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Public works minister refutes all allegations made in grilling

Mousa says interpellation was filed only 22 days after he assumed post



KUWAIT: Former prime minister HH Sheikh Jaber Al-Mubarak Al-Sabah (right) and former defense minister Sheikh Khaled Al-Jarrah Al-Sabah are seen in this file photo.

Kuwait's top court acquits ex-premier, defense minister

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: The special ministers' tribunal yesterday acquitted former prime minister, former defense minister and seven top officials in a high-profile graft case that involved the embezzlement of over KD 150 million in public funds, lawyers said.

After months of deliberations, the court found that former premier HH Sheikh Jaber Al-Mubarak Al-Sabah, who resigned two years ago, former defense minister Sheikh Khaled Al-Jarrah Al-Sabah and seven current and former defense ministry officials were not guilty of charges of

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By B Izzak

KUWAIT: Minister of Public Works Ali Al-Mousa yesterday denied allegations that he failed to carry out his duties and implement a final court ruling regarding the illegal distribution of hundreds of state-owned agricultural plots. Speaking during a grilling by opposition MP Abdullah Al-Mudhaf, the minister said some 400 land parcels mentioned in the court ruling were all distributed in 2013, more than nine years before he was appointed in the Cabinet.

Mousa said that the grilling against him was filed just 22 days after becoming minister and despite repeatedly informing the griller that he was prepared to cooperate on the issue. The minister added that a report on the entire issue prepared by the Audit Bureau was available during the tenure of former minister Shaye Al-Shaye, "but the lawmaker did not grill him and decided to grill me days after my appointment".

Mousa said when MP Mudhaf gave him the report, he told him he would form an investigation committee to probe the issue, but the lawmaker refused and filed the grilling. "The lawmaker is grilling me for land distributed when I wasn't a minister," Mousa insisted. The minister said he has referred the issue to the public prosecutor and was ready to send the issue back to the prosecutor with more documents.

He said after the court of cassation



KUWAIT: Minister of Public Works Ali Al-Mousa gestures during a National Assembly session yesterday. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

issued its ruling to seize 396 land plots from beneficiaries because granting them was illegal, he asked the government's legal department on Feb 9 to form a committee to oversee the implementation of the ruling. He said on Feb 15, the director of the agricultural authority issued a decision to form a committee to discuss the mechanism of implementing the ruling. Mousa insisted that these measures certainly were against corruption and corrupt people and proof that "I did not fail in carrying out my duty".

At the start of the grilling debate,

Mudhaf said that he obtained the Audit Bureau report in December, and then asked that implicated employees should be suspended and referred to the public prosecution. The lawmaker insisted that the court ruled that all the 396 land parcels should be taken away from those who got them through illegal channels.

At the end of the debate, 10 opposition MPs filed a no-confidence motion against the minister. Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem said voting on the motion will take place on March 16.

News in brief

Sisi meets Saudi King, Crown Prince

RIYADH: Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz yesterday received Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi, who is visiting the kingdom. Earlier, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman accompanied Sisi on a tour of the Al-Turaif historical district, which is on the UNESCO World Heritage List.

6m have died from COVID

PARIS: Over six million people have died worldwide from COVID-19 since the pandemic began, according to a tally from official sources compiled by AFP yesterday. A total of 6,003,081 people have succumbed to the virus, AFP counted at 1100 GMT. — AFP

Saudi Gitmo detainee repatriated

WASHINGTON: A mentally ill inmate from Guantanamo Bay has been repatriated to Saudi Arabia, the US Department of Defense announced Monday. Mohammed Al-Qahtani was tortured by interrogators at the US military base in Cuba where he has been detained for nearly two decades. — AFP

Nickel soars to record \$100K

LONDON: The price of nickel skyrocketed to a record high yesterday over concerns about Russian production as the Ukraine conflict has rocked commodity markets. The metal briefly traded at \$101,365 per ton, nearly double its 2007 peak. It later eased to \$82,195. — AFP

Ukrainians flee cities; US bans Russian oil

KYIV: Desperate civilians fled besieged Ukrainian cities yesterday as US President Joe Biden announced a ban on Russian oil imports to punish Moscow for the invasion. The announcement by Biden will further tighten unprecedented sanctions on Russia, targeting the economic lifeline that is bankrolling President Vladimir Putin's war.

"We're banning all imports of Russian oil and gas and energy. That means Russian oil will no longer be acceptable at US ports and the

American people will deal another powerful blow to Putin," Biden said in an address from the White House, adding that the decision was taken "in close consultation" with allies. The ban came with Democrats threatening legislation to force Biden's hand, despite the likely impact on already soaring gas prices.

Russia agreed to set up "humanitarian corridors" from four cities on the 13th day of the war, even as the UN said the number of refugees flooding across Ukraine's borders had passed two million. Buses streamed out through an evacuation corridor from the northeastern city of Sumy - where 21 people were killed in air strikes overnight - while civilians on foot took an unofficial escape route out of the bombed Kyiv suburb of Irpin.

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BILA TSERKVA, Ukraine: A man walks between houses destroyed during air strikes on this central Ukrainian city yesterday. — AFP

Changes bring chances for Arab women

CAIRO: "I think the way to happiness is to be around the people you love, to do the work you love, and to be able to live the way you want," said Ayesha Al-Hamall, now a media specialist of Saudia, the flag carrier of Saudi Arabia. Changes in the Gulf state have become increasingly visible since 2017, especially with the introduction of the Saudi Vision 2030, as the government has implemented a series of measures aimed at bridging the gender gap in social status, such as ending the ban on female driving and relaxing the male guardianship system, which mandates that every woman must have a male guardian who is authorized to

make a range of decisions on her behalf.

Consequently, the past few years witnessed more and more women join the Saudi job market, where the labor force participation rate of women rose from 20 percent at the end of 2018 to 33 percent at the end of 2020. "It gives us a good promising view to the future and the changes that are coming more," said Hamall, who obtained bachelor's degree from King Faisal University as an information system graduate.

What is happening in Saudi Arabia mirrors many Middle Eastern countries' efforts to facilitate women's access to education, employment and even politics. In early 2020, Lebanon's newly-formed government saw an unprecedented six female cabinet members out of 20, including Zeina Akar, the first female defense minister and deputy prime minister in the Arab world. Kuwait appointed eight female judges for the first time in the same year.

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Iran puts military satellite in orbit

TEHRAN: Iran announced yesterday it had successfully placed a military satellite in orbit, as talks on reviving a 2015 nuclear deal between Tehran and major powers reach a critical stage. "Iran's second military satellite - named Nour-2 - has been launched into space by the Qassed rocket of the aerospace wing of the Revolutionary Guards and successfully placed in orbit 500 km above the Earth," the official IRNA news agency reported.

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps described the Nour-2 as a "reconnaissance satellite" in a statement on its Sepah News website. It said the satellite was launched from the Shahroud desert in Semnan province, some 300 km east of the capital.

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Local

Kuwait donates \$5 million to Afghanistan, \$2 million to Ukraine

Cabinet eulogizes former MP Dr Ahmad Al-Khatib

KUWAIT: In its weekly meeting on Monday, the Cabinet, headed by His Highness the Premier Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah, said that upon directives of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, and in light of humanitarian fallout and refugees' influx; some \$5 million will be donated to Afghanistan, and another \$2 million to the Ukraine via relevant UN agencies and the International Committee of the Red Cross.

According to Foreign Minister, Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs and Acting Minister of Defense Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah, the Cabinet was briefed by the recent visits of Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi and Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune to the country, as both held talks with His Highness the Amir on bilateral relations and current regional and international affairs, in addition to issues of mutual interest. The Cabinet was also briefed with participation of Foreign Minister, State Minister for Cabinet Affairs and Acting Defense Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah in the 26th EU-GCC council ministerial meeting, held recently in

Brussels. Means to enhance cooperation on regional and global challenges, and issues of common interest that require discussion and exchange of views, including on partnership, trade, education, health, climate change, environment protection, renewable energy resources and cyber security, were discussed among other issues throughout the meeting. The Cabinet was also briefed by Kuwait Foreign Minister and State Minister for Cabinet Affairs and Acting Defense Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah's meeting with Belgium Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Sophie Willems on the sidelines of the 26th EU-GCC council ministerial meeting. The meeting reviewed bilateral relations and ways to strengthen them in various fields to achieve common interests of the two countries, in addition to discussing latest regional and international developments.

Then the Cabinet followed up on latest developments related to the coronavirus pandemic, listening in this regard to a briefing by Minister of Commerce and Industry and Acting Minister of Health Fahad Al-Shuraiaan. It voiced relief over overall declining num-

Ministers briefed on COVID-19 situation



KUWAIT: His Highness the Premier Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah chairs the Cabinet's meeting. —KUNA

bers. It then reviewed items on the National Assembly agenda, while extending sincere condolences over the passing away of Dr Ahmad Al-Khatib, whose contributions best served the country throughout his career, especially in the parliamentary work, through his membership in the Constituent Assembly and beyond. Other issues discussed during the meeting included follow up on the State's annual plan (from April 1, 2021 to December 31, 2021). It also

reviewed latest Arab, regional and international developments, as well as condemning the terrorist bombing attack at a mosque in the Pakistani city of Peshawar, which left scores of worshippers either dead or injured. The Cabinet voiced solidarity with the friendly Islamic Republic of Pakistan and backing to all measures it takes to maintain security and stability, wishing mercy upon the dead and speedy recovery for the injured. — KUNA

Ukrainian envoy discusses with KRCS aiding refugees

KUWAIT: Ukrainian Ambassador to the State of Kuwait Balanutsa Oleksandr yesterday discussed with Kuwait Red Crescent Society Chairman Dr Hilal Al-Sayer means of aiding the Ukrainian people namely refugees in countries neighboring their homeland. In remarks to the press on the sidelines of his meeting with Dr Sayer, ambassador Balanutsa affirmed that the KRCS efforts for relieving stricken peoples have been noticeable, noting that the talks dealt with means of offering humanitarian aid to the Ukrainian refugees in countries neighboring Ukraine. He lauded the Kuwaiti society's efforts for relieving peoples' suffering from natural and man-made catastrophes worldwide.

Meanwhile, Dr Sayer affirmed the society's readiness to coordinate with humanitarian and social organizations for securing delivery of the assistance to the Ukrainians in the countries close to Ukraine. At least 1.7 million Ukrainians, mostly women and children, have fled Ukraine to neighboring countries in eastern and southeastern Europe since Russia began its invasion of Ukraine nearly two weeks ago.

Separately, KRCS and the UN's food agency signed a deal yesterday to provide urgent aid to some 22 million impoverished Afghans, at a time where humanitarian conditions in the war-torn nation have deteriorated sharply. Highlighting the deal's "importance," KRCS chief Maha Al-Barjas said the aid would meet the "dire needs" of the Afghan people, many of whom are living in sheer penury. The Kuwaiti charity's "partnerships" with global bodies such as the UN Food Program are a "source of pride," she added, saying such initiatives encapsulate KRCS' commitment towards humanitarian endeavors. — KUNA



KUWAIT: A group photo on the sidelines of the Ukrainian Ambassador to Kuwait Balanutsa Oleksandr's meeting with Kuwait Red Crescent Society Chairman Dr Hilal Al-Sayer. — KUNA

Changes bring chances for...

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In 2021, Tunisian geology professor Najla Bouden Romdhane became the first female prime minister in the Arab world, a quantum leap in women's empowerment in the country and the Middle East. Also in the year, in a historic first, 98 Egyptian female judges were appointed to the country's State Council.

In the economic arena, an increasing number of Middle Eastern women are as well breaking the occupational stereotypes that women in the region are limited in options. According to the findings by Startup Compass, a data collecting and consulting

company, the global average percentage of female internet entrepreneurs is 10 percent, while in the Besides, Middle Eastern women are demonstrating their strength in sports. In some war-torn countries, sports have helped them not only relieve pressure but earn self-esteem. Some athletes have managed to win honor for their motherland at international events. In the summer of 2021, in Tokyo, karateka Feryal Abdelaziz became the first female Egyptian to have won a gold medal at the Olympic Games. Yusra Mardini, a 23-year-old female swimmer who was in Tokyo as a member of the Olympic team of refugees, told the world that "refugees will not give up easily and will continue to pursue the dreams despite the harsh journey."

Also in Tokyo, Syrian girl Hend Zaza became the world's youngest table tennis player to qualify for the modern Olympics. Although she lost in her first match, the 12-year-old made history at the moment she stood on the Olympic stage. — Xinhua

unable to reach the required speed. In January, Iran tested a solid-fuel rocket for its satellite program, state media reported.

Major powers involved in talks on bringing Washington back into the Iran nuclear deal after then president Donald Trump's 2018 withdrawal have said that an agreement is close. Iran and the UN nuclear watchdog said Saturday they had agreed an approach for resolving key outstanding issues but new Russian demands stemming from the Ukraine conflict may delay a deal.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Saturday that, before it backs a revived deal, Moscow wants written assurances from Washington that Western sanctions imposed over the Ukraine war will not affect its economic and military cooperation with Tehran. The following day, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said such demands were "irrelevant". Sanctions on Russia over its invasion of Ukraine "have nothing to do with the Iran nuclear deal", he said.

The Russian demands have cast doubts on whether negotiations in Vienna, which have reached critical stages, could be concluded swiftly. As with the original agreement, Moscow is expected to play a key role in the implementation of any fresh deal with Tehran, for example by receiving shipments of enriched uranium from Iran. — AFP

240 million. All the defendants were detained for several months before being released on bail pending trial.

The ruling is not final as it must be reviewed by the court of cassation, whose rulings are final. This is Kuwait's biggest graft case that reached the court involving senior members of the ruling family. Around 30 years ago, former oil and finance minister Sheikh Ali Al-Khalifa Al-Sabah was tried for embezzlement but finally acquitted.

Sheikh Jaber has occupied several Cabinet posts since the 1980s, including defense and information minister, before being appointed prime minister in late 2011. He resigned two years ago after the news about the army fund graft case became public.

Ukrainians flee cities; US bans...

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But Ukraine accused Russia of attacking another of the corridors leading from the beleaguered southern port city of Mariupol, where aid workers said tens of thousands were living in "apocalyptic" conditions. Kyiv has branded the corridors from four cities a publicity stunt as many of the exit routes lead into Russia or its ally Belarus. Both sides accuse each other of ceasefire violations.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has sparked fears of a wider European or even global conflict, and unleashed the continent's fastest growing refugee crisis since World War II. Sweeping international sanctions have failed to persuade Putin to back down, leading Western nations to consider an energy embargo despite the likely pain to their own economies. Crude prices had surged after the White House said Biden would speak to "announce actions to continue to hold Russia accountable for its unprovoked and unjustified war on Ukraine".

Russian troops are slowly encroaching on Kyiv despite intense efforts by outgunned Ukrainian forces, and moving faster through the east and north of the country. Despite the sound of nearby shelling in Irpin, seen as a critical point for the advance on the capital, civilians fled in icy wind and a thick snowfall, AFP reporters saw. People waited in a long line to cross over the Irpin river on makeshift walkways of planks and mangled metal, after the Ukrainians blew up the bridge leading into the capital to hamper any Russian advance.

"I didn't want to leave, but there's nobody left in the homes around us, no water, no gas and no electricity," Larissa Prokopets, 43, told AFP. She said she was leaving after several days spent "hiding in the basement" of her home, which kept "shaking" due to bombardment nearby. Russia had refused calls for a humanitarian corridor in Irpin and the nearby suburbs of Bucha and Gostomel "although we had everything ready for this," Ukrainian interior ministry official Anton Gerashchenko said.

Evacuations had however begun in Sumy, near the Russian border and 350 km east of Kyiv, where Russia had formally declared a humanitarian corridor, officials said. Dozens of buses had already left in the direction of Lkhvytsia, to the southwest, said the interim chief of the Poltava region, Dmitry Lunin. The corridor is designed to evacuate civilians, including Chinese, Indians and other foreigners, officials said.

The evacuation came after 21 people, including two children, were killed in Sumy when "enemy planes insidiously attacked apartment buildings," Ukrainian rescue services said. Three people were killed and three children wounded by landmine in

Chernihiv, north of Kiev, officials said. Ukraine's defense ministry has also accused Russia yesterday of violating a ceasefire to ease a days-long blockade of Mariupol, describing it as "genocide".

A six-year-old girl identified only as Tanya has died from dehydration under the rubble of her destroyed home in Mariupol, the city council said. "In the last minutes of her life she was alone, exhausted, frightened and terribly thirsty," Mayor Vadym Boychenko said.

Long queues of cars snaked out of the southern city of Mykolaiv, where sporadic shell fire could be heard. "We're leaving as soon as possible. There are attacks every day, it's terrifying," said Sabrina, 19, who had a dog on a lead and a cat in her jacket. She said she had no news from her husband who was on the frontline.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky denounced what he called unkept promises by the West to protect his country, and renewed calls for a no-fly zone that leaders have so far dismissed. "It's been 13 days we've been hearing promises, 13 days we've been told we'll be helped in the air, that there will be planes," Zelensky said on a video broadcast on Telegram.

Global outrage mounted over the invasion and the plight of civilians caught up in the bloodshed. The International Committee of the Red Cross said Mariupol residents faced "atrocious" conditions and were running out of food, water and medical supplies. "The bottom line today is that this situation is really apocalyptic for people," ICRC head of media Ewan Watson said in Geneva. At least 474 civilians have been killed since the start of Russia's assault on its ex-Soviet neighbor, according to the UN, although it believes the real figures to be "considerably higher".

The onslaught has created a huge refugee crisis for European countries that have taken in Ukrainians fleeing the conflict, particularly Poland. "It doesn't stop," Filippo Grandi, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, said as he announced that two million people had fled. Germany and Spain meanwhile said they were probing possible Russian war crimes in Ukraine, adding to an investigation by the International Criminal Court into any alleged crimes by either side.

Russia has warned Western countries against becoming involved in the conflict, and said oil sanctions would have "catastrophic consequences". Putin has equated sanctions with a declaration of war and put nuclear forces on alert. He has pledged the "denazification" of Ukraine and demands its "neutralization" and demilitarization.

At home, Russia has cracked down on dissent, arresting more than 10,000 people for anti-war protests and clamping down on independent media. The west has so far steered clear of the no-fly zone demanded by Zelensky, with Putin warning it would be considered as "participation in the conflict" with nuclear-armed Russia. — AFP

Iran puts military satellite in...

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Telecommunications Minister Issa Zarepour hailed the successful launch. "The first signals from Nour-2 have been successfully received by ground stations," he said in statement on IRNA. "This reconnaissance satellite will orbit the Earth every 90 minutes, and its mission will last at least three years."

The United States has repeatedly voiced concern that such launches could boost Iran's ballistic missile technology. But Iran insists it is not seeking nuclear weapons and that its satellite and rocket launches are for civil or defensive purposes only. Iran successfully put its first military satellite into orbit in April 2020, drawing a sharp rebuke from Washington.

Sepah News said yesterday that the Nour-1 was "still fully operational and transmitting data". At the end of December, Iran announced it had failed to put in orbit "three research cargos" carried by Simorgh (Phoenix) satellite carrier as the rocket was

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embezzlement and facilitating graft. The senior officials involved in the case include former defense ministry undersecretary Jassar Al-Jassar, a number of military attaches abroad and director of the so-called army fund. The officials were charged with embezzling some KD 157 million of the fund's assets, estimated at KD

Local

Kuwait rings bell for women's empowerment on Int'l Women's Day

Organized by Boursa Kuwait and UN in collaboration with SCPD

KUWAIT: For the fifth consecutive year, the closing bell at Boursa Kuwait rang in support of women's empowerment on International Women's Day, which falls on March 8 of every year. The bell ringing ceremony aims to raise awareness to the empowerment of women financially, specifically in the private sector, as well as highlighting the key role the sector plays in support of the Women's Empowerment Principles (WEPs) to achieve the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The events also aim to raise awareness of these principles to improve sustainable practices and operations and encourage their adoption, as well as increase the transparency of women's empowerment principles.

This year, the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) chose the theme of "Women's Empowerment today for a sustainable tomorrow", which recognizes and celebrates the contribution of women and girls around the world, who are leading the charge to build a more sustainable future for all.

The event took place in the context of Kuwait's efforts to develop and empower women's capabilities to contribute to Kuwait's development goals and participate in the decision-making process, in line with the pillars of the Kuwait National Development Plan (KNDP) and the "New Kuwait 2035" vision.

The event was organized by Boursa Kuwait with the participation of the General Secretariat of the Supreme Council for Planning and Development, the Regional Office of UN Women and the United Nations Development Program in Kuwait and involved the participation of the National Bank of Kuwait and Zain in a panel discussion.

