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PM calls for improving peoples' quality of life

Sheikh Sabah speaks about major challenges facing governments

Amir greets citizens, residents on Ramadan

KUWAIT: Amiri Diwan conveyed on Wednesday HH the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah's greetings to citizens and residents on the advent of the holy month of Ramadan. The Diwan thanked Allah that this year's Ramadan comes while the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic are receding, urging everyone to continue following relevant health guidelines to maintain their health and safety. It added HH the Amir cannot receive citizens or residents wishing to congratulate him on the holy month of Ramadan, wishing everyone well. The Diwan wished wellness and prosperity for the leadership and people of Kuwait, wishing them many glad returns of this blissful occasion. — KUNA



HH the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah

KUWAIT: HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah on Wednesday addressed Kuwait's statement at the World Government Summit hosted by Dubai, calling for collective global action to improve peoples' quality of life. The premier called for a rapid international response and joint efforts by governments to pave the way for improving the quality of life of all nations.

Employment of advanced technological and digital solutions to enhance business environments, social, economic and environmental structures requires governments' joint vision on drawing up strategic and legislative schemes as well as policies, in addition to utilizing advanced technologies to attain sustainable development, he said.

Kuwait had laid the cornerstone for government knowhow through the launch of the "national center for economic knowledge", tasked with multiple missions for building a robust and advanced economy in line with Kuwait's 2035 vision. Moreover, it is seeking to set up and apply the knowledge index for public establishments for measuring the gaps between their performance and outcome, in cooperation with the World Bank, HH the Prime Minister said, expressing pleasure for proposing the index as a Kuwaiti initiative, sharing with other states expertise and potentials for upgrading performance of the governments, their apparatuses and institutions.

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DUBAI: HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Sabah addresses Kuwait's statement at the World Government Summit on March 30, 2022. — KUNA

News in brief

World Cup ball 'fastest ever'

DOHA: FIFA on Wednesday launched the 2022 World Cup ball for the finals in Qatar, promising it would travel faster in the air than any ball in the history of the competition. The ball made by Adidas is called Al Rihla, which means "the journey" in Arabic, and its design "is inspired by the culture, architecture, iconic boats and flag of Qatar", FIFA said in a statement. — AFP



Saudi deposits \$5bn in Egypt

CAIRO: Saudi Arabia has deposited \$5 billion at Egypt's central bank, according to state media in both countries, a day after Qatar pledged \$5 billion in investment and amid a surging wheat import bill. The Egyptian and Saudi governments have signed a draft agreement for Saudi investments in the country totaling a projected \$10 billion. — AFP

Temp rises twice world average

DUBAI: Temperatures in the Middle East and Central Asia have risen 1.5 degrees Celsius since the 1990s, twice the global average, according to an International Monetary Fund report released on Wednesday. The region is on the "frontlines" of the climate crisis, with food security and public health in danger, and increased risks of poverty and conflict, the report warned. — AFP

Lynching a US hate crime

WASHINGTON: US President Joe Biden on Tuesday signed into law a bill finally making racist lynchings a federal hate crime, ending more than a century of delays in outlawing the symbol of what he called "pure terror". Anyone convicted under the new law will face up to 30 years in prison. — AFP

51% of children aged 10 unable to read: MP

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: MP Hamad Al-Matar strongly criticized on Wednesday the government's educational policy, saying Kuwait spends on education as much as Finland, which occupies the top spot in education in the world, but said the end result in Kuwait is as good

as in Uganda. He said that there is an educational gap of 4.8 years in Kuwait, meaning that people who are 18 have the educational skills of people who are 13 years old. The lawmaker said that 51 percent of children aged 10 and under cannot read simple texts.

MPs also called on the government to adopt a strict naturalization policy to protect the country's national identity, adding that only those who deserve it should be given citizenship. Debating the government's five-year program during a regular session on Wednesday, MP Abdullah Al-Turaiji said the government should counter those who undermine national identity and stop granting Kuwaiti citizenship except to those who deserve it.

MP Bader Al-Humaidi charged that at one stage,

the country's population swelled from just 200,000 people to one million through forgery in granting citizenship. Many lawmakers had in the past called on the government to launch a wide-scale investigation into claims that as many as 400,000 people had illegally obtained Kuwaiti citizenship.

Humaidi also called on the government to tackle the imbalance in the demographic structure in the country, where expatriates form some 70 percent of the population of 4.6 million. Turaiji stressed there is an urgent need to implement policies to employ Kuwaiti citizens in place of expatriates. Minister of Oil Mohammad Al-Fares pledged to the Assembly to accelerate plans to Kuwaitize all jobs in the oil sector.

Saudi Arabia hosts talks on Yemen war

RIYADH: Talks on Yemen's devastating war started in the Saudi capital Wednesday, but without the Houthi rebels, hours after the Riyadh-led coalition announced a ceasefire for the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. The week-long discussions in the Saudi capital are hosted by the six-nation Gulf Cooperation Council headquartered there and include United

Nations envoy Hans Grundberg and Washington's Tim Lenderking.

The talks come after the Saudi-led coalition backing the Yemeni government said it would cease military operations during Ramadan, which starts when the crescent moon is spotted on Friday or Saturday. The Iran-backed Houthis - who rejected joining talks held on the territory of its enemy - days ago also made a surprise offer of a truce and of a prisoner swap. The ceasefire, the first since April 2020 in Yemen, has been respected so far.

The recent flurry of statements brings a glimmer of hope in a brutal war that has killed hundreds of

Continued on Page 6



RIYADH: US Special Envoy for Yemen Tim Lenderking speaks during a conference on Yemen's war hosted by the GCC on March 30, 2022. — AFP

Muslims face frugal Ramadan as prices rise

BEIRUT: Russia's Ukraine invasion, which has already exacerbated food woes in parts of Africa and the Middle East, is marring preparations for the holy month of Ramadan and forcing a turn to frugal iftar sunset meals. From Lebanon to Tunisia and Somalia,

Muslims who traditionally break a dawn-to-dusk fast with lavish family meals, are now struggling to secure even the most basic staples in light of skyrocketing food and fuel prices.

"High prices affect and spoil the spirit of Ramadan," said Sabah Fatoum, a resident of the Zionist-blockaded Gaza Strip, where consumer goods prices have climbed by up to 11 percent, according to Palestinian authorities. "We hear that prices will rise even more... it's a burden for people," the 45-year-old told

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GAZA: Palestinians buy dried fruit for the holy month of Ramadan in Khan Yunis on March 30, 2022. — AFP

Local

Premier tours Expo Dubai; UAE VP receives Kuwait PM

Pavilion reflects Kuwait commitments to secure future



DUBAI: His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah on Wednesday received Dubai Crown Prince and Chairman of the UAE Executive Council Sheikh Hamdan bin Mohammad bin Rashed Al Maktoum on the sidelines of the World Government Summit (WGS).



DUBAI: UAE Vice President, Prime Minister and Ruler of Dubai receives His Highness the Prime Minister at the headquarters of Expo 2020 Dubai. The meeting was attended by Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmed Nasser Al-Mohammed Al-Sabah, Advisor at the Diwan of His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Dr Basil Hammoud Al-Sabah, Kuwait's Ambassador to the United Arab Emirates Salah Muhammad Al-Baijan and the delegation accompanying His Highness the Prime Minister. —KUNA photos



KUWAIT: Vice President of UAE, Prime Minister and Ruler of Dubai Sheikh Mohammad bin Rashid Al-Maktoum, in the presence of the Crown Prince of Dubai and Chairman of the UAE Executive Council Sheikh Hamdan bin Mohammad bin Rashid Al-Maktoum on Wednesday received His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah at the headquarters of Expo 2020 Dubai.

His Highness the Prime Minister conveyed the greetings of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, as well as His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, congratulating them on the success achieved by the Emirate of Dubai in organizing Expo 2020 Dubai and the World Government Summit - wishing them continued prosperity along with further progress.

His Highness visited the Kuwait pavilion, which received wide international acclaim from various media for its modern and attractive design inspired by the vision of Kuwait 2035. The pavilion, located in the sustainability District in the Expo, reflects Kuwait's commitments to secure future for current and future generations and to introduce people of the world with Kuwait and its strategic projects, initiatives, and development goals, in accordance with the Kuwait vision and under the title (New Kuwait .. New Investment Opportunities for Sustainability).

His Highness the Prime Minister also visited the pavilion of the sisterly United Arab Emirates and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia at (Expo 2020 Dubai). In a press statement, His Highness the Prime Minister expressed his appreciation to the massive efforts exerted by brothers in the UAE,



DUBAI: His Highness the PM visited the Kuwait pavilion, which received wide international acclaim from various media for its modern and attractive design inspired by the vision of Kuwait 2035.

especially Dubai, for organizing and hosting such a global event in the Arab world in spite of the COVID-19 pandemic and its challenges.

"This dazzling global success with its innovative architecture is the result of years of hard and serious work and preparation to present an exceptional icon and a milestone in the history of Expo since its launch in 1851 in terms of design, management and operation", His Highness said. " This

event was able to attract the attention of visitors from all over the world as a global platform for nations and peoples of more than 190 countries to exchange experiences and relations, strengthen partnerships in various fields", he added.

"It provides collective solutions to global challenges and build a safe and environmentally friendly future and a platform for communication and work towards achieving global goals", he

continued. At the conclusion of his visit, His Highness Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Sabah praised the efforts of the national cadres and the working teams supervising the pavilion of the State of Kuwait from various concerned government agencies, stressing that they have spared no effort over the past months to highlight the country's ancient civilization, its great history, and its bright future. —KUNA

Mubarak 'Alaikom Al-Shahar!

US Ambassador to Kuwait
Alina L Romanowski

On behalf of the US Embassy, I want to wish all Muslims in Kuwait and around the world a happy Ramadan. Ramadan is a season of fasting, worship, and community, observed every year by two billion Muslims across the globe, nearly four million of whom reside in the United States. As President Biden said: "Muslim Americans have enriched our country since its founding. They are as diverse and vibrant as the America they have helped build."

Today, the United States boasts a thriving community of Muslims from a diverse range of backgrounds, including thousands of Kuwaiti nationals who've chosen to make the United States their home while they study or work. And for more than 31,000 US citizens living in Kuwait, Ramadan 2022 is an especially exciting time. Kuwait's beautiful traditions, ranging from festive ghabgas and Girgitaan to buzzing diwanis, will be enjoyed by all during the holy month. May this be a blessed month full of health and prosperity for you and your loved ones.



Kuwait sponsors over 1,000 orphans in Iraq

IRBIL: Kuwait's Consul to Irbil Dr Omar Al-Kandari on Wednesday announced sponsoring more than a thousand orphans in the province of Kurdistan, Iraq, as part

of "Kuwait by your side" campaign. Al-Kandari stated to Kuwait News Agency (KUNA), that they have distributed the financial aid provided by donors via Kuwaiti charitable societies and organizations.

He further illustrated that the project is organized by local partners and non-government organizations in Kurdistan, indicating that it is part of a plan to ease suffering of those in need and displaced persons in the region, and affirming that Kuwait will continue to provide humanitarian aid with future projects in the works.

On his part, Chief of Hebaa charitable foundation, Mohammad Salim commented that the project sponsors 1,140 orphans, with shares distributed efficiently and accurately. He added that they aim to raise even more sponsorships, and garner more efforts as there is a great number of orphans, due to Iraq's decades-long conflicts and catastrophes. Salim expressed gratitude and appreciation to Kuwait and its charitable societies for their continuous support to Iraq, adding that Kuwait sponsored 10,000 Iraqi orphans over the past few years. —KUNA



Local

Kuwait Green Building Council and Volvo Cars host 'Green Talks' initiative

'The role of existing buildings in Kuwait in the sustainability agenda'



Featured speakers included from left to right Yassine Lafhail, General Manager at ENGIE Solutions, Ashraf Tamim, General Manager at BNK Automotive and BNK Motion, Azizz K. Mamouji, Deputy Managing Director at Gulf Consult, Eng. Khaled Al-Mashaan, Chairman of Kuwait Green Building Council, CEO and Vice Chairman of ALARGAN International Real Estate Company, Eng. Ravi Armoudjian, LEED Coordinator at Gulf Consult and Representative of the Chadirji Foundation for Architecture and Society in Kuwait, Hanin Hamdan, Senior Sustainability Associate at KEO, and Eng. Sandra Draskovic, General Manager at Kuwait Green Building Council.

KUWAIT: Kuwait Green Building Council in partnership with BNK Automotive and Volvo Cars hosted the 5th "Green Talks" at the Volvo Studio at the Khaleejiya square, with the theme of the talks being "The role of existing buildings in Kuwait in the sustainability agenda". The 5th iteration of the "Green Talks" series took place on Monday, March 28, 2022 at the Volvo Studio at the Khaleejiya square.

The speakers included Eng Ravi Armoudjian, LEED Coordinator at Gulf Consult and Representative of the Chadirji Foundation for Architecture and Society in Kuwait, Hanin Hamdan, Senior Sustainability Associate at KEO International Consultants, Azizz K Mamouji, Deputy Managing Director at Gulf Consult, Eng Sandra Draskovic, General Manager at the Kuwait Green Building Council, Yassine Lafhail, ENGIE Solutions, Kuwait, General Manager.

Attendees included members of the Kuwait Green Building Council, Volvo Cars management and thought leaders in the fields of architectural development, construction, academia, energy efficiency, renewable energy solutions, sustainable operations, and environmental sustainability. There is always an open debate going on about whether it is better for the climate to demolish an old energy-inefficient building and build a well-insulated high-performance replacement.

To achieve significant reduction in CO2 emission in Kuwait, Kuwait GBC stressed the importance of adaptive reuse of the existing buildings and the ways re-use and renovation can contribute to the continuity of the architectural tissue and sustainability in Kuwait. An adaptive reuse and deep retrofit can turn vacant or inefficient buildings into energy efficient and high-performance buildings while at the same time prolonging their life and reducing negative impact on the environment.

Also commenting on the occasion, Khaled Al-Mashaan CEO of ARGAN and Chairman of KGBC stated: "We were happy to partner with BNK

Automotive and Volvo Cars for this edition of KGBC Green Talks as we believe it's important to raise awareness on CO2 emissions that comes from existing and new constructions. Discussions will take a broad perspective to this debate and cover diverse topics and case studies, including the cultural, social, economic, and environmental value of preserving and renovating modernist architecture in Kuwait, benefits of achieving energy efficiency for existing buildings and legislative framework and financial incentives to achieve all above. We look forward to more collaborations of this kind in the future."

"Today we are proud to welcome the Kuwait Green Building Council for their 5th Annual Green Talks. A part of our social responsibility efforts is to support sustainability and positive development initiatives and we look forward to today's discussions on existing buildings in Kuwait and their role on the sustainability agenda," Ashraf Tamim, General Manager at BNK Automotive.

The Kuwait Green Building Council (Kuwait GBC) is a national, non-profit organization that is committed to developing a sustainable property sector for Kuwait by encouraging the adoption of green building practices. The Kuwait GBC was formed as an initiative in 2009 with organizations and businesses from different industries in Kuwait, and legally established as a company in 2017. It is uniquely supported by both private and public sectors in Kuwait, united in one common goal to provide leadership and to advance green building principles for protecting the environment and ensuring sustainability.

"Green Talks" is a seminar style event specifically geared towards environmental awareness, green building practices, sustainability, and resilience, with all-round well-being in mind. This event aims to engage Kuwait community with the green building trends, economic, environmental, and social sustainability, and importance of being environmentally conscious.



Khaled Al-Mashaan, Chairman of Kuwait Green Building Council, CEO and Vice Chairman of ALARGAN International Real Estate Company.



