery off course.

While Fed boss Jerome Powell has pledged that interest rate rises would be carefully calibrated, the prospect of higher borrowing costs has rattled markets across the world with most key indices deep in the red from the start of the year — and with Wall Street particularly hard hit.

Powell's comments will be pored over for signs of the Fed's plans, which most commentators believe include a first hike in March. "The big question going into this meeting for traders and investors is whether the Fed will increase... four times this year and when the first interest rate hike will take place," said Naeem Aslam, chief market analyst at Avatrade. "Market players understand that the Fed needs to raise the interest rate. Hence, they have prepared themselves for an interest rate hike next month."

Markets strategist Louis Navellier expects three rate hikes this year and that after the recent bout of selling across markets, added that buying opportunities were emerging. "I'm very comfortable that we are going to have a bottom here soon. Remember, the market is a manic crowd," he noted. While there remains some optimism among analysts about the outlook, the International Monetary Fund on Tuesday lowered its growth outlook for the global economy saying it has started the year "in a weaker position than previously expected". It said Omicron threatened to set back the recovery as countries impose containment measures, while other issues remained, including inflation and geopolitical tensions.

Included in those tensions is the standoff on the Ukraine-Russia border, with Moscow building up troop numbers and the West led by the United States warning the risk of an invasion "remains imminent". US President Joe Biden said such a move would prompt "enormous consequences" and even "change the world", adding that he would consider imposing direct sanctions on Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin on top of a raft of measures being drawn up.

Minutes from its December gathering pointed to a more hawkish tilt, with plans to speed up the taper of its vast bond-buying program, the selling of the assets it already has and three or four rate increases before the end of the year. While boss Jerome Powell pledged any tightening would be carefully calibrated, the prospect of higher borrowing costs has rattled markets across the world with most key indexes deep in the red from the start of the year, with Wall Street particularly hard hit. —AFP

Germany cuts 2022 GDP growth forecast on pandemic woes

BERLIN: The German government yesterday lowered its economic growth forecast for 2022 as an Omicron-fuelled surge in coronavirus cases holds back Europe's industrial powerhouse.

The country's gross domestic product is now estimated to expand by 3.6 percent, down from 4.1 percent in a previous forecast. The start of the year "will still be subdued due to the coronavirus pandemic, especially in the service sectors", the economy ministry said in a report.

But the bounce-back in Europe's biggest economy should "noticeably" pick up pace once infections level off and global supply chain frictions ease over the course of 2022. The ministry's forecast is more pessimistic than that of the Bundesbank central bank, which is penciling in 4.2 percent growth this year.

Germany, whose export-oriented economy is particularly vulnerable to the global supply chain bottlenecks and raw material shortages caused by the pandemic, has seen its recovery lag behind other major European economies like France and Italy. The flagship auto industry has been hardest hit, with giants like Volkswagen, BMW and Daimler forced to trim production at some plants over a shortage of semiconductor chips.

Vaccine mandate

German gross domestic product (GDP) grew by just 2.7 percent in 2021, official data showed earlier this month, well below the expected European

IMF urges El Salvador to remove bitcoin as legal tender

SANTIAGO: The IMF on Tuesday called on El Salvador to change course and stop using bitcoin as legal tender, citing "large risks" posed by the cryptocurrency. The small Central American nation in September became the first country in the world to embrace the digital money, allowing consumers to use it in all transactions, alongside the US dollar.

The call by the Washington-based crisis lender came as the cryptocurrency dropped in value amid wider volatility on Wall Street in recent days, undoing much of the gains it had made during a record-setting climb in value last year. The IMF staff had previously called on El Salvador's President Nayib Bukele to reconsider putting bitcoin at the center of his country's finances.

The latest pronouncement used much stronger language and came from the IMF's board, which is comprised of representatives of member governments including the United States.

The board's directors "urged the authorities to narrow the scope of the bitcoin law by removing bitcoin's legal tender status," according to a statement. They "stressed that there are large risks associated with the use of bitcoin on financial stability, financial integrity and consumer protection" and with issuing bitcoin-backed bonds. Bitcoin was trading at about \$37,000 on Tuesday, having lost about half its value compared to the record of \$67,734 hit in November.

'Bitcoin city'

Bitcoin shot up in value in 2021 as Wall Street showed a growing appetite for cryptocurrency, while Tesla boss Elon Musk's controversial tweets about the digital assets helped the market rise and



BERLIN: The German government yesterday lowered its economic growth forecast for 2022 as an Omicron-fuelled surge in coronavirus cases holds back Europe's industrial powerhouse.

Union average of around five percent.

The country of 83 million people reintroduced curbs on public life in recent weeks to tame a resurgence in COVID-cases, including measures that exclude the unvaccinated from restaurants, bars and non-essential shops. Germany is nevertheless seeing record numbers of new infections blamed on the highly contagious Omicron variant. The country added another 164,000 cases over the past 24 hours—an all-time high. German lawmakers will begin debating the introduction of a vaccine mandate for adults.

The measure is backed by new Chancellor Olaf

Scholz, whose government replaced Angela Merkel's cabinet last month, but has divided public opinion and sparked street protests. Economy Minister Robert Habeck said in the report that "an increased vaccination rate should make it possible to sustainably contain the pandemic" this year and "accelerate the economic recovery".

Consumer spending will be a key growth driver, the ministry said, as businesses gradually resume normal service and meet pent-up demand from customers flush with savings. Industrial firms can also expect to see higher demand for exports as the global recovery from the pandemic shock continues. — AFP



MIZATA, El Salvador: In this file photo, the President of El Salvador, Nayib Bukele, gestures during his speech at the closing ceremony of the Latin Bitcoin conference (LaBitConf) at Mizata Beach, El Salvador. — AFP

fall alike. The trend was not lost on Bukele, who was elected in 2019 with promises to fight organized crime and improve security in his violence-wracked country.

His move last September to legalize bitcoin in El Salvador drew worldwide attention and sparked protests on the streets of the capital San Salvador that were also over his administration's judicial reforms, which critics said threaten democracy. Thousands took to the streets carrying signs reading "No to bitcoin" and at one point burning one of the bitcoin ATMS that had been installed nationwide.

They didn't appear to deter Bukele, who announced in November plans to build the world's first "Bitcoin City," powered by a volcano and financed by \$1 billion cryptocurrency bonds. His administration had also taken advantage of price drops to buy the digital asset for the country.

The IMF was wary of the cryptocurrency's adoption from the start, with spokesman Gerry Rice saying before Bukele made the move official, "Adoption of bitcoin as legal tender raises a number of macroeconomic, financial and legal issues that require very careful analysis." —AFP

Burgan Bank launches Online Carnival

KUWAIT: Burgan Bank has launched the Online Carnival, a new promotional campaign for its Burgan Rewards Program. The campaign provides Burgan credit card holders with the opportunity to double their points when paying for their online purchases using any of Burgan credit cards. This campaign highlights part of the bank's commitment to take the customers' banking experience to a whole new level with a variety of exclusive benefits and all-new rewards.

During the campaign period extending from January 27 to February 10, credit card holders will earn double their Burgan Rewards Program points or miles when shopping online on local or international outlets and paying the total value of their transaction with any Burgan Bank credit card.

Commenting on the Online Carnival campaign, Saket Jajoo, Head of Cards - Retail Banking at Burgan Bank, said "People are increasingly shifting to making most of their purchases online, whether for ordering food, shopping, and booking activities or vacations. This is why we designed the Online Carnival to offer our customers added value on any purchase online during the duration of the campaign and give them the chance to make the most of their online banking experience, with more rewards and benefits tailored to their modern lifestyle."

Burgan Rewards is a rich loyalty program introduced to enhance the customers' overall banking experience with a diverse range of flexible and exclusive reward options and benefits including cash back, airline tickets, hotel reservations, in-store shopping, e-vouchers, and much more.

Business

Boubyan Bank's net profits increase to KD 48.5 million with an EPS of 13.57 fils

Al-Shaya: We are optimistic about 2022 with many positive indicators supporting such optimism

KUWAIT: Boubyan Bank has announced KD 48.5 million in net profits for the year 2021 with growth rate by 41 percent and an earnings per share of 13.57 fils along with a recommendation to distribute 5 percent in cash dividends and 5 percent in bonus shares. Moreover, the bank continued its prudential approach by allocating KD 50.8 million in provisions.

The bank's Chairman, Abdulaziz Abdullah Al-Shaya commented: "Thanks to Almighty Allah, we built on our experiences over the past years to continue our outstanding results in 2021, and we aspire for more achievements in 2022 in light of many positive indicators for 2022 underpinning this."

Al-Shaya stated that all of the Bank's main indicators witnessed a remarkable growth in 2021 where the total combined assets of Boubyan Bank Group increased to KD 7.4 billion, growing 14 percent, and the operating profits increased to KD 100.5 million, growing by 8 percent compared with last year.

Moreover, the total of customers' deposits grew by 10 percent to reach KD 5.6 billion, while the financing portfolio grew by 14 percent to reach KD 5.5 billion, and operating income grew by 12 percent to reach KD 188 million.