Boursa Kuwait is committed to raising awareness of the women's empowerment principles and implementing the WEPs, and this initiative is part of the company's efforts to create a lasting meaningful impact on the community where it operates as part of its Corporate Sustainability strategy, in line with Goal 5 - Gender Equality - and Goal 17 - Partnership for the Goals - of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Boursa Kuwait formally made a commitment to women's empowerment when it signed the Women's Empowerment Principles (WEPs) in 2019. Launched in 2010 by UN Women and the UN Global Compact, the WEPs are a set of seven principles offering practical guidance to businesses on how to empower women in the workplace, marketplace and community, thereby bringing significant benefits to companies and societies.

Key role in development

Speaking at the ceremony, Boursa Kuwait's Head of Markets Noura Al-Abdulkareem said, "We ring the bell for women today in celebration of the key role they play in development, specifically in capital markets and at Boursa Kuwait. We remain committed to the training and development of our female workforce and look forward to providing equal opportunities for women throughout our company and the wider capital market."

Abdulkareem added, "Boursa Kuwait joins organizations from all over the world to commemorate this day, proving our commitment to the WEPs and supporting listed companies to empower their female workforce and their inclusion and contributions in senior positions. We also continue to encourage listed companies to take action in support of sustainable development, as well as their valiant efforts to increase the transparency of women's empowerment principles and practices."

Among the organizations participating in the bell ringing ceremony are the Sustainable Stock Exchange initiative (SSE), the UN Global Compact, UN Women, International Finance Corporation: IFC and World Federation of Exchanges (the "Global Partners"). It is expected that over 120 exchanges, including Boursa Kuwait, will ring the bell this year as part of their commitment to women's empowerment. Furthermore, the number of exchanges that have signed the WEPs is up to 25, which is a marked increase from the 10 in 2019.

The exchanges are also working to scale up their actions on women's empowerment by promoting transparency of relevant metrics, organizing training on board diversity, and encouraging their listed companies to sign the WEPs.

Secretary-General of the Supreme Council for Planning and Development Dr Khaled Mahdi stated that the government of the State of Kuwait is committed to the continuous support for the principles of empowering women, which is in line with the pillars of the KNDP and the "New Kuwait 2035" vision and aligned with the fifth goal of the United Nations' SDGs. As part of the KNDP goals, the government of Kuwait is targeting to have 35 percent of its decision makers to be women, who at present only represent 21 percent



Eaman Al-Roudhan



Shaikha Al-Bahar

of the senior positions in the public sector.

Dr Mahdi also hailed the private sector and its commitment to employing women and providing training and development opportunities as well as giving them the opportunity to assume leadership positions and participate in the decision-making process, in support of the WEPs and towards achieving sustainable development goals.

The Secretary-General also considered this initiative a symbol of integrating women into the national economy and an appreciation of the importance of this partnership, claiming that it is proof of the national development plan's policies and pillars to promote social and economic integration at all levels.

Dr Mahdi also said that the General Secretariat is one of key entities supporting the empowerment of women in Kuwait, with the establishment of its Women and Business Affairs Committee, adding that the percentage of women working in the General Secretariat exceeds 80 percent of its total workforce. He also added that the private sector is increasingly cognizant of the fact that empowering women results in higher productivity and attracts more clients.

Speaking on behalf of UN Women, Regional Director for the Arab States Susanne Mikhail said, "Our partnership with Kuwait has to date facilitated access by around 50 companies to knowledge and tools on how to increase women's participation, through commitment to the Women's Empowerment Principles. I congratulate each and every signatory to the Women's Empowerment Principles for their pledge to advance women's leadership at all levels and invite all members of the Kuwaiti private sector to consider signing the WEPs statement of support today."

Hideko Hadzialic, Resident Representative, UNDP Kuwait also spoke during the event, saying, "Empirical evidence suggests that empowerment of women in enterprises and corporate governance significantly improves productivity and business outcomes. We are delighted to see more and more Kuwaiti companies signing up for the WEPs and learning good practices from each other."

Deputy Group CEO of National Bank of Kuwait Shaikha Al-Bahar said: "International Women's Day this year is an important occasion to highlight inspiring female role models and the key role played by women in continuing to support recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic."

Bahar emphasized that the call for gender equality aims to ensure a sustainable future, as the promotion of gender equality is one of the major global challenges of the 21st century.

"The representation of women at all levels of decision-making around the world needs more efforts to reach the desired level," she said, noting that there are examples of women who led the way to change and contributed to building and progressing their communities, a fact that motivates new generations of women to strive to participate in achieving prosperity for their countries.

"The National Bank of Kuwait (NBK) has long held a firm belief that diversity is a source of strength and a competitive advantage for any organization, as a diverse workforce understands customers better and is able to provide more creative and innovative solu-



KUWAIT: Officials applaud after ringing the closing bell at Boursa Kuwait on International Women's Day yesterday.

tions," Bahar added.

NBK's Deputy Group CEO also noted that the bank's employee composition ratios reflect its commitment to gender equality, as females constitute 45 percent of total employees, and women in leadership and supervisory positions represent 30 percent of total workforce. In addition, NBK is committed to promoting gender equality as a key element in managing talent development by taking various measures to ensure the participation of women in leadership positions, providing mentoring and appropriate opportunities for their career development, as well as promoting the culture of women empowerment across the entire group.

Bahar added that NBK's commitment to gender diversity and inclusion extends to cover customers by launching products and services targeting female customers and entrepreneurs, while continuing to advance its strides in this area, in line with its commitment to promote financial inclusion.

Reducing the gender gap

Eaman Al-Roudhan, Chief Executive Officer of Zain Kuwait said: "I'm very proud that Zain is once again joining forces with our community partners at Boursa Kuwait, Supreme Council for Planning and Development, Women's Research and Studies Center, as well as global partners at UNDP and UN Women. This collaboration will surely contribute to shedding light on the great efforts exerted by the State of Kuwait to empower women and girls."

Roudhan added: "At Zain, we are well aware of the importance of the United Nations' Women Empowerment Principles (WEPs), and perhaps the best reflection of our commitment is the fact that Zain was the first company from the Kuwaiti private sector to officially join this initiative years ago. During this period, we have taken a big step to develop a clear roadmap that outlines many vital pillars that are well aligned with these principles."

Roudhan explained: "Across the past years, our efforts included creating new policies that reduce the gender gap within the workplace, implement flexible hours for mothers, provide a fair work environment where our female employees take on leadership positions. In addition, we have supported many education programs that encouraged girls to pursue careers in the areas of science, technology, engineering and math (STEM)."

Roudhan continued: "One of our recent success stories in this scope was concluding Zain Great Idea 6, the sixth edition of our renowned tech startups accelerator program, which has empowered, trained, and invested in over 1,500 passionate Kuwaiti and Arab young men and women throughout the past decade. Not only that, but ZGI 6 has seen the highest-ever turnout of female entrepreneurs in the program's history."

Roudhan added: "With Kuwait's accelerating approach towards digital transformation, I believe women have growing opportunities to take part in the private sector. This, however, depends on the role of the government in activating and developing the private sector's participation first, and then supporting women empowerment. Developing women empowerment within the private sector relies on the government's adoption of the private sector's role in achieving digital transformation."

Roudhan concluded: "Zain continues to actively participate in the various local and regional programs to contribute to achieving the nation's sustainable goals, most importantly women empowerment efforts. We strive to be present at initiatives that serve international sustainable goals and help elevate the region's part on the global scene. All of these efforts are well aligned with our own sustainability targets at Zain Kuwait and across Zain Group."

Dr Lubna Al-Kazi, Head of the Center for Women's Studies and Research at the College of Social Sciences at Kuwait University, expressed her happiness on the

occasion of ringing the bell for women's empowerment for the fifth year in a row, highlighting Boursa Kuwait as one of the private sector entities that signed the WEPs, adding that the ceremony confirms the private sector's support for women's empowerment and their belief that integrating and involving women in all areas of economic development is the only way to achieve real progress.

Kazi added, "Kuwaiti women graduated from various fields, including science and technology, with graduation rates superior to their male peers, and benefiting from this human capital is a smart and logical investment decision. They have become leaders in banks, the oil sector as well as the fields of technology and communications. Furthermore, the percentage of women who have joined the private sector is constantly increasing, and they must be given the opportunity to participate in the decision-making process and climb the corporate ladder. In the 21st century, it is unreasonable for women not to participate in the labor market to achieve goals of the "New Kuwait 2035" vision."

Boursa Kuwait is a champion of women's empowerment and is a true pioneer in the inclusion of women in the workforce. The company has been involved in several initiatives dedicated to empowerment and inclusion, which began when the company first rang the bell for women in 2018. Boursa Kuwait also signed the Women's Empowerment Principles (WEPs) 'Statement of Support in 2019 and made a formal commitment to drive Corporate Sustainability in financial markets by becoming a member of the United Nations-led Sustainable Stock Exchanges (SSE) initiative, a platform for the exchange of experience and knowledge that helps broaden the collaborations between exchanges and all market participants, in 2017.

Boursa Kuwait's Corporate Sustainability strategy stipulates ensuring initiatives apply and fall in line with the company's corporate social responsibility (CSR), industry best practice standards and investor expectations, creating strong and sustainable partnerships that ultimately achieve success and allow Boursa Kuwait to leverage the capabilities and strengths of other companies or organizations that have experience in different fields, and integrating sustainability efforts with the company culture, in order to achieve longevity and an ongoing impact that is carried on and instilled in the day-to-day operations of the stock exchange.

As part of the strategy, Boursa Kuwait has launched many initiatives in partnership with local and international organizations, focusing on support for nongovernmental organizations and charity programs, financial literacy and capital market awareness, the empowerment of women, as well as environmental protection.

Speaker lauds women's role in development

KUWAIT: Kuwait's top lawmaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem on Wednesday heaped praise on his female compatriots for the "integral role" they play towards national development, saying his country's history is dotted with their accomplishments. Against the backdrop of the annual International Women's Day, he called on the country's legislative and executive powers to give women more opportunities to showcase their capabilities. Despite the plethora of achievements they have already made, women can still contribute more towards national development plans, he added.

WSCS organizes symposium to mark International Women's Day

By Ben Garcia

KUWAIT: On International Women's Day, the Women's Social Cultural Society in Kuwait hosted a seminar titled 'Violence in the Absence of Women's Shelter' on Monday evening. The event was attended by Consultant and Life Coach Reem Al-Aidan, Protection Officer at UNHCR Amal Al-Beedh and Constitutional and Cassation Attorney Athra Al-Refai.

Refai argued there aren't enough laws protecting women facing domestic violence in Kuwait. "Kuwait is a state of laws where violence is criminalized, but it lacks a law on protection from domestic violence. So law no. 6 of 2020 on protection from domestic violence, which obligates the state to take responsibility for protecting society, combating violence and punishing those

who are abused within the family, was tainted," she said.

Refai explained the law in article 25 stipulates that the Supreme Council for Family Affairs shall prepare executive regulations within six months from the date of publication, but until today there is no regulation. "The law mentions in article 5 the establishment of shelters and children's centers, but until today there is no shelter. The building prepared by the state has not received any victims. Also, there is no hotline or staff to receive victims of violence. The law opened avenues for its use against women, due to the absence of the department concerned with examining reports of violence to determine the extent of truth, lack inclusion of women in courts and judgments issued against them," she said.

The ultimate goal for women globally is

to live a decent life away from violence and injustice. "What Kuwaiti women need now is to criminalize sexual harassment in the workplace. We need a list of domestic violence incidents to activate protection orders, but it wasn't placed in the proper context in order to become a real law that should be applied to all," Refai said. "We need government responsibility to represent women in all leadership positions, and also have a bigger role in the National Assembly. Their recent absence caused us disappointment in providing support to women," she added.

Beedh spoke about gender-based violence, specifically in camps for refugees and internally displaced women and girls. "Women endure various levels of violence, and because of displacement, their situation is even worse. They face all kinds of violence only because they are women - because of their gender. This affects their lives and their future," she said.

This year's theme for International Women's Day is about climate change and a sustainable tomorrow. "It shows how



KUWAIT: Speakers at the seminar organized by the Women's Social Cultural Society on International Women's Day. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

refugee women are part of this year's celebration. There will be no sustainable tomorrow if there are no voices from women. Generally, women who are displaced from their normal environment are facing several issues of inequalities. Their life is shattered, specially displaced adolescent girls who are facing increased risks of disrupted education as well as an extra caregiving burdens.

Refugee and internally displaced women are more likely to hold precarious jobs in the informal sector and face disruptions in livelihoods and income-generating activities," Beedh said.

UNHCR is innovating to enhance support to refugees, returnees and internally displaced women and girls, while promoting their leadership throughout the response.

Local

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Photo of the Day



KUWAIT: Members of Al-Fatat hockey team participate in an event organized in cooperation with the IIHF marking the International Women's Day, wearing attire representing jobs taken by Kuwaiti women, at the Kuwait Winter Games Club in Kuwait City yesterday. —Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

The Shimmer of Hope

By Dr Nermin Al-Houti

Our column today hovers in the Saudi skies and above the clouds of Malta! The shimmer of hope is not bound to a certain place, as each human being searches for its rays regardless of the source of its light. Such a thing took place recently, starting with a man who is going ahead with implementing the 2030 strategy and already fulfilled much of it since he started it in 2021, placing Saudi Arabia among the 15 large economies in the world. A man of his word: His Highness Prince Mohammad bin Salman. He was interviewed by the American Atlantic Magazine and was asked various questions starting with closely personal ones that brought the reader closer to the Prince, then the questions continued, covering political and world issues. When one reads the dialogue, he feels that the shimmer of hope emanates from between the words of the Saudi Crown Prince. Words that carried a lot about the strategy and policy of Saudi Arabia which spreads much hope for tomorrow. It was an interview with a brilliant politician at a time in which disputes are many, and several economies are going downhill, yet his words open the path of hope for us so that we know that the shimmer of hope is still bright in the Arabian Peninsula.

And while wars are raging and there is fear others may break out, we saw the light of hope coming out of Malta through the Second World Forum for a Culture of World Peace organized by Abdulaziz Al-Babtain Cultural Foundation in the Maltese Capital Valletta that was held last week. My colleague Mohammad Hilal Al-Khaldi wrote on his Twitter account: "in a time when wars are raging and people are killed, the man of peace and culture, Kuwaiti poet Abdelaziz Al-Babtain organizes a peace conference in Malta in which he gathers politicians and intellectuals to rescue whatever can be rescued through spreading the culture of forgiveness and peace, and once again this man places the name of Kuwait in prominence." This makes one feel that tomorrow is better and there are those who fight for the sake of humanity, so the shimmer of hope continues to shine in the skies of the universe.

Kuwait Airways launches flights to Mykonos starting from June 6

KUWAIT: Kuwait Airways announced the operation of its scheduled commercial flights to the city of Mykonos in Greece, commencing from June 6, 2022, with two flights per week on Mondays and Wednesdays.

In this regard, Kuwait Airways Chief Executive Officer, Engineer Maen Razouqi stated, "Kuwait Airways is pleased to announce to its customers the operation of its flights to the city of Mykonos in Greece. The destination of Mykonos is one of the most important and new destinations of Kuwait Airways, selected after extensive and systematic research due to its historic and touristic attractions along with its rich, diverse culture, in addition to its distinction as a suitable destination for spending the summer vacation."

Razouqi added, "The launching of Mykonos destination emanates from within the framework of the Company's strategy to expand its network to various destinations and locations, especially for the summer season, during which we expect to witness recovery and tremendous demand from passengers, that will significantly encourage tourism and travel around the world and develop it for the benefit of the tourism and hospitality sector. Moreover, Kuwait Airways is



KUWAIT: Kuwait Airways CEO Maen Razouqi with Ambassador of Greece to Kuwait Konstantinos Piperigos.

relentlessly striving to provide diverse and newer options that meet the requirements and aspirations of its customers to travel." In the same context, Razouqi received the Ambassador of Greece to Kuwait, Konstantinos Piperigos, in the presence of KAC's Board Members, Adel Al-Sane and Ahmed Al-Ibrahim, where they discussed methods to enhance joint cooperation and bilateral relations between the two countries and seek to develop them in all fields related to the aviation sector.

In this regard, Razouqi said, "We are honored by the visit of Ambassador Konstantinos Piperigos to the Kuwait Airways headquarters, where His Excellency was briefed on the history of the Blue Bird, with its important achievements, developments and events. We also discussed the extent of relations between the State of Kuwait and Greece and the convergence of understanding between them in the



KUWAIT: Kuwait Airways CEO Maen Razouqi with Ambassador of Greece to Kuwait Konstantinos Piperigos, in the presence of KAC's Board Members Adel Al-Sane and Ahmed Al-Ibrahim.

public interest of both parties and achieving the desired objectives in consolidating and strengthening the bonds of relations between the two countries."

Meanwhile, Ambassador Piperigos commended on the important step taken by Kuwait Airways in launching Mykonos destination and including it in its scheduled flights, thus making it convenient for passengers to travel to Greece and providing a good opportunity to understand the ancient history of Greece with its diverse culture, in addition to enjoying a summer holiday that includes numerous entertainment programs and activities.

Piperigos also pointed out that launching of the Mykonos destination is an important part of joint cooperation between the State of Kuwait and the Republic of Greece, contributing significantly to consolidating relations between the two countries and in the enhancement of several other fields.

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stc surprises passengers at Kuwait International Airport's Terminal 4

KUWAIT: Kuwait Telecommunications Company - stc, a world-class digital leader providing innovative services and platforms to customers, enabling the digital transformation in Kuwait, surprised the passengers at Terminal 4 in Kuwait International Airport with giveaways distributed to passengers and airport employees. The initiative aimed to instill a festive and uplifting atmosphere at Kuwait International Airport in celebration of the country's national holidays.

Building on its national holidays' celebrations, stc organized the initiative as part of its extensive program held under the slogan of "February is very 'wayed' different with stc". The initiative falls in line with stc's corporate social responsibility strategy and the Company's keenness in celebrating the joyous national occasion with the Kuwaiti people.

stc distributed gifts to both departing and arriving passengers and offered passengers with complimentary drinks and confectionaries as a welcome gesture to spread joy and happiness amongst all travelers. stc's Corporate Communications team also handed out giveaways to airport employees at the departure zones in Terminal 4 at Kuwait International Airport as a token of appreciation for their hard work and effort.

stc said, "This event is part of a series of activities launched under the national days campaign



with the tagline "February is very 'wayed' different with stc" during the month of February, which focused on celebrating Kuwait's national holidays with the people of Kuwait. stc also affirmed "We will continue to launch social and community based initiatives that fall in line with its corporate social responsibility strategy as we at stc have always been committed to proactively giving back to the community, and believe that even the smallest gesture can make a difference."



Women rally in Pakistan despite attempts to shut down protest

Georgia, a bleak new home for Russian exiles



KYIV: Fire breaks out at Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant.

Russia targeting Ukraine’s nuke plants

Zaporizhzhia has six reactors of a more modern, safer design

PARIS: Russia is directly targeting Ukraine’s nuclear facilities in a strategy to undermine Ukrainian resistance to the Russian invasion but the tactic carries grave risks, observers say. After advancing Russian forces seized Ukraine’s defunct nuclear plant at Chernobyl and the still-operational reactors at Zaporizhzhia, their sights could be on a third facility, Konstantinovka, in the south.

French President Emmanuel Macron said Monday a key priority of the West was to avoid “catastrophes” with Ukraine’s nuclear power plants in the Russian invasion. With 15 operational reactors, Ukraine is the seventh-largest producer of nuclear electricity in the world, according to International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) figures for 2020.

The country, which relies on nuclear energy for more than half of its power supply, has made significant improvements in safety over the years, experts say. Zaporizhzhia alone has six reactors of a more modern, safer design than the one that melted down at Chernobyl in 1986 in the world’s worst-ever nuclear disaster.

‘Cut off power’

Russia has likely made taking Ukraine’s nuclear stations a priority as “that allows them to cut off power to the large cities,” international relations analyst Jean-Marc Balcenic told AFP.

“One of the Russians’ objectives is to get people to leave, to exhaust the resisters’ ability and will to defend,” Balcenic said. “No more electricity means no more heating, no running water, no fridges or freezers.”

A French military source told AFP that “they’ll want to take all of the nuclear plants to increase the pressure” on Ukrainians.

But Russian leader Vladimir Putin told Macron that he “had no intention of attacking nuclear power stations” and that he was “ready to act in line with IAEA norms”, Paris said.

Russian forces could be within artillery range of the three reactors at Konstantinovka in southern Ukraine, situated between Kherson — the first major city captured — and the Black Sea port of Odessa, a possible future target.

Taking control

Most of Ukraine’s reactors “were planned by the Soviets, they have the blueprints in Moscow,” a French military source said.

Once the army has control of a site, the Russians

“can bring in their own teams of engineers to take care of the power plant,” the source added. Another option is forcing local staff to continue operating the site, as appears to be the case at Chernobyl.

The IAEA has warned that more than 200 security and maintenance staff there have been prevented from leaving since Russian forces took over on February 24. “Russians took over Chernobyl while the night shift was finishing its shift. The day shift was never able to come back” to the plant, Natasha, whose father works at the reactor and asked her real name be withheld, told AFP.