Ashraf Tamim, General Manager at BNK Automotive and BNK Motion.



Eng. Sandra Draskovic and Eng. Ravi Armoudjian during the 5th Green Talks.



The full house at the Volvo Studio during the 5th Green Talks organized by Kuwait Green Building Council

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KRCS takes part in Arab Red Crescent, Red Cross meetings

RIYADH: Kuwait Red Crescent Society took part in the Arab Red Crescent and Red Cross Organization meetings in its 46th session in Riyadh on Wednesday, under the slogan (United for Humanity). Secretary General of the Board of Directors of Kuwait Red Crescent Society (KRCS) Maha Al-Barjas told KUNA on the sidelines of the meetings, that it is important that international and regional establishments cooperate with the Arab Red Crescent and Red Cross Organization to enhance the humanitarian efforts to reach different parts of the world.

These meetings discussed latest humanitarian developments in the countries facing crisis to provide aid and relief through partnership, said Al-Barjas. Several Arab Red Crescent and Red Cross societies took part in the meetings, supervisors from the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and the Arab League. —KUNA

Guraish: Traditional occasion held at home, workplaces

Customary event reflects closeness and intimacy



KUWAIT: Guraish is an annual traditional occasion that has been passed down from generation to generation throughout Kuwait's history, with Kuwaiti people marking it at home and workplaces at the end of the month of Shaaban, which precedes the holy month of Ramadan. In the past, Kuwaiti women used to come together at homes to celebrate Guraish, an Arabic word which means generosity, but only in recent years it has become a social carnival thrown by friends and workmates.

Speaking to KUNA on the annual occasion, Maryam Al-Enezi, a banker, said that employees of different ages at ministries, government establishments, authorities, companies and banks are in the habit of throwing Guraish during the last five days of Shaaban. The customary event reflects some sort of closeness and intimacy among staffers and shows sticking to long-lasting social habits and traditions

in Kuwait, Al-Enezi elaborated.

Actually, Guraish has remarkably developed from just a customary occasion to a widely celebrated social carnival that is chiefly meant for people to gear themselves up for the fasting month of Ramadan. Saad Al-Fayez, a civil servant, said that only family members, relatives and friends used to celebrate the occasion at home just to bid farewell to the daytime meals of breakfast and lunch, where women would come together bringing dishes with them.

Om Abdulaziz Madhi, a Kuwaiti woman, remembered that Guraish was nothing but a day for Kuwaiti families to come together in family leaders' houses, bringing with them food that could perish during Ramadan like dried fish and dried date, etc. Guraish, which used to be just a last meal ahead of the fasting month, has become over recent years a wonderful social occasion organized by employees

at public and private institutions, she pointed out.

However, she believed that the main characteristics of Guraish have really become a thing of the past, developing from just simple meals cooked by women at home to big impressive ones served by restaurants. Mohammad Al-Rashed, a catering company employee, said restaurants and catering companies always receive so many orders from both public and private sectors to celebrate this traditional occasion.

Abdullah Abdullatif Al-Othman Heritage Center's Chief Anwar Al-Refaai said Guraish is part of habits and customs in Kuwait, marked by citizens during the last days of Shaaban in preparation for the holy fasting month. On the origin word of Guraish, he said some historians believe that it means generosity, relating it to the sound of coins, while others opine that it means a light meal. —KUNA



KUWAIT: The prevention sector at Kuwait Fire Force discussed the sector's plan for summer as a pre-emptive step to get ready and prevent summer fires in order to have a season free of fire in Kuwait. Deputy Chief for prevention sector Major General Khalid Fahad rewarded outstanding employees at the sector in appreciation of their efforts.



Kuwait Heart Society organizes workshop on 'Cardiac Amyloidosis'

KUWAIT: Kuwait Heart Society organized a workshop on "Cardiac Amyloidosis, Diagnosis and treatment" on Sunday. Head of the Cardiac Unit at Hussa Al-Abdelrazaq Heart Center at Sabah Health Zone, and member of Kuwait Heart Association Dr Mousa Akbar said "we met to discuss a rare disease that affects the heart with Mubarak, Sabah, Amiri Hospitals, Sabah Al-Ahmad Heart Center and Adan Hospital." He said that there is a new medicine for the condition - raising hope for cure, but it is costly, especially if the patient is treated abroad. "We were able to bring the medicine to Kuwait, making the cost somewhat less," he said.

Meanwhile, Hematology consultant at Kuwait Cancer Center Dr Ahmad Al-Hurajji said they discussed the symptoms of Amyloidosis, means of diagnosis and new treatment methods. He said that the disease is rare, but it is not sufficiently diagnosed, but it is necessary to spread awareness to avoid complications. Cardiologist Fahad Al-Hajiri said the disease affects the blood and heart and its diagnosis is not easy. The workshop was organized to spread awareness among doctors and society



Participants pose for a group photo.

IBPC Meritorious Awards



KUWAIT: IBPC Meritorious Awards function took place at Indian Embassy auditorium on 25th March, 2022 at 6:00 pm. The program started on time with auditorium filled completely with Principal, dignitaries, students, parents and members. There were more than 300 guests in the auditorium and 150 on virtual platform.

The ceremony started with lighting of lamp by HE Sibi George, Joyce Sibi, Gurvinder Lamba, Sunit Arora & Dr Kamlesh. It was followed by National Anthem of Kuwait & India. Sunit Arora,

director of the event started by welcoming the guests and giving the details of the program followed by Dr Kamlesh giving the criteria and to select the schools and students.

Gurvinder Lamba, IBPC Chairman Nominee gave a welcome speech and briefed the activities performed by IBPC. He highlighted on the importance of education and the felicitations by IBPC as a way of giving back to the society. HE Sibi George, the Indian Ambassador to Kuwait captivated the attendees with his motivational speech,

depicting the importance of education, congratulating and wishing the best to the students for their future.

The Criteria formulated by IBPC include the Awardees for 10th & 12th Std students from Indian Schools with CBSE board. Cut off marks for 10th is 97% and above and for 12th is 95% and above. The school trophies were won by DPS (FAIPS) for the 10th Std & by Indian Educational School (Bhavans) for 12th Std. The Gold & Silver medals and School trophies were

distributed followed by Bronze Medals totaling to 246 students.

Under the mentorship program to encourage children, 6 students were prepared who did the anchoring for the whole program. The auditorium was filled with applause and cheering on an amazing performance of the students last year. Finally a vote of thanks was delivered by Sunit Arora who thanked the Chief Guest, IBPC Committee, Students, Parents, Sponsors, Media and his entire team.



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International

As Ukraine holds out, its military losses remain hard to gauge

Kyiv has been far more eager to discuss Russian losses

PARIS: Five weeks into the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Kyiv has kept the extent of its military losses under wraps, but analysts say the country has probably succeeded in limiting the toll thanks to years of preparation and smart tactics. Hiding combat deaths and equipment destruction is standard procedure in wartime, and both Russia and Ukraine have given scant details on losses that are impossible to verify, but surely downplayed in order to keep morale up.

"It's not clear what the rate of attrition is for the Ukrainian forces is. The answer is, We don't know," said Michael Kofman, a Russia specialist at the CNA think-tank based in Arlington, Virginia. Ukraine has provided just two military status reports since Moscow launched its invasion on February 24, initially hoping to overwhelm the country's main cities in just a few days.

The latest came March 12, when Kyiv acknowledged 1,300 soldiers killed out of the country's standing land-based force of 130,000 troops. Taking a standard wartime ratio used by observers of three wounded for every soldier killed, this would mean the fighting has taken around 5,000 Ukrainian soldiers out of combat — a figure analysts say is probably much higher.

Kyiv has been far more eager to discuss Russian losses, giving daily updates that now claim that 17,300 Russian soldiers have lost their lives. Moscow for its part said on March 25 that after a month of fighting it had lost 1,351 soldiers with 3,825 wounded, with Russian sources confirming the death of one general and a senior naval commander.

But NATO officials estimate that of the 150,000 to 200,000 Russian troops deployed to Ukraine, 30,000 to 40,000 have been either killed, wounded or taken prison-

er. Ukraine's army also claims it has killed seven Russian generals, a figure that Western officials say would be an unusually high casualty rate among military top brass.

'Perfectly prepared'

While such differences in tolls are seen as normal in an intense information war that is accompanying the ground conflict, observers say Ukraine may have had some success in limiting losses. Attackers in a conflict risk greater losses than defenders, analysts say, while Ukraine has also benefitted from considerable improvements in its military over the last eight years.

Even with the help of airborne missile strikes, assault forces often struggle to break through positions held by smaller numbers of dug-in troops. A recent analysis from the France-based Foundation for Strategic Research said the conflict provides an "excellent demonstration" of the notion of a defensive force being worn down less than an attacking force.

"This is all the more true as Ukrainian forces have adopted tactics based on high-tech guerrilla operations instead of direct confrontation, avoiding Russian firepower," the analysts said. Analysts also note that since Moscow's 2014 annexation of Crimea and its aid to pro-Russian separatists in Ukraine's east, Kyiv has hiked defence spending while streamlining its military command capabilities. The military budget has tripled to some 3.5 billion euros (\$3.9 billion) in 2021, and Washington has sent \$2.5 billion in defence aid since 2014 even as NATO allies including Canada and Britain have provided training help. "The Ukrainians were perfectly prepared, and had perfectly deployed their resources," a Western military source, who asked not to be named, told AFP.



LVIV: Ukrainian soldiers and relatives attend a ceremony at the funeral of the soldier Teodor Osadchyi, killed during the Russian invasion, at Lychakiv cemetery in Lviv, western Ukraine, on March 29, 2022. — AFP

Cutting-edge foreign equipment such as accurate anti-tank missiles from Britain and the US, as well as TB2 combat drones from Turkey have also allowed Ukraine to limit its losses. Ukraine has also been able to tap on large numbers of human resources with non-professional soldiers willing to swap trades and defend their country.

As of Tuesday, the widely followed Oryx military analysis blog, using photos and videos taken on the bat-

tlefields, set Russia's losses at 318 destroyed or abandoned tanks; over 500 armoured vehicles, 16 fighter jets, 35 helicopters and two navy ships. On the Ukraine side it counted 79 lost tanks, under 200 armoured vehicles, 12 jets and 13 ships. "There has been such evidence of the Russian casualties and massive equipment losses that we haven't seen on the Ukraine side," said a British military observer, who asked not to be named. — AFP

UK apologises for hospital scandal over 200 baby deaths

LONDON: More than 200 babies could have survived had they been given better care at birth, a damning report into Britain's biggest maternity scandal said on Wednesday, prompting a government apology. The report listed a catalogue of repeated failings at the Shrewsbury and Telford Hospital NHS Trust over a 20-year period from 2000 to 2019. Babies were stillborn, died shortly after birth or were left severely brain-damaged, according to the review, which was ordered in 2017 after concern at the high rates of neonatal deaths at the hospital group. It also disclosed that nine of 12 mothers who died during the period could have had "significantly" better treatment, and others were made to have natural births when they should have been offered Caesarean sections.

But the state-funded group, which operates several hospitals in Shropshire, central England, either failed to investigate sufficiently or learn from the cases. The report's author, maternity expert Donna Ockenden, said that meant "the true scale of serious incidents... went unknown over a long period of time".

"To all the families that have suffered so gravely, I am sorry," Health Secretary Sajid Javid told parliament, vindicating years of campaigning by those affected. "The report clearly shows that you were failed by a service that was there to help you and your loved ones to bring life into this world."

Javid and the hospital trust promised to implement the report's dozens of recommendations, acknowledging that the care and even compassion given was not up to standard. He vowed that those responsible for "serious and repeated failures" would be held to account. A police investigation is looking at some 600 cases, he added. — AFP



LISMORE, Australia: This handout photograph taken on March 30, 2022, and released by the Australian Defence Force shows Australian Army soldiers work with the State Emergency Services (SES) volunteers in a Bushmaster protected mobility vehicle while on standby to conduct evacuation tasks in New South Wales town of Lismore. — AFP

Australian beach town inundated by floodwaters

SYDNEY: The Australian coastal enclave of Byron Bay, known for its celebrity residents and idyllic beaches, was inundated by floodwaters Wednesday as severe storms again battered the country's east. Torrential rain that began Monday proved unrelenting, with nearly 300 millimetres (11.8 inches) falling in the area in 24 hours, forcing many shops in the Byron Bay town centre to close as roads were cut off by rising water levels.

Byron's normally buzzing high street-lined with popular restaurants, bars and clothing stores-was all but empty, transformed into a river by the metre-high, mud-brown floodwaters. In the nearby town of

Alstonville, 420 millimetres of rain fell in 24 hours. By Wednesday afternoon, there were 16 evacuation orders in place across the affected region, urging thousands of people to leave their homes for higher ground. For weeks Australia's east has been smashed by extreme weather, fuelled by La Nina weather patterns and climate change. Record rainfalls and deadly flooding have killed at least 22 people since early February. In Lismore, which last month was devastated by record 14.3-metre (47-foot) floods, the town's levee was breached Wednesday morning, sweeping away any progress made by a weeks-long clean-up effort.

The town's local member of parliament Justine Elliot warned residents on social media that the levee's siren would not sound because of a malfunction. "You MUST get out now," she wrote on Twitter. Lismore business owner and community organiser Sally Flannery told AFP that water levels in the town had reached the second storey of some homes and businesses, as they did last month during record floods. — AFP

Iraq MPs fail for third time to elect new president

BAGHDAD: Iraqi lawmakers Wednesday failed for a third time to elect a new national president for lack of a quorum, officials said, deepening the war-scarred country's political crisis. The continued failure by parliament to select a president after last year's elections reflects a deep schism between Shiite political groupings. "The assembly adjourned its session until further notice," the parliament's press service said without giving a new date. Iraq's federal court has given lawmakers until April 6 to choose a new president. If that deadline is missed, said political scientist Hamza Haddad, "we could reach a point where new elections are decided to break the deadlock".

A parliamentary source told AFP that only 178 out of 329 lawmakers were present in parliament Wednesday, far short of the two-thirds quorum required for the vote. As in the previous two aborted votes, last Saturday and February 7, Wednesday's session was boycotted by a major Shiite coalition bloc in parliament.

Half a year after October 2021 legislative elections, Iraq still does not have a new president or prime minister, keeping the country in a state of political paralysis. Parliamentarians must first elect the head of state, by convention a member of the Kurdish minority, with a two-thirds majority. The president then appoints the head of government, a post now held by Mustafa al-Kadhemi. Among the 40 candidates for the presidency, two are considered the frontrunners: incumbent Barham Saleh, of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), and Rebar Ahmed of the rival Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). On February 13, Iraq's supreme court ruled out a presidential bid by KDP-backed veteran politician Hoshiyar Zebari, after a complaint filed against him over years-old, untried corruption charges. — AFP

PM calls for improving...

Continued from Page 1

Sheikh Sabah greeted Sheikh Mohammad bin Rashed Al-Maktoum, UAE Vice President, Prime Minister and Dubai Ruler, ministers and other figures who were present. He noted the need for deeper examination of governments' role in the future in the shadow of multiple crises, conflicts and continuous growth of information technology.

Among the major challenges facing governments in the current century are climate change, water scarcity, geopolitical strife, demographic changes, poverty, health crises and economic and financial issues, thus a rapid response is required along with inter-governmental efforts to stem these issues' repercussions and seek to transform them into promising opportunities that may improve peoples' quality of life, the Kuwaiti prime minister pointed out in his address to the WGS.