Speaking of the bank's market shares, the bank's share of local financing continued its growth journey in reaching approximately 11 percent in 2021, compared with 10 percent at the end of last year, while Boubyan Bank's share of retail finance grew to 14 percent, compared with 13 percent as at the end of last year, thereby positioning Boubyan Bank in third place among local banks in terms of volume of assets and market share.

A great year of achievements

Adel Abdul Wahab Al-Majed, Vice-Chairman & Group Chief Executive Officer of Boubyan Bank, stated: "Last year was marked by milestones and successes achieved by the bank in pursuit of its expansion plans, which aimed further local expansion in addition to expanding regionally and internationally."

"After 12 years of Boubyan's transformation phase, our operating profits have exceeded KD 100 million, and we have now become the third largest bank in Kuwait in terms of volume of assets and market share. We are now a group of three banks: Boubyan, BLME and NOMO digital bank, in addition to two subsidiaries: a Takaful insurance company and Boubyan Capital Investment company", he added.

Al-Majed stressed: "Our achievements are thanks to Almighty Allah, and then many other factors: the most prominent of which are our clear strategy, stable executive team over many years, and focusing on customers in addition to investing in digital banking services and in our human resources with special focus on our national cadres."

International expansion

"The bank's international expansion endeavors were crowned with success, supported by digital expansion through the acquisition of the Bank of London and the Middle East "BLME" in 2020, where Boubyan's current holding stands at 71 percent. Following this, Boubyan Bank announced last July the full launch of NOMO Bank in Kuwait and the UK as the first Islamic digital bank from London, which can offer its services to

Boubyan Bank's customers and non-customers alike," he stated.

He went on to add: "We aspire for BLME to become the Islamic bank of choice for GCC customers in the United Kingdom as we have incorporated a set of guiding principles for the bank as a part of its transformation strategy following the acquisition including having a sustainable customer-focused brand aligned with Boubyan Bank's Group", he added.

Speaking about NOMO Bank, Al-Majed elaborated: "The new NOMO digital-first banking experience lets users apply for a UK-based bank account in minutes using their smart phones, thereby giving them the chance to enjoy a unique banking experience in Kuwait and worldwide."

"This cuts out lengthy application processes that can take a prolonged time. Also, through an intuitive smartphone App, Nomo allows its customers to spend, send and invest their wealth on the go, with 24/7 access wherever their lifestyle takes them," he added.

Al-Majed elaborated: "Nomo's banking proposition is unique in that it gives non-UK residents from Kuwait the remarkable opportunity of opening a UK-based account and enjoying the many prestigious benefits of the UK banking system. Moreover, the local banking solutions of NOMO Bank help customers avoid high international fees and open up investment opportunities that would not be usually available to non-UK residents."

Corporate banking... outstanding solutions

Attracting companies which support the national economy across various sectors in the local market remains one of the most important goals of Boubyan Bank, which seeks to be achieved through offering a collection of outstanding banking services and solutions that meet all the needs of corporate customers. The Corporate Banking Group remains focused on continued development and enhancement of advanced digital products and services, thereby expanding the scope of offered services and reinforcing the suite of corporate banking services. Furthermore, SMEs continue to remain a key focus and retain the full support of Boubyan Bank in enabling the growth of their business by offering them the best banking services and solutions.

Over the past years, the group succeeded in offering most of the bank's products and services digitally using cutting-edge technology; the importance of this focus was evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. The group was also keen on staying up-to-date with the development of technological and digital aspects of banking services and products offered to local companies by adding various services, which can be performed online, or through Boubyan Corporate App.

Maintaining the leadership in digital services

Over the recent years, Boubyan managed to monopolize Global Finance's award for the World's Best Islamic Digital Bank owing to the strength of strategy set by the bank for attracting and servicing digital customers, obtaining high client adoption of digital offerings and providing them with cutting-edge services, and growth of customers



Abdulaziz Abdullah Al-Shaya



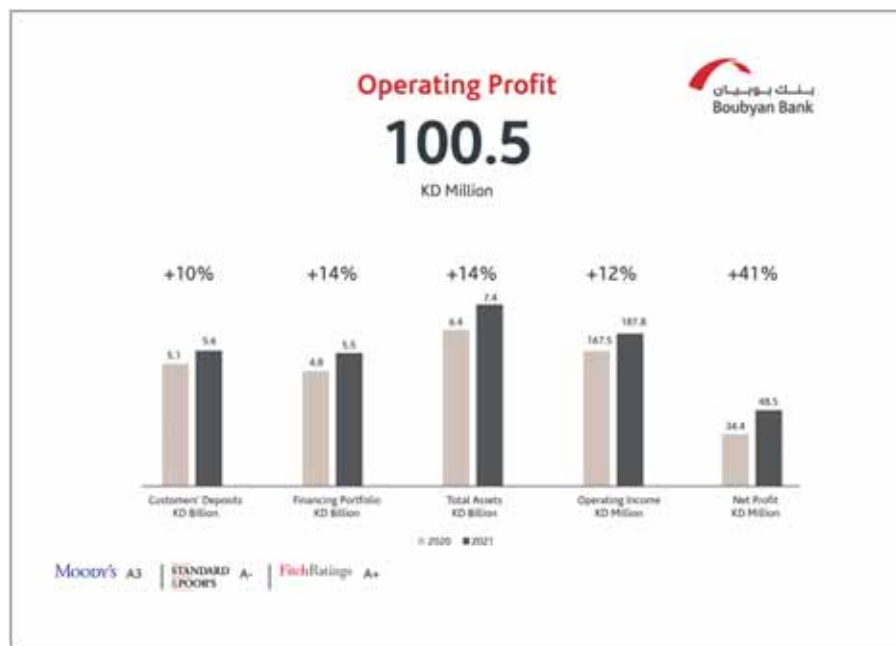
Adel Al-Majed

who use digital banking services through the bank's various channels, whether through online banking or smart phones.

Furthermore, Boubyan Bank excelled digitally last year by expanding the services of youths' account "Prime", which became more like a "bank within a bank" operating independently from Boubyan Bank. Boubyan also launched the London-based NOMO Bank, which is the fruit of our investments in digital services.

Service Hero, the international consumer-driven customer satisfaction index.

Al-Majed stated: "What distinguished Boubyan the most was that despite the ongoing growth of its customer base, this was not accompanied by inferior service or any negative impact due to such an increase, which always represented a fresh challenge to our employees to maintain the same level of service." Al-Majed went on to explain:



Boubyan concluded the year by inking an important agreement with DIFC FinTech Hive to launch a Boubyan Accelerator to spurn the growth and expansion of all types of Kuwaiti tech startups out of the bank's keenness to support young Kuwaitis' projects, making Boubyan Bank the first bank in Kuwait to run this program for startups in Kuwait.

In 2021, Boubyan Bank continued accelerating digital transformation across all of its operations to enhance the robustness and integrity of its business and the ability to keep up with the significant growth in the bank's operations with full efficiency in addition to the impact of these practical steps on the environmental protection and the achievement of international goals at the level of sustainable development.

The crisis caused by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Kuwait has revealed the strength of Boubyan Bank and its ability to continue delivering its quality customer service without compromising the high levels maintained over the recent years. This helped the bank continue topping the pyramid of customer service in Kuwait, which was affirmed by being named the Best Islamic Bank in Customer Service for the eleventh year in a row since 2010 by

"Customer service is an integral part of the bank's culture. It is no secret that almost all banks offer similar products, however, our excellence and outperformance come through service and the way of dealing with customers, especially in Kuwait where customers have high expectations."

Al-Majed highlighted that Boubyan Bank continued receiving many awards in 2021 as it was named the Best Islamic Financial Institution in Kuwait by Global Finance, which also named Boubyan Bank the World's Best Islamic Digital Bank, the Best Islamic Digital Bank in Kuwait and the Best Islamic Digital Bank in the Middle East.

Our society.... The greatest responsibility

The year 2021 has been no different than the previous one in terms of the state of instability that swept the world and Kuwait owing to the continued concerns and fears arising as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, which affected many aspects of life. 2021 swung between reopening at the beginning, followed by partial lockdown, and finally returning to normal life as a result of vaccinating most of Kuwait's population.

The past year was a significant milestone concerning Boubyan Bank's con-

tinuation to undertake its social role through organizing many events and initiatives, which highlighted its local leadership as to serving the society, and reiterating its CSR leadership position in Kuwait.

In 2021, Boubyan Bank published its first sustainability report for 2020 titled (Sustainability - a Gene and Core Value) that tackles Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) sustainability indicators, which are among the important aspects to evaluate the bank's performance and positioning locally and regionally. In light of this commitment to corporate social responsibility, 2021 witnessed Boubyan Bank's continued acceleration of digital transformation across all of its operations to enhance the robustness and integrity of its business and the ability to keep up with the significant growth in the bank's operations with full efficiency in addition to the impact of these practical steps on environmental protection and the achievement of international goals at the sustainable development level, which is considered a main pillar in the bank's strategy where preserving the environment and minimizing electronic emissions and paper waste account for a main part.

Accordingly, the bank collaborated with one of the local companies to provide it with an integrated paperless environment, reduce printing costs, and offer automated document archiving solutions, minimize operating cost and reduce transaction-processing time in order to offer swift and state-of-the-art service to Boubyan customers.