That poses a problem given the strict division of tasks between the night and day shifts, she added. “There is nuclear fuel which is kept in a special pool, in certain conditions in terms of temperature, quantity of minerals, and so on,” Natasha said.

“But the night shift doesn’t have access to this data. If the fuel is not maintained properly, this could generate a risk, like a local explosion,” she fears. Round-the-clock work with only one meal per day, no medicine or hygiene facilities and lack

of sleep are also beginning to take their toll.

On Monday, “an employee ran away in some exclusion zone and nobody can find him,” Natasha said — leaving him stranded up to 60 kilometres from the nearest town in the depths of winter.

‘Unprecedented danger’

The Russian capture of Zaporizhzhia, around 170 kilometres (105 miles) north of the annexed Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea, raised the spectre of nuclear disaster around the world, as shelling hit the plant and caused damage.

It is unclear for now whether the nuclear plant was hit on purpose or by accident, although vital structures appear to remain intact.

“We don’t get the impression that (the Russians) wanted to bombard the power station, but neither did they take particular care,” the French military source told AFP. The International Atomic Energy Agency says that radiation levels remained “normal” in the latest data. A fire broke out at the plant’s training facility but there appears to have been no damage to the reactors.

IAEA chief Rafael Grossi nevertheless warned Monday that “military operations at nuclear power facilities have caused unprecedented danger of a nuclear accident, risking the lives of people living in Ukraine and in neighbouring countries, including Russia.” — AFP



Radiation levels remained ‘normal’

Probe calls former UK speaker a ‘bully’ and a ‘serial liar’

LONDON: Former UK House of Commons speaker John Bercow was yesterday branded a “serial liar” in an official report that upheld bullying claims against him and recommended he should be denied a parliamentary pass for life.

Bercow, 59, gained an international reputation for his theatrical interventions and dressing down of MPs, as he presided over often fractious debates about Brexit. He stepped down in 2019 following accusations that he fostered a culture of bullying and harassment within parliament.

Yesterday, parliament’s sanctions panel upheld an earlier ruling by the legislature’s standards commissioner, concluding that Bercow had displayed “threatening conduct” including verbal abuse and displays of anger.

“The respondent has been a serial bully. Like many bullies, he had those whom he favoured and those whom he made victims. These three complainants were victims,” the report said, accusing him of being a “serial liar” in the probe. “The respondent’s conduct was so serious that, had he still been a Member of Parliament, we would have determined that he should be expelled.

“As it is, we recommend that he should never be permitted a pass to the Parliamentary estate.” In response, Bercow, the longest serving Commons speaker since World War II, denounced the initial report as “amateurish” that would not pass muster in court.

“It is a travesty of justice and brings shame on the House of Commons... “To describe what I have



John Bercow

experienced as a kangaroo court is grossly insulting to kangaroos. “It is based on the flimsiest of evidence, rooted in hearsay and baseless rumour, and advanced by old school dogmatists... settling some ancient scores with me.”

Reformer

Although he has had his pass revoked, the former Conservative MP can still access parliament as a guest or as a member of the public. In his 12 years as the top official in Britain’s elected lower chamber, Bercow was no stranger to controversy.

His broadside against then US president Donald Trump and a perceived bias in his role in Brexit debates riled many within his own party. The speaker wields enormous power in choosing which MPs speak on what subjects and when, and Bercow proudly promoted the rights of backbenchers to hold ministers to account through emergency debates and questions.

Bercow riled eurosceptics by selecting amendments for debate that challenged the government’s strategy for leaving the European Union. He was criticised about a sticker in his car saying “Bollocks to Brexit!”. — AFP

Repression of women on rise in rebel held Yemen

DUBAI: Her voice shaking, 26-year-old Balqees recounts her ordeal at a Houthi rebel checkpoint in northern Yemen, where experts say repression of women is rampant after years of civil war. “There is no limit to their shame,” she said, asking to use a pseudonym for fear of reprisal.

The Houthis, from the Zaidi Shiite sect of Islam, whose traditional stronghold is Yemen’s mountainous north, control the capital Sanaa as well as swathes of the country.

Yemen has long been a deeply conservative society, but the Iran-backed Houthis are enforcing their austere brand of Islam with an iron fist, witnesses say. It is rare for women to speak out, but Balqees described how a Houthi official stopped her at a checkpoint leaving Sanaa when travelling by bus with female friends.

All were aged over 20 but Balqees said he referred to them as “minors”. “He was asking us questions and yelling,” she said. “He accused us of violating public morality.” Balqees said they were dressed in modest clothes, but not the plain black flowing robes and face veil women have traditionally worn in Sanaa for decades, and which the Houthis prefer.

“He had a problem with the way we were dressed,” she said, complaining their clothes were too colourful. Violations of women’s rights in Houthi-controlled areas grew “more acute” last year, according to Yemeni non-governmental organisation Mwatana for Human Rights.

The clampdown on freedoms includes prohibiting the use of contraception and restricting



SANAA: File photo shows Yemeni women walk in the old city market of the Houthi rebels held capital Sanaa. Experts say repression of women in Yemen is rampant after years of civil war. — AFP

women’s right to work, it said. “The situation is bad for women all over the country, but it is worse in the areas under Houthi control,” Mwatana’s Noria Sultan told AFP.

One resident in Sanaa, also speaking on condition of anonymity, said rebels used the smallest apparent infringement of their rules as an excuse to “beat, imprison and humiliate women”. In Balqees’s case, rebel officials also objected to the women travelling without a male guardian—which although not law in Yemen, is demanded by Houthi forces. “It used to be normal for women to travel,” she said.

When Balqees said she planned to cross the front lines to travel to the government-controlled southern port of Aden, things turned worse. “He said, ‘God willing, you’ll be going to hell,’” she said.

Houthi forces seized their identification papers and ordered them back to Sanaa. “I felt like I was being interrogated like a criminal,” she said, adding the soldiers were staring and leering at them in an unpleasant manner. — AFP

International

Warplanes for Ukraine? West weighs tricky options

Ukraine's air force fleet consists of ageing Soviet-era MiG-29

PARIS: Ukraine has stepped up calls for Western allies to supply military jets in the face of the Russian invasion, but quickly providing war planes would be highly unusual and risky. "We are people and it is your humanitarian duty to protect us," Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelensky said on Sunday, after Russian forces pressed their advance toward major cities.

"If you don't, if you don't give us at least planes so we can protect ourselves, there's only one thing to conclude: you want us to be killed very slowly," he warned.



**Jets could
be brought
in by land**

Ukraine's air force fleet consists of ageing Soviet-era MiG-29 and Sukhoi-27 jets, used for aerial combat or supporting ground troops, and heavier Sukhoi-25 jets to take out ground targets, according to the Military Balance assessment by the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS).

These are the only planes Ukrainian pilots could fly immediately without additional training—no NATO or other European ally shows any appetite for taking part directly and risking being deemed a co-combatant by Moscow. "We must stop this war without becoming warring parties ourselves," said French President

Emmanuel Macron, whose country currently holds the rotating EU presidency. It's the same reason NATO has ruled out trying to impose a no-fly zone over Ukraine, despite repeated requests by Kyiv.

Deal with Poland?

Only a few former Warsaw Pact countries still have the MiG-29s that would best serve Ukraine as it tries to fend off the Russian advances, according to the IISS. Poland has 28 — which it obtained from Germany for a symbolic one euro some two decades ago—while Slovakia has 14 and Bulgaria 11.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said during a visit to Moldova on Sunday that Washington was "actively" looking at a deal with Poland to provide Ukraine with the planes. In exchange, US media reports said the US could supply Poland with F-16 fighters. But those replacements might not be immediately available, meaning the Polish air force could find itself short-handed as war rages just over its border.

Warsaw also appears unwilling to risk provoking Russia, with the office of Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki posting on Twitter on Sunday: "Poland won't send its fighter jets to #Ukraine as well as allow to use its airports."

France's Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian suggested that EU nations would try to keep quiet on any military aid. "I think it's advisable in this situation that each country show discretion on equipment delivered to Ukraine," he said on Sunday.

Airfields destroyed

Another complication is that even if Soviet-era planes are made available, getting them to Ukraine is a



PRZEMYSL, Poland: A woman smiles as she receives a flower from a Polish priest on the occasion of the International women's day at the train station of Przemyl where hundreds of refugees from Ukraine wait for their relocation, in Przemysl, Poland. — AFP

delicate matter. "To deliver a plane, it needs to be flown to the country, which could be interpreted as active participation in the conflict" by a NATO country, a French fighter jet pilot told AFP on condition of anonymity. In theory the jets could be brought in by land, but such transport convoys require significant logistical planning, made more difficult by the destruction of several key bridges in Ukraine over the past two weeks.

Western officials are also uncertain on the current operational status of the military bases that house MiG-29s, and the ability of Ukrainian forces to carry out the necessary maintenance operations as the conflict spreads. Several airbases have already been struck, and Ukraine's defence ministry said on Sunday that an airfield was "put out of action" at Vinnytsia in the centre west, well away from the Russian ground advance until now. — AFP



TBILISI, Georgia: Demonstrators hold posters during a rally in support of Ukraine in Tbilisi. — AFP

Georgia, a bleak new home for Russian exiles

TBILISI, Georgia: Sitting at a windswept terrace of a tiny bar in Georgia's capital Tbilisi, Russian exile Roman Mikhailov said he had no choice but to leave his country "immediately" when Moscow invaded Ukraine. The 25-year-old logistics manager said the attack on Ukraine, which shocked the world, was a point of no return for some Russians who oppose President Vladimir Putin's longtime rule.

He is among those Russians who fled in large numbers to Georgia within days—or even hours—of Moscow's invasion, to escape asphyxiating Western sanctions and a feared escalation in repression by the authorities.

"The majority of Russians support Putin and it's very hard to be even politically neutral," he told AFP from the Russian expats' favourite bar, deep in the labyrinth of Tbilisi's narrow streets. "I am against Putin and the only prospect I have in Russia is to end up in prison-like Navalny." Opposition leader Alexei Navalny, who led the biggest protests against Putin that Russia has seen in recent years, has been jailed and his political organisations banned. There are few routes out of Russia for those wishing to leave now. Western airspace is largely closed to Russian carriers.

But Tbilisi has for years served as a hub for Russian opposition circles, and Georgia is one of the few countries where Russians can stay for a year without a visa. Sipping her beer at a nearby table, computer programmer Marina Boldyreva said she was on holiday in the Black Sea country when Putin announced the attack.

Hearing the news, she decided not to return home to Saint Petersburg, Russia's second city, and turned her

break into "an immigration". It will be "impossible to live in Russia", the 26-year-old said. "It will face a terrible economic crisis."

'No moral right to stay'

The new wave of Russian emigres vividly remember what they were doing when they heard news of the invasion, launched by Putin in the early hours of February 24. "I will remember forever how I learned the war had begun," said Denys Sinyakov, a 44-year-old who works in cinema. That day he was filming the timeless frescoes of the Dormition Cathedral in the city of Vladimir outside Moscow, regarded as the mother church of Mediaeval Russia. "I was looking at those frescoes and it was such a surreal feeling. You are in the cradle of Russian civilisation—those icons that depict darkness and light—but all I could think of was Ukraine."

His sense of shock was worsened by the fact that his wife is Ukrainian. "My country attacked my wife's country. I have no moral right to stay in Russia," he said. Sinyakov said he left behind a newly-built house, where the couple were "dreaming to live".

Not all Russians in Tbilisi agree about Putin's role in Ukraine. Emotions were running high among the dozen or so exiles queuing at an ATM, debating an invasion that has forced so many into immigration. "I fully support Putin. He does what is good for Russia's interests," said Larisa Shubova, a 55-year-old businesswoman. "Let the world see our might." "What 'might' are you talking about?" 34-year-old engineer Pavel Gruzdev retorted angrily. "Russia is an outcast now."

The influx of Russians has also sparked mixed feelings among Georgians. Tbilisi has seen near daily mass rallies in solidarity with Ukraine since Moscow stunned the world with its full-scale attack.

Georgia itself saw a Russian invasion in 2008. Anti-Russian sentiment is on the rise, with some Western leaders voicing concern that Georgia—and another pro-Western ex-Soviet republic, Moldova—could become the Kremlin's next target. — AFP

300 years in Ukraine, including during Soviet times, when religion was officially outlawed and believers practiced in secret. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the Orthodox faith in Ukraine splintered into three branches: one whose clerics pledged loyalty to the Moscow patriarchate; one loyal to a newly established patriarchate in Kyiv; and the smaller Ukrainian Orthodox Autocephalous Church.

But this changed after Russia seized and annexed Crimea from Ukraine in 2014 and then backed separatists, who carved out two unrecognised breakaway regions in Ukraine's east. That conflict has since claimed some 13,000 lives. Four years after the annexation of Crimea, the Istanbul-based Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople recognised Kiev's religious independence, allowing the creation of a unified Ukrainian Church.

The Russian Church lost many members to the new unified Ukrainian Church but remained the country's second-largest confession. According to a poll in 2021, 58 percent of Orthodox believers said they were members of the new unified church, compared with 25 percent who pledged allegiance to the Moscow patriarchate. But now priests like 33-year-old Olshansky are calling for a split. "All our prayers are now for the re-establishment of peace in Ukraine and for the victory of our army," he says.

How US might help Ukraine without broadening the war

WASHINGTON: The United States believes Russia is digging in for a protracted war, and Washington wants to help Kyiv resist, but an overarching goal remains—limiting the conflict to Ukraine to avoid spillover that could provoke "World War III." The US military establishment is walking a tightrope as it seeks to balance such demands and avoid nuclear escalation, according to public statements by American leaders and AFP interviews with several officials who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the sensitive issue.

The conflict "may not be over soon," warned Secretary of State Antony Blinken during his latest visit to Europe. US intelligence sources initially feared a lightning attack that would see Kyiv fall within days. But the Pentagon soon realized Russia's army was "behind" in its battle plan, due to logistical problems and Ukraine's fierce resistance. The US military assumes, however pessimistically for Washington, that Russia's massive and superior military capacity could eventually overwhelm Kyiv. As one senior US defense official put it: "I just don't think we should underestimate" Moscow's "firepower."

Putin 'destined to lose'

The suffering, Blinken cautioned, "is likely to get worse before it gets better." But Russian President Vladimir Putin "is destined to lose," he insisted. In private, US officials go further, not hesitating to assert the Russian leader has already lost. And they are adapting their strategy accordingly. Their first priority is to keep providing major assistance to Ukraine's resistance so it can hold on, even if some cities begin to fall. The Americans have put in place "robust information and

Red line

Preventing a broadening of the war is a red line that was bluntly summarized by another official: "We don't want World War III." Even before Russia's invasion, President Joe Biden—acutely mindful of the threat of a nuclear face-off—warned that any direct US involvement in Ukraine would provoke a "world war." He has given directives to avoid such a spiral, by limiting the capacity of American intervention.

Washington is therefore emphasizing the preventive and deterrent deployments of soldiers in allied countries that are on Russia's doorstep, which have been visited by Blinken and US Chief of Staff General Mark Milley. But any option that could be interpreted by Putin as a major escalation has been ruled out, to avoid Moscow branding any NATO country a "co-belligerent" of Ukraine. Should the Russians attack forces of a single NATO country, all other members of the transatlantic alliance, including the United States, would be obligated to come to its aid militarily under Article 5 of the treaty that unites them, and which Biden has pledged to respect. — AFP



PEREKHRESTIA, Ukraine: A family brings gifts in a school in Perekhrestya, close to the Ukrainian-Hungarian border. — AFP

Priests call for split

The monastery that Olshansky oversees has become a centre for dispensing aid to the masses of people fleeing the fighting in the east. When he spoke to AFP, a group of some 33 adults and children who had spent the night there, some sleeping on the floor in front of the altar, were eating their breakfast of porridge and buttered bread sandwiches.

"We're trying to help everyone," says Olshansky, who wears clerical robes and a black hooded sweatshirt. "We don't ask who they are." Olshansky's monastery is also helping Ukrainian armed forces, collecting and sending supplies like hygiene products and sleeping bags.

Olshansky is not alone in calling for a break from the Moscow patriarchate, whose head, Patriarch Kirill, has called Russia's opponents in Ukraine "evil forces" rather than condemning the invasion. In the Lviv diocese, Kirill's name is no longer mentioned in the liturgies and several priests from across Ukraine have posted a video calling for a complete break with the Russian Church.

Another group of priests from the Lviv region has called for a national meeting of the Church to formally declare its independence from Moscow. That text has been posted in front of the Church of Saint George, the headquarters of the Russian Orthodox Church in Lviv, next to another listing the needs of the Ukrainian fighters.

'Brother killing his own brother'

One such priest is taking refuge at the monastery, after fleeing his parish near Kyiv with his wife and two young children. "I am 100-percent convinced that we should separate from the Russian patriarchate," says his wife, Vera Khvust.

"If they consider us brothers, then you can't have a brother killing his own brother. A good neighbour will never go to war against his neighbour." Western Ukraine—where the vast majority of residents practice the Greek Catholic faith—has been a bastion of Ukrainian nationalism for decades. Anti-Russian sentiment was high in the country even before the Crimea annexation.

So after the Kremlin unleashed its war on the country, Olshansky faced abuse and threats from some local elected officials. For them, his association with a Moscow-based church meant he was a figure of influence for Russia.

Some Russian Orthodox churches in the west of the country have even been searched, suspected of concealing weapons. One group of youths hung up a placard insulting the Moscow patriarch at the Church of Saint George. Despite these tensions, Olshansky says he does not feel threatened. "They are only emotions. I don't get angry at these people. I understand them and forgive them," he says. — AFP

Ukraine priests want to break from 'Cain' Russian church

LVIV: The Kremlin's war against Ukraine has pushed some priests in the country to call for a break from the Russian Orthodox Church, to which their parishes have belonged for centuries. Like much of their social and cultural fabric, Ukraine and Russia have been intertwined by their religious beliefs for hundreds of years.

But President Vladimir Putin's war, which has killed hundreds and forced more than 1.7 million people to flee the country, has changed that too. "The Russian president is today's Cain," says Iov Olshansky, a priest at the Orthodox Resurrection New Athos Monastery in the western city of Lviv. In the Bible, Cain, the first son of Adam and Eve, kills his brother Abel. "The only way for our Church is independence," he says.

Unified Ukrainian Church

The Russian Orthodox Church was dominant for some

International

‘Sexism exists’: South Korea feminist presidential candidate’s lonely crusade

Sim is a stark contrast to her gaffe-prone rivals

SEOUL: Solid political credentials, scandal-free, and an excellent debater: Sim Sang-jung is one of South Korea’s most established woman politicians. But as a left-wing feminist from a minor party, she doesn’t stand a chance of becoming president on Wednesday.

In socially conservative South Korea, every president except one has been male and come from one of the country’s two major parties. The next president will also be a man—the front runners are both male.



Korea is still a patriarchal society

As a four-time parliamentarian and seasoned labour and women’s rights activist with not a whiff of scandal about her, Sim is a stark contrast to her gaffe-prone rivals—Yoon Suk-yeol from the opposition People Power Party, and Lee Jae-myung of the ruling Democratic Party.

From Yoon’s suspected links to dodgy shamans to widely reported allegations against Lee of mafia ties, the leading candidates have thrown so much mud at each other on the campaign trail that some local media have branded it the “election of the unfavourables”.

Still, Sim doesn’t stand a chance of winning—her approval rating has never left the single digits. As a self-identified feminist, Sim is the antithesis of the PPP’s Yoon, who has vowed to abolish the ministry of gender equality—claiming, despite the evidence, that women do not face systemic discrimination.

“Sexism clearly exists in South Korean society,” Sim told AFP by email. Yoon’s stated objectives risk fanning dangerous misogynistic sentiment and will, ultimately, damage South Korean democracy, she said. “We

already know the historical consequences of election campaign strategies that encourage hate,” she added.

‘Patriarchal society’

Despite its economic and technological advances, South Korea remains socially traditional and patriarchal, and has one of the world’s thickest glass ceilings for women. It has the highest gender wage gap in the OECD club of developed economies and only 3.6 per cent of board members at the country’s conglomerates are female. Similarly in politics, women hold just 18.6 percent of assembly seats in parliament—putting South Korea in 125th position in a global ranking maintained by the Inter-Parliamentary Union, just a few seats ahead of North Korea in 130th place.

“Korea is still a patriarchal society, and it is very hard for any female politician to rise to the top,” Gi-Wook Shin, a sociology professor at Stanford University, told AFP. The country’s sole woman president, Park Geun-hye, in office from 2013 to 2017, “was an exception, who rode on the legacy of her father”, the late dictator Park Chung-hee, he said.

Sim’s second key handicap as a viable candidate is that she hails from the small, left-wing Justice Party, which holds six seats in the National Assembly. South Korea, which uses a first-past-the-post election model, has a strong two-party system, and every president has come from that duopoly.