Sheikh Sabah indicated that improving the quality of life is possible through technological empowerment, global economic link-up, expanding the network of sustainable cities and employing clean ener-

gy. He called for rationing nations' wealth to ensure a sound future for the next generations so they may have a stable and secure life.

As for climate change, the premier affirmed that Kuwait has been seeking to implement the Paris accord for climate change at the national level to cut carbon emissions in the 2015-2035 period. Moreover, Kuwait has adopted solutions for employment of renewable energy, replacing fossil fuel with liquefied gas, building and overhauling oil refineries to produce clean fuel, in addition to the state adoption of a strategy designed to attain low carbon emissions until 2050.

Sheikh Sabah has indicated that governments' roles have been changing with respect of empowerment and capacities' boosting, rather than operating and administering, amid intensive employment of knowhow and innovation of advanced technologies. He underscored the need for a common vision by governments to bolster and overhaul the business environments, economic, social and environmental structures.

Among the governments' modern tasks are setting up and updating the knowledge economy, the digital economy, innovative structures, and networks of scientific research centers so they may become capable of facing challenges and meet requirement of the third millennium, in addition to improving the quality of life. — KUNA

Saudi Arabia hosts talks on...

Continued From Page 1

thousands and left millions on the brink of famine in Yemen, long the Arab world's poorest country. "The success of Yemeni consultations is not an option but a reality that must be reached," said GCC secretary-general Nayef Al-Hajraf in opening remarks.

Both the UN and US envoys welcomed the GCC initiative and praised the warring sides' pledges to temporarily cease hostilities. Lenderking said the US supports UN efforts to advance a "durable, inclusive resolution" and backs its truce proposal "as a first step towards a comprehensive ceasefire and a new, more inclusive, political process". Grundberg said he continues to engage "with the parties with a sense of urgency to reach this truce by the beginning of Ramadan."

On Tuesday night, the coalition announced a "cessation of military operations in Yemen beginning at 6:00 am (0300 GMT) Wednesday". This, it said,

"coincides with the launch of Yemeni-Yemeni consultations with the aim of creating the appropriate conditions for their success and creating a positive environment during the holy month of Ramadan for peace making in Yemen".

The rebels had on Saturday called a three-day truce and offered peace talks, but only on condition the Saudis end their blockade and air strikes and remove coalition forces from Yemen. A day later they said a prisoner swap was agreed that would free 1,400 of their fighters in exchange for 823 pro-government personnel - including 16 Saudis and three Sudanese. The last prisoner swap in Yemen's war was in Oct 2020, when 1,056 were released on each side, according to the International Committee of the Red Cross.

Yemen's devastated economy and its complex political situation as well as military matters and humanitarian aid are all on the table at the talks in Riyadh, even as possible outcomes remain unclear. "It is not clear where the Riyadh consultations will lead," said Maged Al-Madhaji, director of the Sanaa Centre for Strategic Studies. "The meeting's agenda is still very general, and the discussions will be limited to one party and will not include the Houthis. — AFP

Muslims face frugal Ramadan...

Continued from Page 1

AFP ahead of the holy month that starts this weekend with the sighting of the crescent moon.

Russia and Ukraine, with vast grain-growing regions that are among the world's main breadbaskets, account for a huge share of the globe's exports in several major commodities such as wheat, vegetable oil and corn. The disruption in export flows

resulting from Russia's invasion and international sanctions has spurred fears of a global hunger crisis, especially across the Middle East and Africa, where the knock-on effects are already playing out.

The toll is most evident in countries such as Yemen, the Arab world's poorest, where a devastating war since 2014 has sparked one of the world's worst humanitarian crises. Food prices there have doubled since last year and the fact that Ukraine supplies nearly a third of Yemen's wheat imports has heightened fears of a deepening famine. Mohsen Saleh, a resident of the capital Sanaa, said that every year prices shoot up ahead of Ramadan, "but this year, they have increased in a crazy way, people can't take it". "The economic situation is very diffi-

cult," the 43-year-old told AFP. "Most people in Yemen are poor and exhausted."

In Syria, where a conflict since 2011 has plunged nearly 60 percent of the population into food insecurity, Ramadan to many has become a painful reminder of better, bygone days. Cooking oil has more than doubled in price since the start of the Ukraine war and is sold in limited quantities. The Syrian government, not spared by its status as a staunch Moscow ally, is also rationing wheat, sugar and rice.

"I thought last Ramadan was going to be our most frugal," said Basma Shabani, a 62-year-old Damascus resident, looking back at a year also marred by the COVID pandemic. "But it seems

that this year we will remove even more dishes from our spread. "We can't afford more than one type of dish on our table anymore and I am worried that in the future even this one dish will be beyond our reach."

In Tunis, Ramadan traditions have also been put to the test. Food donations, a common custom during the holy month, have dropped to a trickle, with former benefactors now struggling to source basics for themselves. Mohamed Malek, a 20-year-old student volunteer, has been collecting Ramadan food donations for years. "Our donation cart is usually full within the hour but this year this is not the case," he told AFP. "Some people are even telling us 'let us find food for ourselves first'." — AFP

International

Pakistan PM's future in doubt as coalition ally switches sides

'He will fight until the last over and the last ball'

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan's future looked increasingly in doubt Wednesday after a key coalition partner switched allegiance ahead of a parliamentary no-confidence vote this weekend. The cricket-star-turned premier was expected to address the nation in the evening, as weeks of political turmoil came to a head-including allegations of foreign interference.

No prime minister in the country's history has seen out a full term, and Khan is facing the biggest challenge to his rule since being elected in 2018, with opponents accusing him of economic mismanagement and foreign-policy bungling.



Khan lost the crucial support of the military

"He will fight until the last over and the last ball," Interior Minister Sheikh Rashid Ahmed told reporters, using a cricket analogy to describe Khan-one of the sport's all-time international greats before he entered politics.

Debate on the no-confidence motion is due to start Thursday, leaving Khan scrambling to keep his own Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) members on side-as well as a slew of minority parties. On paper the PTI and coalition partners have 176 seats in the 342-member assembly, but on Wednesday the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM-P) said its seven lawmakers

would vote with the opposition, which has a combined 163 seats.

More than a dozen PTI lawmakers have also indicated they will cross the floor, although party leaders are trying to get the courts to prevent them from voting on Sunday. In the past, Pakistan parties have also resorted to physically preventing lawmakers from voting against key legislation by blocking access to the national assembly, leading to cat-and-mouse chases and even accusations of kidnapping.

Senior MQM-P leader Faisal Subzwari tweeted Wednesday that his party had finalised an agreement with the opposition, led by the Pakistan People Party (PPP) and Pakistan Muslim League (PML-N). Hours later, MQM-P heavyweight Syed Amin-ul-Haque announced his resignation as tech minister in Khan's cabinet.

Feuding dynasties

The PML-N and PPP dominated national politics for decades until Khan forged a coalition against the usually feuding dynastic groups. He was elected after promising to sweep away decades of entrenched corruption and cronyism, but has struggled to maintain support with inflation skyrocketing, a feeble rupee and crippling debt.

Some analysts say Khan has also lost the crucial support of the military-claims both sides deny-and Pakistan's army is key to political power. There have been four military coups-and at least as many unsuccessful ones-since independence in 1947, and the country has spent more than three decades under army rule.

If Khan loses next week's vote, a new government could be headed by PML-N's Shehbaz Sharif, the brother of former prime minister Nawaz Sharif, who has not returned since being released from jail to get medical treatment abroad.



ISLAMABAD: Pakistan's opposition parties leaders Shahbaz Sharif (2L), Asif Ali Zardari (C), Fazlur Rehman (L) and Bilawal Bhutto Zardari (R) speak during a press conference in Islamabad on March 28, 2022. — AFP

Also given a senior role will likely be the PPP's Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, son of assassinated former prime minister Benazir Bhutto and ex-President Asif Zardari. One card up Khan's sleeve could be to call an early election-the next one must be held before October 2023.

"The best option in this situation would have been fresh elections to enable the new government to handle economic, political and external problems faced by the country," said political analyst Talat Masood, a retired general.

"The country is heading towards something unpre-

dictable... where there is going to be a lot of chaos and problems." Hassan Askari, another political analyst, agreed. "The long-term political repercussion of the evolving situation will be instability, continued conflict in politics and inability to cope with economic challenges that Pakistan is currently facing," he said.

Khan has railed against his domestic opponents for weeks, but on Sunday told a rally in the capital that a "foreign conspiracy" was also plotting his removal. "We have been threatened in writing but we will not compromise on national interests," he said, without offering evidence or details. — AFP



File picture taken on March 24, 2022 and released from North Korea's official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) on March 25, 2022 shows North Korean leader Kim Jong Un (C) walking near what state media report says was a new type inter-continental ballistic missile (ICBM) before its test launch at an undisclosed location in North Korea. — AFP

Why did N Korea fake a 'monster missile' test?

SEOUL: North Korea faked a "successful" launch of its most powerful long-range missile to shore up domestic support for Kim Jong Un's regime after the real test ended in failure, analysts say. State media trumpeted the "miraculous" launch of what it claimed was a new Hwasong-17 intercontinental ballistic missile on March 24, publishing dramatic photos and videos of leader Kim personally overseeing the test.

But analysts identified discrepancies in Pyongyang's account, and South Korean and US intelligence agencies have concluded that North Korea actually fired a Hwasong-15 — a less-advanced ICBM which it had already tested in 2017.

Why would North Korea do this? Analysts say it urgently needed a domestic propaganda victory ahead of a key anniversary, after the real launch of the Hwasong-17 a week before ended in failure with the missile exploding above the capital Pyongyang.

"North Korea wanted to shore up citizens' loyalty ahead of the Day of the Sun by branding Kim Jong Un a capable leader of a military powerhouse," analyst Yang Moo-jin told AFP, referring to the birth anniversary of founding leader Kim Il Sung on April 15. But "the March 16 launch failed spectacularly and-worse-it happened in Pyongyang so people got to witness the dramatic failure. Kim probably thought he needed something very strong to make up for it, and that's probably why he lied," Yang added.

Whether it was a Hwasong-15 or a Hwasong-17, the March 24 launch showed significant progress from North Korea's last ICBM launch, said Kim Dong-yup, of the University of North Korean Studies. "It's definitely a different upgraded version," he said, adding that Kim was seeking a larger arsenal of missiles more for "domestic reasons" than as a bargaining chip with the US.

Fake it til you make it?

It would not be the first time North Korea has fabricated weapons development progress-it attempted to pass off a failed January 2016 submarine-launched ballistic missile test as a success using altered video footage, analysts said.

It is surprising that Pyongyang is still up to "such 'fake it till you make it' shenanigans", said Mason

Richey, an associate professor at Hankuk University. According to Richey, the fact that independent analysts-let alone US and South Korean intelligence-were able to detect the deception so quickly undermines North Korea's credibility. If Pyongyang has "lied about something as apparently obvious as ICBM type, have they also lied about more opaque areas", he said, like whether their missiles survive re-entry or how light and compact their warheads are.

If the credibility of its nuclear deterrent is called into question, it "could make uber-hawkish defence officials in the US a bit itchier to try a bloody-nose or decapitation strike in future US-North Korea crises," he added. North Korea announced the purported Hwasong-17 launch with a slick, Hollywood-style video featuring leader Kim in a black leather jacket and sunglasses, flanked by generals, appearing to give the signal to launch a giant missile.

But discrepancies spotted in that footage were what first tipped analysts off that the official version of events was misleading at best. Seoul-based specialist website NK News analysed satellite imagery and found indications that some of the footage was filmed earlier than state media claimed, probably at the failed March 16 test. "Kim Jong Un was likely targeting domestic audiences, to suppress rumours likely spreading over the highly visible ICBM failure over Pyongyang the previous week," and to boost "nationalistic pride" ahead of April 15, NK News analyst Colin Zwirko told AFP. "He might not have wanted to waste the Hwasong-17 footage and wasn't able to launch another quickly, and telling the truth about a Hwasong-15 test would have lacked impact", as it was first tested in 2017, he added.

Propaganda revolution

The fact that Kim himself was front and centre of the event indicates that the propaganda was aimed at shoring up support for the leader personally, Hong Min of the Korea Institute for National Unification said. "The North faked a Hwasong-17 launch out of a strong drive to show achievements under Kim's watch to the public with Kim at the centre," he said.

The striking KCTV video announcing Hwasong-17 was a "major departure" from previous North Korean propaganda efforts, said Rachel Minyoung Lee, a non-resident fellow with the 38 North programme at the Washington-based Stimson Center.

"It's a revolution in the history of North Korean propaganda," she told AFP. While state propaganda has changed and evolved since Kim Jong Un came to power, largely to compete with the influx of foreign movies and dramas, this took things to a new level, she said.—AFP

Russia's Lavrov to visit India

NEW DELHI: Russia's foreign minister will visit India for a two-day visit beginning Thursday, officials said, likely to press New Delhi to resist Western pressure to condemn the Ukraine invasion. India has abstained from UN resolutions censuring Russia and continues to buy Russian oil and other goods. US President Joe Biden last week described India as "somewhat shaky" on Russia. Sergei Lavrov's trip coincides with visits by British foreign secretary Liz Truss and Daleep Singh, Washington's chief sanctions strategist. Truss and Singh, the US Deputy National Security Advisor for International Economics, were expected to urge India to assist in Western efforts to isolate Russia economically. Singh "will consult closely with (Indian) counterparts on the consequences of Russia's unjustified war against Ukraine and mitigating its impact on the global economy," the White House said.

'New world order'

Lavrov was due to arrive in India from China, which has also refused to condemn the invasion and has provided a level of diplomatic cover for an increasingly isolated Russia. In a video released ahead of a meeting with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, Lavrov said the world was "living through a very serious stage in the history of international relations".

At the end of this reshaping of global relations "we, together with you, and with our sympathisers will move towards a multipolar, just, democratic world order", Lavrov said. Lavrov was due to attend meetings hosted by China about Afghanistan involving diplomats from the United States and the Taliban-led country's neighbours — but not India, which was not invited.

India's relations with China deteriorated sharply

Government critic prevented from leaving India

NEW DELHI: A prominent Indian activist and writer has said she was prevented from flying to Europe to speak about intimidation of journalists and rights in the world's largest democracy. Journalists and activists have long complained of harassment under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, whose government has been accused of trying to silence critical reporting.

Rana Ayyub, a fierce critic of Modi and his Hindu nationalist government, was due to take a flight to London on Tuesday and then to Italy to attend different events. But Ayyub, 37, said on Twitter that she was stopped at Mumbai airport because of an investigation by authorities into an alleged money laundering case against her.

The events in Europe had "been planned and publicised all over my social media for weeks. Yet, curiously the... summon arrived in my mail much after I was stopped at the immigration," she said. Ayyub has been told to appear on Friday for questioning in connection with the case, local media reports said. The Indian Enforcement Directorate, which was not immediately available for comment on Wednesday, has accused Ayyub of siphoning off money meant for coronavirus victims for her personal use. Ayyub, who has denied the allegations, says she has been a victim of relentless harassment by far-right Hindu groups-including rape threats-because of her reporting on issues including the marginalisation of India's minority Muslims.

The International Center for Journalists expressed support for her on Tuesday, tweeting that the "blatant legal harassment" of Ayyub must stop. Ayyub wrote a book accusing Modi of being complicit in deadly sectarian violence in Gujarat in 2002, when he was state

after 20 Indian troops and four Chinese soldiers died in a brawl on their disputed Himalayan border in 2020, although Wang visited India last week.

Old friends

India and Russia have had a close relationship for decades. New Delhi, which describes Moscow as its "longstanding and time-tested friend", sources most of its key military hardware from Russia. India's Russian-origin arsenal includes about 3,500 battle tanks, most of its combat Sukhoi and MiG aircraft, its only aircraft carrier in service, eight non-nuclear submarines and four destroyers.