Furthermore, as a part of its corporate social responsibility, the bank organized workshops to various government entities and institutions on enhancing efficiency, effectiveness and change management. The bank continued supporting SMEs through many initiatives, the most significant of which was supporting the youths' initiative (Tetaman) in cooperation with Sheghel.com platform, where a group of freelancers offered free services to Kuwaiti SMEs' owners, especially those who were severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Moreover, and to support Kuwaiti sports following the past interruption, the bank sponsored the Kuwaiti Handball League, being one of the popular sports in Kuwait in addition to being a game, which is expected to see continued of growth over the upcoming years.

Young & ambitious human resources

Boubyan gives a special attention to its human resources as a part of its business strategy as a modern bank that keeps up with international and regional developments through its young management. The bank is known for giving the youths an outstanding leading role, especially as the bank provides them with all the training and academic resources that give them an excellent opportunity to gain professional and practical expertise, and this makes them gain great experience compared with their age."

Boubyan Bank succeeded last year in maintaining a high national manpower ratio that currently stands at 80 percent approximately, which is not only the highest among local banks but also at the level of the Kuwaiti private sector, where the bank stands as an example of successful local manpower recruitment and a creator of excellent job opportunities in the region.

Huawei launches its flagships P50 Pro, Huawei P50 Pocket

KUWAIT: Huawei Consumer Business Group announced yesterday the launch of the new Huawei P50 Pro, the ultimate camera phone with aesthetic design and Huawei P50 Pocket - its latest foldable phone that takes fashion beauty and technological innovations to next level, during a regional launch event that took place in Riyadh.

Pablo Ning, President of Huawei Consumer Business Group - Middle East and Africa said "We are glad to bring the new Huawei P50 Pro and Huawei P50 Pocket to our users in the region as we remain committed to the pursuit of the best quality, aesthetics and photography experiences. The new Huawei P50 Pro returns to the philosophies that sit at the heart of flagship phones with a True-Form Dual-Matrix Camera and exquisite design while the Huawei P50 Pocket brings fashion, beauty and tech innovations into the fold with Huawei Image, whilst its all-new hinge design enables the smartphone to fold seamlessly into a slim and pocketable form."

The Huawei P50 Pro will be available in two beautiful, premium finishes - Cocoa Gold and Golden Black Gold in Kuwait on the 3/2/2022 with pre-order starting from 27/1/2022 at a price of KD 319.9 from

Huawei's online platforms as well as certified retailers. While the Huawei P50 Pocket will be available in White and Premium Gold in Kuwait on 10/2/2022 with pre-order starting from 3/2/2022 at a price of KD 429.9 from Huawei's online platforms as well as certified retailers.

Dual-Matrix camera

The Huawei P50 Pro's Dual-Matrix Camera system delivers true to life imagery with extreme clarity. The Huawei XD Optics allow consumers to capture amazing images and reproduce fine details. Huawei P50 Pro also launches with XD Fusion Pro, an improved solution that incorporates a new Super Colour Filter System, True-Chroma Image Engine and Super HDR technology to significantly improve detail, color and dynamic range. It also supports an unprecedented 200 times zoom range, helping users capture any object regardless of distance.

The True-Chroma Image Engine delivers the highest possible color accuracy, creating images that reflect what is seen by the human eye. The ambient light sensing system uses a 10-channel multi-spectrum sensor, which is coupled with color calibration of more than 2,000 colors across the P3 wide color gamut, to improve its ability to detect ambient light and average color hue accuracy by 50 percent and 20 percent respectively.

Huawei P50 Pocket

The Huawei P50 Pocket folds seamlessly into an ultra-slim, lightweight body that is a joy to hold. The



new-generation Multi-Dimensional Hinge is a total upgrade from its predecessor, featuring an even shorter radius. Combined with the exclusive Multi-Dimensional Lifting design, it allows the device to be even slimmer and produce a smoother screen when unfolded. The back of the device captures the shadows and texture of the earth, which are brought to life through the advanced 3D micro-sculpture design on the white version of the device. Huawei joined forces



with prominent haute couture designer, Iris Van Herpen, in a cross-industry collaboration to create the HUAWEI P50 Pocket Premium Edition.

The Huawei P50 Pocket fully supports the cutting-edge technology that debuted with Huawei P50 Pro including the True-Chroma Image Engine and Huawei XD Optics. One of the main features is the selfie with rear camera: it uses selfie algorithms and the big camera sensor to boost low light performance, allowing users to take superior, more atmospheric selfies. The Huawei P50 Pocket's Huawei Ultra Spectrum Camera combines powerful hardware and software, as well as the tweaking of over 2,000 colours across the full P3 colour gamut, to let users accurately capture what they see. Using the Ultra Spectrum Fluorescence Photography4 feature, the phone can also capture content and details that are unseen by the human eye. It also introduces Sunscreen detection for the first time. Accessible via the Mirror app, this handy feature visualises the spread of sunscreen on skin to help users check for uncovered spots and avoid getting sunburnt.

Business

At up to \$8,000/week, America's travel nurses keep COVID-hit hospitals afloat

Travel nursing sector revenue grew 35% in 2020, projected to expand 40% in 2021

WASHINGTON: For Allyssa Findorff, the decision to hit the road on short-term nursing contracts was an easy one: she'd always wanted to see the rest of America, and the attractive rates on offer helped seal the deal. A year into the pandemic, with what she felt was enough experience in the ER under her belt, the 32-year-old, her restaurant server boyfriend and their two dogs left their native Wisconsin for her hospital assignments in Florida, followed by Colorado and now Arizona.

With the Omicron variant pushing the nation's health care system to the brink, and staff leaving in droves due to poor conditions and burnout, "travel nurses" are helping plug the gaps-and sometimes pulling in wages that exceed those of surgeons. "My boyfriend and I kind of agreed to only stay somewhere for four months, even if we love it, just so that we keep moving," she told AFP, adding the pair wanted to see "each corner of the country" by the time she's done.

Travel nursing isn't new, but the sector saw revenue growth of 35 percent in 2020, and was projected to expand a further 40 percent from 2020 to 2021, according to figures by Staffing Industry Analysts.

Mike Press, a recruiter at staffing agency Judge, told AFP rates were going as high as \$8,000 per week, though this was on the higher end. Most listings on Facebook groups advertising for jobs currently fall around the \$3,000-5,000 per week range, still significantly higher than before the pandemic, when travel nurses typically earned around 15 percent more than those on staff per year.

Year's salary in three months

Contracts typically last three to four months, during which time travel nurses can make as much as they did in a full year before the pandemic, although some hospitals are now "testing the water with four-to-six week contracts" as the current hospitalization spike is forecast to taper, said Press.

Stacey Bosak, a 45-year-old from the Philadelphia area, is a single mother-of-four who leapt at the opportunity to start "traveling" as soon as the pandemic hit. Elective surgeries were being canceled, staff who worked in non-emergency fields were being laid off-and besides, Bosak had an instinct for running towards dangerous situations others might flee from-including during the September 11, 2001 attacks, prior to being a nurse.

"When 9/11 happened, I drove there, and obviously there was nothing to do, and so when this happened, I had all the tools to help," she said. Her first job as a travel nurse came in the spring of 2020 in New York, when the city became the global epicenter of the coronavirus.

After a stint in Maryland, Bosak is back in her home area on a short contract. She says that the situation during this wave "has been hell on Earth." "The hospital is no place for a sick person right now-it's really bad," she said, with staffing shortages extending to administrators and other types of medical worker.

Bosak gave the example of a case where she was tending to COVID patients who required high-flow oxygen through a nasal cannula, a technique which has been shown to reduce the need for invasive intubation on a ventilator, which not all patients need. But because the hospital didn't have enough high-flow machines, the patients had to be intubated, which can lead to worse outcomes.

Corporate greed

Hospital systems have accused recruitment agencies of exploiting the pandemic, with industry group American Hospital Association in February 2021 calling on the Federal Trade Commission to investigate. "It shouldn't be permitted during a pandemic, just like we don't permit building companies to triple the price of lumber after a hurricane," John Galley, chief human resource officer at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, told



SEATTLE, US: Nurse Elisa Gilbert checks on a patient in the acute care COVID-19 unit at the Harborview Medical Center in Seattle. —AFP

trade magazine Becker's Hospital Review recently.

But according to Edward Smith, executive director of the DC Nurses Association, the nursing crisis existed well before the pandemic. One of the underlying reasons was low nurse-to-patient ratios driving nurses to burnout, caused by the greed of hospitals themselves.

"It's not that there's not a shortage of available nurses-there's really a shortage of available nurses that will continue to put their license in jeopardy, their lives in jeopardy, and the patient's care in

jeopardy," he said.