The Justice Party campaigns on issues such as climate justice, as well as LGBT and labour rights—all considered radical in South Korea. Sim entered politics after spending more than two decades on the front lines of South Korea’s turbulent labour rights movement, going underground as a factory worker to organise unions while a student. In 1985 she helped lead a groundbreaking strike and was rewarded by being put on the “most wanted” list of the country’s then authoritarian government. Her key policy as a presidential candidate reflects this background: she proposes a four-day work week, a revolutionary idea in a country where workers endure notoriously long hours.



SEOUL: Supporters of South Korea’s presidential candidate Sim Sang-jung of the opposition Justice Party hold up placards during an election campaign in Seoul ahead of the March 9 presidential election. — AFP

Polling suggests her strongest support is among women in their 20s, but her overall approval ratings hover woefully low at around two to three percent. She’s a hero to some younger women for managing to “articulate the women’s rights agenda” in the male-dominated labour movement, Vladimir Tikhonov, professor of Korean studies at the University of Oslo, told AFP.

Long game

But Sim has made costly mistakes: she did not speak out when a key corruption case hit incumbent President Moon Jae-in’s administration, which made her party look complicit, analysts say. People assumed her party was “a coalition partner of the Democratic

Party, rather than a more reform-oriented left-wing alternative,” said Yesola Kweon, a politics professor at Sungkyunkwan University in Seoul.

Sim herself blames her low approval ratings on her inability to convince South Koreans to see beyond the narrow policy choices offered by the two main parties. “We couldn’t convince people to believe in possibilities,” she told AFP. But although Sim has no chance of winning, it’s an “important symbolic stance” that she is on the ballot on Wednesday, said Sharon Yoon, a Korean studies professor at the University of Notre Dame. She’s seeking to change Seoul’s “two-party system that runs on personality politics and regional loyalties rather than policy interests,” she told AFP. “She is playing a long game.” — AFP



ISLAMABAD: Aurat March protesters hold placards and shout slogans as they gather to mark the International Women’s Day in Islamabad yesterday. — AFP

Women rally in Pakistan despite attempts to shut down protest

LAHORE: Around 2,000 women rallied yesterday in the Pakistan city of Lahore despite efforts by authorities to bar the protest and withdraw security for an event frequently the target of violence.

Rallies on International Women’s Day have received fierce backlash since they were embraced four years ago in deeply conservative and patriarchal Pakistan. In a society where women have been shot, stabbed, stoned, set alight and strangled for damaging family “honour”, critics accuse rights activists of promoting liberal Western values and disrespecting religious and cultural mores.

Yesterday dozens of events marking International Women’s Day — known as the Aurat March in Pakistan — were held across the country. Non-violent counter-protests, dubbed “hijab marches”, were also staged by women from conservative religious groups in Karachi, Lahore and Islamabad where participants called for the preservation of Islamic values. In the eastern city of Lahore, city authorities urged organisers to cancel the rally

over safety concerns, and threatened to not provide security. Following a legal challenge, the Lahore High Court ruled the event could go ahead and authorities agreed to provide protection. The women marched through the streets in a jovial atmosphere, chanting slogans such as “Give respect to women” and “End the patriarchy”.

They were guarded by riot police — and greeted by a small band of men chanting “end this obscenity”. Student Sairah Khan, 23, cited recent high-profile cases of brutal violence against women “without consequences” for her attendance.

In Karachi — Pakistan’s largest city — around 1,000 women gathered in a festival atmosphere with organisers conducting security checks as police stood by idly. “We have only one slogan: Equal wages, protection and peace,” one woman chanted from a stage. In the capital Islamabad around 200 women rallied outside the city’s press club. “We have come to raise our voices and highlight our issues,” said student Fatima Shahzad.

They were outmatched by more than 400 counter-protesters from extremist religious parties. But organiser Farzana Bari pledged “we will continue to assert ourselves”. “These are the women who refused to bow down,” she told AFP. In 2020, groups of hardline Islamist men turned up in vans and hurled stones at women as they marched through Islamabad. Doctored videos and photos of last year’s events were spread online and even appeared on popular television shows falsely accusing women of chanting or carrying blasphemous slogans — an act which carries the death penalty in Pakistan. — AFP

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky openly invited foreigners to his country to form part of an “international brigade” that would fight side by side with Ukrainians against the Russians. Francis heeded that call after putting himself in their shoes.

“They are just like us. Just normal folks. That are now drawn into a conflict and standing there to fight,” he said. “What if Canada was attacked and everyone left Canada? We’d be all alone. Wouldn’t we want help? I know I would,” he added.

Morale booster

After packing his rucksack with essentials like a bullet-proof vest, hearing protection and a wilderness survival kit, Francis flew nearly 6,000 kilometres to Warsaw. “In my wallet, in a little vial, I’ve got a bit of my grandmother’s ashes. She always wanted to come to Europe. Now she’s here,” he said.

In the Polish capital he got help from a foreign exchange student friend from high school, who booked Francis a hotel room and drove him part of the way to the Ukrainian border. There, Francis plans to help out at an aid station, before travelling to Lviv and onward to Kyiv. Once across the border, he will get a Ukrainian armband and a weapon. Coordinating his crossing is

London police make arrest in 2008 murder

LONDON: London police investigating the 2008 murder of a Norwegian student yesterday said they had made an arrest, as they urged a Yemeni suspect who fled the country to give himself up. Martine Vik Magnussen, 23, was found dead in the basement of a block of flats in central London, after a night out partying at a private members club popular with celebrities.

A Yemeni man, Farouk Abdulhak, was quickly identified as a suspect for her murder but fled Britain, travelling to Egypt then on to Yemen. Police on Monday said a woman in her 60s was arrested in central London on suspicion of assisting an offender and was taken into custody.

Detective Chief Inspector Jim Eastwood, leading the investigation, said Magnussen’s family had been informed of the development. “Though it represents a positive step, there is still much more work for us to do,” he added.

“Most importantly, Farouk Abdulhak should be aware that this matter has not, and will not, go away,” he said, promising to do everything to bring him back to Britain. “His status as a wanted man will remain and we will not cease in our efforts to get justice for Martine’s family.

“I’m appealing to Farouk Abdulhak directly: come back to the UK. Come back to face justice.” Magnussen and Abdulhak were both students at the private Regent’s University London—then known as Regent’s College—and knew each other socially. He was also well known to her friends.

Abdulhak, who was 21 at the time and had lived in London since childhood, stayed at the flat in Great Portland Street, near Regent’s Park, where her body was found on March 16, 2008. A post-mortem examination gave the cause of death as compression to the neck. She had also been raped. A coroner ruled that she was unlawfully killed at an inquest in 2010. — AFP

Jan Plewka, a Polish firearms instructor who has been helping dozens of foreign fighters both from Poland and elsewhere.

“I’ve never been to Afghanistan, I have no formal combat experience but I have lots of training. Hopefully I can put it to use,” Francis said. Some 20,000 international volunteers have already joined the fight against invading Russian forces, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said on Sunday.

Their presence can help Ukraine’s troops on multiple fronts, according to Francis. “They’re getting more manpower. They’re getting more firepower. They’re getting more of whatever kit we bring. I have tons of medical supplies I can hand out,” he said. “We would also definitely help their morale just by being there.”

The last few days have been a blur for Francis. “It’s been pretty sleepless. You psych yourself up, right? Like you’re constantly thinking of what can happen,” he said. Though he is wary of Russian tanks, in general Francis said he is not afraid.

“It’s war. If I catch a bullet over there, I catch a bullet. So be it,” he said. “I know what I’m getting myself into but I wouldn’t be able to sit back and watch all this on Facebook and not help—with the skillset that I have,” he added.—AFP

UN rights chief to visit China’s Xinjiang in May

GENEVA: The UN rights chief said yesterday she would make a long-delayed visit to China in May, including to Xinjiang, where Western lawmakers have accused Beijing of genocide. “I am pleased to announce that we have recently reached an agreement with the government of China for a visit,” Michelle Bachelet told the UN Human Rights Council.

She said that the UN rights agency, OHCHR, and Beijing had “initiated concrete preparations for a visit that is foreseen to take place in May.” There have long been calls for the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to visit Xinjiang.

Rights groups say that at least one million mostly Muslim minorities have been incarcerated in “re-education camps” in Xinjiang, a far-western region where China is accused of widespread human rights abuses including forced sterilisations of women and forced labour. The US government and lawmakers in five other Western countries have declared China’s treatment of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang a “genocide” — a charge denied by Beijing. China says it is running vocational training centres in the region designed to counter extremism.



GENEVA: United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet delivers a speech at the opening of a session of the UN Human Rights Council. — AFP

‘Unfettered access’

The Chinese government has for years said that Bachelet was welcome to visit Xinjiang, but an agreement on her demand for “meaningful and unfettered access” has until now appeared elusive.

On the sidelines of the Winter Olympics, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres told leaders in Beijing last month that he expected them to allow Bachelet to make a “credible” visit to China, including to Xinjiang. And yesterday, the UN rights chief said an agreement had been reached.

“Preparations will have to take into account Covid-19 regulations,” she told the rights council. “The government has also accepted the visit of an advanced OHCHR team to prepare my stay in China, including on-site visits to Xinjiang and other places,” she said. “This team will depart to China next month.”

While Bachelet did not clearly specify that she herself would travel to Xinjiang, her spokeswoman Elizabeth Throssell told reporters she would visit the region. “I can confirm that both the advanced team and the High Commissioner will go or are due to go to Xinjiang, and obviously visit Beijing and other locations,” she said. “This was the product of negotiations.” Throssell said “an agreement on the parameters that respect our methodology,” had been reached, including “unfettered access to a broad range of actors, including civil society.”—AFP

Canadian goes to war in Ukraine

WARSAW, Poland: Former Canadian infantry soldier Hunter Francis has no connection to Ukraine. But when he saw that Russian troops were shelling residential areas there, he flew over to join the battle. “It wasn’t really a decision. Just something that you had to do. It’s the right thing to do,” said the 24-year-old, who is from the Eel Ground First Nation reserve in New Brunswick.

“This stuff’s not supposed to happen. There should not be a full-scale invasion of another country in the 21st century,” he told AFP. The criminology student’s travel plans came as a shock to his friends and family—especially to his mother.

“Everyone I’ve told said I’m insane. You’ve gotta be insane to voluntarily walk into a warzone,” he said, calm and cool-headed and wearing combat fatigues. “No-one likes to do this stuff... I’m just doing what needs to be done. Someone’s gotta do it. That’s been my mentality my whole life,” he added.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 9, 2022

Business

Zain ‘Best Mobile Operator’ and ‘Best ISP’ in Kuwait during 2021

Company’s excellence recognized by Service Hero Index for tenth time

KUWAIT: Zain, the leading digital service provider in Kuwait, ranked first in the ‘Best Mobile Operator’ category for the tenth time and the ‘Best Internet Service Provider’ category for the sixth time in Kuwait for the year 2021 by Service Hero, the Arab World’s only 100 percent consumer powered customer satisfaction index.

The announcement was made during the virtual event held by Service Hero, featuring the participation of many industry leaders, executives, public figures, and private sector representatives. The Index celebrated the companies that received the highest scores from consumers in recognition of their world-class service level and quality, each in their respective industries. Zain came on top of the categories under the telecommunications sector.

Zain ranked first for achieving the highest customer satisfaction scores by providing the best quality service standards to the Kuwaiti market. The award came after an in-depth evaluation by Service Hero’s independent advisory council, which recognized Zain’s leadership in offering the best innovative digital services, as well as its relentless pursuit of excellence and innovation with the aim of achieving superior digital lifestyle transformation for its customer base, considered the biggest in Kuwait.

Zain received the two awards for achieving high rates of customer satisfaction. The recognition from Service Hero for the tenth and sixth times demonstrates Zain’s commitment in providing its customers with the highest levels of service, further reinforcing its efforts in maintaining the values of its brand. The company is motivated to continue its pledge in providing innovative services to meet the needs of its



- On top of the categories under telecommunications sector
- Ranks first for achieving the highest customer satisfaction scores
- Recognition for offering best innovative digital services

customers as well as to facilitate their personal, professional, and business needs.

Last year, Zain received the Gulf Breakthrough Award from Dell Technologies, the global leader in technology solutions. The award recognized Zain’s Strategic Partnership with Dell in driving digital

transformation within the telecom and IT sector in the region, as well as its offering of advanced solutions across its B2B and B2C platforms as per world-class standards.

The award is a testament from one of the world’s biggest technology leaders in Zain’s capabilities and

contributions to empowering digital transformation. The award reflected the company’s leadership in adopting the highest international standards to offer advanced solutions with fantastic service quality to its subscribers and corporate customers, whom it considers an essential part of the Zain family, the biggest family of subscribers in Kuwait.

Service Hero’s assessment method is statistically rigorous, robust, and relevant. From representative sample sizes to service quality checks and ratings scales, Service Hero’s Index provides a rigorous annual snapshot of consumer feelings. Based in Kuwait, Service Hero is the only consumer powered customer satisfaction index in the Middle East. The company is a member of ESOMAR (European Society for Opinion and Marketing Research) and adheres to the global organization’s principles and guidelines for self-regulation and ethical practice.

Service Hero is overseen by an Independent Advisory Council to assure results that are impartial, objective, and accurately reflect consumers’ preference, making the company’s findings a credible benchmark that offers transparent and relevant insight for companies.

It is comprised of academics and business professionals representing leading institutions and corporate establishments in Kuwait, including local banks, investment funds, consultancy groups, as well as private academic institutions such as the American University of Kuwait, Australian College of Kuwait, and Gulf University for Science and Technology. Since 2010, Service Hero has measured around 300,000 validated consumer assessments covering more than 300 private sector companies.

CBK celebrates International Women’s Day

KUWAIT: The Central Bank of Kuwait (CBK) recognized International Women’s Day yesterday by celebrating CBK female staff’s excellence across its ranks. In a statement, the Bank reaffirmed its commitment to empowering women on all levels and in all sectors within CBK to realize their full potential.

The statement indicated women make up 59 percent of all central bank staff, with 40 percent of which hold leadership positions. This is above the global rate for women in leadership positions in regulatory bodies and financial sector institutions



(30 percent). It also exceeds the European Central Bank’s 2026 targets of (51 percent) women staff, and (36 percent) of women in leading management positions.

The CBK statement added that the number of women staff selected for CBK’s distinguished performance awards stood at (57 percent) of the total awardees, a

testimony to CBK female staff excellence and professionalism. The CBK continues to stress gender equality and the principle of equal opportunity in all the training programs and scholarships it provides staff, the ultimate objective being further development of the institution to better enable it to uphold its mandate.

Shell set to stop Russian energy purchases

LONDON: Energy giant Shell said yesterday it will withdraw from Russian gas and oil and immediately stop purchases of its crude, citing the country’s ongoing invasion of Ukraine. The company also apologized for buying a cargo of Russian oil last week, adding that it should not have happened.

“Shell today announced its intent to withdraw from its involvement in all Russian hydrocarbons, including crude oil, petroleum products, gas and liquefied natural gas in a phased manner, aligned with new (UK) government guidance,” it said in a statement. “As an immediate first step, the company will stop all spot purchases of Russian crude oil.”

The group will also shut its service stations, aviation fuels and lubricants operations in Russia. A wide-range of international companies have stopped doing business in Russia since President Vladimir Putin ordered the invasion of Ukraine late last month.

The United States said it was in talks with allies about banning oil imports from Russia, but Germany and other European nations have balked at the idea as the continent is highly dependent on Russian crude and gas. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson stated Monday that it was “the right thing to do” to move away from Russian hydrocarbons—but called for a gradual “step by step” approach. Shell came under fire last week after it bought a shipment of Russian oil at a vast discount, despite international outcry over the assault on Ukraine.

“We are acutely aware that our decision last week to purchase a cargo of Russian crude oil to be refined into products like petrol and diesel—despite being made with security of supplies at the forefront of our



thinking—was not the right one and we are sorry,” said chief executive Ben van Beurden.

The group has already pledged to commit profits to a dedicated fund for Ukraine. “We will work with aid partners and humanitarian agencies over the coming days and weeks to determine where the monies from this fund are best placed to alleviate the terrible consequences that this war is having on the people of Ukraine,” added van Beurden.

Shell had already announced just over one week ago that it will sell its stake in all joint ventures with Russia’s state-controlled Gazprom.

The news came after rival British energy major BP decided to exit Russia, pulling its 19.75-percent stake in Rosneft. Shell remains in “continuous discussions” with governments about “the need to disentangle society from Russian energy flows, while maintaining energy supplies”, van Beurden added yesterday. “These societal challenges highlight the dilemma between putting pressure on the Russian government over its atrocities in

Ukraine and ensuring stable, secure energy supplies across Europe.

“But ultimately, it is for governments to decide on the incredibly difficult trade-offs that must be made during the war in Ukraine.” Shell will continue to work with governments to manage the impact on energy supplies particularly in Europe.

‘Unwinding tentacles’

The group’s share price dipped 0.2 percent in early afternoon deals on London’s flat stock market. “Shell’s apology for buying Russian oil shows just how strong the winds of change are blowing through the corporate world,” noted Hargreaves Lansdown analyst Susannah Streeter.

“But unwinding Shell’s tentacles from the economy is set to be a complex affair and ... Shell has also warned that exiting Russia’s energy sector will be hugely challenging, requiring concerted government action to ensure stable and secure supplies across Europe.” — AFP

Pressure mounts on US companies in Russia

NEW YORK: As a growing list of US multinational businesses—from Apple to Levi’s—suspend activities in Russia, some companies choose to stay in the country despite the risks to their reputation.

But they face mounting pressure: calls for repercussions are appearing on social media under hashtags such as #BoycottMcDonalds and #BoycottPepsi—two companies that received letters from New York state’s pension fund chief. These companies “need to consider whether doing business in Russia is worth the risk during this extraordinarily volatile time,” Thomas DiNapoli said in a statement.

DiNapoli has also sent letters to snack manufacturer Mondelez; cosmetics groups Estee Lauder and Coty; and brokerage firm Bunge. A team from Yale University that keeps a list of companies with a significant presence in Russia said about 250 have announced withdrawal from the country since it invaded Ukraine.

The group said the withdrawals call to mind “the large-scale corporate boycott of Apartheid South Africa in the 1980s.” Many US companies still in Russia remain silent. Brands including McDonald’s, Bunge, Mondelez, Estee Lauder, Kimberly-Clark and Coty did not respond to an AFP request for comment.

Legitimate reasons

Starbucks said that its 130 coffee shops in Russia are owned by a Kuwaiti conglomerate. The coffee giant has pledged to donate any profit from its business in Russia to humanitarian efforts in Ukraine.

Yum Brands said its approximately 1,000 KFC and 50 Pizza Hut restaurants in Russia are nearly all operated by independent owners under license or franchise agreements. It announced Monday that it “has suspended all investment and restaurant development in Russia.” Some businesses may have legitimate reasons to stay, several experts in ethics and communications strategy told AFP.

Companies may be hesitant to leave because they make essential products such as pharmaceutical ingredients, said Tim Fort, a professor of business ethics at Indiana University. “This is a time when (you’ve) got to pick your side, and it doesn’t strike me as this being very difficult to pick,” he said. “Any one company leaving the country isn’t

going to tip the balance... but there’s a cumulative effect,” Fort added.

‘What’s going on?’

A company as well-known as McDonald’s can have influence in Russia at a time when the general population has almost no access to sources of information other than the official messaging on the invasion. “Russians (will) be able to survive without the Big Mac, but (ask) why is McDonald’s closed? What’s going on? It’s a more powerful signal in that sense,” Fort said.

Richard Painter, a professor at the University of Minnesota, warned of “serious risks for American and Western Europeans who are currently in Russia.

“These companies should do everything they can to bring their people home,” he said. Painter said companies “should think about the message that needs to be emphasized: that Russia cannot do this to Ukraine... while at the same time participating in the international economy.” The economic sanctions imposed on Russia with broad consensus by Western governments “is really the best way to deal with Russia, as opposed to a military confrontation,” the former White House ethics lawyer said.

Some companies may be betting the criticism will rain down in the short term but ultimately subsidize, said Brian Berkey, who specializes in corporate ethics at the University of Pennsylvania.

Other crisis situations, such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, led to calls for boycotts against certain companies—but without much effect. Support for such initiatives is not always unanimous, but “mostly people in the United States and in Europe are unified in thinking that what Russia is doing is clearly unacceptable,” he said.

Mark Hass, a communications specialist at Arizona State University, said the economic interest of companies that have chosen to stay in Russia “outweighs the reputational one.”