India also has large Russian orders pending including a \$5-billion deal for S-400 air defence systems — of which the first deliveries began last year — as well as four frigates and one nuclear-powered submarine. India has however been diversifying with big imports from France, the US and Zionist entity. It has also been making more equipment itself, including an aircraft carrier which is undergoing sea trials.

India meets about 85 percent of all its energy needs with imports, and the recent rise in oil prices because of the Ukraine war is causing additional hardship for hundreds of millions of Indians. New Delhi has been buying up discounted Russian oil and is working with Moscow on a rupee-rouble trade mechanism to facilitate trade, according to media reports.

A team from Russia's central bank is in India this week to discuss payment mechanisms, the Hindu daily reported. "When the highest god of the West, US President Joe Biden, has already said that India is shaky on Russia and we have ignored it already, why should we be worried about the way some in the West see this visit?" New Delhi-based Russia expert Nandan Unnikrishnan from the Observer Research Foundation told AFP. "We should look at everything from the prism of our own national interests. The Western perspectives won't determine our national interests." — AFP



NEW DELHI: File photo taken on May 27, 2016, Indian journalist and author, Rana Ayyub speaks during the launch of her self-published book 'Gujarat Files' in New Delhi. — AFP

premier. Investigators cleared Modi of involvement. She has since become a commentator for The Washington Post and other media. In February UN rights experts called on the government to stop "misogynistic and sectarian" online attacks against her. Last week, British anthropologist Filippo Osella from the University of Sussex said he was deported by "remarkably rude and unprofessional" immigration officials on arrival in India without any proper explanation.

The professor of anthropology and South Asian studies said he had a valid research visa and suspected his visits to India's arch-rival Pakistan may have triggered the government's action. "Collaborative research projects on charities in urban Sri Lanka and education opportunities in rural Pakistan were funded by the Economic and Research Council (UK) and the British Council respectively. I have never tried to hide my short research trips to Pakistan from the scrutiny of the Indian authorities," he said. The Indian Express quoted an official from India's Foreigners Regional Registration Office as saying he was "denied entry as per orders from higher officials". — AFP

THURSDAY, MARCH 31, 2022

Business

National Investments Company profits climb to 1,018% in 2021

A recommendation to distribute the highest cash dividends in NIC's history at 45 fils

KUWAIT: The National Investments Company (NIC) approved the consolidated financial statements for the year ended December 31, 2021. The statements included a detailed analytical presentation of the company's performance and financial position.

In a press statement, Chairman of the National Investments Co Hamad Al-Ameeri disclosed that in 2021, NIC went on to achieve outstanding results in its performance, with profits of KD 24.4 million at 31 fils per share, for the fiscal year ending on December 31, 2021, compared to a loss of KD 2.7 million, a loss of about 3 fils per share, for the same period at the end of 2020.

The Board of Directors also recommended the distribution of the largest cash dividends in the past 10 years, equivalent to 45 fils per share.



Hamad Al-Ameeri

- NIC recorded in 2021 the highest profits at all levels of KD 24.4 million at 31 fils per share
- The Board of Directors recommends the distribution of the largest cash dividends in the past 10 years, equivalent to 45 fils per share
- NIC started 2021 with M&A transactions, sell-side mandates, restructuring and various advisory services, promoting digital innovation in investment products and services, in addition to keeping pace with the rapid changes in the world of business and finance
- NIC's exceptional performance over more than three and a half decades included outstanding successes in its various activities, which placed it in the ranks of the leading companies not only in Kuwait, but in the region as well

Exceptional Performance

Al-Ameeri added that the financial results for 2021 were positive, noting that the company started the year 2021 with a strong set of investment operations for the benefit of its customers, including several M&A transactions and sell-side mandates, and restructuring as well as other general advisory services. NIC also attracted several new investments in infrastructure, credit, IT and private equity.

solutions that contribute to meeting the needs and requirements of our customers and shareholders in full.

Al-Ameeri revealed that this strategy is based on achieving several other integrated goals and objectives, such as providing innovative business solutions, digital investment platforms, enhancing service quality and operational efficiency, accelerating the

Chief Executive Officer of NIC, confirmed that the company witnessed a year of strong performance and operational achievements that strengthened its financial position by the end of the fiscal year 2021. NIC was able to overcome the conditions that prevailed in Kuwait and the world as a result of the pandemic and its consequences such as the curfew and lockdown since the beginning of 2020.

He added that the approved plans and strategic visions reflected the success of the company's work team, strengthening its position in the financial sector and raising its standing in the investment sector as one of the largest and most prestigious investment companies in Kuwait and the region. In 2021, the company recorded a remarkable rise in profits, amounting to KD 27 million, and achieving outstanding performance at the level of the company's projects in Kuwait and the region. This was reflected in the continued growth of profit ratios and strong financial results.

Al-Mukhaizim said that NIC reported an excellent growth in the company's total assets of 31.2 percent by the end of 2021, amounting to KD 290.6 million, compared to KD 221.4 million for the same period last year. He praised the 8.4 percent increase in the total assets under management (AUM) that amounted to KD 1.09 billion at the end of 2021, compared to approximately KD one billion for the same period last year, despite the challenges and fluctuations that the region experienced.

Also, NIC registered higher profits and distributable reserves of KD 48.4 million, constituting 60.7 percent of the capital, compared to KD 31.5 million for the same period last year. Other comprehensive income also achieved an exceptional hike in

year end 31/12/2021 approximating KD 8.8 million. He also shed light on the outstanding hike of 47.5 percent in management, brokerage and advisory fee income that reached KD 9.1 million compared to KD 6.2 million in the same period of 2020.

Al-Mukhaizim explained that NIC's Financial Advisory Services (FASD) achieved exceptional success in 2021. The company successfully supported a leading fitness and lifestyle business in securing debt and listed

tion, Al-Mukhaizim announced that NIC's investment funds achieved record performance ratios in 2021, thanks to the performance of the funds management team and the company's expertise in managing investment shares funds.

Commenting on this performance, Al-Mukhaizim said that Al-Wataniya Investment Fund performed well, with returns of 27.8 percent in 2021, an increase of 297 percent since its inception. Mawarid Fund for indus-



The exceptional performance achieved by NIC over three-and-a-half decades resulted in remarkable successes in its various activities, placing it among the leading companies not only in Kuwait but also in the region



Al-Ameeri pointed out the exceptional performance achieved by NIC over three-and-a-half decades, which resulted in remarkable successes in its various activities, placing it among the leading companies not only in Kuwait, but also in the region, therefore confirming its position as one of the largest investment companies in terms of revenue volume and profitability supported by positive results, the ability to overcome all crises and exceptional circumstances, and reaffirm their ability to maintain the interests of their customers with high efficiency and without interruption. Enhancing profits and operational revenues, as well as diversifying sources of income, are some of the pillars of NIC's work model, within the framework of a conservative policy that ensures achieving the highest returns for shareholders with the lowest possible risks. This is the basis of NIC strategy.

Al-Ameeri went on to say that the improvement in global and local economic conditions in 2021 enabled NIC to strengthen its position in the financial sector and raise its standing in the investment sector, noting that trading in the company's shares has improved in general in 2021 and that the company's share price has increased significantly, and that the company has also succeeded in operating the Market Maker service in Boursa Kuwait, starting August 22, 2021. The shares of Boursa Kuwait and Gulf Cable Company were selected to join the list, with more expected to be added in an announcement to be made in the coming days.

Al-Ameeri added that integrating the digital transformation process is part of the company's business strategy, pointing out the efforts made by the company's work team to move forward with the realization of Vision 2022, which is based on an advanced digital strategy that keeps pace with rapid changes in the markets and the investment sector by providing innovative services and quality products with the help of the latest technology, as well as the adoption of smart digital

automation of internal processes and procedures, strengthening internal control, improving resource management, strengthening governance, and monitoring the budget and the operational and capital expenditure.

At another level, and as a culmination of the company's tireless efforts and distinguished performance during 2021, NIC was honored by several prestigious international platforms specialized in business and finance. These awards were made on different occasions as testimonies of appreciation and praise from major global monitors of the performance of financial and investment institu-

- **NIC confirms its position as one of the largest investment companies in terms of revenue and profitability, supported by positive results and its ability to overcome all crises and extraordinary situations**
- **The international awards won by NIC in 2021 were the result of a collective effort, in addition to intense strategic efforts in CSR throughout the year, which focused on meeting the needs and requirements of society**

tions in the region and the world.

The NIC contributions and initiatives in carrying out its social responsibility have consolidated the company's position through community contributions, raising of awareness and involvement that have a direct and concrete impact on the development and growth of society.

Outstanding achievements

Fahad Abdulrahman Al-Mukhaizim, the

2021, reaching KD 25.6 million, an increase of 584 percent compared to KD 3.7 million for the same period last year.

Al-Mukhaizim said that despite the challenges the region witnessed in 2020 and 2021, the total shareholders' equity of the parent company rose by 23.9 percent to KD 216.8 million in 2021 compared to KD 175 million to the same period last year, taking into consideration that the company distributed cash dividends to shareholders for the

FedEx. As for the other project in Germany, a leasing contract was signed with a major company in the logistics sector. The two projects are expected to bring in annual returns of 8 percent and 8.5 percent respectively.

There were distributions to customers holding shares in the Company's real estate investments in the UK and USA, as well as an increase in the annual returns from 9 percent to 10 percent of its real estate investment in the UK Manchester area. In addi-

trial and petroleum services recorded return of 30 percent, while Zajil Services & Telecommunications Fund achieved a good return of 15.5 percent. In addition, Al-Mada Investment Fund achieved a return of 31.6 percent in 2021.

He added that NIC has an impressive track record of relations with clients and long-term partnerships that depend on great confidence and prudence in professional wealth management and in providing integrated products, solutions and plans as well as adopting the latest investment methods in wealth management. In 2021, new capital was attracted from clients of funds and portfolios, amounting to approximately \$150 million.

He praised the thoughtful strategy and the insightful vision of the owners of NIC by mainly investing in the privatization of Boursa Kuwait through leading a consortium of local financial institutions and a global operator to acquire 44 percent of the capital in 2019. This strategy later proved the correctness and success of the company's decision to seize the investment opportunity, which resulted in an influential and distinctive growth in the value of the investment and had a significant financial impact on NIC's success in reaping profits and achieving sustainable returns as well.

Al-Mukhaizim concluded that the company's owners are looking forward to 2022 with a positive outlook in terms of growth and maintaining an organizational structure that is keen to provide positive performance, create new paths, continue efforts in developing resources, and provide the best investment opportunities with highest returns.

In conclusion, Al-Mukhaizim extended his sincere thanks and appreciation to the Board of Directors and all staff at NIC for their constant efforts to achieve this outstanding performance and growth. He also expressed his appreciation for the clients and shareholders of NIC for their precious trust, wishing everyone continued cooperation and success.



شركة الاستثمار الوطنية
NATIONAL INVESTMENTS COMPANY

Al Safat Investment Company, a full-fledged investment-licensed company with a capital of \$85.2 million. In addition, it supported a buy-side transaction for a leading logistics company, one of Kuwait's largest multi-sector businesses, while it is also working on two flagship pre-IPO mandates, with expected completion in 2022 and 2023 as well as contracts to provide general advisory services.

He continued that the NIC also co-invested with a group of its customers in two projects to develop logistics warehouses in Europe, namely in Italy and Germany. The first project, a warehouse in Italy, was leased to



Fahad Abdulrahman Al-Mukhaizim

- Significant growth of 31.2% in total assets, reaching KD 290.6 million compared to the same period at the end of 2020, which amounted to KD 221.4 million
- In 2021 the volume of AUM jumped to KD 1.09 billion, compared to KD 1 billion in the same period ending in 2020
- Profits and distributable reserves increased to KD 48.4 million, representing 60.7% of the capital, compared to KD 31.5 million in 2020
- A remarkable increase of 584% in other comprehensive revenues through comprehensive income during the current year 2021, reaching KD 25.6 million, while other comprehensive revenues reached KD 3.7 million in 2020
- Growth rate of 23.9% in total shareholders' equity, reaching KD 216.8 million, compared to KD 175 million in the same period in 2020, despite the challenges the region experienced in 2020 and 2021
- An exceptional increase of 47.5% in the management, brokerage and advisory fee income, amounting to KD 9.1 million, compared to KD 6.2 million in 2020
- Outstanding performance in achieving record ratios and good returns on most of our investment funds in 2021, with Al-Wataniya Investment Fund reporting an increase of 27.8%, Mawarid Fund for industrial and petroleum services achieving a 30%, return, Zajil Fund for Services and Telecommunications recording a return of 15.5%, and finally the Al-Mada Investment Fund achieving a 31.6% return
- The strategic decision by the NIC owners to invest mainly in the privatization of Boursa Kuwait Company had a distinct material impact on the financial position of the company

Business

'Zain Business' showcases latest cloud solutions to Kuwait business community

Company holds two-day event at JACC, featuring local business and banking executives



Panel discussion during Zain's cloud and cybersecurity event

KUWAIT: Zain, the leading digital service provider in Kuwait, hosted a two-day event to mark the launch of its managed cloud services and cybersecurity solutions. The event took place at the Recital Hall in Jaber Al-Ahmad Cultural Center (JACC), and featured top executives from business, banking, and retail sectors. The new services are powered by ZainTech, Zain Group's regional digital and ICT solutions arm in the MENA region.

The event was attended by Zain Kuwait's Chief Enterprise Business Officer Hamad Al-Marzouq, Zain Group's Chief Technical Officer Nawaf Al-Gharabally, ZainTech CEO Andrew Hanna, and top executives from banking, investment, and local business sectors as well as Zain's global partners.

The launch is part of the company's continuous efforts to offer a portfolio of world-class, advanced security solutions to the local business community, serving businesses of all sizes, including large enterprises, SMEs, startups, and government institutions. This comes in line with Zain's digital transformation strategy that aims at empowering a more efficient business sector in the Kuwaiti market under the New Kuwait 2035 vision.

The first day's program featured a number of panel discussions that hosted executives from Kuwait's banking and financial sectors. The discussions focused on the multi-cloud environment challenges in banking and finance, cloud challenges and opportunities in the financial sector, digital transformation trends in banking, leveraging the power of data in the banking and financial sectors, and cybersecurity challenges in the new COVID era.

The second day's program featured panel discussions that hosted representatives and officials from the Kuwaiti private sector's biggest institutions. The discussions highlighted the future of the digital retail experience, offloading the ERP onto the cloud, the challenges COVID posed on the retail sector, cybersecurity challenges during the pandemic, and leveraging the power of data in retail.

ZainTech was introduced in October 2021 as Zain Group's regional digital and ICT solutions arm. The company unifies Zain Group's ICT assets to offer enterprises and governments a unique value proposition and comprehensive enterprise digital solutions and transformation services under one roof across the MENA markets.

With this announcement, Zain takes a new step towards its pledge to enable a full and secure digital transformation within the Kuwaiti business community. The company is introducing an integrated



Hamad Al-Marzouq



Nawaf Al-Gharabally



Andrew Hanna

- Zain's solutions in partnership with ZainTech, Zain Group's regional digital and ICT solutions arm
- Company launched latest world-class managed cloud services and cybersecurity solutions
- Event featured panel discussions with Zain's global partners, shedding light on digital transformation challenges in banking and retail sectors

portfolio of managed cloud services and cybersecurity solutions to enterprises in joint collaboration with ZainTech.