Hospital groups have lobbied furiously against state level bills that would legislate against low staffing to patient ratios-spending \$25 million in Massachusetts in 2019 to defeat such an effort. Finally, the current windfalls for travel nurses come with certain pitfalls, Colin Bosak, who advises temporary medical staff for the firm 1847Financial, told AFP. Most temporary staffing companies don't offer benefits like retirement plans-or, ironically, health insurance. —AFP

News in brief



Emirates NBD profits jump

DUBAI: Dubai's largest bank, Emirates NBD, announced yesterday that its net profits jumped in 2021, as the economy of the Gulf city state rebounded following a slump due to coronavirus. The bank, the second largest lender in the United Arab Emirates, said its net profits rose 34 percent to \$2.5 billion, from \$1.9 billion in 2020. It said in a company statement that the bank has set aside \$1.6 billion in impairments, covering loan losses, a 26-percent decrease from last year, due to improving economic conditions. "Emirates NBD's profits grew 34 percent in 2021 demonstrating the resilience of the Group's diversified business model," said chairman Sheikh Ahmed bin Saeed Al-Maktoum. The bank said total income increased three percent to \$6.5 billion, from \$6.3 billion a year earlier, "as higher retail volumes offset the impact of low interest rates". —AFP

EU launches space startup fund

PARIS: The EU launched Tuesday a billion-euro fund to support startups in the space sector with the hope it will be a "game changer" and attract private investors into the key sector. Named the Cassini fund after the 17th century Italian astronomer, it was launched as part of the European Investment Fund (EIF) which provides risk financing to small and medium-sized businesses across Europe. "Many of our startups cannot get sizeable equity investment in the EU once they need to scale up," said Thierry Breton, the EU's internal market commissioner, at a gathering for the European space industry in Brussels. —AFP

Argentine GDP grew in 2021

BUENOS AIRES: Argentina's economy grew 10.3 percent in the first 11 months of 2021 from the same period a year earlier, the Indec statistics institute said Tuesday. For the month of November, GDP grew 9.3 percent year-on-year and 1.7 percent from October, it said. The data suggests Argentina is exiting the recession it fell into in 2018, worsened in 2020 — when GDP dropped 9.9 percent — by the coronavirus epidemic. Economic growth is a key target for the center-left government in its negotiations with the International Monetary Fund on refinancing a \$44 billion loan. —AFP

Used cars turn to gold as Sri Lanka economy falters

COLOMBO: Supermarket shelves are bare and restaurants can't serve meals, but Sri Lanka's economic crisis is a bonanza for used car dealers, with vehicle shortages pushing prices higher than a house in a nice area. The island nation of 22 million is on the brink of bankruptcy, inflation is red hot and the government has barred a range of "non-essential" imports to save dollars needed to buy food, medicine and fuel.

In the car market, this two-year ban has kept factory-fresh automobiles off local roads, forcing desperate buyers to pay some of the world's highest prices for beaten-up compacts and no-frills family sedans. Anthony Fernando spent a recent weekend courting through sales lots in the Colombo outskirts on behalf of his daughter, who has tried to find an affordable set of wheels for nearly a year.

"She was thinking that prices will come down," the 63-year-old told AFP, but now she is "paying for procrastinating".

Prices have gone "beyond the reach of a common person", he said. A five-year-old Toyota Land Cruiser was on offer online for an eye-watering 62.5 million rupees (\$312,500) — triple the pre-ban rate, and enough to buy a house in a middle-class Colombo neighborhood or a new luxury apartment in the city center. A decade-old Fiat five-seater with a busted engine

that might be stripped for parts elsewhere was listed at \$8,250 — more than twice Sri Lanka's average yearly income.

"A car and a house are symbols of success," said a grinning Sarath Yapa Bandara, the owner of one of the capital's biggest dealerships. "That is why most people are willing to buy even at these high prices."

'Out of this world'

Car ownership remains a virtual necessity in the traffic-snarled streets of Colombo, where a ramshackle bus and rail network was already struggling with overcrowding.

The number of taxis has also fallen sharply, with drivers selling their cabs to cash in on the dizzying prices, and those still working charging double their old fares or more. "You must have your own car," said Udaya Hegoda Arachchi, another buyer preparing to bite the bullet at a dealership.

"We can't expect prices to come down anytime soon, given the economic situation in the country," he told AFP. COVID has sent Sri Lanka into a tail-spin, drying up all-important earnings from tourism and foreign remittances.

In March 2020 the government brought in a wide-ranging import ban-including for new cars-to stop foreign currency from leaving the country. But the policy has not been able to staunch the outflow of dollars, and has instead left the nation struggling to source critical goods.

Food retailers have rationed rice, restaurants have shuttered because they cannot find cooking gas, and cash-strapped power utilities unable to



COLOMBO: In this picture taken on January 10, 2022, customers look at cars displayed for sale at a car dealership in Malabe, in the district of Colombo. —AFP

afford oil have imposed rolling blackouts. Farmers have run out of fertilizer.

Chinese debt

Rating agencies have warned that Sri Lanka might default soon although the government says it will meet its commitments. It is trying to renegotiate its Chinese debts with Beijing. The import ban has also left car parts in short supply, meaning drivers are at risk of being stranded after a breakdown.

Ravi Ekanayake told AFP that his Colombo repair garage was doing a roaring trade from owners unable to afford the astronomical costs of switching to a new vehicle. "But parts are scarce. It is a catch-22: You either get caught with an old car without

parts or you don't have the money to buy a new car."

Financial analyst Murtaza Jafferjee said the prices also underscored a problem caused by excessive money printing by a cash-strapped central bank, with "too much money chasing too few goods".

He said the prices were also increasing transport costs and adding to inflation, which hit a record 14 percent in December. "When vehicles become unaffordable for a segment of society, their activities will be limited. Then we will also see a loss of economic output," the CEO of JB Securities said. "We are about to collapse and not many people appreciate the depth of the problem." —AFP

Microsoft sees strong earnings on cloud computing

SAN FRANCISCO: Microsoft beat market expectations Tuesday with strong quarterly performance in cloud computing and software, still benefitting from the pandemic's online shifting of work, play, shopping and learning.

The US tech colossus, which announced last week a blockbuster deal to buy gaming giant Activision Blizzard, said profit jumped to \$18.8 billion in the final three months of last year. "Digital technology is the most malleable resource at the world's disposal to overcome constraints and reimagine everyday work and life," CEO Satya Nadella said, in announcing revenue of \$51.7 billion.

Microsoft investments include pouring money into the booming video game market and by extension the metaverse, the virtual reality vision for the internet's future. On an earnings call, Nadella pointed to the tens of millions of people playing games such as Forza, Halo and Minecraft, many investing in "avatar" proxies for online worlds, saying that the metaverse is a natural extension.

Microsoft is also meshing virtual gathering components with non-game offerings, such as Teams online collaboration software, according to executives.

"We feel very well positioned to be able to catch what I think is essentially the next wave of the internet,"

Nadella said on the call. The Redmond, Washington-based tech company last week announced a landmark deal to buy scandal-hit "Call of Duty" maker Activision for \$69 billion.

This would be the largest buyout ever for Microsoft, well ahead of LinkedIn in 2016 for \$26.2 billion.

Revenue at the career-focused social network was up 37 percent when compared with the same quarter a year earlier, according to the earnings report. Acquiring the troubled but highly successful Activision will make Microsoft the third-largest gaming company by revenue, behind Tencent and Sony, Microsoft said. The proposed merger faces regulatory approval at a time when Europe and the United States are seeking to rein in Big Tech.

Revenue in the Microsoft division which makes Xbox consoles and video game content grew 10 percent in the recently ended quarter, according to the earnings report.

'PC renaissance'

"Redmond is continuing to see strength in the field as more enterprises continue to move to the cloud with Nadella & Co," Wedbush analyst Dan Ives said in a note to investors. Ives saw the strong earnings from Microsoft as a "broader indication of strength we expect to see across the enterprise cloud software landscape throughout this earnings season."

Microsoft competes with Amazon and Google in the cloud computing market. Units devoted to cloud services at Microsoft each logged double-digit revenue growth, bringing in tens of billions of dollars, according to the earnings report.

Microsoft's division devoted to the Windows oper-

ating system also flourished on what Nadella referred to as a "renaissance" of the personal computer (PC) market that had been withering before the pandemic forced many people around the world to stay home. "More than ever people are turning to PCs to exercise their agency, and unleash their creativity," Nadella said.

"We are experiencing a PC renaissance with increases in time spent on PCs and PCs per household," Microsoft stock was up slightly in the wake of the earnings call. Some of the more bullish investors had expected better financial results, according to Wedbush. "In this jittery market we will see every tech print initially viewed as glass half empty, but ultimately this remains a core cloud name to own," Ives said. Third Bridge vice president Scott Kessler was among analysts keen for insight into what effect an end to the pandemic will have on Microsoft growth fueled by remote work, play, and school.

"We've seen many darlings of the early Covid period becoming fallen angels," Kessler said in a note.

Nadella expected digital technology to remain a valuable resource as people and businesses "reimagine" life and society looks for solutions to challenges such as labor shortages. "We are living through a generational shift in our economy and society," Nadella said. —AFP



Satya Nadella

Lifestyle | Features

THE EXILED SCULPTOR OF 'ALL THAT IS NO LONGER THERE' IN SYRIA



In this file photo Syrian sculptor Khaled Dawwa works on a clay art piece, representing a street in Syria destroyed by Syrian regime forces and their allies, during a photo session in his workshop in Vanves, near Paris.



Syrian sculptor Khaled Dawwa poses in front of a clay artwork. —AFP photos

A Syrian neighborhood targeted by regime bombing lies in ruins, with bodies and broken toys poking out of the rubble; tall, grey buildings are reduced to crumbling, empty shells, their walls blown away or pockmarked by the blast. The scene, captured in devastating detail, has been created by artist Khaled Dawwa, a Syrian exile and prison survivor who now works in France.