McDonald’s, for instance, gets nine percent of its revenue and three percent of its operating profits from Russia. But “if social media starts identifying you as a company that’s willing to do business with an authoritarian aggressor, who’s slaughtering thousands of people in the Ukraine, you’re in big trouble,” Hass said. “And it will hurt business more broadly than just in Russia.” —AFP

Business

Hard labor: The children who make bricks to survive in Chad

42% of Chad's population of around 15m lives below the poverty line

NDJAMENA, Chad: Celestin sweats profusely in the searing heat. Like dozens of other youngsters in Chad's capital N'Djamena, the scrawny 13-year-old in rags is up to his knees in mud, making clay bricks. The teenagers work on a large plot of land in the Waria district near the Chari River in the south of the city. There are no trees to give shade. Here, in the heart of the Sahel, the Harmattan wind is just a light, dusty breeze. Celestin, who wishes to go only by his first name, uses his feet to knead clay soil, mixed with water, straw and manure. In exhausting labor, he then fills moulds to fashion the bricks.

"I get back pain," he says, without looking up from his task. The lad has been making bricks for a year. For six hours of work a day, he earns around 2,500 CFA francs (\$4.15, under A4). "But I have no choice, I have to support myself." Celestin works six days a week and lives in a makeshift shack in a nearby district.

Pittance

A short distance away, Felix, 10, is busy moving the bricks. He has a puny torso on rickety legs, yet each time he carries up to four bricks—a weight not far from 12 kilos (26 pounds). "I earn around 500 francs a day (75 euro cents / \$0.83). I come here right after school," he says, out of breath. Other children, barely older and clad in rags, do the same job. They are paid by the owner to take the bricks from the place of manufacture to the place of sale. In recent years, the trade in clay bricks has greatly increased, with the soaring price of cement. Makeshift factories like these have sprouted up throughout the city.

Chad is, according to the United Nations, the third least developed country on the planet. The World Bank estimates that 42 percent of a population of around 15 million lives below the poverty line.

The central African country has ratified international conventions that ban the labor of children under 14, but "due to economic hardship, many families are forced to let their children work," says Humanium, an NGO specializing in the rights of children. In a 2018, the group described "very harsh" working conditions for youngsters in Chad, who faced long hours and low wages.



NDJAMENA, Chad: Young boys are working at a brick factory in N'Djamena on February 14, 2022. — AFP

"It's intolerable to see children working in Chad when they should be in school," said Mahamat Nour Ibedou, secretary general of the Chadian Convention on Human Rights. "The law is there, but the government does nothing to apply it."

Scarred hands

With dusty clothes and a face spattered in mud, Mahamat, 16, tirelessly repeats the same gestures to mix earth, manure and straw with a shovel as he has done since he was 10 years old. "I have sore arms all the time," he says, speaking from a pit. "I earn around 500 francs a day, but I give everything to my mother so that she can feed us, my brothers and me."

Adults too try to survive with earnings from the clay brick business. "I manage to make 250 (bricks) a day,

which brings in a little money, even if it's not enough to live on," says Martin Wari, 34, who also works as a primary-school teacher for part of the day.

At 27, Emile Deaonadji is a veteran brickmaker. He started working at the site in 2010 and today sounds fatalistic. "Obviously it's hard, but how do I eat if I don't do it?", he asks, near a brick-curing oven that gave off stifling heat and a pungent stench. "My parents don't have any money, so they forced me to come here to earn some," he said, displaying the scars on his hands. The young man, who is also studying to become a mechanic, earns around 12,500 CFA francs (\$21 / £19) a week, which he says he hands over in full to his parents. "I've seen more and more children come here to make bricks," he says. "It's really hard for everyone." — AFP

What would be the impact of a US ban on Russia crude?

WASHINGTON: The movement to bar imports of Russians oil exports has gained momentum in recent days in Washington following Moscow's brutal invasion of Ukraine. A bipartisan group of lawmakers last week introduced the Ban Russian Energy Imports Act, which would declare a national emergency as a result of Russian aggression and prohibit all US imports of Russian energy.

President Joe Biden's administration initially resisted a US oil ban amid worsening inflation and higher prices at the pump. But as public outrage at Moscow has risen, the White House now says it is in discussions with allies on such a ban while working to ensure adequate oil supplies, although no decision has been made. Below are some of the key questions involved.

How would a ban affect the US oil market?

Russia accounts for less than 10 percent of US imports of oil and petroleum products, which includes mazut, a low-quality fuel that can be refined into higher-quality products. The relatively small share of the US energy picture means "it's easier for the US than for anybody else" to ban those imports, said Antoine Halff, a research scholar at Columbia University's Center of Global Energy Policy.

"I wouldn't minimize what it takes to replace Russian oil, but it's achievable," he said.

What would be the impact on oil prices?

Even without a ban, oil prices have risen about 30 percent in response to the Russian invasion.

US gasoline prices averaged \$4.07 a gallon on Monday, an increase of \$0.62 from a month earlier and 47 percent higher than the year-ago level, according to the American Automobile Association. Washington and Brussels imposed stiff financial sanctions on Moscow, aimed at cutting the country off from the global economy and shutting down its supply of funds, but the penalties specifically exempt transactions involving energy.

Even so, experts say some of the price increase is due to buyers who "self-sanction," avoiding purchases of Russian oil. Houston oil consultant Andrew Lipow believes the market has priced in about three million barrels a day of disrupted output, due to actions such as tanker owners declining to load Russian oil or traders pulling back because of lack of bank financing amid Western sanctions.

"No one wants to purchase a cargo of crude oil and then have it seized because it ran afoul of sanctions," said Lipow who pointed to nervousness over buying crude "tainted" by a connection to a sanctioned entity.

Will Europe join a ban?

A US embargo would have more bite if it were joined by the European Union. In general, Europe's economy is much more reliant than on Russian energy, especially natural gas, which accounts for about 40 percent of supply. US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken said Sunday that "active discussions" were underway with European nations about banning Russian oil imports, but leading European officials threw cold water on the idea on Monday, noting that was no way to abruptly do without.

"Europe has deliberately exempted energy supplies from Russia from sanctions," German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said in a statement, adding that key supplies for heat generation, mobility and industrial production "cannot be secured in any other way at the moment."

How would the US make up for lost Russian oil?

There already have been signs of how the West's retreat from Moscow is remaking the geopolitical landscape. The Ukraine crisis has raised the stakes of ongoing talks on a new Iran nuclear deal that could potentially remove US sanctions on Iran's petroleum sector.

In another apparent shift, senior US officials reportedly traveled to Venezuela over the weekend to meet with the government of Nicolas Maduro. The South American country was once a top source of US oil imports, but Washington halted imports in 2019 following sanctions on the country.

Of the two countries, Iran is well positioned to quickly raise output, while there are more questions about Venezuela given the state of its infrastructure, Columbia University's Halff said.

Russia is a big enough oil producer that not all of the lost barrels can be replaced, but "you could offset some of it."



Will US petroleum producers make up the difference?

Large domestic companies such as ExxonMobil and Chevron have been cautious about ramping up investment in response to higher oil prices, in part due to Wall Street's skepticism towards aggressive drilling plans. The firms have shifted some of their extra cash from higher profits on dividends and share buybacks.

Oil prices remaining above \$100 a barrel likely would incentivize some more activity, but producers also are watching the global picture to see how the situation evolves.

"The biggest risk here, of course, is if you go ahead and you start drilling, and then the United States makes a deal with Iran, and also this Iranian oil hits the market," said Stephen Schork an oil analyst who writes a newsletter on energy markets.

How will the Russia crisis affect US climate policy?

The cornerstone of Biden's climate agenda, the Build Back Better Act, was already struggling on Capitol Hill, even before the invasion of Ukraine seized national attention. Biden's critics in the Republican party have said the crisis highlights the need to reconsider White House policies such as the canceling of the Keystone pipeline and the removal of drilling acreage in Alaska and other environmentally sensitive habitats. But environmentalists say the lesson of the crisis isn't the need for more domestic oil production, but more investments in electric vehicles and renewable energy.

"Today, Russia provides 10 percent of the world's oil," said Mark Brownstein, senior vice president at the Environmental Defense Fund. "You want to make that oil worthless? Show Putin you don't need it. That's what accelerating the transition to a clean energy future will do." — AFP

Qatar and Kuwait expected to witness surge in bilateral relations: Webinar

KUWAIT: Doha Bank hosted a virtual customer connect meeting recently on the theme "Bilateral and Synergistic Opportunities between Qatar and Kuwait." Dr R Seetharaman, CEO of Doha Bank gave insight on Global economies. He said "According to IMF Jan 2022, Global growth is expected to moderate from 5.9 percent in 2021 to 4.4 percent in 2022. Advanced economies growth is expected to moderate from five percent in 2021 to 3.9 percent in 2022. Emerging economies growth is expected to moderate from 6.5 percent in 2021 to 4.8 percent in 2022. US fed expected to begin monetary tightening in March 2022."

Dr R Seetharaman gave insight on Kuwait Economy and Qatar Economy. He said "Kuwait economy expected to grow by 4.3 percent in 2022. In 2022, Central Bank of Kuwait Open Applications for New Digital Banks in the Region. Qatar- Kuwait trade exceeded QR 7bn in 2021. LNG deals have happened between Qatar and Kuwait in recent years. Qatar economy expected to grow by 4 percent in 2022. Qatar Budget 2022 is based at an average oil price of \$55/ Barrel. Health, education, and infrastructure have been given thrust in Qatar Budget 2022. Qatar plans to boost LNG production to 126 million tons a year (MTPA) by 2027."



Abdulaziz Yaqoub Al-Babtain, Ooredoo Kuwait Chief Executive Officer, spoke on "Telecom Roles in Kuwait during the Pandemics." He said "Ooredoo Kuwait was acquired by Ooredoo Group, formerly known as QTEL the global financial crisis. This is one of the company's most significant investments during that time which greatly contributed to Kuwait's economy. Ooredoo is one of the largest leading Qatari communications companies in the State of Kuwait delivering mobile, fixed, broadband internet and corporate managed services. That being said, investments between Kuwait and Qatar are a great opportunity to turn both nations into investment hubs. We are hoping that this will materialize during 2022 as we are working towards hybrid investment models between Kuwait and Qatar. Furthermore, Central Bank of Kuwait has opened digital banking opportunities, which are very interested in. We are currently having discussions with local and Qatari banks, in addition to Fintech. Ooredoo Kuwait's 5G rollout increased further during 2021. During the pandemic, we introduced new innovative digital solutions to our customers, we supported the government and community during the crisis, partnering with well-established companies, and more."

Junaid Ansari, Head of Investment Strategy and Research at Kamco Invest, spoke on "GCC equity market performance and oil market." He said: "Despite the record performance of GCC markets last year, we don't expect a correction this year. However, gains are not expected to be as high as what we saw last year. 2022 is expected to see higher dividend announcements for FY-2021. Investors need to time their entry and exit according to the dividend timelines. Given the current situation between Russia and the US, oil prices are expected to remain elevated in the near term. However, later this year or next year, with the likelihood of Iran coming back and OPEC+ adding additional production coupled with higher production in the US, we can see oil prices ease to around \$75-80 per barrel."

R Raghu CEO, Marmore MENA intelligence, The research arm of Kuwait financial center "Markaz" shared "Overview of Kuwait economy and banking sector and the impact of rising interest rates on banks, corporates and capital markets." He said "The Credit growth rebounded in Kuwait in 2021 driven mainly by the retail segment. The Return of Equity (ROE) of Kuwaiti Banks that hit a low of five percent in Q4 2020 has been recovering. Net Interest Margin (NIM) of Kuwait Banks fell due to prevailing low interest rate environment and NPLs still remain well below 2 percent of the net total loans. The earnings of Kuwaiti Banks yet to reach pre-pandemic levels. Kuwait is moving towards cashless payments and hence digitization is a key strategic objective for Kuwaiti banks. Most of the leading banks in Kuwait are involved in various digitization initiatives. Kuwaiti Banks are expected to have a positive impact from the rate hike while non-banks profitability might be affected due to rate hikes." Najah Al-Sulaiman, Chief Country Manager, Doha Bank Kuwait Branch gave the vote of thanks and closing remarks.



Europe stocks jump; nickel strikes record above \$100,000

LONDON: European equities attempted to rebound yesterday from recent Ukraine-driven losses, while nickel prices rocketed to a record peak on Russian supply fears. Frankfurt won 1.1 percent and Paris added 1.4 percent in early afternoon eurozone deals, despite Asian losses.

London stocks rose by just 0.3 percent at midday, with sentiment dented by Russia's ongoing invasion of Ukraine. The London Metal Exchange suspended trade in nickel after the base metal spiked to a record \$101,365 per ton as Russian supply concerns sparked sharp volatility. Oil prices gained ground but held below Monday's peaks.

'Pause for breath'

"Stocks across Europe are mostly rising, as the bears pause for breath," said City Index analyst Fiona Cincotta. "Broadly speaking, the mood in the market has improved today as headlines from eastern Europe have slowed." Asian markets however fell further Tuesday as investors try to assess the impact of the Ukraine war on the world economy.

As Russia's invasion of its neighbor continues, commodity prices have been sent to record or multi-year highs, forcing observers to re-evaluate their outlook for the global recovery. Monday's session saw a sea of red after the United States said it was considering banning the import of crude from Russia, the world's number three producer, sending the price of Brent to almost \$140 for the first time since 2008.

While the black gold eased back slightly from that peak, it remains elevated. Europe was not so keen on the US idea, with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz saying Russian oil and gas are of "essential importance" to the continent's economy. Roughly 40 percent of European Union gas imports and one quarter of its oil come from Russia. Meanwhile, Moscow warned that in retaliation for strict sanctions imposed on it for the invasion, it could cut off natural gas supplies to Europe via the Nord Stream 1 pipeline. European gas prices hit records Monday, while other commodities sourced from Ukraine and Russia also rallied, with wheat also at an all-time high.

Stagflation

The Ukraine crisis comes just as uncertainty was rising owing to surging prices caused by a spike in demand for oil, tight supplies and pandemic-induced supply chain snarls, among other things.

Markets remain fearful of stagflation—a vicious mixture of low economic growth and elevated inflation. "There are fears we are heading for a period of stagflation in the eurozone given the energy crunch and the region's exposure to Russia," noted ThinkMarkets analyst Fawad Razaqzada. Europe gas reference Dutch TTF sank 12 percent to 199.35 euros per megawatt hour on Tuesday, one day after striking a record 345 euros. — AFP

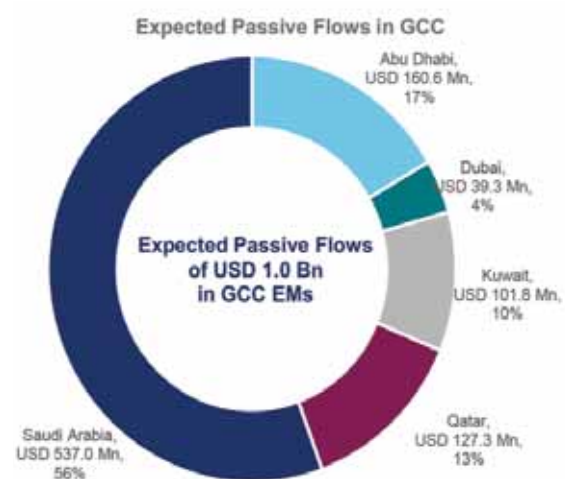
Business

KAMCO Economic Report

GCC markets expected to attract passive fund flows close to \$1.0bn

War on Ukraine shakes up valuations across asset classes globally

KUWAIT: The Russia/Ukraine situation has shaken up valuations across asset classes globally. The event comes at a time when global markets closed 2021 at near record levels and economies across the globe were expecting recovery from the pandemic, especially in the Emerging Markets (EM). As economic growth picked pace, inflation reached decades high levels in the US and most other market. This prompted central banks to increase interest rates. Consensus estimates suggested five to six rates hikes this year by the US Fed and equity and fixed income markets were trading factoring in this possibility and expectations largely pointed towards flatish or a small correction in financial markets this year.



The current Russia/Ukraine situation has led to an earlier-than-expected decline in markets across the globe, particularly in the European region due to proximity and some involvement in the conflict. The MSCI World index is currently trading with a decline of 12.8 percent since the start of the year reflecting 14.5 percent decline in European markets while the US dropped by 11.9 percent. The EM index has also seen a decline, but relatively smaller at 10.1 percent as gain in Brazil and a smaller decline of 7.3 percent for the Chinese market partially offsets the overall impact of a 41.3 percent decline in Russian equities.

Gulf Bank launches 8th edition of AJYAL program

KUWAIT: As part of its strategy for the year 2025, and in order to develop the capabilities and skills of its employees, Gulf Bank has launched the eighth edition of its AJYAL program. The latest edition of the program includes a new batch of trainees who have been working for up to five year, and aims to assist the employees in refining their skills and helping them develop and expand their skill sets on both professional and personal levels.



Salma Al-Hajjaj

For the second year in a row, Gulf Bank is spearheading its AJYAL program in partnership with the American University of Kuwait. Gulf Bank's Human Resources and talent development teams continue to implement the Bank's strategy with distinguished banking professionals and local talent that will ultimately contribute to consolidating the Bank's position as the leading Kuwaiti Bank of the Future.

The program aims to help graduates acquire global best practices while developing a deeper understanding of banking, in addition to developing both their personal and professional skills. Gulf Bank's AJYAL program has helped the Bank transform its work culture of excellence into a results-oriented environment, with employees applying their acquired skills to real business challenges.

Gulf Bank's General Manager of Human Resources, Salma Al-Hajjaj, said that the process of admitting participants into the AJYAL program is subject to strict

KFH continues efforts to support 'Diraya' campaign

KUWAIT: Kuwait Finance House (KFH) continues efforts to support "Diraya" financial and banking awareness campaign launched by the Central Bank of Kuwait and Kuwait Banking Association for the second year in a row. The campaign aims to shed light on customers' rights, rules and regulations of dealing with banks, information safety and security against intrusion, combating fraud transactions in addition to other warnings and regulations. This campaign comes as part of the bank obligation to keep the customers informed about their rights and duties towards banking and financial transactions and their cyber security.

The campaign discusses finance types, banking cards, awareness of customers with special needs, tips on cyber security and protection of bank accounts. Also, it provides the mechanism to lodge complaints, protect customers' rights and identify the banking sector duties and its role in enhancing and developing national economy. KFH contribution in the campaign

With talks of sanctions on Russia and a number of restrictions already in place, investment firms rushed to offload Russian equities. However, with the Moscow Stock Exchange closed for a week, investors were unable to sell their positions, with the added restriction from financial dealing with Russian firms. In addition, Russia last week banned brokers from selling securities owned by foreign investors. Moreover, investment firms, especially the ones invested in EM, are facing redemption pressure from investors as a result of the declining markets and the exposure to Russia. On the other hand, the inability to sell Russian equities increases the possibility of increasing the weight of Russian allocation in their portfolio, further complicating the situation. Estimates from Morningstar Direct showed US mutual funds and ETFs owned more than \$71 billion in Russian equities and bonds at the end of January-2022.

After contemplating for weeks, MSCI and FTSE announced that the index compilers would remove Russia from their EM universe and treat it as a stand-alone market. MSCI would reduce the weight of Russia to zero from 9-March-2022. Russia had a weight of around 3.8 percent in MSCI's Emerging Market Standard Index in December-2021. However, the events at the start of 2022 had already lowered the weight of Russia to around 2.2 percent, according to reports. With MSCI removing Russia from its indexes, the weight of the rest of the EM countries are expected to increase.

MSCI EM Index

According to reports, there are around \$1.8 trillion of active and passive assets tracking the MSCI Emerging Market index globally. Out of this around \$425 billion are estimated to be passive funds tracking the index. This would imply that flows to other constituents of the index is expected to increase in the coming weeks as Russia is removed from the index. However, unlike the previous reconstitutions by the MSCI, the inability to sell Russian equities by the fund managers could make the process of reallocation much more gradual as compared to a much shorter window for passive funds. GCC countries reported a weight of 5.73 percent in the MSCI EM Standard index as of

| GCC Trading Activity (USD Mn) | Aggregate flows since 21-Feb-2022 | Estimated additional flows since 21-Feb-2022 |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--|
| Kuwait | 2,296.9 | 624.7 |
| Saudi Arabia | 32,146.2 | 8,392.4 |
| Dubai | 1,224.0 | 263.9 |
| Abu Dhabi | 4,925.6 | 775.9 |
| Qatar | 3,118.2 | 958.5 |
| Bahrain | 43.2 | 13.5 |
| Oman | 116.2 | 10.9 |
| Total GCC | 43,870.4 | 11,039.8 |

December-2021. We expect the weight to increase to 5.96 percent after the index reconstitution. The increase in weight by 0.23 percent is expected to attract additional passive flows to the tune of \$1.0 billion, based on passive funds tracking the index of around \$425 billion. In addition, with over 3x active funds, the actual flows to the GCC markets could easily exceed \$3.0 — 3.5 billion, in our view.