During the past few years, the local business market witnessed an accelerated wave of implementing digital transformation within private sector companies, SMEs and startups, and government institutions. However, at the same time, many new challenges surfaced along with this wave, emphasizing the importance of preserving data and protecting the digital infrastructures of companies from security breaches. Zain took the responsibility to offer an all-inclusive and integrated portfolio of cloud services and digital solutions built on the latest world-class technologies and provide cybersecurity solutions to the local business community.

Kuwait has always been a flagship market for Zain Group operations, and its pioneering developments in the enterprise segment have helped inspire initiatives in other Zain markets. ZainTech's establishment as the driver of the Group's digital and ICT solutions regionally reflects the need to continue to upgrade and evolve business solutions in order to manage the needs of transformational enterprises and continue providing customers, through the Zain operations, with the best-in-class

services.

Technologies such as big data, cloud, artificial intelligence, IoT and cybersecurity are defining the next stage of digital solutions, and ZainTech is positioned to support entities such as Zain Business in Kuwait with a wide range of best-in-class business offerings, leveraging its own expertise as well as the deep and wide partner relationships that it possesses.

Zain recognizes the importance of data in driving digital transformation in Kuwait. For this, the company has partnered with renowned global providers in cloud computing, data center solutions, and IT services to bring the best-in-class solutions to its business customers.

Zain's cloud solutions are custom-built by our talented solution architects to enable sustainable digital transformation, innovation, cost optimization and accelerated time to market. Zain solutions are backed by industry-leading SLAs with proactive 24/7 support through an advanced network operations center. Zain's portfolio covers a wide range of solutions from cloud advisory, virtual private servers and cloud containers to in-country data-centers and fully managed applications.

As global cyber threats continue to rise, the early

detection and fast response to cyber security incidents can significantly help organizations contain risk and reduce the economic impacts on their operations, and bottom lines.

Zain's fully managed cybersecurity solutions are built on the same premise and are designed to help businesses in Kuwait in swiftly detecting and responding to cyber threats, to ensure full protection of their operations and meet compliance requirements. Zain's solutions are custom-built by skilled security engineers and offer flexible payment models to suit every customer's specific requirements.

Zain Group recently introduced ZainTech across MENA, providing a center of excellence and managed solutions across the ICT stack including cloud, cybersecurity, big data, IoT, AI, smart cities, robotics, drones, and emerging technologies. ZainTech leverages Zain's global reach, unique footprint and infrastructure across its operations as well as other key markets in the Middle East to offer a single point of contact for sales and personalized customer care for multi-national corporations with multiple points of presence across the region.

Zain's strategy is centered around digital transformation leadership and empowering the community to enjoy a smarter portable lifestyle, as well as using advanced technology to enable an easier and more flexible life. The company places itself as an active partner in creating the future of smart life in Kuwait. Today's launch will contribute to prove the company's full potential in triggering the digital community.

Al-Waseet Financial Business Co wins top brokerage award

KUWAIT: In continuation of its pioneering role in the financial brokerage market, Al-Waseet Financial Business Company won the award for the "Highest Brokerage Company Dealing in Boursa Kuwait for the Year 2021", during the annual conference of the Arab Capital Markets Association, which was hosted by the Kingdom of Bahrain in March 2022.

Deputy CEO Hashim Abul received the award on behalf of Al-Waseet Financial Business Company and expressed thanks and appreciation for the award.

Al-Waseet's winning this award is an achievement for the company, he said. It is also an appreciation of Al-Waseet's success and excellence in

gaining the customer satisfaction and trust in choosing Al-Waseet Financial Business Company due to its competency, human capabilities and advanced automated systems in accordance with the highest standards followed in the financial brokerage market.



KUWAIT: Hashim Abul receives the award on behalf of Al-Waseet Financial Business Company

Business

Germany looks to farm fumes in breakup with Russian gas

Independent farm energy production seen as a way out of crisis

FRANKFURT: As Germany scrambles to reduce its dependence on Russian energy, the pungent fumes from the manure and other organic waste in Peter Kaim's farm could be part of the solution.

An hour's drive west of Berlin, a strong smell emanates from three large cylinders in the middle of a muddy field on Kaim's property shared with 100 dairy cows. Every day, tons of organic waste—mainly manure, corn and grass—are poured into these receptacles. In a process called "methanisation" fuelled by bacteria, the organic matter is transformed into gas.

This mini power plant supplies heating to about 20 homes in the village of Ribbeck, known for a pear tree whose praises the beloved 19th century writer Theodor Fontane once sang in a classic poem. Everything "comes 100 percent from our farm", Kaim told AFP. The farmer prides himself on "independent" energy production against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine, and calls on the state to "adopt simpler authorization procedures" to help biogas become a bigger part of the mix in Germany.

Like this operator, the entire biogas sector sees its chance in the current crisis as Berlin looks to quickly curb its dependence on Moscow for energy. Before the Ukraine war, Germany imported 55 percent of its natural gas from Russia, half its coal and around 35 percent of its oil.

In a sign that their message is being heard, the German government announced this month its desire to "increase the production of 'green' gas", as part of moves to boost resilience in the face of rising energy prices.

2/3 of Nord Stream

For the moment, biogas accounts for only one percent of consumption in Europe's top economy. "We could immediately increase our production

by 20 percent, and replace five percent of Russian gas, if some regulatory barriers were lifted tomorrow," Horst Seide, president of the German federation of biogas producers, told AFP.

A concerted effort to boost the sector would allow it in the long term "to produce two-thirds of the capacity of Nord Stream 2", the gas pipeline project which Berlin suspended after last month's Russian invasion of Ukraine, according to the industry group. The history of biogas in Germany goes back decades. In the early 2000s, the country threw its weight behind the sector, making it a European leader.

Half of the continent's methanizers are located in Germany. But beginning in 2014, the German government reversed course, deciding to curb the production capacity of the industry with a complex system of targeted subsidies. The main objection stemmed from the massive industrialization of the sector, which posed serious environmental problems linked to the increased risks of water pollution and leakage of polluting gas.

A land grab for energy use to the detriment of food production has also been a cause of concern.

The agriculture ministry says 14 percent of Germany's farmland is already used for the generation of energy. As a result of disincentives, the opening of new biogas facilities has declined sharply, from 1,526 in 2013 to 94 in 2014, just after the regulatory change, to a mere 60 in 2021.

'Food insecurity'

The sector says it has learned from its mistakes and wants to be part of the solution when it comes to pulling away from Russian gas, calling for regulations to be loosened.

However, some experts are skeptical. "In a future context of food insecurity due to the war in Ukraine, it is complicated to defend an increase in



RIBBECK, Germany: Giant tanks used in the biogas-producing process are pictured at a biogas unit in Ribbeck, Brandenburg. —AFP

biogas production using the current model," Michael Sterner, an energy researcher at the University of Regensburg, told AFP.

The expansion of production can be done in a "decentralized" way using small installations and "sustainable raw materials", responds Ingo Baumstark, spokesman for the federation of gas producers.

The industry says it wants to abandon maize

monocultures dedicated exclusively to energy production to focus on residue and waste from agricultural production. But such a model, an improvement from an environmental point of view, would require a colossal logistical operation. Currently 80 percent of the organic matter used for biogas in Germany comes from plants grown exclusively for this purpose, according to the German Environment Agency. —AFP

Aleid Foods unveils regional expansion strategy Goals_25

KUWAIT: Keeping pace with the momentum and ambition of achieving leadership in the food sector and expanding its business across the Gulf region, Aleid Foods Company announced the launching of Goals_25, a clear strategic plan and a pivotal turning point in Aleid's journey of continuous development, which consolidates the idea with everyone in the work environment and solidifies the trust in the company's ambitious expansion strategy and creating growth opportunities.

To launch the expansion strategy, Aleid Foods CEO Eng Mohammed Al-Mutairi explained the symbolic meaning of the Goals_25 plan, carefully defining the strategic steps of the company in the coming years, with the "number 2 stating the pursuit of listing Aleid Foods in two stock exchange markets in the region, and the number 5 signifying enablement of the subsidiary and partner products, services, and brands to enter five vital commercial cities in the Gulf.

Finally, the number 25 in the plan indicates the company's aim at doubling its returns by KD 25 million by end of 2025, compared to the returns achieved by end of the last year 2021.

Aleid Foods Company is initiating the launch of the Goals_25 plan by opening the company office in Dubai, the heart of commercial activities in the region, and one of the most vital regional markets known for its competitive qualities, diversity, and high capacity to import and re-export foods goods with specifications matching the Gulf markets. Aleid Foods' Dubai office will indeed be a dynamic center for managing the growing commercial activities of the company and its subsidiaries.

Al-Mutairi emphasized Aleid Foods commitment to achieving Goals_25 plan "through harnessing all the capabilities and efforts towards enabling it, by creating a dynamic and flexible work environment that supports the goals and thrives to achieve positive results through the expansion of the company's structure, based on growing local talents and global expertise. This is in addition to the continuous development of solid governance policies keeping pace with business progress through Goals_25 plan and establishing Aleid Foods' influential positioning in the local and regional markets, based on its unique portfolio of products, diverse sources of income and services in the markets", he explained.

Al-Mutairi concluded by highlighting Aleid Foods' performance and the motto associated with it, explaining, "As we always say, continuous growth and our journey is just the beginning".



Aleid Foods CEO Eng Mohammed Al-Mutairi

Markaz supports SpeakUp Kuwait program as gold sponsor

KUWAIT: Kuwait Financial Centre "Markaz" announced its successful participation as a Gold Sponsor in the closing ceremony of Speak Up Kuwait, a non-profit self-developmental program organized by DEEP Consultancy. The program, which was launched in February, aims to help senior university students and fresh graduates enhance their public speaking skills through a multi-week mentorship scheme based on business psychology. The closing ceremony was held on 19 March 2022 at Dar Al-Athar Al-Islamiyyah, where the "Speaker of Kuwait 2022", Sarah Al-Shammari, was announced and honored.

Markaz's sponsorship of SpeakUp Kuwait falls in line with its corporate social and economic responsibility strategy and its broad-ranging initiatives aimed at empowering youth by providing them opportunities to acquire skills and capabilities critical for the success of their careers.

Abdullatif W Al-Nusif, Managing Director, Wealth Management & Business Development at Markaz, commented: "Empowering youths by nurturing and strengthening their skills allows them to be better versions of themselves and excel in different environments in their workplaces and in life in general. Public speaking skills are particularly considered a competitive advantage in the corporate world and can attract better opportunities in the job market. We at Markaz are pleased with our support to the SpeakUp Kuwait program as it aligns with our strategy and initiatives for youth development."

Experience upgraded mobile office with Huawei MateBook E

KUWAIT: The long-awaited ultra-slim 2-in-1 laptop Huawei MateBook E officially debuted on 09-03-2022 it takes portability and flexibility with its 3 screens in 1 to new levels! This new generation of HUAWEI MateBook E can bring a more intelligent and efficient experience for anybody looking to stay productive while on the go.

We are living in a world in which physical barriers are disappearing, and people no longer have to remain in a particular geographic location for work. Those people need a laptop that is extremely portable and flexible to use, and this is exactly what Huawei MateBook E provides. It is a powerful productivity tool combining the advantages of traditional laptops and tablets to help users get work done faster and more efficiently.

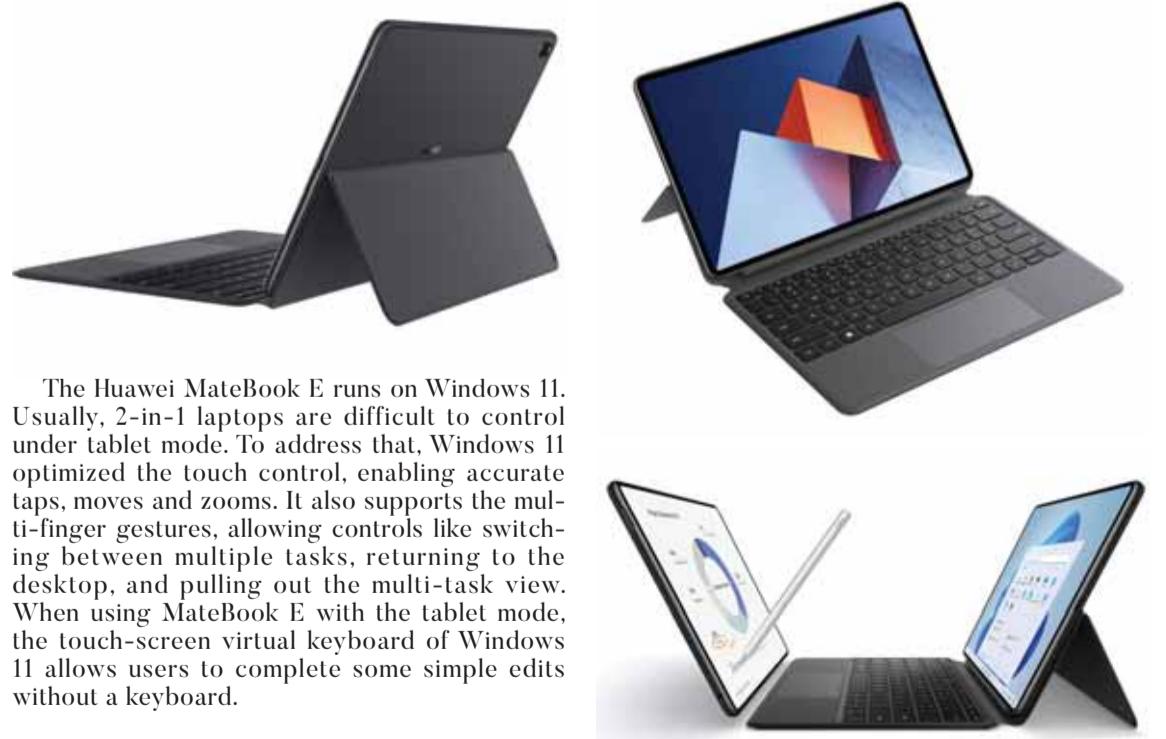
It is the perfect three screens-in-1 laptop because it depicts the complete experience of PC, tablet and smartphone in one device. It is also incredibly thin and light for a laptop, making it easy to carry around. What is even more amazing is that it can be switched easily (Laptop mode, Tablet mode, and Smartphone mode). These modes will allow users to tackle different mobile office scenarios. The display of the Huawei MateBook E can be detached and used as a tablet. For annotation and presentation, the laptop and Huawei M-Pencil can offer an even better experience in tablet mode. What makes it even better is that this laptop also offers the smartphone mode: this feature gives you full control over your smartphone through the PC.



egy and initiatives for youth development."

Dina Al-Weheab, Organizational Psychologist and Founder of DEEP Consultancy, said: "We believe that a motivational work environment is created by capable and articulate leaders who can influence and inspire. Public speaking mastery is a fundamental skill, and effective communication and public speaking skills improve several areas of individuals' personal lives and careers. The SpeakUp Kuwait program is unique in its way of teaching public speaking by applying psychological research. We would like to thank Markaz for its support of the program."

Featuring 7 final participants and four mentors, the Speak Up Kuwait program was offered through a total of 12 sessions with two per week. Ten best-performing trainees were given public speaking opportunities to share their stories at the award night held at Dar Al-Athar Al-Islamiyyah. The speeches were evaluated by a panel of judges from different fields, and the best speaker was named the Speaker of Kuwait 2022. The public event also included music and entertainment by the Kuwaiti band "Sons of Yousef" and stand-up comedian "Shaikha Al-Khalidi".