In his colossal work entitled "Here is my heart!" Dawwa is still battling oppression, urging viewers "not to forget the revolution by the Syrian people and all their sacrifices". "When I'm working on this piece in my studio, I'm in Damascus. I do everything I can here, while not being there...", the 36-year-old tells AFP. Deeply scarred by the years of repressive rule and violent crackdowns and the loss of friends killed, missing or imprisoned, Dawwa's work is both an act of revolt and memory, targeting "the international community's inaction against dictatorial regimes" in Syria and elsewhere.

"In the face of the disaster that is happening in Syria, I feel a responsibility because I have the tools to express myself," he says. Among several of his massive installations—including one in bronze—being exhibited for the first time this year in France, "Here is my heart!" has been on display in Paris and soon

transfers to a big national museum.

Bearing witness

Dawwa began the piece in 2018, as regime forces retook the rebel bastion of Eastern Ghouta, on Damascus' outskirts. At nearly six meters (nearly 20 feet) long and more than two meters high, it is imposing. Using polystyrene, earth, glue and wood, covered in clay, he details the destruction inside and out—the shattered doors, blown-away balconies, right down to the overturned chairs. In the debris, crunched-up bicycles and the wreckage of a bus can be seen—but also the bodies of a child lying next to his ball and of an old woman.

"It's totally unique and innovative," says philosopher Guillaume de Vault, of the French Institute for the Near East (Ifpo) and co-author of "Destructiveness in Works. Essay on Contemporary Syrian Art". "Artists have shown destroyed things and made it their art, but he shows the process of destruction from within," de Vault adds, speaking from Beirut. "He stops before the form has totally disappeared but the viewer is inevitably led to imagine the moment when everything will crumble..."

'Broken memories'

Themes pitting people against authority dominate the works of Dawwa, who graduated from Damascus' School of Fine Arts. From the onset, he took part in the



Syrian sculptor Khaled Dawwa works on a clay artwork.

nationwide anti-government protests that began in 2011, before joining other artists and activists to set up an independent cultural center in Damascus, initiated by Syrian actor Fares Helou. Despite police pressure, Dawwa continued to demonstrate and work at the centre for three years. By 2013, he was practically the only one left there. "My battle was to not abandon the project, otherwise it was as if we were giving up hope," he says. It was during that period he came to understand the

impact his sculptures could have.

Posting a photo of his work on Facebook, he was surprised to see it shared hundreds of times. Although risky, he continued to create and post pictures, but then destroyed the sculptures "in order to leave no trace", he says. Then, in May 2013, he was seriously wounded in his studio by shrapnel and, on leaving hospital, jailed, spending two months in various prisons. "There were thousands of people. Every day, at least 10 would die,"

he says. "Their bodies would stay for two days next to us, no one removed them from the cell... on purpose."

Of the horror of the experience which still gives him nightmares, he says: "They broke the memories in my head." After his release, he was forced into the army but escaped beforehand, fleeing to Lebanon, then to France in 2014 where he was granted refugee status.

'Rebuilt our history'

His street-scene artwork, he says, is an attempt to convey "all that is no longer there: families, memories". The Syria conflict, which broke out in 2011, has killed close to half a million people and spurred the largest conflict-induced displacement since World War II. Veronique Pierey de Mandiargues, a founding member of France's Portes Ouvertes Sur l'Art association, which supports artists in exile, said Dawwa "wanted to create a fixed image of what was happening in Syria so that it remains in our memories".

Lifting her hand to her heart, Syrian psychoanalyst Rana Alssayah, 54, also a France-based refugee, expresses her emotions on first seeing the piece. "The magnitude of the destruction that Khaled has recreated, it's so real... I couldn't look at all the details inside the buildings, it was too hard." Through this work, "he is saying the sorrow and pain that we can't talk about, he has rebuilt our history." —AFP



Racing pigeons are pictured inside cages next to awards at the International Trade Fair of Racing Pigeons EXPOGolebie in the International Congress Centre in Katowice, Poland. —AFP photos



Zbigniew Oleksiak is pictured at the International Trade Fair of Racing Pigeons EXPOGolebie.



Racing pigeons are pictured inside cages at the International Trade Fair of Racing Pigeons EXPOGolebie.

POLAND'S PIGEON FANCIERS EYE MOVING UP THE PECKING ORDER

Opening one of his many cages, Michal Trojczak watches proudly as more than 70 dusty-blue pigeons take flight, soaring high above snow-covered fields in eastern Poland. "My birds are athletes," says the 42-year-old pigeon fancier, who inherited his passion for breeding the birds from his father and grandfather. Poland boasts Europe's biggest community of homing pigeon breeders—and a string of international competition trophies—but trails other countries in the breeding of pedigree birds that command a higher value.

As one of those who has decided to do something about that, Trojczak said he had turned professional after retiring from the army a few years ago and teamed up with a friend. Together, they bought Belgian pigeons with prestigious pedigrees, investing thousands of euros, including 11,000 euros (\$12,400) alone for the progeny of a bird called Porsche 911. "He's provided us with a lot of satisfaction and money," the ex-army captain tells AFP. Now, he hopes the sky's the limit for Polish pigeon-enthusiasts who, he believes, will rise to rival their Belgian and Dutch counterparts within a decade.

Birds of communication

Pigeon lofts are a part of Poland's landscape especially in the mining region of Silesia, where pigeon breeding has historic roots and the birds enjoy near-mythic status. After a day

underground, it's still common to see miners emerge into the daylight, scanning the skies for their winged friends. Released hundreds of kilometers (miles) from their pigeon lofts, the birds find their way home thanks to an ability to detect the earth's magnetic field and orient themselves according to the sun.

Flying with the wind, they can reach up to 120 kilometers (74 miles) per hour. After Poland won back its independence in 1918, the use, breeding and racing of pigeons was regulated by the military affairs ministry due to the strategic importance of the birds' ability to carry communications. The Nazis immediately banned pigeon breeding after occupying Poland in 1939, and enthusiasts were forced to start again from scratch after the war.

Strength in numbers

"With more than 40,000 members, we're the largest organization of its kind in Europe, founded more than 100 years ago," said Krzysztof Kawaler, head of the Polish association of homing pigeon breeders. France and Belgium—where pigeon fancying has deep roots—have around 11,000 and 13,000 breeders respectively, according to their associations.

"We take home the most prizes at international competitions," Kawaler told AFP at a trade fair in Katowice, in the heart of the Silesia region. Those tournaments do not see the pigeons congregate in one place, as world

athletes do at the Olympics. Instead, every country holds its own local races in which the pigeons are equipped with electronic rings to record their flight time.

The results are calculated across the countries using coefficients that notably take into

account the number of participating pigeons. Since Poland has so many breeders, it helps boost its scores, according to Trojczak. "But it doesn't reflect the pigeons' actual worth," he stresses, lamenting that Polish pigeon fanciers are still viewed as amateurs in Western Europe.



A visitor inspects the wings and feathers of a racing pigeon at the International Trade Fair of Racing Pigeons EXPOGolebie.

Pecking order

"On the Polish market, pigeons go for between 250 zlotys (around 55 euros) and four, five or even six thousand zlotys for those that participate in international tournaments," veteran breeder Zbigniew Oleksiak told AFP. In Western Europe, however, prices start at around 200 euros but can go sky high, like the Belgian pigeon, Armando, which fetched 1.25 million euros at auction in 2019. The buyer was Chinese, as was the proud new owner of New Kim, another Belgian bird which sold for 1.6 million euros the following year. Like tree-horses, it is the pedigree—the bird's family tree—that matters to buyers, especially those from Asia.

Long hours

For Trojczak, the days are long, especially in spring and summer. "You have to train the pigeons to get them into shape, monitor their health, feed them well," he says. "When you have to prep the birds for a race, sometimes I'll be up and running at 4:00 am and won't finish till 9:00 pm." He now sells around 100 pigeons a year at prices ranging from 100 to 2,500 euros, which allows him to "live quite comfortably when combined with my military pension". But it's not just a money-maker, pigeon breeding is above all a labor of love. "I can trace each of my pigeons back three or four generations... I know their family trees better than my own," he says, laughing. —AFP

Lakers beat Nets in Davis’ return, Clippers rally to stun Wizards

James finishes with 33 points, seven rebounds and six assists

LOS ANGELES: LeBron James scored a team-high 33 points and Anthony Davis returned to spark the offense as the Los Angeles Lakers beat the short-handed Brooklyn Nets 106-96 on Tuesday in New York.

James shot 14-of-21 from the floor and added seven rebounds and six assists for the Lakers, who have lost five of their last eight and are struggling to maintain a .500 win-loss record this season in the Western Conference standings.

Davis played his first game since injuring his knee in a 110-92 loss to Minnesota on December 17 and finished with eight points. Davis had a dunk on the game's first possession and played 25 minutes. The Lakers went 7-10 while Davis was sidelined, with James carrying the offensive load.

"Just his presence impacts this ball club," James said of the superstar forward. "He adds another dynamic player on the floor. You can't have all the eyes on myself, Russ (Westbrook) and Melo (Carmelo Anthony)."