Trading activity in the GCC witnessed a steep spike since the start of the conflict (since 21-Feb-2022) as active fund managers started reallocating funds out of Russia to other emerging markets. And with the improving crude oil outlook and excellent credit rating profile for the bulk of the GCC countries, the region attracted higher than expected flows from EM investors. Total trading activity in the GCC since 21-Feb-2022 stood at \$43.9 billion. Average daily value traded (ADVT) witnessed a steep increase of 58 percent to reach \$3.1 billion since 21-Feb-2022 until 7-Mar-2022 as compared to \$1.9 billion in average daily trades since the start of the year until 20-Feb-2022. According to our calculations, GCC markets attracted additional flows of \$11.0 billion since the start of the conflict, and the bulk of these trades were by active

emerging market focused foreign investors.

Trading activity reports from the five EM exchanges in the region (Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, ADX, DFM and QE) showed consistently net positive trades by foreign investors. Weekly trading report on Saudi Exchange showed SAR 6.9 billion (\$1.9 billion) in net buying by foreign investors for the week ended 3-Mar-2022 and 24-Feb-2022. The Monthly report for Boursa Kuwait showed net foreign buying at KD 60 million (\$197.4 million) during February-2022. Similarly, daily trading activity reports from ADX and DFM showed net foreign buying at AED 2.5 billion (\$692.2 million) and AED 507.7 million (\$138.1 million), respectively. The weekly report for Qatar Exchange showed net foreign buying at QAR 1.8 billion during the last week of Feb-2022 and first week of March-2022. The increase in trading activity also includes investors that anticipated the shift in funds and invested to take advantage of market movements favoring the regional exchanges. As such, a decline in indices in the GCC cannot be ruled out once passive investors start taking position in GCC stocks. However, as mentioned above, the shift would be much more gradual as compared to previous index reconstitutions.

UBS reveals \$200m exposure to Russia

GENEVA: Swiss bank UBS said Monday it has under \$10 million of loans outstanding to clients subject to sanctions imposed over Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The bank said its exposure to Russia totalled \$200 million. In an annual report, the bank said its "current direct exposure to Russia, Ukraine and Belarus is limited." UBS said it identified "a small number of Global Wealth Management clients subject to the recently introduced sanctions, with total loans outstanding of under \$10 million."

Traditionally neutral Switzerland last week aligned itself with EU sanctions against Russia over the February 24 invasion of Ukraine and ordered the freezing of Russian assets. Director general Ralph Hamers and chairman Axel Weber said in a letter to shareholders that "we are working to implement sanctions imposed by Switzerland, the US, the EU, the UK and others—all of which have announced unprecedented levels of sanctions against Russia and certain Russian entities and nationals."



"These events, together with counter-sanctions and other measures taken by Russia, will have ongoing effects on the markets and the global economy," UBS warned, while "current geopolitical tensions also may lead to increased risk of cyberattack from foreign state actors." UBS has previously reported a net profit for 2021 at \$7.5 billion, despite the bank taking a \$861 million hit related to the fallout from last year's collapse of US hedge fund Archegos. By comparison Swiss rival Credit Suisse booked a \$5.5 billion hit. — AFP

Burgan Bank reveals Al-Thuraya Account draw winner

KUWAIT: Burgan Bank, announced yesterday Basam Adel Amash as the lucky winner of the draw prize of Al-Thuraya Salary Account monthly draw. The draw rewards new and existing customers who transfer their salary to Burgan Bank by offering them a chance to win KD 10,000 every month. Each account holder has one chance to enter the draw.

The Al-Thuraya account holders have the option to hold money in Kuwaiti Dinar and other major currencies and can access account-related services such as standing orders, loans and credit cards, and benefit from the discounts and offers throughout the year.

Customers wishing to open the Al-Thuraya account can do so by simply visiting the nearest Burgan Bank branch and obtain all the necessary details.



Salma Al-Hajjaj with GBK's administrative management

criteria. In addition to passing the interview process, selected applicants engage in a comprehensive educational six-month training program that aims to develop participants' basic banking skills, cultivating holistic bankers in accordance with the Bank's long-term growth strategy. Al-Hajjaj added that the AJYAL program also provides outstanding trainees with the opportunity to travel abroad and attend an additional one-week training course, in addition to attending pre-arranged field visits to a number of major international banks.

She affirmed Gulf Bank's belief in the necessity of empowering and training Kuwaiti talents in order to develop their skill sets according to the highest international banking standards. Al-Hajjaj added that employee training in all forms has enabled its employees to contribute to achieving the Bank's goals and exceeding the sector's expectations, adding, "We are proud to have witnessed multiple success stories within the Bank over the past years." Al-Hajjaj noted that the main objective of the AJYAL program is to develop participants' capabilities and skill sets with the goal of promoting a performance-driven culture. Other objec-

tives include providing technical solutions to enable Bank-wide digital transformation and adopting global risk management practices. All of these goals are ultimately directed towards providing customers with simple and innovative services, and fall within the Bank's sustainable growth efforts.

comprises the dispatch of various messages on different topics related to the main components of the campaign. These messages are sent to all types of customers to suite the culture and nature of each tier. Also, messages are sent on continuous basis to employees who are considered as the second main component in the awareness triangle (customers - employees - public) who are either potential or targeted customers, thus aiming to achieve the targets of the campaign. The main targets of the campaign comprise awareness, identification of and warning against any possible risks of failing to follow safety and security instructions upon using modern technology means. Regulations include refraining from extending any information about accounts and personal transactions to any unknown parties or reply to messages from unknown sources as this would be a violation to data privacy and banking protection regulations.

KFH is keen on spreading financial education, saving and investment knowledge and customer's awareness of the bank's products and services. KFH appreciates the efforts extended by the Central Bank of Kuwait and Kuwait Banking Association in organizing the Be Aware "Diraya" campaign to spread awareness in society regarding banking and financial transactions and e-banking services. Technology has opened vast business opportunities. However, several risks and challenges were also detected considering the several attempts,

most of which failed, to hack customers accounts and cause system damage. Accordingly, this situation has called for a comprehensive awareness plan and enhancement of the cyber security systems, anti-money laundering systems and prevention of other legally incriminated and suspicious activities.

KFH messages highlight the clear and defined policies placed by the Central Bank of Kuwait to supervise the lending and finance operations at banks. These policies provide that the customer shall be provided with the loan details, value and No. of instalments, settlement dates, instalment/ net salary ratio and default penalties. The customer is given at least 2 days grace period to review the contract fully before signing. Once signed, a draft copy of the contract shall be given to the customer including type of loan, payment term, instalment value and profit. There are two types of loans offered to customers, consumer loan and residential loan.

According to CBK instructions, the bank is required to provide financial advice and all information concerning the finance contract and explain all details related to the finance transaction including rate of return/ finance amount, No. of instalments to be paid by customer and components of each instalment before signing the contract with the customer. Customer shall be given two days period to review the contract and read the terms and conditions carefully and be aware of his rights and obligations before signing the contract.



In this photograph Nepal's athlete Mira Rai (center back) poses with other runners after a training session on the outskirts of Kathmandu. — AFP photos



Nepal's athlete Mira Rai (center) takes part in a training session with other runners on a hill on the outskirts of Kathmandu.

Mira Rai: Child soldier, ultra-runner, mentor

For years Nepali child soldier turned ultra-runner Mira Rai trained alone every morning, but now she leads other young women up and down the hills, hoping the sport can help them break cycles of poverty and discrimination. Rai, born in a farmer's home in eastern Nepal, emerged as a trail running prodigy in 2014 after her racing debut in a steep 50-kilometre race in Kathmandu. Within a year she finished first at the 80-kilometre Mont Blanc Ultra in Chamonix, and was the second-placed woman in the Skyrunners World Series, garnering sponsorships including French sports manufacturer Salomon.

She went on to win races around the world, including the 120-kilometre Ben Nevis Ultra in Scotland in 2017, when she was named the National Geographic People's Choice Adventurer of the Year for championing women in sports. The same year, she began the Mira Rai Initiative to train young women like her from impoverished backgrounds. "I don't know where I would be if I wasn't lucky enough to find support," she said. "This sport can change lives for others like it did for me. That's why I have to help."

In deeply patriarchal Nepal, running is an unlikely career choice for girls, especially in rural communities—even though they grow up racing up and down hills to fetch water or to go to school. They are instead expected to marry early, rear children and keep the home fires burning while the men work.

Some 50 percent of Nepali women aged between 25 and 49 are married by their 18th birthday, according to the Himalayan nation's 2016 Demographic Health Survey, many because of poverty. Only about a quarter of Nepali women par-



Nepal's athlete Mira Rai takes part in a training session.

ticipate in the labor force. "It is not easy to pursue sports as a woman. But girls have to be empowered," she said. "Otherwise their potential is easily wasted and they will live a life of anonymity." One of her first batch of trainees, Sunmaya Budha, was heading for a teenage marriage until she persuaded her parents to delay the ceremony. She started racing secretly before she was chosen to train with Rai, and in December she beat her coach into second place in a 110-kilometre UTMB World Series Event race in Thailand. "My win is also hers," said Budha, who remains unmarried at 23. "She opened the doors for us."

Child soldier to runner

Rai was only 14 when she left her home

in eastern Nepal to join Maoist rebels fighting to overthrow Nepal's rulers, hoping she could do something for her family. "My family struggled for even a single meal... I always wanted to do something to rescue my parents out of that situation," Rai said. As a child soldier, she learnt to shoot guns and disarm opponents—but also did extensive running exercises. "They would give opportunities to girls too... So I was able to learn a lot there," she said. But when the decade-long insurgency ended in 2006, former child soldiers such as Rai were disqualified from joining the national army.

With little cash or career prospects, she was ready to leave for a job in a Malaysian electronics factory, but her karate instructor urged her to stay. She could not afford the 15-cent bus fare to the nearest stadium, so



Nepal's athlete Mira Rai (left) takes part in a training session with other runners on a hill on the outskirts of Kathmandu.

started with practice runs on the capital's congested roads, on one of which she was spotted and invited to enter a race. Dressed in a cheap t-shirt and \$3 shoes, she ran for hours before she felt dizzy and stopped to refuel with juice and noodles.

"I have been running up and down hills in my village since I was little, so it was not completely new to me," she said. Rai won that first contest, and a pair of running shoes, kick-starting her trail-running career.

Independent girls

Now 33, injuries and the pandemic have curtailed her competitive activities, and she is concentrating more on training others. The initiative, funded by the Hong Kong chapter of community group Asia Trail Girls, selects young girls with potential

from all over Nepal for a nine-month program in Kathmandu. As well as athletics clothes and running shoes, they are given lessons in English, public speaking, and social media handling—with tourism guide training an optional extra.

"I am sharing what I know with girls who want to join trail running," Rai said. "I want them to be independent, even if in future they don't become runners." Among her current prospects is Anita Rai, 22, daughter of a farmer in Solukhumbu, the district that includes Mount Everest. "I'm not sure what I would be doing if I didn't get selected for this," she said. "We run up and down hills all the time in my village, but I didn't know this could be a sport too." — AFP

SOLEMN PARIS FASHION WEEK DRAWS TO A CLOSE

Paris Fashion Week, which ended yesterday, has been over-shadowed by the war in Ukraine, with designers struggling for ways to balance declarations of solidarity with the glamour and spectacle of their shows. Some offered heartfelt tributes to the Ukrainian people alongside their women's autumn-winter collections—none more so than Balenciaga designer Demna.

A refugee himself during a conflict in his native Georgia in the early 1990s, he admitted that fashion week felt like "an absurdity" against the background of the war in Ukraine. But he decided that cancelling the show would have felt like "surrendering to the evil that has already hurt me so much for almost 30 years". Demna (who has dropped his surname Gvasalia) recited a Ukrainian poem to open his show and draped the seats in the country's blue-and-yellow flag.

Russian cancelled

France's fashion federation, which urged attendees to experience the week "with solemnity, and in reflection of these



Body armor

Some of the clothes this week looked strangely prescient, especially at Dior and Balmain where models appeared to be wearing body armor. Balmain's Olivier Rousteing explained the golden shields and flak jackets were actually dreamt up after traumatic facial burns he suffered in a domestic accident and the resulting fear of being trolled online. Dior's Maria Grazia Chiuri said her own "protective" designs—including airbag corsets and vests with internal heating—reflected the fact that "the world was already at war" even before the Ukraine invasion. "COVID was another form of war. We have all experienced some very difficult months," she told AFP.

Of course, there were plenty of shows that made no mention of the war. Vivienne Westwood's show, inspired by cabaret and theatre, was a shot of much-needed color and pageantry. On the final day, Chanel went full tweed—with suits, coats and trousers all in the Scottish textile, which also covered the walls of the Grand Palais.

Darker tones

This fashion week was supposed to be celebrating the return to relative normality as pandemic restrictions eased and almost all houses were back to live shows. The screaming fans who gathered outside venues across Paris to welcome stars such as Bella Hadid, Serena Williams and a pregnant Rihanna were clearly in good spirits. But regardless of world events, many designs were trending darker anyway. Saint Laurent's silky gowns, elegant suits and fake-fur coats were almost all pitch-black. Hermes, Rochas, Givenchy, Isabel Marant—all opted for largely monochrome and sombre palettes.

Even US designer Rick Owens, whose show was lauded as "transcendental" by Vice, made changes. His wild, apocalyptic designs are usually soundtracked by ear-bleeding techno and industrial noise. This time, however, he opted for Mahler's 5th symphony: "A piece I would have considered too sentimental in the past but better suited to the sobriety and search for hope in our current condition." — AFP



Models present creations for Balmain Fall-Winter 2022-2023 collection fashion show during the Paris Womenswear Fashion Week in Paris. — AFP photos





This aerial screenshot from an AFPTV video shows a swimming pool in the courtyard of the So Heng Tai mansion in the Talad Noi neighbourhood of Bangkok. — AFP photos



In this photo people walk past the Rong Kuak Shrine in the Talad Noi neighborhood of Bangkok.

‘The bottom line’: Scuba divers help preserve historic Bangkok mansion

A 200-year-old Chinese mansion in Bangkok’s heart isn’t an obvious place for a scuba school, but in a city relentlessly demolishing its architectural heritage the business is helping preserve the historic home. Dive instructor Poosak Posayachinda’s family has owned the traditional teak-walled So Heng Tai for eight generations, but it lives

The city’s breakneck reinvention over recent years has seen gleaming malls and flashy condos fly up, and buildings like the art deco Scala movie theatre and 1920s British embassy come down. Thai law only protects properties over 100 years old and there is limited political enthusiasm for safeguarding old architecture at the expense of profitable develop-

ment. For families with historic properties, the annual costs of maintenance can be a huge liability, according to historian and archaeologist Phacha Phanomvan.

Historical theft While the culture ministry keeps a

to become boutique hotels elsewhere. “You want to keep these properties where they are... You’re essentially robbing Bangkok of its (history),” she said. Photographer Ben Davies spent five years documenting neighborhoods for his book “Vanishing Bangkok”, an experience that left him despondent. “Something like (30-40 percent) of the buildings and com-

A glimmer of hope? Elsewhere in the region offers Thailand possible solutions, notably Singapore which has won praise since the late 1980s for its heritage protection efforts. Its strategy examines the entire city-island holistically with conservation going hand-in-hand with planning, says Yeo Kang Shua, an architectural history expert at the Singapore University of Technology and Design. Underpinning the scheme is the “three R” principles: maximum retention of buildings, sensitive restoration and careful repair.

“In the 1980s a lot of owners deemed it a death sentence for their properties to be given conservation status, but today because of the rarity of such buildings in Singapore, the real estate prices are... enormous,” he told AFP. Despite the challenging environment, there are some signs of change in Bangkok.

In recent years a prominent Sino-Thai business family renovated dilapidated Chinese 1850s warehouses, turning them into the Lhong 1919 “riverside heritage destination”. It now houses a shrine and has become a space for exhibitions, concerts, pop-ups, cafes and food vans and there are plans for a wellness resort. Back at So Heng Thai, Poosak takes his students through their paces.

Channeling the attitude of his ancestors-who came to Thailand with “one pillow and one mattress”-he’s determined to save his family home. “If someone comes to give me an offer, the answer is no, simple as that, no matter how much it is,” he said. — AFP



In this photo the swimming pool is pictured at the So Heng Tai mansion in the Talad Noi neighbourhood of Bangkok.



In this photo a portrait of Thailand's former King Rama I hangs above family pictures at the So Heng Tai mansion in the Talad Noi neighborhood of Bangkok.

on thanks largely to his decision to convert it into a scuba academy. The survival of the building, originally built as a home and office for the family business trading birds’ nests with China, is a rare success story in a city that harbors little sentiment or legal protections for historic architectural gems. “It’s because people want to make more money-that’s the bottom line,” Bangkok-based American architect Bill Bensley told AFP.

ment. For families with historic properties, the annual costs of maintenance can be a huge liability, according to historian and archaeologist Phacha Phanomvan.

national heritage database, Phacha said many properties are not registered and fall through the cracks. “For individual owners without state assistance... it’s better for them to sell the property. Sell the individual building and then sell the (land),” she said.

Adding to the challenge is a growing collectors’ market for teak from Thai wooden houses, she said-some are even dismantled, relocated, and reassembled

munities I photographed had either disappeared or changed virtually beyond recognition,” he told AFP. And in the rush to develop, Davies says it is unclear how much of Bangkok’s heritage will remain in a decade. “I have a horrible feeling that one day Bangkok will be, outside of its temples and few palaces, (a) unrecognizable but (b) have lost so much of its identity and character so it will look like any other megacity around Asia,” he said.

K-Pop’s BTS back for first Seoul show after thriving in pandemic

South Korean supergroup BTS return to the stage in Seoul to play for their adoring home-grown fans for the first time since 2019 on Thursday, after tickets for the three-night stadium concerts sold out in minutes. While COVID-19 emptied arenas and shut clubs worldwide, the K-Pop septet thrived during the pandemic-scoring a string of number one hits, expanding their global fanbase, and reaping record profits. Despite most of the band catching the virus, the trailblazing musicians barely missed a beat as the world locked down-using social media, fancams, and livestreams to cement their position as the world’s biggest and most influential boyband, analysts say.

for something new fell down the rabbit hole of BTS,” Saeji told AFP. The group’s feel-good songs were a “perfect” antidote to COVID blues, she said, and their digital native fans, well used to livestreaming gigs and social media engagement, pivoted naturally to virtual concerts. Even BTS’ first-ever No. 1 hit on the Billboard Hot 100 “Dynamite” wouldn’t exist without COVID: “we were trying to convey the message of healing and comfort to our fans,” bandmember Jin told Esquire.

The floppy-haired musicians, all in their 20s and often sporting earrings and lipstick, appeal to a generation comfortable with gender fluidity. They are credited with generating billions for the South Korean economy, and their label HYBE enjoyed a surge in profits despite holding fewer concerts during the pandemic. The global music industry saw performance revenues collapse as venues closed, but recorded-music revenue grew significantly, thanks largely to subscription streaming services, industry data showed.

K-Pop rise People are drawn to BTS because



In this file photo members of Korean K-pop group BTS arrive on the red carpet during the K-CON 2014 (Korean Culture Convention) at the Los Angeles Memorial Sports Arena.— AFP

“Oddly enough, I think that the pandemic may have helped BTS to grow their worldwide fame,” said “K-Pop professor” CedarBough Saeji of Pusan National University. “So many people who were stuck at home and desperate

their music “reflects the world’s complexity and human experiences”, said Candace Epps-Robertson, an assistant professor at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. “We want to hear how others process challenging emo-

tions and obstacles,” she told AFP. K-pop followed the success of Japan’s J-pop in the 1990s and quickly won a strong following in Asia, but had struggled to cross the Pacific.

BTS are widely credited for bringing K-pop into the mainstream in the US, and analysts say the pandemic supercharged their role on the world stage. The group was invited to the United Nations General Assembly last year-their second visit-to deliver a speech about embracing change. This “shows another dimension that previous K-pop acts didn’t have”, said Ramon Pacheco Pardo, a professor at King’s College London.

When three members tested positive for the virus-two more were later infected-Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the World Health Organization chief, wished them a fast recovery on Twitter, adding a reminder about the importance of vaccinations. That tweet garnered tens of thousands of engagements, and researchers said BTS-all vaccinated-had become “the most significant driver of health discourse” on social media.

Record profits

Despite fewer concerts, HYBE enjoyed a record-setting year in 2021 posting more than \$1 billion in sales, driven by online content and albums. Even before the pandemic, social media had been a key tool for BTS to connect with their largely female fans-collectively known as ARMY. The group has always livestreamed concerts to accommodate their global fanbase, a practice that made “the transition to online-only, streamed concerts at least slightly easier”, said Jenna Gibson, a PhD candidate at the University of Chicago. In 2020 BTS were forced to call off what was supposed to be their largest international tour with almost 40 gigs, though they held some concerts online.