The Huawei MateBook E runs on Windows 11. Usually, 2-in-1 laptops are difficult to control under tablet mode. To address that, Windows 11 optimized the touch control, enabling accurate taps, moves and zooms. It also supports the multi-finger gestures, allowing controls like switching between multiple tasks, returning to the desktop, and pulling out the multi-task view. When using MateBook E with the tablet mode, the touch-screen virtual keyboard of Windows 11 allows users to complete some simple edits without a keyboard.

Real colour full view display

The Huawei MateBook E is equipped with the 12.6-inch OLED FullView Display, offering a 90 percent screen-to-body ratio. This, combined with the four-sided narrow bezels, provides a more immersive visual perception. Compared with LCD screens, OLED screens are lighter and thinner and have a brighter and richer color display.

Being a 2-in-1 laptop that you can really take with you anywhere, the diversification of usage scenarios means users must consider the effect of bright environments like outdoors on the screen. The screen brightness of Huawei

MateBook E can reach up to 600 nits, suitable even for outdoor environments.

Exciting super device features

The new laptop expands on the Super Device capabilities with innovative multi-device connectivity features. This laptop can connect wirelessly with compatible smartphones such as the newly launched Huawei P50 Pro and with monitors like the Huawei MateView via a USB-C cable or wirelessly providing you with futuristic multi-device collaboration and cross-device file sharing with simple drag and drop gestures.

Business

Sri Lankans sweat and seethe as economy grinds to a halt

Anger mounting over the worst economic crisis in living memory

COLOMBO: As Sri Lankans faint in day-long queues for fuel and swelter through stifling evening blackouts by candlelight, anger is mounting over the worst economic crisis in living memory. A critical lack of foreign currency has left the island nation unable to pay for vital imports, leading to dire shortages in everything from life-saving medicines to cement.

Long lines for fuel that start forming before dawn are forums for public grievances, where neighbors complain bitterly about government mismanagement and fret over how to feed their families as food prices skyrocket.

"I've been standing here for the past five hours," Sagayarani, a housewife, told AFP in Colombo while waiting for her share of kerosene, used to fire the cooking stoves of the capital's poorer households.

She said she had seen three people faint already and was herself supposed to be in hospital for treatment, but with her husband and son at work she had no choice but to wait under the blistering morning sun.

"I haven't eaten anything, I'm feeling very dizzy and it's very hot, but what can we do? It's a lot of hardship," she said, declining to give her surname. Trucks at the port are unable to cart food and building materials to other urban centers, or bring back tea from plantations dotted around Sri Lanka's verdant inland hills.

Buses that normally transport day laborers across the capital sit idle, some hospitals have suspended routine surgeries, and student exams were postponed this month because schools ran out of paper.

"I've been living in Colombo for 60 years and I've never seen anything like this," Vadivu, a domestic worker, told AFP. "There's nothing to eat, there's nothing to drink," she added. "The politicians are living in luxury and we are begging on the streets."

Expecting worse

Many among Sri Lanka's 22 million people are no strangers to privation: throughout the global oil crisis of the 1970s, authorities issued ration books for essentials such as sugar. But the government concedes the present



COLOMBO: A woman waits in a queue to buy kerosene for home use at a service station in Colombo.— AFP

economic calamity is the worst since the South Asian nation's independence in 1948, and a popular local quip now is that the rationing system at least offered some certainty that goods would be available.

A series of misfortunes have pummeled the country— which emerged from decades of civil war only in 2009 — in recent years. Farmers were hit by a crippling drought in 2016 and the Easter Sunday Islamist bombings three years later, which killed at least 279 people, led to a wave of cancellations from foreign travelers.

The coronavirus pandemic then decimated a tourism sector already reeling from the attacks and dried up the flow of remittances from Sri Lankans abroad.

Both are critical sources of foreign cash needed to pay for imports and service the nation's ballooning \$51 billion foreign debt.

But a far bigger factor was government "mismanagement", said Murtaza Jafferjee, chairman of the Colombo-based Advocata Institute think-tank. He

blamed years of chronic budget deficits, ill-advised tax cuts just before the pandemic that sent government revenue into freefall, and subsidies on electricity and other utilities that disproportionately benefited wealthier Sri Lankans.

The government has also frittered away public money on white-elephant projects, including a lotus-shaped skyscraper that dominates the Colombo skyline, with a revolving restaurant that now sits dormant. Poor policy decisions have compounded the problems. Last year officials declared Sri Lanka would become the world's first completely organic farming nation and overnight banned imported fertilizer, in an apparent effort to slow down foreign currency outflows.

Farmers responded by leaving their fields empty, driving up food prices and months later the policy was abruptly dropped. Sri Lanka is now seeking a bailout from the International Monetary Fund, but negotiations could stretch until the end of the year,

and people are bracing for even leaner times ahead. "I am expecting it to get a lot worse," Jafferjee said. "Unfortunately, they are unable to contain it, because the people who created the crisis are still in charge of economic management."

'Pushed to the brink'

By night, as the orange hue of street lights illuminates Colombo's wealthier neighborhoods, large pockets of the city are in near darkness. Rolling power cuts that stretch for hours each day leave restaurants and corner stores trying to operate under dim candlelight. Other business owners give up and draw down their metal shutters for the evening.

Resentment is palpable and frustrations have occasionally boiled over. A motorcyclist was stabbed to death outside a petrol station last week after a dispute sparked by accusations of queue-cutting.

But most indignation is directed upwards to the administration of Gotabaya Rajapaksa, a member of a ruling family once beloved by much of the country's Sinhalese majority for bringing the ethnic civil war against the Tamil Tigers to a brutal end.

Support for the Rajapaksa clan has since gone into a tailspin, with an angry crowd this month attempting to storm the president's office. Other demonstrations have for now been more subdued, organized through social media and taking the form of silent candlelight vigils during blacked-out nights.

"We've been pushed to the brink," said Mohammed Aker, an engineering student standing alongside thousands of others at a rally staged by a leftist opposition coalition. The 20-year-old told AFP that day-to-day struggles had left him little time even to contemplate what he knew were poor prospects for finding work after he graduated.

"We're not even able to get essential items... We can't even make tea at home," he said. "Our futures have become a question mark. We are here protesting because things need to change." — AFP

Vietnam's VinFast announces \$2bn US electric car factory

WASHINGTON: Vietnamese car manufacturer VinFast announced Tuesday it will build a \$2 billion electric vehicle factory in the US state of North Carolina amid its push to enter the competitive global market for EVs. President Joe Biden cheered the announcement of the 800-hectare factory in Chatham County that will also make electric busses and EV batteries, calling it "the latest example of my economic strategy at work."

"Our efforts to build a clean energy economy are driving companies to make more in America, rebuild our supply chains here at home, and ultimately bring down costs for the American people," he said.

VinFast said construction on the facility that will be able to produce 150,000 vehicles a year would start

this year once a permit is obtained, and aim to finish by 2024. In a statement, the automaker said the factory would produce the five-passenger VinFast VF 8 and the seven-passenger VinFast VF 9, both of which are all-electric SUVs.

Under the company's memorandum of understanding with the state of North Carolina, VinFast said it would expand the factory in the future. "North Carolina's strong commitments in building a clean energy economy, fighting climate change and reducing greenhouse gas emissions in transportation make it an ideal location for VinFast to develop its premium, smart and environmentally friendly EVs," VinFast Global CEO Le Thi Thu Thuy said in a statement.

The carmaker is a subsidiary of Vietnam's largest private conglomerate, Vingroup, which is owned by Pham Nhat Vuong, the country's richest man with a fortune Forbes estimates as \$6.3 billion. Last July, VinFast announced it would launch two new electric vehicles in North America and Europe in 2022. The American electric vehicle market is an increasingly competitive space, home to Tesla, a host of EV startups and the Detroit automakers, who have recently announced electric versions of longstanding models. — AFP



Lulu Hypermarket in Dubai Silicon Central Mall

Abu Dhabi's Lulu invites pitches for 2023 UAE listing

ABU DHABI: Lulu Group International, which runs one of the Middle East's largest supermarket chains, is considering an initial public offering early next year in the United Arab Emirates, people familiar with the matter said.

The diversified conglomerate—valued at more than \$5 billion in 2020 — has asked global banks to pitch for roles for potential listings, the people said, asking not to be identified discussing confidential information. The firm may opt for multiple listings in the Gulf stock exchanges, one of the people said.

Deliberations are ongoing and no final decisions have been made on the venue or details of the offering, the people said. It wasn't immediately clear if Lulu wants to list parts of the business or the entire firm. Abu Dhabi-based Lulu Group was founded by Indian entrepreneur Yusuf Ali, who set up the first Lulu store in the early 1990s during a years-long oil boom in the Gulf region. The company also operates shopping malls and other businesses including hospitality, shipping and real estate. The company has an annual revenue of about \$8 billion, employs more than 57,000 people and mainly operates in 22 countries located across the Middle East, Asia, US, and Europe.

"We don't want to comment on market rumors," said V Nandakumar, Lulu Group's director of communications. Saudi Arabia's sovereign wealth fund is exploring a potential investment in LuLu Group International. This comes after ADQ acquired almost a fifth of LuLu Group International for just over \$1 billion in late 2020.

Indebted Evergrande to sell \$575 million stake in mega-project

BEIJING: Troubled Chinese developer Evergrande on Wednesday said it will sell its stake in an incomplete development near Shanghai for \$575 million as it scrambles to find cash to pay its mammoth debts. The real estate giant is drowning in \$300 billion of liabilities, and has struggled to repay bondholders and investors after a clampdown by Beijing suddenly turned off the liquidity taps. On Wednesday the developer said it would sell the Crystal City Project, a vast commercial zone in Hangzhou, an eastern city outside of Shanghai for 3.66 billion yuan.

Part of the proceeds from the sale will go to repaying construction fees of 920.7 million yuan, the company said in a filing to the Hong Kong stock exchange. The remaining cash will be used as "general working capital of the group", Evergrande added. "The group's liquidity issue has adversely affected the development and progress of the group's projects," it said. On Tuesday night, the firm's Evergrande New Electric Vehicle unit also confirmed in a separate filing that it plans to start mass production of its first electric car on June 22.

It had said Sunday it would start taking orders for the car and open sales centres in 15 major Chinese cities, including in Tianjin, Shanghai and Guangzhou.

But the announcement was unable to prevent the unit's share price plunging almost 10 percent on Wednesday after resuming trading. The auto arm had halted trading on March 21 along with Evergrande Group and Evergrande Property Services. That came as the developer said it was looking into how lenders have laid claim to deposits of more than 13.4 billion yuan for its property services subsidiary.—AFP

Germany activates emergency gas plan to secure supply

BERLIN: Germany on Wednesday raised the alert level under its emergency gas plan as fears rose that Russia could cut off supplies if Western countries refused to make payments in rubles.

"A crisis room will now be established in the ministry," Economy Minister Robert Habeck said in a press conference, after G7 countries rejected Russia's demand for payments in its currency. The "early warning" measure, the first of three alert levels under the government's gas plan, was "preventative" and intended to assure supply of the fuel, Habeck said. Only at the third "emergency" level would the government intervene in the market to divvy up limited supplies, prioritizing "protected" consumers including homes and hospitals, the ministry said in a statement.

Gas reserves were currently at 25 percent of capacity, Habeck said in his press conference, adding that a stop to deliveries from Russia would have "serious" consequences, though supplies continued to flow. "We are in a situation where every kilowatt-hour saved helps," Habeck said in an appeal to private consumers and businesses to limit their energy use. The Kremlin reiterated on Tuesday that it will only be accepting payment in rubles for gas deliveries to the European Union—after Group of Seven (G7) energy ministers called this arrangement "unacceptable". —AFP



WASHINGTON: VinFast, the Vietnamese automaker under Vingroup, said Tuesday it will build its first US factory in North Carolina, part of the company's previously stated plans to invest and expand in the country.

Energy prices push Spanish inflation to 37-year high

MADRID: Spanish inflation has surged to a near 37-year high due to soaring energy prices following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, official data showed Wednesday, adding pressure on the government.

The rate jumped to 9.8 percent in March from 7.6 percent in February, its highest level since May 1985, according to a preliminary estimate from national statistics institute INE. "It is a bad figure which affects our economy, especially more vulnerable groups ... due to runaway energy prices," Socialist Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez told parliament. Like the rest of Europe, Spain has been struggling since last year with soaring energy prices, with households and businesses struggling to pay electricity bills. Since Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, oil prices have spiked, and Spain's transport and farm sectors have staged noisy protests and strikes to demand help with crippling gasoline prices.

The March increase was due to the surge in electricity and fuel prices, but also by the rise in

the cost of food items due to the war, the statistics office said. Sanchez's government approved Tuesday plans to offer 16 billion euros (\$17.5 billion) in direct aid and loans for companies and households hit by the impact of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

The measures, which will remain in place until June 30, include a discount of 20 cents per litre of fuel, with the government paying 15 cents and fuel providers the rest. It also includes a 362-million-euro aid package for the agriculture and farming sector, 68 million euros for the fishing and aquaculture industries and a two percent cap on rental increases. For households, over the next three months, rent increases will be limited to a maximum of two percent.

Spain, together with Portugal, will send a proposal in the coming days to the European Union to cap gas prices, on the back of a special authorization announced late last week by Brussels authorizing the two countries to intervene in power markets. The government hopes that the combination of economic aid and finding a way to decouple gas prices from electricity costs will help defuse internal tensions. "We are convinced that the national response plan and especially the agreement reached in Brussels to set a gas reference price... will allow us in the near to bend the curve (of inflation) and stabilize the evolution of the cost of living," Sanchez said. — AFP

EU unveils 'sustainable' fashion push

The EU on Wednesday announced proposals to crack down on "fast fashion" by making clothing easier to repair and more durable as part of a push to bolster environmental standards. "It's time to end the model of 'take, make, break, and throw away' that is so harmful to our planet, our health and our economy," EU Commission Vice President Frans Timmermans said.

The plan, which will now be negotiated by EU member states and lawmakers, aims to ensure that by 2030 textiles sold in

the EU will be made as much as possible from recycled fibers and cut down on the amount of hazardous microplastics they contain. "Fast fashion should be out of fashion, and economically profitable re-use and repair services should be widely available," a statement said.

The proposal would introduce labeling on clothes detailing how easily recyclable and environmentally friendly they are. It would also ban the destruction of unsold products "under certain conditions", including garments that had not been sold or

were returned to shops. The EU says that textiles have the "fourth highest impact on the environment and climate change" across its 27 nations after food, housing and transport.

The bloc estimates that Europeans buy 26 kilograms (57 pounds) of clothing and household linen, 73 percent of which is imported, and throw away some 11 kilograms of textiles, or 5.8 million tons in total. Textile production has doubled worldwide between 2000 and 2015 but less than one percent gets recycled, and up to 35 percent



of the microplastics released into the environment come from polyester or acrylic-based clothing.

The textile proposal was part of a

broader "sustainable products initiative" to bolster existing rules aimed at making goods more energy efficient and recyclable. The EU's executive says it intends to tighten its requirements on product design by imposing the use of more durable, resistant and recycled materials. Goods would have to be easier to maintain and repair, with concrete steps envisioned including facilitating the replacement smartphone batteries. — AFP



A photograph shows a drawing dubbed 'Le Serment du Jeu de Paume' by Luc-Olivier Merson, an interpretation of Jacques-Louis David's painting in the original format based on David's wash study and Jean-Pierre-Marie Jazet's engraving, at the Jeu de Paume hall in Versailles, near Paris.—AFP

Versailles reopens room where French democracy was founded

moment of the French Revolution.