James said he used the motivation of playing in New York to ignite the fire inside him. The last time the Lakers played in New York, James was serving a suspension for fighting. "I missed my first appearance in New York because of a suspension. Hopefully, I make them proud," he said of the fans who cheered him on Tuesday. Malik Monk hit six threes and added 22 points as the Lakers shot 47.2 percent from the field. Westbrook added 15 points and Anthony chimed in 13.

Tuesday's loss continued a string of inconsistent performances by the Nets, who were missing all-stars Kevin Durant and Kyrie Irving. Durant sprained the medial collateral ligament in his left knee during the second quarter of their 120-105 home win over the New Orleans Pelicans on January 15.

Irving has been banned from playing home games by New York City health officials because he refuses to get vaccinated against COVID-19. With those two out, the Nets are leaning on James Harden, who bounced back from one of his worst games of the season with a triple-double of 33 points, 12

rebounds and 11 assists against the Lakers.

Clippers comeback

In Washington, Luke Kennard scored seven points in the final nine seconds as the Los Angeles Clippers engineered one of the biggest comebacks in NBA history with a 116-115 win over the Washington Wizards.

Kennard delivered the go-ahead four-point play with two seconds remaining for the Clippers, who at one stage were down 66-31 in the first half before scoring 80 points in the second. "We kept chipping, chipping away," Clippers coach Tyrone Lue said. "When we got to (within) 10, I was like, 'OK, we've got a real shot, we've got a real opportunity here if we can get some stops.'"



Embiid powers 76ers; Celtics dethrone Kings

Kennard hit a 32-foot basket out of a timeout and then, after Washington committed a five-second inbound violation, sank another running three-pointer while being fouled by star Wizards guard Bradley Beal. Kennard finished with 25 points.

The result tied the second-largest comeback in NBA history, when the Sacramento Kings dug their way out of a 35-point hole against the Chicago Bulls in 2009. The record is held by the Utah Jazz, who overcame a 36-point deficit to defeat the Denver Nuggets in 1996.

Amir Coffey scored a career-high 29 points for the Clippers. The Wizards have now lost four in a row. "This January has been wild," Coffey said. "You never know when the game's over. Just play



NEW YORK: LeBron James #6 of the Los Angeles Lakers dunks against the Brooklyn Nets at Barclays Center on Tuesday in the Brooklyn borough of New York City. — AFP

through the buzzer." Elsewhere, Joel Embiid had 42 points and 14 rebounds to lift the host Philadelphia 76ers past the New Orleans Pelicans 117-107. Embiid shot 12 of 24 from the field and 18 of 20 from the free-throw line.

It was Embiid's sixth game with at least 40 points this season. In Boston, Jayson Tatum and Jaylen Brown combined to score 66 points as the Boston Celtics clobbered the Sacramento Kings with a 128-75 victory for their seventh win in 10 games. — AFP

News in brief

Kuwait fails to qualify for handball World Cup

RIYADH: Kuwait's handball team has lost its chance to qualify for the 2023 World Cup after they were held to a 25-25 draw during its 2022 Asian Men's Handball Championship match against Iraq yesterday. —KUNA

Martial to Sevilla

MADRID: Manchester United striker Anthony Martial has completed a six-month loan move to Sevilla, the clubs announced on Tuesday, as the France international looks to revive his career in La Liga. Martial will join Sevilla's title charge in Spain, with the club in second place and trailing Real Madrid by four points. The 26-year-old told United's interim coach Ralf Rangnick that he wanted to leave in January after growing frustrated with a lack of playing opportunities. —AFP

Eriksen starts comeback

THE HAGUE: Danish footballer Christian Eriksen, who went into cardiac arrest at last year's European Championships, is training with Ajax as he seeks a new club, the Amsterdam side said Tuesday. Eriksen, 29, who has been fitted with a pacemaker, joined Jong Ajax, the reserve team of his former club after terminating his contract with Inter Milan by mutual consent in December. Italian league rules bar players with pacemakers. —AFP

Juventus to add Vlahovic

ROME: Italian giants Juventus are close to signing Fiorentina's rampaging 21-year-old striker Dusan Vlahovic, Italian media reported widely on Tuesday. Often compared to Zlatan Ibrahimovic, the Serb has 17 goals in Serie A this season and Juventus are ready to pay around 70 million euros for the youngster as they seek to fill the goal gap left by Cristiano Ronaldo. —AFP

Mohammed Jaffar returns home after excellent Dakar 2022

KUWAIT: International motocross athlete Mohammed Jaffar has recently concluded his second attempt in as many years at the illustrious Dakar Rally. This year, he achieved his primary goal of completing the grueling race, which is no small feat by any means. "I was very happy to have another chance at Dakar." Said the award-winning Kuwaiti rider after the race.

He proudly crossed the finish line, in what was the culmination of nearly a year of preparation for him and his hardworking rally team. Upon his return to Kuwait, he made it clear that the annual rally, once

again held this year in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, was still at the top of his mind. "I already miss the Dakar life," said Mohammed Jaffar, enthusiastically.

The Dakar Rally took place over the first half of January 2022, and Jaffar and his team focused all their efforts on bringing the champion motocross athlete to the finish line. Mohammed Jaffar and his entire crew worked extremely hard over the previous months to bring this goal to fruition. And with the success this year, it seems their revised strategy worked in their favor.

Jaffar had this to say on the long hours on the course, and the short nights of interrupted sleep. "It's about how you adapt to constant and extreme stress, and keeping my body and bike healthy for the upcoming day," Jaffar said.

The excitement leading up to the start of the Dakar Rally was palpable, but Jaffar stayed true to the agreed strategy until the very end. He proceeded with confidence and caution from stage to stage,

Brady says family will decide future amid retirement talk

LOS ANGELES: Tom Brady says family consideration will play a big part in determining his future as speculation builds that the NFL superstar could retire. The 44-year-old seven-time Super Bowl champion, widely regarded as the greatest quarterback in NFL history, told his "Let's Go" podcast he will take his time before deciding whether to keep playing.

Brady's bid for an eighth Super Bowl came to an abrupt end on Sunday when Tampa Bay Buccaneers were eliminated from the divisional round after a 30-27 home defeat to the Los Angeles Rams. Reports emerged over the weekend that Brady was giving serious consideration to retiring after the season, despite having one year left on his contract.

Brady on Sunday said he would consider his future on a "day-by-day" basis. On Monday, he gave a more expansive answer, emphasising his family's wishes would influence his next steps. "As I've gotten older football is extremely important in my life, and it means a lot to me, and I care a lot about what we're trying to accomplish as a team and I care a lot about my teammates," Brady said.

Kuwait Tennis Federation chief receives under-14 team

By Abdellatif Sharaa

KUWAIT: Chairman of the Board of Kuwait Tennis Federation Sheikh Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Abdallah Al-Jaber Al-Sabah received the head and members of Kuwait national junior under-14 tennis team after their participation in the international juniors tennis tournament under 14 years (Ten-Pro) which was held in Dubai, UAE recently. The meeting at Sheikh Jaber Al-Abdallah Al-Jaber Al-Sabah International Tennis Complex was also attended by Deputy Chairman Abdelsamad Al-Aryan, Secretary General Faleh Al-Otaibi and players' parents.

Sheikh Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Abdallah congratulated player Mohammad Jassem Al-Awadhi for win-

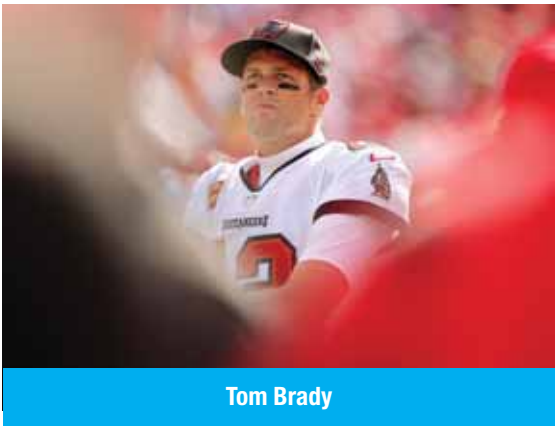
"The biggest difference now that I'm older is I have kids now, too, you know, and I care about them a lot. "They've been my biggest supporters. My wife is my biggest supporter. It pains her to see me get hit out there. And she deserves what she needs from me as a husband, and my kids deserve what they need from me as a dad.

'Not what I want'

"I'm gonna spend some time with them and give them what they need, 'cause they've really been giving me what I need the last six months to do what I love to do. I said this a few years ago, it's what relationships are all about. It's not always what I want. It's what we want as a family. And I'm gonna spend a lot of time with them and figure out in the future what's next."

Brady has a 14-year-old son with former partner Bridget Moynahan, and two children, aged 12 and nine, with his wife, the supermodel Gisele Bundchen. Brady has said in previous interviews that Bundchen had urged him to retire, notably after his fifth Super Bowl victory with the New England Patriots in 2017.

After leaving the Patriots and winning a Super Bowl with the Buccaneers last year in his first season with the Florida franchise, Brady revealed his wife asked him after the win: "What more do you have to prove?" This season, Brady showed no noticeable signs that age was catching up with him, leading the NFL with 43 touchdown passes and 5,316 passing yards, at a career-high average of



Tom Brady

more than 312 yards per game.