The group’s first in-person show since the pandemic was at SoFi Stadium in Los Angeles in November, with the four-night run grossing \$33.3 million, according to Billboard. The same can be expected for this week’s concert, part of their “Permission to Dance on Stage” tour, but for fans, the resumption of the “communal experience” of live music is key, Gibson said. “Fans truly missed that during the pandemic,” she said. — AFP

Kristen Stewart’s life is ‘too good’ right now

The 31-year-old actress is currently planning her wedding after getting engaged to Dylan Meyer last year and she’s also been nominated for her first Oscar, as well as a string of other awards, thanks to her work on ‘Spencer’, so she’s feeling very content. She said: “I’m living a simulation, it’s too good. You run through the list, and I go, like, is that possible? Right now, I’m definitely feeling it. “It’s not lost on me any second of any day. I will tell you that.” Kristen played the late Princess Diana in ‘Spencer’ and she reflected on what she’s learned about the royal - who died in a car accident in 1997 - and how she differed from the rest of The Firm since she started work on the movie.



She told E! News: “She’s ironically this very un-noble figure in history, but she is the one person in the royal family who ever really reached out and touched anyone. “I think the sad thing is, when you see her, she seems like somebody who wants to just be touched. “So there’s this strange friction and there’s this thing that makes you lean into her, and despite not knowing all of the details of her inner life, you can feel them kind of vibrating through everything she says.”

Kristen recently admitted she was “astounded” to have been nominated for Best Actress at the upcoming Academy Awards. She said “I am truly astounded and unbelievably moved and touched and just stunned. I love this movie. — Bang Showbiz



Tom Daley is a strict dad

The 27-year-old Olympian admitted three-year-old Robbie has already learned that if the diver says no to him, turning to his other parent, Dustin Lance Black, will mean he eventually gets what he wanted. Tom said: “I’m Pappa and Lance is Daddy and when I say no to Robbie he immediately goes to Lance and says, ‘Daddy, Pappa says no, but can I?’ And Lance says yes.” Tom admitted he gets “freaked out” witnessing his son’s daredevil behavior, even though his husband has pointed out it’s something he likely inherited from the sportsman.

He told the new issue of Radio Times magazine: “He loves to find things and jump off them and scare the living day-lights out of me. But then Lance says, ‘Well, what do you expect? You climb up things and jump off things for a living’...But it freaks me out. I look back and think, ‘How did my parents deal with watching me do what I do every day and not be petrified?’ “Tom named his son after his beloved father Rob Daley, who died in 2011 aged just 40, and he hopes he’s a “similar” parent to Robbie in the way his dad was for him.

He said: “Robbie is named after Dad. And I do feel I’m similar to how my dad was with me. Whether I was doing well or not, my parents were always there for me. It’s just about being there to support Robbie on the good days, the bad days and everything in between.” Meanwhile, Tom - who came out in 2015 - believes there are no openly gay soccer players in the UK because they are worried about the reaction of fans, not their teammates. He said: “It’s a really hard thing and it takes that one brave person to do it first in football. “I think it’s down to the fans. “I don’t think the people in the teams will have any particular reaction to it. — Bang Showbiz



Saffarine Market, historical landmark in Morocco's old city

Seffarine Market, located in Morocco's cultural capital Fes, is considered one of the most important historical landmarks in the old city. Saffarine market is known for its wide range of copper utensils, crafted by the hands of traditional Moroccan manufacturers. The market was named "Seffarine" after the color yellow of copper pots, plates and antiques that are used by Moroccans for food, drinks, as well as adorning their houses. — KUNA



An Iraqi Kurdish woman competes during a weight lifting championship.



Iraqi Kurdish Ines Muhsin poses with her medals during a weight lifting championship.



An Iraqi Kurdish woman poses as she competes during a weight lifting championship.

KURDISH SISTERS HELP BOOST IRAQ TO WEIGHTLIFTING VICTORY

In Iraq's autonomous Kurdistan region, sisters Ines, Israa and Oshin Muhsin have inherited a hefty mantle from their late father, using it to take their country to weightlifting glory. "We want to write the history of women's sports and preserve our father's" memory, Ines told AFP. At just 20, she already has six gold medals under her belt, and along with her sisters has helped place Iraq squarely on the map of Middle East weightlifting. The regional capital Arbil hosted a championship in December that brought together 14 Arab countries including Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

The Iraqi women's national team-made up of 15 athletes, eight of them Kurdish-clinched the top spot, with nine gold medals, one silver and one bronze. Ines and her sisters, all in their 20s, have been practicing weightlifting for a decade, coached mainly by their father, who died last year of Covid-19 complications.

At her club's modest gym in Arbil, Ines gets ready to lift a 30-kilo (66 pounds) bar, raising it high above her head before letting the weights crash to the floor. "We are

already thinking of international competitions and qualification for the 2024 Paris Olympics," Ines said, adding that the road to the Games would be "complicated". The trio-part of a generation born after their region first gained de facto autonomy in 1991 — need a translator to communi-



An Iraqi Kurdish woman powdering her hands as she trains weight lifting at a centre in Iraq's Kurdish regional capital of Arbil.

cate with their fellow Iraqi teammates, as they only speak Kurdish. Their bilingual mother does the job for local competitions, while another club staff member takes up the baton for trips further afield. Sister Israa, a three-time gold medalist, said she dedicated her achievements to her late father.

"When he was young, he was an athlete, then he became a coach. It is thanks to him that I reached this level," the 22-year-old said. "Before he passed away, he told me: 'if I am no longer there, I want you to continue and to participate in competitions, to become famous and win medals'," she added.

'Blossoming of women's sports'

Women's sports have developed at a sluggish pace across much of conservative Iraq, which has struggled through decades of conflict. But the Kurdistan region was spared the brunt of the violence and destruction, and its infrastructure, facilities and government funding have paved the way for a boom in professional women's sports. After the national

team's success at the Arab championship, Kurdish regional President Nechirvan Barzani received weightlifters from Arbil to congratulate them. The club pays its athletes \$150 a month, and covers their equipment and competition expenses.

Little such support exists elsewhere in the country, where despite subsidies many see the youth and sports ministry's budget as largely symbolic. The Kurdistan region's "climate of freedom" for young athletes and development of sports infrastructure "has contributed to the blossoming of women's sports", said Jazair al-Sahlan, adviser to Iraq's Olympic Committee. Wajed Wadi, one of the Arbil weightlifting coaches, noted the importance of the assistance. "With support and the appropriate environment, a promising, ambitious athlete can achieve something significant," he said. "That's what happened in the Arab championship-our athletes captured all the attention." — AFP



An Iraqi Kurdish woman competes during a weight lifting championship.



Iraqi Kurdish women compete during a weight lifting championship in Iraq's Kurdish regional capital of Arbil in which 14 Arab countries including Egypt and Saudi Arabia participated. — AFP photos



Sports

Duplantis clears 6.19 meters to break world pole vault record

‘I feel like I can jump a lot higher’

BELGRADE: Armand Duplantis warned ‘this is just the start’ as he broke his own world record in the pole vault on Monday, clearing 6.19m at his third attempt at the indoor meeting in Belgrade. “I feel like I can jump a lot higher than I’ve jumped. I feel like this is just a start. I think there are a lot more barriers to push, getting into the 6.20s,” Duplantis told reporters trackside.

The record came in the arena where the Indoor World Championships will start on March 18 with the men’s pole vault final on March 20. The 22-year-old Swedish Olympic champion broke the world record in an almost empty hall, and in a competition where he was the only top-ranked pole vaulter.

After easily clearing 5.61m, 5.85m and then 6m, he passed 6.19m at his third attempt before rushing into the arms of his girlfriend at the edge of the track for a kiss. “I don’t usually practice with heights like this, but I felt really confident going to it today. “The only thing that was on my mind from the beginning was the world record,” explained Duplantis. “That was the only thing I cared about today. If I didn’t break the world record, I was going to be upset.”

Duplantis added: “I think I’ve tried 6.19m 50 times. “It’s been a long time coming. I’ve never had a height that has given me that much trouble, so it’s a very good feeling. It was really hard fought over

these past two years. I’m really happy.” He had already attempted 6.19m this winter in Karlsruhe in Germany, Berlin, Uppsala in Sweden, and in Birmingham, without success. “From now on I will attack 6.20 m, even in two weeks,” he said, sure of his strength compared to the solid competition of the American Chris Nilsen, who cleared 6.05 m on Friday in Rouen.

The Swede had held the record since February 2020, when he cleared 6.17m in Torun in Poland and then 6.18m in Glasgow a week apart. At times he seems able to raise the record one centimeter at a time, like the Soviet and Ukrainian great Sergey Bubka, who, in the days when outdoors and indoors were considered separate, broke the outdoor world record 17 times and set indoor bests 18 times between 1984 and 1994. World Athletics has done away with the distinction between indoors or outdoors in pole vault records.

Duplantis, nicknamed “Mondo”, was born and raised in Lafayette, Louisiana, but competes for Sweden through his mother, who trains him with his father. He became European champion in 2018 in Berlin at only 18, and took the Olympic title last summer in Tokyo with a jump at 6.02m. He will be the overwhelming favorite next week to claim one of the two titles missing from his record, along with the World Outdoor title that he will have the opportunity to win in July in Eugene, Oregon. — AFP



BELGRADE: Sweden's Armand Duplantis clears a pole and breaks his own pole vaulting world record at the World Athletics Indoor Tour Silver meeting in Belgrade on March 7, 2022. —AFP

News in brief

Forest beat Huddersfield

LONDON: Nottingham Forest earned an emotional FA Cup quarter-final clash with Liverpool as the Championship side hit back to beat Huddersfield 2-1 in Monday’s fifth round tie. Forest will play Jurgen Klopp’s side at the City Ground on March 20 thanks to their stirring revival against Huddersfield. It will Liverpool’s first FA Cup meeting with Forest since 1989, when overcrowding on the terraces before their semi-final at Hillsborough led to the deaths of 97 fans of the Anfield club. That match was abandoned, with Liverpool eventually winning the rearranged fixture at Old Trafford. Forest will host Liverpool aiming for another Premier League scalp after enjoying shock wins over Arsenal and Leicester in the FA Cup already this season. They are into the last eight of the FA Cup for the first time in 26 years. Having had a Sam Surridge effort controversially ruled out for off-side, Forest fell behind moments later when Tom Lees netted with a 13th minute header. — AFP

Everton ex-manager dies

LONDON: Former Everton manager Gordon Lee has died at the age of 87, the Premier League club announced yesterday. Lee was in the hot seat at Goodison Park from 1977 to 1981, leading the team to a League Cup final, two FA Cup semi-finals and two top-four finishes in the English top-flight. Lee, who also managed a number of other clubs including Blackburn and Newcastle, signed a number of high-profile players including Graeme Sharp and gave debuts to Kevin Ratcliffe, Kevin Richardson and Steve McMahon. Retired Scotland international Sharp said on evertonfc.com: “I will always be grateful to Gordon Lee for bringing me to Everton Football Club. He showed faith in me and gave me my debut as a young footballer. “Gordon was a massive part of my development and I always enjoyed meeting up with him later in life. — AFP

Falcons ace Ridley banned

LOS ANGELES: Atlanta Falcons wide receiver Calvin Ridley has been banned for the entire 2022 NFL season after being found to have gambled on matches last season, the league said Monday. NFL commissioner Roger Goodell said in a statement Ridley was found to have placed bets on NFL games during a five-day period in 2021. The league said an investigation found there was no evidence Ridley had used inside information, or that any game was compromised in any way. In a letter to the 27-year-old receiver notifying him of his suspension, Goodell said Ridley had risked damaging the integrity of the sport. “There is nothing more fundamental to the NFL’s success - and to the reputation of everyone associated with our league - than upholding the integrity of the game,” Goodell said. — AFP

Players ‘get death threats’

MEXICO CITY: Players of one of the Mexican football teams whose weekend match was marred by clashes between rival fans have received death threats, their club said Monday. Fighting broke out just after the hour mark of Saturday’s game between Queretaro and Atlas at La Corregidora stadium in the city of Queretaro. “My players have received death threats. They’re not calm. There are wives who are thinking of leaving,” Queretaro manager Hernan Cristante told a news conference. According to authorities in the state of Queretaro, 26 people were taken to hospital and 19 of them had been discharged as of Monday. —AFP

Medvedev stays ATP No.1 but no longer flies a flag

PARIS: While the ATP rankings barely moved on Monday following a weekend when the Davis Cup replaced tournaments, there was one visible change, as the Russian flag vanished from the list. Daniil Medvedev stayed on top, but the country column next to his name contained a white rectangle, after the ATP responded to the invasion of Ukraine, by deciding last week to allow Russian and Belarusian players to continue to compete, but not under their national flags. Andrey Rublev, who dropped a place to seventh, Aslan Karatsev in 22 and Karen Khachanov, who fell one spot to 26, also had their nationality hidden by the ATP.

Siblings on skis: Bond is golden for Paralympic brothers

YANQING: When nearly blind teenager Neil Simpson hurtles 100 kilometers an hour down the ski slopes at the Winter Paralympics he knows he is in safe hands-his older brother Andrew is navigating. It’s the younger Simpson’s first Winter Paralympics but he’s already made his mark in Beijing, with the help of his brother and guide Andrew, as the pair claimed Britain’s first gold at the Games. Their victory in the Super-G visually impaired event was followed days later by bronze in the Super Combined, and they are now eyeing more success in the Chinese capital.

Neil, 19, has nystagmus, a condition that causes involuntary eye movements-as a result, his vision is blurry and severely impaired. “I don’t know any different, I’ve had it since birth,” he told AFP. Competing with his brother gives them an edge, Neil said. “It really helps to have Andrew as a guide. You can be very direct, even blunt sometimes... you don’t have to beat around the bush,” he said.

“Obviously we grew up together, so you know what each other is thinking... usually.” The duo uses Bluetooth transceivers built into their helmets to communicate with each other during races.

Andrew, 21, said his job is to give his brother accurate and concise information. “Generally I’ll say sort of what’s coming up in the course, if the hills are rolling over, getting steeper or flatter, what sort of lines we need to take through,” Andrew told AFP.

Foreign players can leave Ukraine, Russia

LAUSANNE: Foreign footballers and coaches working in Russia and Ukraine will be allowed to temporarily suspend their contracts and move elsewhere, FIFA announced on Monday. Sports bodies have barred Russia from international competition following the invasion of Ukraine and FIFA said the new measures were designed “to facilitate the departure of foreign players and coaches from Russia” should they wish to leave.

“Foreign players and coaches will have the right to unilaterally suspend their employment contracts until the end of the season in Russia (June 30),” world football’s governing body said in a statement. “Players and coaches will

be considered ‘out of contract’ until 30 June 2022 and will therefore be at liberty to sign a contract with another club without facing consequences of any kind.” The contacts will be suspended until the end of this season allowing players and coaches to work elsewhere, and they would then be free to move on permanently next season.

FIFA explained the move was chiefly to provide players and coaches with the opportunity to work and receive a salary, and to protect Ukrainian clubs brought to a halt by invasion. Minor players fleeing Ukraine will be treated by FIFA as refugee minors, allowing them access to the international transfer market normally closed to under-18s. FIFA who have already banned Russia from the 2022 World Cup but risk an appeal to the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS), “reiterated its condemnation of the use of force by Russia in Ukraine” and called for “a speedy cessation of hostilities”. — AFP

Belarusian Ilya Ivashka, who rose two spots to 41, was also flagless.

There no Ukrainians in the men’s top 100. One player who jumped without playing was Dominic Thiem the former number three, out with a wrist injury since June, rose one spot to 50 just as he postponed his return to the ATP tour circuit. The 28-year-old Austrian said on Monday he had decided to skip Indian Wells, which starts on Thursday and the Miami Open from March 23 to April 3 and has pushed back his return until the start of the clay court season in April.

“I had really good practice weeks. The wrist is perfectly fine, the hand is getting better and better, but still I decided to pull out of Indian Wells and of Miami to start on the clay courts,” Thiem said on Instagram. He won the Indian Wells tournament in 2019 and reached number three in the world rankings between March 2020 and February 2021, winning his one major, the US Open in 2020. That was his last title. — AFP



INDIAN WELLS: Daniil Medvedev of Russia cools down while training in preparation for the BNP Paribas Open at the Indian Wells Tennis Garden on March 07, 2022. — AFP



YANQING: Norway's Jesper Pedersen competes in the men's super combined sitting event at the Yanqing National Alpine Skiing Centre in Yanqing during the Beijing 2022 Winter Paralympic Games. — AFP

They also have special code words. “If I’m getting away from Neil a little bit we’ll use the word ‘feather’, which just means I need to slow down slightly but not too much, because if I slow down too much, then he’ll be into the back of me,” Andrew said. The smallest mistake could be fatal to their chances of Paralympic glory or possibly result in injury. “The trust has to be very high from both of us,” Andrew said.

Never far away

Since arriving in the Beijing Winter Paralympic coronavirus bubble, the brothers have been inseparable. The family support is all the more invaluable because other relatives have not been able to travel

to China to watch them compete. “We spend all the time together, especially here we’re in the same room, go to meals the same time,” Andrew said. “We’re never away from each other. It means we know exactly what each other wants and needs.”

Despite their close bond there can be occasional slip-ups. “We had a problem once during training,” said Andrew. “Because it was so windy I couldn’t hear Neil, and he was saying for me to tuck, but I thought he was saying slow. So I slammed on the brakes, but he wanted me to go faster.” The brothers will have a chance to add more medals to their collection on Thursday and Saturday when they compete in the alpine skiing giant slalom and slalom events. — AFP

Women’s Sports Day

By Abdellatif Sharaa

KUWAIT: Kuwait Olympic Committee (KOC) board member Fatima Hayat said the first Women’s Sports Day will be held on Saturday March 12th at the KOC temporary premise at Jaber Al-Ahmad City Youth Center with the participation of more than 20 sports activities and social organizations. The first women’s sports day (starting from 10:00 am till 7:00 pm), will have many sports including basketball, volleyball, table tennis, badminton, triathlon, squash, running, tennis and rowing.

That in addition to the sporting activities, there are other several awareness workshops on women health and healthy nutrition. Chairwoman of the women sports committee at KOC will cover the sports, social and awareness aspects in addition to the entertainment. Participation is open for various age groups as the Olympic committee decided to designate a day full of activities. Hayat lauded the role of Women Committee members.



Fatima Hayat

Sports

Tottenham crush struggling Everton, boost top four bid

Everton pushed deeper into relegation danger

LONDON: Antonio Conte challenged Tottenham to push for a top four finish in the Premier League after their 5-0 rout of Everton pushed the woeful visitors deeper into relegation danger on Monday. Conte's side ran riot in north London after Michael Keane's own goal started the spree early in the first half.

Son Heung-min increased Tottenham's advantage and Harry Kane bagged the third before the interval. Sergio Reguilon made it four and Kane netted again to complete the demolition. Tottenham's second successive league victory moved them up to seventh, three points behind fourth placed Arsenal, who have played one game less than their north London rivals.

Conte has frequently bemoaned the "ups and downs" of life as Tottenham manager, pointing to the club's history of inconsistency as proof it will take time for him to make an impact. The last few weeks have underlined Conte's concerns, with victory at champions Manchester City followed by a dismal defeat against lowly Burnley. The swaggering display against Everton, which came immediately after an

embarrassing FA Cup loss at second tier Middlesbrough, at least provided hope that the Italian could turn the tide eventually.

"A good game. Also a good answer after the last defeat," Conte said. "It's not enough. The players and I want to fight for a position at the top of the table. "We have to take this responsibility in the last 12 games to give everything. I want an answer from my players against Manchester United on Saturday. "I want to see if we're getting better in a tough game against an important team fighting with us for the top four."

For slumping Everton, the alarm bells are ringing after a fourth defeat in five league games since Frank Lampard replaced the sacked Rafael Benitez. Lampard's team are languishing just one point and one place above the relegation zone. Although they have a game in hand on third bottom Burnley, this wretched surrender suggests there is a serious chance of Everton being condemned to play outside the top tier for the first time since 1954.

"I could tell there was a fear of relegation when I



LONDON: Tottenham Hotspur's Colombian defender Davinson Sanchez (right) fouls Everton's Brazilian striker Richarlison during the English Premier League football match between Tottenham Hotspur and Everton on March 7, 2022. — AFP

came in. This challenge isn't bigger than I expected, I knew it would be (hard)," Lampard said. "Individual errors led to goals which took the game away from us. When you know what's coming and fall foul of it, that's the most disappointing thing. "The reaction was not good enough. It was the reaction of a team used to losing away from home. We need to sort it out."

Rampant Spurs

Tottenham took the lead in the 14th minute when Ryan Sessegnon made a well-timed run behind Seamus Coleman and whipped a cross into the six-yard box. Kane was ready to pounce until Keane made a hash of his clearance and diverted the ball into his own net. Conte's men struck again three minutes later with another flowing move.

Kane picked out Dejan Kulusevski and he clipped it into the path of Son, whose low drive from just

inside the area squirmed under Jordan Pickford's weak attempted save. Tottenham were rampant and Kane was next to get on the scoresheet in the 37th minute. Evading Everton's offside trap, Kane took Matt Doherty's pass in stride before planting a cool finish past Pickford for his 12th goal in 14 league appearances against the Toffees. Everton's frustrations boiled over in an angry skirmish between players from both teams at half-time.