On June 20, 1789, a group of people's representatives, who were demanding reforms from the monarchy, found their entry blocked to the hall of deputies in the palace and looked around for an alternative meeting place. They ended up signing the "Oath of the Real Tennis Room", vowing to establish a written democratic constitution. It led to the formation of the National Constituent Assembly, which soon after abolished feudalism and approved the Declaration of the Rights of Man.

The room is reopening on Friday after eight months of work, giving the public "a forgotten part of our history," Catherine Pegard, president of the palace's public administration, told AFP. It is dominated by a monumental canvas, also restored, which was based on the famous unfinished work by Jacques-Louis David depicting the signing of the oath. —AFP

The Palace of Versailles is reopening the site of an often-overlooked part of its history on Friday with a fully restored Jeu de Paume Room that hosted the founding of French democracy. The room was made in 1686 for Louis XIV to play Jeu de Paume—also known as "real tennis", an early version of the modern game. But more than a century later, it became the unlikely venue for a key

Russian, US ISS record-holders return to earth

A record-breaking US astronaut and two Russian cosmonauts reached Earth Wednesday, with tensions between Moscow and the West soaring over Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Russia's space agency Roscosmos said. "The crew of Roscosmos cosmonauts Anton Shkaplerov and Pyotr Dubrov, as well as NASA astronaut Mark Vande Hei, has returned to Earth," Roscosmos said after footage showed the Soyuz descent module touching down at the expected time of 1128 GMT.

NASA's Mark Vande Hei is returning after setting a new record for the single longest spaceflight by a NASA astronaut, clocking 355 days aboard the International Space Station. Vande Hei is joined by cosmonaut Pyotr Dubrov, with whom he blasted off from Baikonur in April last year, and who now holds the record for the longest mission by a Russian at the ISS. Anton Shkaplerov, who is rounding off a standard six-month mission, is the third member of the returning crew.

Relations between Moscow and Washington have been in tatters since the



Russian cosmonauts Pyotr Dubrov (right) and Anton Shkaplerov (center) and NASA astronaut Mark Vande Hei (left) are seen inside the Soyuz MS-19 space capsule shortly after the landing in a remote area outside Dzhezkazgan (Zhezkazgan), Kazakhstan. — AFP

Kremlin launched an invasion of Ukraine last month, killing thousands and forcing four million people to flee the country. Space was one of the few areas of cooperation between Russia and the West untouched by the fallout of Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, but here, too, tensions are growing.

The ISS, a collaboration between the US, Canada, Japan, the European Space Agency and Russia, is expected to be wound up in the next decade. Last month, Roscosmos chief Dmitri Rogozin, an avid supporter of what Moscow has called a

"special military operation" in Ukraine, suggested that Western sanctions targeting Russia in response had put the orbital lab in jeopardy. "If you block cooperation with us, who will save the ISS from uncontrolled deorbiting and falling on US or European territory?" Rogozin wrote in a tweet last month—noting that the station does not fly over much of Russia. Rogozin has also traded barbs on Twitter with the now-retired astronaut Scott Kelly, who has been sharply critical of the invasion. —AFP

TRUNK SHOW AFTERNOON TEA FASHION 2022-2023 FASHION SURVIVAL



Models present creations from local designers during the afternoon tea fashion 2022-2023 at Aceh governor's palace in Banda Aceh. — AFP photos

Lifestyle | Features

Jada Pinkett Smith breaks silence after Oscars slap

Jada Pinkett Smith took to Instagram on Tuesday in her first public comments since husband Will Smith slapped comic Chris Rock at the Oscars. "This is a season for healing and I'm here for it," she wrote in a post that had been liked more than 65,000 times within the first couple of hours. There was no elaboration and comments on the post were restricted.

The brief statement came less than 24 hours after Smith issued an apology to Rock over the attack at Sunday's glitzy Hollywood ceremony. In a shocking episode broadcast live around the world, Smith stormed onstage and hit Rock for a joke about his wife's closely cropped head. Pinkett Smith has alopecia, a condition that causes her to lose hair.

Stunned Oscar attendees were initially unsure if the powerful slap was part of a skit, until Smith shouted profanities from his

seat. Rock managed to return to the awards, but the atmosphere at the event had shifted unmistakably. Moments later, Smith won the Oscar for best actor, giving a tearful speech in which he claimed: "Love will make you do crazy things."

Trade title Variety reported Tuesday that the TV audience grew by more than 600,000 during Smith's speech. On Monday, as the Academy of Motion Pictures and Sciences said they were probing the assault with view to possible sanctions, Smith said sorry. "I would like to publicly apologize to you, Chris. I was out of line and I was wrong. I am embarrassed and my actions were not indicative of the man I want to be," the "King Richard" star wrote on Instagram.

"Violence in all of its forms is poisonous and destructive. My behavior at last night's Academy Awards was unacceptable and inexcusable," Smith said. There has been no public comment so far from Rock and no immediate reply to AFP queries to his representatives. Meanwhile, takes on the incident have continued to spiral on social media, with YouTube personality and boxer Jake Paul offering \$30 million for the two men to get in a ring. "I got \$15m for Will Smith and \$15m for Chris Rock ready to go," he wrote on Twitter. "Let's do it in August on my undercard." While neither man has ever boxed professionally, Smith played Muhammad Ali in the 2001 biopic "Ali." — AFP

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In this file photo US actor Will Smith (left) and Jada Pinkett Smith attend the 94th Oscars at the Dolby Theatre in Hollywood, California. — AFP



Picture taken on March 18, 2022 of Foo Fighters' drummer Taylor Hawkins on stage at the Lollapalooza 2022 music festival in Santiago. — AFP

Foo Fighters cancel tour after Taylor Hawkins death

Foo Fighters on Tuesday announced the cancellation of all scheduled tour dates "in light of the staggering loss of our brother Taylor Hawkins." Hawkins, the 50-year-old drummer for the Grammy award-winning rock group, died over the weekend in a hotel in Bogota shortly before the band was set to perform at the Festival Estereo Picnic on the city's outskirts.

In its statement posted to social media, Foo Fighters said "we're sorry for and share in the disappointment that we won't be seeing one another as planned." "Instead, let's take this time to grieve, to

heal, to pull our loved ones close, and to appreciate all the music and memories we've made together."

It is unclear whether any members of Foo Fighters, the group founded by lead singer and former Nirvana drummer Dave Grohl, will still attend Sunday's Grammys, where they had been slated to perform. The band is nominated for three awards, Best Rock Album, Best Rock Performance and Best Rock Song at the upcoming gala.

Preliminary toxicology tests found that Hawkins had drugs including opioids in his system before he died, but Colombian investigators did not specify whether the mix caused his death. As part of one of the world's most influential and critically lauded alternative rock bands, Hawkins was known for his on-stage charisma and classic rock-inspired beats, which he once said were influenced by legends like Phil Collins and Queen's Roger Taylor. Foo Fighters celebrated their 25th anniversary last year in a pandemic-delayed tour and had most recently produced "Studio 666," a rock-and-roll horror movie. — AFP

Koons on the Moon — sculptures to be placed on lunar surface

American pop artist Jeff Koons is to send sculptures to the Moon later this year on a spacecraft blasting off from the Kennedy Space Center in Florida, his gallery said Tuesday. Koons, one of the most celebrated and expensive living artists, is famed for kitsch pieces such as "Ballon Dog" and "Rabbit," and his work is exhibited in galleries around the world. His latest project "Moon Phases" consists of physical sculptures that will be left permanently on the lunar surface in a transparent,

thermally coated miniature satellite, the Pace Gallery in New York said.

Koons will also make unique digital versions of the sculptures-marking his entry into the lucrative new world of NFTs (non-fungible tokens). The sculptures will travel on the "Nova-C Lunar Lander," designed by private company Intuitive Machines, and will be placed on the surface of the Moon in the Oceanus Procellarum.

"I wanted to create a historically meaningful NFT project," Koons, 67, said. "Our achievements in space represent the limitless potential of humanity." The gallery released no details on the number or size of sculptures heading into space, but said the location will become a lunar heritage site. It added the project would mark 50 years since America's last crewed trip to the Moon. NASA is targeting May for a test flight of Artemis-1 — an uncrewed lunar mission-ahead of an eventual crewed landing, likely no sooner than 2026. — AFP



In this file photo Jeff Koons is seen. — AFP

Geneva watch show returns under shadow of Ukraine war

Switzerland's top luxury watch fair will resurface this week in Geneva after two years of pandemic-induced virtual shows, but Ukraine's raging conflict and COVID lockdowns in China could dampen the mood. The Watches and Wonders show, taking place from Wednesday until April 5, will this year see 38 of the biggest high-end watch brands, including Rolex, Patek Philippe, Cartier and Tag Heuer, gathered under one roof.

"We are extremely happy to have succeeded in setting up this major fine-watchmaking event in a difficult health and human context," Emmanuel Perrin, head of the Foundation High Horology (FHH) said in a statement. "After two years of pandemic and 100 percent digital editions, it was important to be able to gather again the main actors of our industry."

High-end watch fairs have long been a fixture in Switzerland, where nearly 57,500 people work in the country's world-renowned watchmaking industry. Many retailers make an annual trip to Switzerland during the fair season to put in orders for the year. But in the digital age, this show has also become a precious communications tool for reaching watch fans, with videos and presentations from the event available to all online.

Ukrainian 'princesses' pine for home in Czech castle

Ukrainian seamstress Olga Shandyba had never lived in a castle until she fled war for the Czech Republic. Now she would give anything to leave the fairytale lodgings and return home. The 37-year-old is among 22 Ukrainian women and children being housed at a 14th century castle in the western Czech Republic after fleeing the Russian invasion of their homeland. "We never expected to live in a castle," Shandyba told AFP. "Our children are like princesses. We are like princesses. For them it's an adventure," she said. "It is an adventure for us too in a way."

The Becov nad Teplou castle is home of the St Maurus Reliquary, a cherished 13th-century artifact said to contain the remains of St John the Baptist, among others. It is considered by some the second most valuable artifact in the country after the Czech crown jewels. Becov is now also home to a dozen Ukrainian refugee children and 10 mothers of various backgrounds, including a florist, a lawyer and a piano player. "We are very grateful for the quiet, the warmth, the kindness," said Shandyba, who fled heavy shelling in her hometown of Okhtyrka by train.

Of more than four million Ukrainian refugees fleeing the war, the Czech Republic has welcomed 300,000. The country's National Heritage Institute has earmarked 110 beds at 17 different heritage sites to provide free shelter as part of



Ukrainian flags hangs from the windows of the Becov nad Teplou castle, where Ukrainian refugees found a shelter, in Becov nad Teplou, Czech Republic. — AFP photos

the relief effort.

Blue and yellow

The Institute has so far registered 66 refugees—a third of whom are living in Becov nad Teplou, including in a dormitory normally used for out-of-town tour guides. "This year, we will only hire local guides who have a place to stay," Becov caretaker Tomas Wozovsky told AFP. Nastya Bidkova, a singing teacher from Ukraine's Dnipro, said it was "absolutely unexpected" to live in a castle. "We felt very lucky when we

arrived at night and saw a beautiful castle with our flags out of the window. It was really nice," she told AFP.

Becov had no problem sourcing Ukrainian flags as blue and yellow were the colours of its former owners, the Questenberg family, Wozovsky said. "We had them in store and could fly them almost the instant the decision was taken to show our solidarity," he said.

The town of Becov nad Teplou, with fewer than 1,000 inhabitants, has welcomed more than 60 Ukrainian refugees over the past month. Housed in hotels, pensions and private homes as well as the castle, the children now attend the local school. The town is also taking care of visas and essentials like linen and towels, as well as jobs which, however, are hard to find. The refugees received a free tour of the castle with all its gems and the town held a get-together to welcome the newcomers.

'Didn't talk'

The children have begun to relish the opportunity and shake off their fears. "For the first two days they didn't talk, they were timid, too quiet after all their suffering and travel," Wozovsky said. "Now they are normal children." But despite the hospitality, the shadow of the Russian invasion looms large. The children's mothers often look worried, smiles are rare, and they opt to indulge in odd jobs to keep their minds from wandering.

"Yes, they are living in a castle, but there's certainly no bonus involved," Wozovsky said. Bidkova said she would rather swap the experience for Ukraine. "To get back to our families and our men who are fighting for peace over there," she explained. Shandyba too said she wanted to return to her own house. "If it's still standing," she added. — AFP

Triumphant return?

The 2022 edition, being held in Geneva's Palexpo conference centre, had been expected to signal the triumphant return of in-person hobnobbing over exquisite timepieces, and booming business for their creators. After taking a beating during the first pandemic year in 2020, when exports plunged 21.8 percent, the Swiss watchmaking industry saw a spectacular rebound last year. Watch exports soared 31.2 percent in 2021, according to Swiss customs, surpassing not only their pre-pandemic level, but also the record-high of 2014.

And during the first two months of this year, exports swelled nearly 15.7 percent compared to the same period last year, according to the Federation of the Swiss Watch Industry. But the devastating conflict in Ukraine has put a damper on the jubilant mood. At first glance, Russia's invasion should not have much impact on the industry. Russia represented only 1.1 percent of Swiss watch exports last year, and a number of brands halted their exports to the country even before European sanctions imposed over the war.

However, the sector is heavily dependent on tourism and on consumer confidence, both now dealt a fresh blow after two years of COVID chaos. And Russia also happens to be a major supplier of diamonds, gold and other precious metals used by high-end watchmakers. Ongoing large-scale COVID lockdowns in China—one of the biggest markets for Swiss watches—has also cast a shadow over the industry and this week's show. Some analysts have already lowered their 2022 forecasts. Jon Cox, a top industry analyst with the Kepler Cheuvreux financial services company, recently slashed his outlook for the year from eight-percent growth to five, pointing to the drop in sales in Russia and on wealthy Russians travelling abroad—plus the conflict's impact on European clients as a whole. — AFP



Olga Shandyba (left), another Ukrainian mother and children cook in a small flat at the Becov nad Teplou castle complex, where Ukrainian refugees found a shelter.



Olga Shandyba (second right), another Ukrainian mother and children cook in a small flat at the Becov nad Teplou castle complex.

Healy hits century; Australia power into World Cup final

Tournament favorites beat West Indies



WELLINGTON: West Indies' captain Stefanie Taylor plays a shot watched by the Australia's wicketkeeper Alyssa Healy (right) during the Women's Cricket World Cup semi-final match between Australia and the West Indies on March 30, 2022. — AFP

Samson leads Royals to big IPL win over Hyderabad

PUNE: Sanju Samson led from the front with a blistering 55 as Rajasthan Royals opened their season campaign in the IPL with an emphatic 61-run win over Sunrisers Hyderabad on Tuesday. The captain, playing his 100th match for Royals who won the inaugural Indian Premier League edition under late Australian star Shane Warne in 2008, guided his team to 210 for six in Pune.

Royals' bowlers led by Prasad Krishna, who rattled the top-order including dismissing skipper Kane Williamson for two, restricted Hyderabad to 149-7 despite an unbeaten 57 by Aiden Markram. "I think every season we come with great dreams, it's a franchise that takes good care of us," man of the match Samson said of his side that finished in the bottom two among eight teams in the last three editions. "Our owners trust us, give us space. One game at a time."

Leg spinner Yuzvendra Chahal claimed three wickets to reach 250 scalps in T20 matches and pace bowler Trent bowler took two wickets. Samson, a wicketkeeper-batter, remained the hero after he smashed three fours and five sixes in his 27-ball blitz and put on a key stand of 73 with Devdutt Padikkal, who made 41. West Indies left-hand batter Shimron Hetmyer hit 32 off

13 balls and recorded two sixes to take the Royals' total past 200 after being out into bat first.