Buccaneers coach Bruce Arians has said he will be "shocked" if Brady does not return for the 2022 season. Arians said he had not spoken to Brady over his future since Sunday's loss. "He can take all the time he needs," Arians said.

Brady added he would only play on if he was certain of his own commitment. "Every year I just have to make sure that I have the ability to commit to what the team really needs, and that's really important to me," he said. "The team doesn't deserve anything less than my best. And if I feel like I'm not committed to that, or I can't play at a championship level, then you gotta give someone else a chance to play." — AFP



ning the single's bronze medal, and lauded the performance of the players during the tournament. He also wished them more success in future events.

Kuwait's national team included head of delegation Ali Al-Daihani, team manager Abdelredha Al-

Shatti, coach Johannes Martijn Molenkamp and players Yaqoub Yousuf Mohammad, Abdelwahab Al-Abdallah, Mohammad Al-Awadhi, Abdellatif Al-Abdallah, Mohammad Qalli, Musa'ed Madoh and Fares Al-Kazmi.



historic Dakar Rally next year. Mohammed Jaffar is a motocross athlete who lives and trains in Kuwait City, Kuwait. He is the founder of the Kuwait-based motorcycle academy, Moto School.

Sports

South American stars sweating on World Cup qualification

Suarez, Cavani, Sanchez could miss out on global extravaganza

MONTEVIDEO: Three of South American football's biggest stars — Luis Suarez, Edinson Cavani and Alexis Sanchez — risk missing out on the World Cup in Qatar as South American qualifying enters its final straight. With Brazil and Argentina already qualified, seven nations are battling it out for the final two automatic qualifying spots with just four matches remaining. Right now Suarez and Cavani's Uruguay and Sanchez's Chile are both sitting a point outside the crucial fourth spot held by Colombia.

"Many times in the qualifiers we've had to get out the calculators," said Cavani when he arrived in Uruguay on Sunday after his crucial assist in Manchester United's 1-0 win over West Ham a day earlier. "Other times it's been a bit calmer but that's the way it is: difficult. We can't afford to drop points and need to get as many as possible."

Uruguay are currently seventh and have changed coaches since the last round of matches in November. After a record-breaking 15 years at the helm, iconic veteran coach Oscar Tabarez was fired following a disastrous fourth straight qualifying defeat in which Uruguay conceded 11 goals and scored just one.

Diego Alonso will take charge of the team for the first time in a bid to negotiate the tricky path towards Qatar. Twice former winners, Uruguay have not failed to qualify for the World Cup since 2006. Uruguay travel to Paraguay today before hosting Venezuela — the only team in the single 10-nation qualifying group with no realistic hope of reaching

Qatar — on February 1. But they are not the only ones sweating.

Ecuador 'close'

Third-place Ecuador are well set to join the continent's two heavyweights, sitting six points ahead of the chasing pack. The next five teams are separated by just two points. Chile will be without some crucial players for their two matches in the coming week.

Midfield enforcer Arturo Vidal is suspended after a red card in their last match — a 2-0 home defeat to Ecuador — and Chile received further bad news with three players ruled out of today's visit of Argentina after testing positive for COVID.

Watford center-back Francisco Sierralta is in quarantine in England while midfielder Mauricio Isla and forward Jean Meneses both tested positive upon arriving in Santiago. Chile will travel to Bolivia — a point

behind them — on February 1.

Ecuador could secure their place in Qatar by this time next week if results go their way. They host Brazil, who are without the injured Neymar, today before a trip to Peru five days later. "We're close but we still lack the hardest thing which is closing it out, because we have some tough games ahead," said Ecuador's Argentine coach Gustavo Alfaro.

They must also play Brazil in Quito behind closed doors due to coronavirus restrictions in the country, although the Ecuadoran Football Federation has submitted a last-ditch request to authorities to

Uruguay visit Paraguay today

coach Vahid Halilhodzic.

"Malawi scored a fantastic goal. I think we played really well in the first half, unfortunately we lacked efficiency. We had around 10 chances you can't miss. "But I was always confident. The team was upset but I knew at some point we would score a second goal. We controlled the match and we more than deserve to qualify."

Morocco's quarter-final tie was due to take place at Olenbe Stadium in Yaounde but will be moved after a fatal crush outside the ground on Monday which killed eight people and injured 38. As with the earlier match between Senegal and Cape Verde in Bafoussam, a minute's silence was observed before kick-off and players of both teams wore black armbands.

Morocco, bidding for a second Cup of Nations title and first since 1976, fell behind on seven minutes when Mhango caught Yassine Bounou off his line with a superb long-range strike. The Atlas Lions responded by creating a series of chances as Imran Louza stung the palms of Charles Thomu, who then did well to

keep out Hakimi's powerful free-kick and the follow-up from Louza.

Mhango dragged wide for Malawi after a terrific long ball from Micium Mhone, but the Flames found themselves under sustained pressure as Morocco captain Romain Saiss volleyed against the bar. En-Nesyri prodded weakly at Thomu from close range before the Malawi goalkeeper tipped Hakimi's low drive onto the post and then denied Sofiane Boufal with his legs.

Morocco were finally rewarded for their persistence on the stroke of half-time as En-Nesyri rose to power Selim Amallah's deep cross past Thomu. Hakimi appealed vociferously for a penalty in the second half when his cross struck the arm of Malawi defender Dennis Chembezi, but the Paris Saint-Germain star took matters into his own hands to secure victory. His late equalizer against Gabon had secured top spot in the group stage, and Hakimi delivered again with another magnificent free-kick 20 minutes from time to end Malawi's impressive run. — AFP

The study found that players' passing success rate fell by up to five percent and that the virus affected footballers over the age of 30 more seriously. It also suggested that teams with the most players who had recovered from COVID had worse results than their rivals.

"So far, the results suggest a permanent alteration in the player's abilities," said James Reade, director of the economics department at the University of Reading and co-author of the study, albeit with a caveat. "The majority of players had not been vaccinated (at the time of the study) and this remains a complicating factor."

'Longer rehabilitation' time than flu

There have been reports of players struggling from cardiac inflammation, including Gabon duo Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang and Mario Lemina, who both left the ongoing Africa Cup of Nations to recover from COVID. But French football federation medical director Emmanuel Orhant said there was

no definite link between the virus and increased risk of cardiac problems for footballers.

He found, in December 2020, that 2.2 percent of 350 players who tested positive had a cardiac issue. "All were mild and disappeared within a few weeks, and it is impossible to say that all were linked to COVID," Orhant told AFP.

But he did say that players were taking longer to recover from COVID than they usually do from the flu. "We know that the virus has an impact on short-term ventilation," Orhant said. "With the flu, we can put the players back on the pitch as soon as they are better. This requires a longer rehabilitation time."

But with the vast majority of cases in European countries now being caused by the Omicron variant, it is expected that the effects will be far less severe. "We can no longer talk about Omicron in the same way we talked about the first infections, which were much nastier," added Orhant. "Today, most players have almost no symptoms." — AFP



BERGAMO: Inter Milan's Chilean forward Alexis Sanchez shoots on target during the Italian Serie A football match between Atalanta and Inter on January 16, 2022 at the Azzuri d'Italia stadium in Bergamo. —AFP

Hakimi fires Morocco into quarter-finals after Malawi scare

YAOUNDE: Achraf Hakimi scored a brilliant free-kick to send Morocco through to the quarter-finals of the Africa Cup of Nations after a 2-1 win over Malawi on Tuesday. Gabadinho Mhango gave outsiders Malawi, playing their first ever knockout game at the tournament, a shock early lead with a stunning goal from 40 metres at Ahmadou Ahidjo stadium.

But Youssef En-Nesyri headed Morocco level in first-half stoppage time before Hakimi drilled in the winner on 70 minutes to set up a meeting with Egypt or Ivory Coast in the last eight. "When you win you get respect," said Morocco



YAOUNDE: Morocco's defender Achraf Hakimi (left) celebrates with Morocco's goalkeeper Munir Mohand Mohamedi after scoring his team's second goal during the Africa Cup of Nations (CAN) 2021 round of 16 football match between Morocco and Malawi at Stade Ahmadou-Ahidjo in Yaounde on Tuesday. — AFP

Footballers suffering from COVID effects after initial recovery

PARIS: Very few top-level footballers have suffered from life-threatening bouts of COVID, but the longer-term effects of the virus are now being seen in the game, with one study suggesting even players' passing quality can suffer. There have been several high-profile cases of COVID-19 effects preventing players returning to the pitch immediately after testing negative for the virus.

Bayern Munich midfielder Joshua Kimmich, who was not vaccinated, missed two months of action due to lung damage, while Juventus forward Paulo Dybala said he struggled with a "shortness of breath" when he returned in 2020 after testing pos-

itive. Even seven-time Ballon d'Or winner Lionel Messi admitted that he needed "more time than expected to recover" after contracting COVID over the winter break. There have been a handful of more serious cases in professional football.

Newcastle goalkeeper Karl Darlow spent three days on a hospital drip, Montpellier winger Junior Sambia was hospitalised in intensive care and Nantes' Jean-Kevin Augustin has not started a first-team game since 2019 due to long COVID.