That was the only time they showed any fight and the team with the league's worst away record this term were breached again in the 46th minute. Son surged forward and his pass found Kulusevski, who sent over a low cross that left the Everton defense flat-footed as Reguilon slotted home with his first touch after coming on at half-time. Tottenham showed no mercy and, from Doherty's diagonal cross, Kane volleyed the goal of the night with a superb strike from an acute angle in the 55th minute. — AFP

Sudanese women footballers tackle hurdles to play

KHARTOUM: Sudan's women's football team is yet to win a match, but members say they have scored a victory by overcoming challenges including discrimination and a coup to play the game. "The girls are still taking their very first steps in international football," said coach Salma al-Majidi, training the team that was formed just last year.

A few years ago, the prospect of a Sudanese women's national team was inconceivable, given the strict policing of social mores under the hardline Islamist regime of deposed autocrat Omar Al-Bashir. But within months of his ouster in 2019, and on the back of mass protests against his rule, Sudan launched its first women's football tournament. In 2021, Sudan's first women's national team was born.

The team has since taken part in the Arab Women's Cup 2021, playing against Egypt, Tunisia and Lebanon. It also played against Algeria, but it has yet to claim any victories, including in its latest two games against South Sudan. "They have much less experience than the other teams," Majidi told AFP after a friendly with neigh-

boring South Sudan in February, which Sudan lost 6-0. "But their performance is getting better." In a second friendly against South Sudan later last month, Sudan lost again, 3-0.

'Kicked out of fields'

Majidi blamed the team's loss in the latest matches in part on the disruption of practice due to anti-coup demonstrations. Mass protests have regularly rocked the country, claiming at least 85 lives since a military coup in October led by army chief Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan. Among other things, the coup resulted in one of their matches with Algeria being cancelled after it was set to take place on October 26 — the day after the military power-grab. "We could not prepare properly," said Majidi. "And it has recently become hard to practise on a regular basis."

Majidi has faced a tough challenge before. She was also the first Arab woman to coach a men's football team, including several of Sudan's second league men's clubs. Team captain Fatma Gadal was among the women who resisted state-sanctioned gender



KHARTOUM: South Sudan's players warm up before the start of a FIFA women's football friendly match between Sudan and South Sudan at Jebel Awliaa stadium in Sudan's capital Khartoum. — AFP

discrimination during Bashir's three-decade rule.

For years, she and others had to navigate myriad obstacles to play the game, snatching opportunities to practise when they could, on pitches out of sight of public view. While under Bashir there was no legal ban on women's football, a conservative society coupled with the Islamist leanings of the government left it in the shadows. Gadal said they had to "often look for secluded areas" to train, as many viewed football as a "masculine sport".

"People were generally against it, and we were often kicked out of fields when we were seen playing," Gadal said. Women were at the forefront of mass protests against Bashir, voicing their pent up anger against decades of inequality and restrictive policies that severely diminished their role in society. Along with Bashir's rule, the uprising eventually did away with public order laws that imposed stiff restrictions on women's actions and dress in public, sparking hopes for a more liberal Sudan. — AFP

Future on hold as Real Madrid await PSG blockbuster

MADRID: Carlo Ancelotti has been around long enough to know these are the games that really matter at Real Madrid. A Champions League last-16 tie against Paris Saint-Germain, with all the noise, the drama and the intrigue, will carry greater significance for Madrid's president Florentino Perez than any of their other 39 fixtures so far this term. In 2018, Zinedine Zidane launched his entire coaching career off winning titanic battles like these.

No matter that Real Madrid finished almost 20 points behind Barcelona in La Liga. Zidane marched his team past four European heavyweights in the knock-out stages - PSG, Juventus, Bayern Munich and, in the final, Liverpool - and was instantly hailed a genius. If success in Europe can excuse domestic failure at Real Madrid, the reverse is also true. Winning La Liga this season however may not be enough to prevent serious questions being asked about the direction of the club if it is PSG celebrating at the Santiago Bernabeu.

Ancelotti knows the demands better than anyone. He experienced them in 2015, after leading Madrid to the yearned-for 'La Decima' - the club's 10th Champions League crown - only to be sacked the following season. "Madrid is not a club where you put down roots," he wrote in his book 'Quiet Leadership' in 2017. "You are only ever a piece of the project." Even when Real Madrid appointed Ancelotti last summer, it felt more like a marriage of convenience, Perez finding a trusted guardian to smoothen out a period of transition after Zidane's departure and the financial uncertainty caused by the pandemic.

Ancelotti, meanwhile, grabbed an unexpected chance to manage at the very highest level again. It has worked out better than perhaps either imagined. Real Madrid's 4-1 win over Real Sociedad on Saturday sent them eight points clear at the top of La Liga, which they will surely now win from here. A commanding performance certainly suggested they can overturn their 1-0 deficit against PSG.

But for as long as Madrid continue to rely on a core of players in their thirties and coaches that manage rather than build, familiar questions remain: How long can it last? And then, what comes next? Two figures at PSG throw those questions into even sharper focus. Kylian Mbappe's scintillating late winner in the first leg in Paris appeared to be both deflating and thrilling for Madrid supporters in equal measure. Many felt they were getting an up-close preview of a player that will be theirs in the summer.

Such is Mbappe's quality and appeal, his arrival at Real Madrid would grant the club a generational shift in one move, a 23-year-old superstar to instantly build a team around. Mbappe would update their style and restore their status, Real Madrid once again with a side not just to be respected, but feared. The other pertinent figure is PSG's coach Mauricio Pochettino, whom Madrid have coveted for the last five years and strongly considered to replace Zidane in 2018. "I take it as something positive that Madrid think highly of me," Pochettino said the following year. — AFP



PARIS: Paris Saint-Germain's Italian goalkeeper Gianluigi Donnarumma warms up prior to the UEFA Champions League round of 16 first leg football match between Paris Saint-Germain (PSG) and Real Madrid at the Parc des Princes stadium in Paris. — AFP

that his club only received a fraction of that sum. "I don't know where the 200,000 or 300,000 euros they are talking about went! We as a club only got 25,000 euros," he says. His move to Paris as a free agent, after refusing to sign a contract extension with Milan, enraged his former fans to the point that they barracked him throughout Italy's Nations League defeat to Spain at the San Siro in October. At that point he was behind Keylor Navas in the pecking order at PSG but since then has started to play more regularly and was in goal for last month's single-goal victory over Madrid. There is a decent chance he will start in today's showdown after being rested for his side's 1-0 defeat at Nice on Saturday, in what would be the biggest match of his club career. — AFP

Donnarumma: From foot of Vesuvius to the world at his feet

CASTELLAMMARE DI STABIA: Gianluigi Donnarumma could complete a journey that will take him from the foot of Mount Vesuvius to one of the temples of football when Paris Saint-Germain walk out at the Santiago Bernabeu today to defend their slender lead over Real Madrid.

Already a European champion with Italy, goalkeeper Donnarumma joined PSG in the summer after being named the best player at Euro 2020, and he is helping PSG's push to finally conquer the Champions League ahead of the second leg of their last-16 clash in the Spanish capital. It has been a remarkable rise for the 23-year-old carpenter's son, who is already a veteran between the sticks with over 250 appearances for AC Milan and 40 for Italy after beginning his senior career in 2015, at the tender age of 16.

The youngest goalkeeper in the history of the Italian national team, Donnarumma's talents are such that he overcame Italy's traditional reticence to throw young players into the mix. Donnarumma took his first tentative steps as a shot stopper back in 2003 in his home town of Castellammare di Stabia, which sits on the bay of Naples and lies just south of Vesuvius, an active volcano.

"He started right here on this pitch. He came to watch his big brother (Antonio, currently goalkeeper

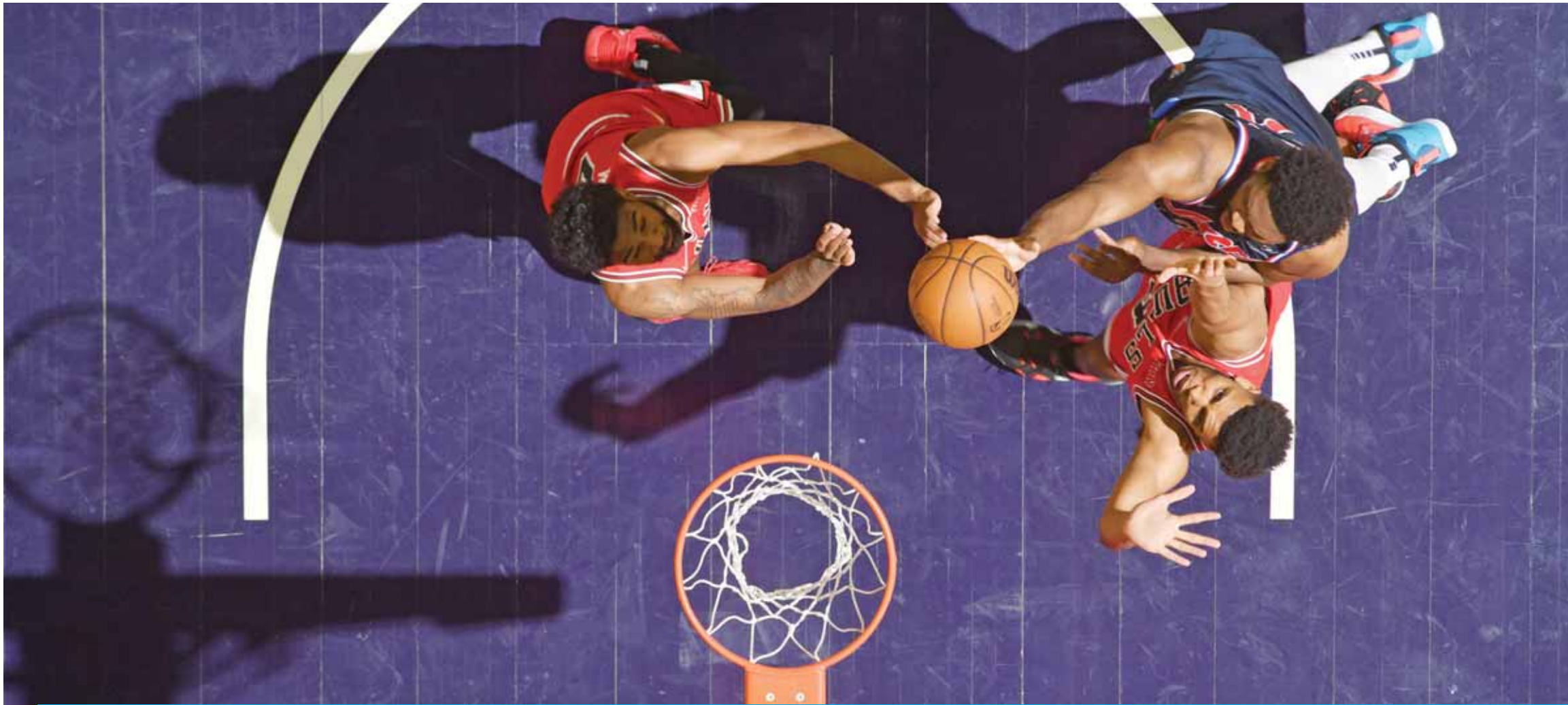
with Serie C side Padova) train and he also put himself in the goal to show off", Ciro Amore, the head of football school ASD Napoli, tells AFP. "He was only four-and-a-half years old and wasn't allowed to be in a team, but we started bringing him to training. He was never afraid of anyone, he already had an imposing physique and he was quite big. We could see that he had all the characteristics of a great goalkeeper."

Donnarumma stayed with ASD Napoli for 10 years until he was snapped up by Milan's youth set up, and when his former coach Ernesto Ferraro died five years later the now Italy goalkeeper paid an emotional tribute to the man who helped him become the successor to World Cup winner and Italian icon Gianluigi Buffon. "Thank you for being a guide, a father, a friend," he wrote on Instagram.

Rapid rise

Donnarumma's arrival at Milan came after a flurry of interest in the already huge goalkeeper, a phenomenon who Ferraro had long pegged as a future Azzurri keeper. "I got calls every week: 'where is he playing? What time?'," says Amore, who was approached by both Milan and their local rivals Inter Milan. "The first club interested was Inter. Their youth team manager came here to the office, to discuss it with his father. We even went to Milan to sign a pre-contract agreement with them," he says. In the end the family plumped for Milan as Antonio, who is nine years his brother's senior, was already playing for the seven-time European champions.

Media in Italy have claimed that the Rossoneri handed over 250,000 euros (\$271,000) for the younger Donnarumma's signature but Amore says



PHILADELPHIA: Joel Embiid #21 of the Philadelphia 76ers shoots the ball against the Chicago Bulls on March 7, 2022 at Wells Fargo Center in Philadelphia. — AFP

Sixers bounce back, overpower Bulls

Embiid enhances his MVP credentials with a 43-point masterclass

LOS ANGELES: Joel Embiid enhanced his MVP credentials with a 43-point masterclass as the Philadelphia 76ers got back to winning ways with victory over the Chicago Bulls on Monday. Sixers big man Embiid had 14 rebounds and two assists as Philadelphia pulled away in the fourth quarter for a convincing 121-106 win.

It was the 10th time this season that Embiid has posted 40 points or more as well as 10 or more rebounds in a single game. The Sixers were buoyed by the return of star signing James Harden, who was rested for Saturday's defeat on the road to Eastern Conference leaders Miami. Harden's return to the starting line-up gave Embiid time and space to work his magic after he was stymied by Miami's defense on Saturday. "He just got it in rhythm," Sixers coach Doc Rivers said of Embiid's performance.

"We didn't force it. We got him in the right spots. Joel one-on-one is very difficult. "He's healthy, he's running the floor, he's beating people down the floor." Harden finished with 16 points and 14 assists, while rising star Tyrese Maxey added 17 points - 13 of them coming in the fourth quarter. Georges Niang caught the eye with 14 points from the bench, 12 of them coming from three-point range, including two late in the fourth. The Sixers improved to 40-24 with the win, second in the Eastern Conference standings.

Rivers, however, believes there is plenty of room for improvement. "We won the game, but I can't say we played great tonight. We know that," Rivers said. "We've got to play better. We were sloppy at times on offense, stagnant. We have to figure that out and we will. We're a team that is progressing all the time, getting better, but we're not there yet." The Bulls fell

to 39-26 and have now lost five straight games. Zach LaVine led the Chicago scoring with 26 points, while DeMar DeRozan added 23.

Popovich close to record

Elsewhere on Monday, San Antonio Spurs coach Gregg Popovich edged closer to owning the record for most wins in NBA history after his team defeated the Los Angeles Lakers 117-110. The victory means Popovich is now level with Don Nelson on 1,335 career regular season wins. Popovich can pass the record today when the Spurs face the Toronto Raptors at home.

The 73-year-old Popovich, who has been with the Spurs since 1996 and has led the team to five NBA championships during his 26 years with the club, reached Nelson's record wins tally in 370 fewer

games. In other games on Monday, Eastern Conference leaders Miami extended their unbeaten streak to three games with a comfortable rout over lowly Houston in Florida. Tyler Herro poured in 31 points, and Jimmy Butler finished with 21 as the Heat improved to 44-22 at the top of the standings.

Bam Adebayo added 18 points, while the Heat also welcomed back Victor Oladipo, who returned from nearly a year-long injury absence with 11 points in just under 15 minutes on the court. In Denver, Nikola Jokic scored a 32-point triple double as the Nuggets sent the Golden State Warriors spinning to a fifth straight loss. Jokic finished with 32 points, 15 rebounds and 13 assists as the Nuggets romped to a 131-124 victory against an under-powered Warriors team missing Stephen Curry, Klay Thompson and Draymond Green. — AFP



ZHANGJIAKOU: Ukraine's Oksana Shyshkova (2nd left) and Nataliia Tkachenko (left) compete in the women's middle distance vision impaired para biathlon final event yesterday at the Zhangjiakou National Biathlon Centre. — AFP

Ukraine team defy heartbreak to win bittersweet golds

ZHANGJIAKOU: It was a bittersweet day for Ukraine at the Winter Paralympics with nine medals and a clean sweep of two biathlon events yesterday - just as one athlete learned her father had been taken prisoner by Russian troops. Despite grappling with heartbreak following Russia's invasion of their homeland, the yellow and blue team dug deep to net two golds, four silver and three bronze medals on day four in Beijing.

In a show of girl power on international women's day, Iryna Bui achieved her lifetime dream of Paralympic gold, sharing the podium with team-mates Oleksandra Kononova and Liudmyla Liashenko in the standing middle distance biathlon race. "We are here to fight for Ukraine, with Ukraine and in the name of Ukraine," the 26-year-old Bui told reporters. Kononova said that even though she is physically in China competing, mentally she is still back home. "All my thoughts, my heart and my soul is with my family and with my child," the 31-year-old said.

"Emotionally it's very difficult to focus and to concentrate on the race and the competition, so this is the most difficult Paralympic Games for me," Liashenko's home in Kharkiv, which is under heavy bombing, was destroyed Monday which caused her to pull out of

her cross-country race, team spokeswoman Nataliia Harach said. The United Nations estimates 1.7 million Ukrainians have fled the country as part of the fastest growing refugee crisis since World War II.

Anastasiia Laletina, 19, pulled out of her biathlon middle distance sitting race on Tuesday morning after receiving bad news from home, Harach said. "Her father is a soldier in the Ukrainian army and (was taken) prisoner by Russian soldiers. They beat him," Harach said. "She was very upset and couldn't take part in the race." Harach added that Laletina was resting and receiving support from the team's doctor. She added a Ukraine team coach's home in Kharkiv had also been bombed in recent days.

'I am shaking'

Ukraine's athletes at the Paralympics have excelled despite the uncertainty and destruction back home. In yesterday's men's visually impaired biathlon race, Ukrainians took all three medals, led by winner Vitalii Lukianenko, 43. Also in biathlon, Grygorii Vovchynskyi nailed silver in the men's standing final after winning gold in the sprint event earlier in these Paralympics. In the men's sitting event, Taras Rad added a bronze medal to his silver from Saturday. "I'm always thinking about my family and friends when I am staying at the hotel... but right now talking about them I am shaking, I worry a lot about them," he said through an interpreter. The Ukraine team are second in the medals table, with six golds and 17 medals in all. Hosts China are top with eight golds. Ukraine have more medal chances in cross-country sprint races today and further biathlon events Friday. — AFP

Haq, Shafique hit hundreds as Australia-Pakistan Test drawn

RAWALPINDI: Imam-ul-Haq cracked a century in each innings and his opening partner Abdullah Shafique hit a maiden hundred as Pakistan's first home Test against Australia in 24 years ended in a tame draw in Rawalpindi yesterday. Haq made an unbeaten 111 following up his 157 in the first innings, while Shafique finished on 136 as Pakistan were 252 without loss when the match ended without a result.

Australia scored 459 in reply to Pakistan's first innings score of 476-4 declared. Australia's first Test on Pakistan soil since 1998 — they previously declined to visit on security grounds — was ultimately spoiled by a flat Rawalpindi Cricket Stadium pitch.

A combined total of 1,187 runs were scored for just 14 wickets over five days as the famed Australian pace trio of Pat Cummins, Mitchell Starc and Josh Hazlewood - with 674 Test wickets between them before this match - got just one more. With a draw assured, the Pakistan openers took the opportunity for batting practice ahead of the second Test in

Karachi starting Saturday. In doing so, they became the first Pakistan pair to put on a century opening stand in both innings of a Test against Australia after teaming up for 105 on Friday.

Shafique was the first to reach his century, pushing seamer Cameron Green for a single to reach the mark in 209 minutes. In all, he hit 15 boundaries and a six. Haq, who was playing his first Test since December 2019, pushed part-timer Travis Head for two to complete his century in 276 minutes. Their stand is Pakistan's highest for the first wicket against Australia in all Tests, bettering the 149 set by Khalid Ibadullah and Abdul Kadir in Karachi in 1964.

So dominating were the two openers that it became only the first instance in 51 years when Australia conceded 100-plus opening stands in both innings of a Test. Geoff Boycott and John Edrich of England were the last pair to achieve the feat against Australia, in Adelaide in 1971. Earlier, left-arm spinner Nauman Ali bowled a nagging line and length to mop up the Australian tail and finished with career-best figures of 6-107 in 38.1 overs - his third five-wicket haul in eight Tests.

His effort enabled Pakistan to get the last three wickets with the addition of just 10 runs after Australia resumed on 449-7. Nauman - whose previous best of 5-35 came on his debut against South Africa in Karachi last year - dismissed Australian skipper Pat Cummins for eight and Nathan Lyon for three in quick succession. Left-arm pacer Shaheen Shah Afridi got rid of Starc to finish with figures of 2-88 in 30 overs. — AFP



RAWALPINDI: Pakistan's Abdullah Shafique (right) plays a shot during the fifth day of the first Test cricket match between Pakistan and Australia at the Rawalpindi Cricket Stadium yesterday. — AFP