But many coaches have also expressed fears in recent weeks about short and medium-term effects. "When players have the virus and then come back, it's not done just by a click of the fingers. Even they feel it, it takes time," said France's World Cup-winning manager Didier Deschamps.

Researchers from the universities of Duesseldorf and Reading saw results from a study, into 257 Bundesliga and Serie A players who returned after suffering with COVID, that suggested performance levels also fell.

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

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Rajaraman Sundarraj Son of Sundarraj and Janaki bearing an Indian passport number: Z5185102 and having an address No- 4A-1 Moongikollai street, Kumbakonam (po) Tanjore Dt., Tamilnadu n 612001 n had embraced Islam and changed the name as RAJA MOHAMMED is duly authenticated by AL-IFTA and Islamic Research sector AL-IFTA dept. Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs Kuwait, under reference no. F2091979. (C 1416) 27-1-2022

I, Kapil Mohan holder of passport nuber V9364954, do declare adding surname George along with given name Kapil Mohan. Full name to be Kapil Mohan

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Egypt beat Ivory Coast on penalties

Salah scores decisive spot-kick to take Pharaohs to quarters



DOUALA: Egypt's forward Mohamed Salah (left) fights for the ball with Ivory Coast's defender Ghislain Konan during the Africa Cup of Nations 2021 round of 16 match at Stade de Japoma yesterday. — AFP

DOUALA: Mohamed Salah scored the decisive spot-kick as record seven-time champions Egypt beat the Ivory Coast 5-4 on penalties after a 0-0 draw in Douala yesterday to reach the Africa Cup of Nations quarterfinals. The Liverpool star smashed home his penalty with the Ivory Coast's Eric Bailly the only player to fail from the spot, and Egypt go on to play Morocco in the last eight in Yaounde on Sunday.

It was a tense last-16 tie which for long spells resembled a battle of attrition on a poor pitch at the Japoma Stadium in Cameroon's economic capital, and it looked for much of the game as though Egypt would pay for their poor finishing. However, Carlos Queiroz's team are now through to the last eight despite having scored just two goals in their four matches in Cameroon so far.

Meanwhile two-time champions the Ivory Coast are out, once again defeated by an Egyptian side who have long held the upper hand in meetings between the continental heavyweights. This was their 11th AFCON encounter and still Egypt have lost just once to the Elephants.

Among their many successes against the Ivory Coast was their victory on penalties in the 2006 final, and a crushing triumph in the semifinals in 2008. This match, like those played on Tuesday, was preceded by a moment's silence in memory of the victims of Monday's tragic crush in Yaounde.

In the wake of those terrible events, there was none of the chaos that followed the Ivory Coast's 3-1 win over Algeria in Douala last week, when fans invaded the pitch at the end. This time the crowd was well below what might have been expected for

such a match, but many of those who were present were clearly there to see Salah, judging by the screams every time the Liverpool star's face appeared on the big screens.

Salah spoke on the eve of the tie of his desperation to win the Cup of Nations, with the last of Egypt's record seven titles coming in 2010, a year before he made his international debut.

Poor finishing

He was the one who delivered the final blow, but only after he and his side squandered a hatful of chances. The young VfB Stuttgart winger, Omar Marmoush, almost put Egypt ahead with a superb 17th-minute strike from 25 m that crashed off the top of the bar. Salah and Mostafa Mohamed were both denied by Badra Ali Sangare in the first half,

while the Ivory Coast lost influential midfielder Franck Kessie to injury after just half an hour.

Still the Elephants almost went ahead when the unmarked Ibrahim Sangare saw his acrobatic effort pushed away by Mohamed El Shenawy. Sebastien Haller, the Elephants' own Europe-based attacking superstar, struggled to get into the game before two attempts, either side of half-time, tested El Shenawy.

The experienced Al Ahly goalkeeper came off injured after a long delay late on as the game petered out, with Mohamed Abogabal replacing him for extra time. The Zamalek shot-stopper produced a fine save to deny the excellent Sangare before Haller was taken off, and as the game went to penalties Abogabal tipped Bailly's kick onto the bar and Salah then had the last word. — AFP

Medvedev mounts comeback as Tsitsipas romps into semis

MELBOURNE: Men's title favorite Daniil Medvedev fought back from the brink of a shock exit yesterday to reach the Australian Open semifinal and keep his dream of a second Grand Slam crown alive. Medvedev, the world number two, looked down and out as he lost the opening two sets to Canadian 21-year-old sensation Felix Auger-Aliassime before mounting a remarkable turnaround.

The Russian saved a match point at 4-5, 30-40 in the fourth set before completing an astonishing revival to beat the ninth seed 6-7 (4/7), 3-6, 7-6 (7/2), 7-5, 6-4 in a marathon 4hr 42min quarterfinal that finished well after midnight on Rod Laver Arena. Asked how he managed to win, the US Open champions Medvedev admitted: "I have no idea. I just fought to the last point and manage to raise my level."

It sets up a repeat of last year's semifinal against Stefanos Tsitsipas, which Medvedev won in straight sets before going on to lose to Novak Djokovic in the championship match. The Greek fourth seed Tsitsipas was earlier in rampant form as he destroyed Italian world number 10 Jannik Sinner 6-3, 6-4, 6-2. By contrast to Medvedev's struggles, Tsitsipas made serene progress in a two-hour afternoon romp halted only by rain, which caused a brief delay for the Rod Laver Arena roof to be shut and the court to be mopped dry.

The change in conditions made no difference to a dominant, flawless performance

from the world number four who grasped control of the quarterfinal with a break in Sinner's opening service game and did not relinquish his firm grip. "My humility helped a lot today, I knew I was going out on the court to face a very good player," Tsitsipas said. "I just focused on my very best shots and it paid off better than I thought."

The women's semifinal line-up was completed by Danielle Collins and Iga Swiatek who enjoyed vastly contrasting wins in the last eight yesterday. Collins swept past unseeded Alize Cornet in just 88 minutes to match her run to the last four in 2019 and shatter the French veteran's dream of making a first Grand Slam semi-final. But seventh seed Swiatek had to fight back from a set and a break down against unseeded Estonian Kaia Kanepi.

The 20-year-old Swiatek proved too dogged as she outlasted Kanepi, who is 16 years her senior, 4-6, 7-6 (7/2), 6-3 after a marathon 3hr 1min encounter in energy-sapping heat. "I had so many break points (nine) in the first set that I felt like I missed my chances," said Swiatek, the 2020 French Open champion. "I was pretty annoyed and I should have been focused on the next point. And that's what I did in the second set."

As temperatures nudged 35 Celsius, the American 27th seed Collins came through against the tenacious Cornet 7-5, 6-1 to continue her resurgence after serious medical problems last year. "It feels incredible, espe-



MELBOURNE: Russia's Daniil Medvedev reacts after winning the fourth set against Canada's Felix Auger-Aliassime yesterday. — AFP

cially after some of the health challenges that I have had," said Collins, 28, who had "scary" surgery for endometriosis in April last year and then tore her abdomen at the French Open. "To be able to get back to this level and be able to compete the way I have and be as physical as I have has been so rewarding."

Collins won her maiden WTA titles at San Jose and Palermo after recuperating and has now matched her 2019 run at Melbourne Park to reach her second Slam semifinal. Top seed Ashleigh Barty will face unseeded American Madison Keys in the other last-four clash today for a place in Saturday's final. — AFP

Winter Olympics threatened by climate change: Report

LONDON: Climate change is threatening the future of the Winter Olympics, reducing the number of suitable venues for the event around the globe, a report warned ahead of the Beijing Games. The Olympics in China, which start on Feb 4, will be the first Winter Games to rely almost 100 percent on artificial snow, according to the study.

"Slippery Slopes: How Climate Change is Threatening the Winter Olympics", was produced by the Sport Ecology Group at Britain's Loughborough University and the Protect Our Winters campaign group. It says more than 100 snow generators and 300 snow-making guns are working flat out to cover the ski slopes of the 2022 Winter Olympics in artificial snow.

The authors say it is an energy and water-intensive process frequently using chemicals to slow melt, but also delivers a surface that many competitors say is unpredictable and potentially dangerous. "The risk is clear - man-made warming is threatening the long-term future of winter sports," the report says. "It is also reducing the number of climatically

suitable host venues for the Winter Olympiad."

"The 2022 Winter Olympics will, no doubt, be an awesome spectacle - watched and enjoyed by millions worldwide," it adds. "But they should also provoke a debate about the future of snow sports, and the limits of engineering artificial natural environments. Slippery slopes lie ahead." Of the 21 venues used for the Winter Games since Chamonix 1924, scientists believe that by 2050 only 10 will have the "climate suitability" and natural snowfall levels to host an event.

Chamonix is now rated "high risk" along with venues in Norway, France and Austria, while Vancouver, Sochi and Squaw Valley in the United States are deemed "unreliable". British freestyle skier Laura Donaldson, who competed at the Salt Lake Games in 2002, warned in the report of the dangers to athletes. "If freestyle super pipes are formed from snowmaking machines in a poor (natural snow) season, the walls of the pipe are solid, vertical ice and the pipe floor is solid ice," she said. "This is dangerous for athletes - some have died." — AFP