'Raw pace'

Hyderabad's Umran Malik clocked speeds of over 148 kmph (92 mph) and claimed two wickets including English opener Jos Buttler, who survived a few reprieves including being caught behind on a no-ball in the opening over, for 35. "Incredibly exciting, he's got that raw pace, hopefully he continues to evolve as a cricketer," Williamson said of the 22-year-old express bowler from Indian-administered Kashmir.

"He's young, got some experience last year which was really valuable and I'm sure he'll just continue to get better," Williamson's dismissal though raised eyebrows after he was ruled out, caught at first slip when the ball seemed to touch the grass before it went into the hands off a diving Devdutt Padikkal who took a rebound off Samson's gloves. The TV umpire ruled in the bowlers favour but Hyderabad coach Tom Moody said "we were very surprised that he was given out, particularly when we saw the replay."

"I can understand the on-field umpires taking it upstairs when that happened and we saw the evidence certainly. We are not umpires but it looked pretty clear to us what the decision was." The 15th edition of the IPL, the world's most valuable cricket tournament, has expanded to 10 teams and 74 matches but league games have been restricted to just two cities—Pune and Mumbai—and crowds are limited in size due to coronavirus-related restrictions. Royal Challengers Bangalore take on Kolkata Knight Riders on Wednesday at Mumbai's DY Patil Stadium. — AFP

Medvedev, Zverev reach Miami last 8, angry Kyrgios out

MIAMI: Top seed Daniil Medvedev moved within one victory of reclaiming the world number one ranking by advancing to the ATP and WTA Miami Open quarter-finals, defeating American Jenson Brooksby 7-5, 6-1 on Tuesday. Australian Open runner-up Medvedev rallied from 3-5 down in the first set to win 10 of the last 11 games and advance after 80 minutes. "It wasn't easy at the start but when he didn't convert a double break point I managed to find another gear, playing better, and I managed to get on top," Medvedev said.

"I tried to keep my energy up. At the start it wasn't enough so I pumped myself up and tried to close it out as soon as possible." Medvedev will next play either defending champion Hubert Hurkacz, the eighth seed from Poland, or South African Lloyd Harris. A victory to reach the semi-finals would move the 26-year-old

Russian back into the top ranking on Monday after he surrendered the spot to Novak Djokovic.

Medvedev matched his best Miami showing, a last-eight run in 2021, by defeating 39th-ranked Brooksby. "Jenson has the potential to be a top player. He's playing better than his ranking," Medvedev said. "But I knew it wouldn't be easy on this surface. It doesn't suit my game perfectly." World number four Alexander Zverev's push to land his first title of the year moved a step closer as the German second seed reached the quarter-finals by beating Australian Thanasi Kokkinakis 6-4, 6-4.

Kokkinakis, who along with compatriot Nick Kyrgios, won the Australian Open doubles title, appeared to struggle with a chest injury in the second set and Zverev moved through the gears when it mattered to set up an encounter with Norway's Casper Ruud for a place in the semi-finals. "He is in the fourth round for a reason so I'm just happy to come through," Zverev said. "I won my first Masters event here and reached my first quarter final so this tournament has been good to me." Kokkinakis hit eight aces but was unable to break the German's serve. Ruud made light work of British number one Cameron Norrie, winning 6-3, 6-4.

Kyrgios has fiery exit

Kyrgios lost his head in the Miami heat and spent his fourth-round match delivering a blistering verbal assault on Brazilian match umpire Carlos Bernardes before crashing out 7-6 (7/3), 6-3 in the last 16 to Italy's Jannik Sinner. The Australian became involved in a running war of words after the walkie-talkie of Bernardes went off mid-point in the first set. Kyrgios was seething with Bernardes, calling him "an absolute clown" before raging: "This is one of the biggest tournaments and you guys can't do your job. It's embarrassing."

The Aussie also snapped: "You wonder why no one watches this sport. It's a laughing stock." Kyrgios refused to let his anger lie and, having already received a code violation for an audible obscenity, was hit with a point penalty at 5-3 in the first set tie-break for unsportsmanlike conduct after appearing to talk with a friend who was sitting courtside. A game penalty was then issued at the start of the second set after Kyrgios shattered his racket.

Kyrgios, who said earlier this week that he was at "peace" with himself on and off the court, was also involved in a bizarre incident on the Grandstand court when a fan ran onto the playing surface and managed to get a selfie with him. "I knew Nick was trying to raise his level," Sinner said. "But I just tried to stay calm somehow and be in the present moment." The ATP fined Kyrgios \$25,000 on Tuesday for smashing his racket and an audible obscenity during his match at Indian Wells against Rafael Nadal. — AFP



FLORIDA: Daniil Medvedev of Russia serves to Jenson Brooksby during the Men's Singles match on Day 9 of the 2022 Miami Open presented by Ita' at Hard Rock Stadium on March 29, 2022. — AFP

WELLINGTON: A double-century opening stand carried tournament favorites Australia to a commanding 157-run win over the West Indies on Wednesday and a place in the Women's World Cup final. Australia dominated their rain-shortened semi-final in Wellington from the outset, built around a 216-run stand—the highest of the tournament—between experienced openers Alyssa Healy and Rachael Haynes. An imposing score of 305 for three off a reduced 45 overs was never threatened by the West Indies, who succumbed for 148 in the 37th over.

The six-time champions Australia are unbeaten at the 50-over tournament and will face either South Africa or 2017 winners England in the final in Christchurch on Sunday. Play started nearly two hours late because of misty rain and Healy, in particular, struggled for timing in the early stages after Australia were sent in on a damp Basin Reserve pitch. She accelerated as the sun came out, posting 129 off 107 balls to register a fourth one-day international century and fell four runs short of her career-best score. The wicketkeeper-batter used her feet to excellent effect against the spin-based Caribbean attack, smashing 17 fours and a six. She didn't hit a boundary until the 12th over but said Haynes had reminded her to remain patient. "I hope I've learned my lesson by now, that it doesn't necessarily have to happen all at once," Healy said. "I love batting with Rach, she's a calming influence." Haynes compiled 85 off 100 balls while the late runs came via unbeaten knocks from captain Meg Lanning (26) and Beth Mooney (43).

Dropped catches

It was a disappointing performance from the sixth-ranked West Indies, who were loose in the field, dropping a handful of chances, and they struggled for momentum with the bat. Captain Stefanie Taylor was their top scorer with a careful 48, but she lacked support after top-order pair Deandra Dottin and Hayley Matthews both departed for 34.

Their hopes weren't helped by injuries suffered in the field to bowlers Chinelle Henry and Anisa Mohammed, with neither able to bat, meaning Australia needed to take only eight wickets. Taylor said her players felt like they were on the back foot from the outset as Healy and Haynes established themselves. "A partnership like that deflates the team and, the pressure they applied, we couldn't get over that," she said. "When you looked up, they were 100 without loss and all the dropped catches didn't help us."

Lanning was relaxed that her team weren't pushed to the limit. "I've been involved in some very stressful semi-finals in the past and we came in expecting a very difficult game," she said. "The West Indies bowled well at the front and put us under pressure but it was a good game plan we had, to build a good base." The second semi-final pits defending champions England against second-ranked South Africa in Christchurch on Thursday, a repeat of the 2017 last-four thriller that was decided in the final over. — AFP

Ochoa inducted to LPGA Hall of Fame after rule change

LOS ANGELES: Mexican legend Lorena Ochoa was inducted into the LPGA Hall of Fame on Tuesday after the tour lifted a 10-year requirement for players to be considered for enshrinement. Ochoa won 27 LPGA titles, including two majors, but had been ineligible because her career only spanned 2003 to her 2010 retirement. But the LPGA Hall of Fame committee dropped the 10-year requirement on Tuesday.

"It's an honor to receive this recognition. It was unexpected and very special to me," Ochoa said. Beth Daniel, a Hall-of-Famer and committee member, said the 10-year rule dated from the tour's early days when it was felt players needed to play longer to support the LPGA. "I think we've seen the tour is strong enough now that we don't need that requirement, so the committee decided to do away with it," Daniel said.

"If you make the Hall of Fame in less than 10 years, more power to you. We shouldn't keep you out of the

Hall of Fame for that reason." Ochoa, inducted to the World Golf Hall of Fame in 2017, won major titles at the 2007 Women's British Open and 2008 Kraft Nabisco Championship. She was the 2003 LPGA Rookie of the Year and a four-time LPGA Player of the Year from 2006 to 2009, when she also won the Vare Trophy for lowest scoring average.

Ochoa was world number one for 158 consecutive weeks, the longest total and consecutive weeks atop the rankings. Ochoa was in her backyard when she received a call with the news. "I was taken aback and I was very moved. Never imagined," Ochoa said. "I walked around the garden several times and laughed to myself for several minutes." The committee also inducted in the honorary category the original 13 founding members of the LPGA Tour.

"The 13 LPGA Founders were true pioneers whose collective passion, determination and foresight changed the course of history for women's sports," LPGA commissioner Mollie Marcoux Samaan said. "It's time to welcome them all into the LPGA Hall of Fame, recognizing the indelible impact they made on the game." LPGA players must win 27 points to earn Hall membership, one point coming from each win and award with two for major wins. The committee added Olympic wins for one point to the criteria. — AFP



MASHHAD: Iran supporters wave the national flag during the 2022 Qatar World Cup Asian Qualifiers football match between Iran and Lebanon, at the Imam Reza Stadium on March 29, 2022. — AFP

Iran again bans women from football stadium

TEHRAN: Iran has once again denied women entry to a football stadium to watch an international match, leaving hundreds of ticketed fans locked out, Iranian media said Wednesday. The World Cup qualifier against Lebanon on Tuesday night, won 2-0 by Iran, was played at the Imam Reza stadium in the north-eastern city of Mashhad. "About 2,000 Iranian women, who had bought tickets for the Iran-Lebanon match, were present in the perimeter of Imam Reza stadium, but could not enter the stadium," ISNA news agency said.

Iran's team captain Alireza Jahanbakhsh joined in criticism of the lockout. "I don't think anything would have happened if women had come to the stadium, and this could promote our culture," he said, quoted on IRIB state television. Mohsen Davari, governor of Mashhad, told IRIB: "I apologise that many people couldn't enter the stadium..." "Unfortunately, a large number of people outside the stadium were deprived of watching the game."

In the face of the controversy, President Ebrahim

Raisi on Wednesday instructed the interior ministry to look into the incident. For his part, Iran's attorney general Mohammad Jafar Montazeri said on radio that "if conditions allowed the sale of tickets to women, a suitable place had to be found for them." The case was "not acceptable... and shows poor management", he said. In January, women were allowed to attend an international for the first time in almost three years, for a World Cup qualifier against Iraq.

The Islamic republic has generally barred female spectators from football and other sports stadiums since it was established in 1979. Clerics, who play a major role in decision-making, argue women must be shielded from the masculine atmosphere and sight of semi-clad men. But world football's governing body FIFA ordered Iran in September 2019 to allow women access to stadiums without restriction and in numbers to be determined according to demand for tickets.

The FIFA directive, threatening Iran's suspension from competitions, came after a fan, Sahar Khodayari, died having set herself on fire in fear of being jailed after trying to attend a match in disguise. She had reportedly been detained in 2018 as she tried to enter a stadium dressed as a male. Her death sparked an outcry, resulting in calls for Iran to be banned and its matches boycotted. FIFA had been pushing for years for Iran to open its stadiums to women, but Tehran had until 2019 only allowed a limited number of women to attend matches on rare occasions. — AFP

Sports

England, France, Italy win friendlies; Germany, Netherlands play out draw

Eriksen scores on Copenhagen return

PARIS: Denmark midfielder Christian Eriksen scored Tuesday on his return to the Copenhagen stadium where he suffered a cardiac arrest last year as England and France also won the latest round of pre-World Cup friendlies. The Dane, wearing the captain's armband, struck in the 57th minute to round off Denmark's 3-0 friendly win against Serbia in the Parken Stadium where he collapsed and nearly died in a European championship match against Finland last June.

"To come back to Parken and score a goal with the welcome I received... is something that gives you goosebumps. It makes me incredibly happy," said Eriksen. At Wembley, Ollie Watkins scored on his first start for England as Gareth Southgate's rejigged side beat 10-man Ivory Coast 3-0.

A reshuffled France also saw Kylian Mbappe and Olivier Giroud on target for the world champions in a comfortable 5-0 victory over South Africa eight months before the World Cup kicks off in Doha. European heavyweights Germany and the Netherlands played out a 1-1 draw in Amsterdam while Italy salvaged some pride days after failing to qualify for a second consecutive World Cup, beating Turkey 3-2 in Konya.

In Copenhagen, taking to the pitch, Eriksen was handed the captain's armband and received a huge wave of applause from the home crowd. "Welcome home Eriksen" and "Welcome home Christian" banners were unfurled by fans as the players came onto the pitch at the capital's national stadium. Joakim Maehle opened the scoring for Denmark after quarter of an hour with Jesper Lindstrom adding a second eight minutes after the break.

Eriksen, who has relaunched his club career with Brentford in the Premier League, scored the third with a shot from outside the box for his 38th goal in

111 appearances. The 30-year-old was substituted after 80 minutes, leaving the field to a standing ovation and was later named man of the match. In London, Southgate's new-look home team took time to settle but first-half strikes from Watkins and captain Raheem Sterling either side of a red card for the visitors put them in total control.

The game fizzled out as a sporting contest as England lost their rhythm but Tyrone Mings headed home from a corner in stoppage time to add gloss to the scoreline for the Euro 2020 runners-up in the final match before the World Cup draw on Friday. European champions Italy also rung the changes days after their shock defeat to North Macedonia that denied them a World Cup berth. Bryan Cristante's 35th minute header and a Giacomo Raspadori brace gave the European champions the win after Cengiz Under had given the hosts a fourth-minute lead.

Serdar Dursun pulled one back with seven minutes left but Gianluigi Donnarumma, who had a wobbly evening, stopped the Fenerbahce forward from heading Turkey level moments later with a superb save. "It was the first time that they all played together so it wasn't easy for them," added Mancini. "They're all young lads, they need time. It wasn't easy even if the match itself wasn't worth very much. They were good and that makes me happy for them."

Dominant France

In Lille, Giroud scored either side of a Mbappe brace for his 48th goal for Les Bleus to close in on Thierry Henry's record of 51. Mbappe curled in France's opening goal after 23 minutes off an Antoine Griezmann cross with the Atletico Madrid forward also involved in Giroud's second. Mbappe



COPENHAGEN: Denmark's Joakim Maehle scores the opening goal during the friendly football match Denmark v Serbia at the Parken Stadion on March 29, 2022. —AFP

got the third with quarter of an hour to go from the penalty spot with Wissam Ben Yedder and Matteo Guendouzi adding two as South Africa played a man down after Khuliso Mudau's late sending-off.

In Amsterdam, Tottenham forward Steven Bergwijn came off the bench to equalize for the

Netherlands after Thomas Mueller had put the Germans ahead just before the break. "Heading into Qatar, we have to use every international match and that was valuable," said Germany captain Manuel Neuer. "We were decent for long stretches and the bottom line is that the team is on a very good path." —AFP

Bitter disappointment in Cairo as Egypt lose World Cup shot

CAIRO: Heads in Cairo hung heavy as the Pharaohs lost their place in the Qatar World Cup to the Senegalese Lions of Teranga after a nailbiting penalty shootout on Tuesday. Portuguese coach Carlos Queiroz tweeted after the game that the "dream is over", after once again finding his team in a shootout with the hopes of Egypt's 103-million strong population hanging in the balance.

Tuesday's match in Senegal was an eagerly awaited second chance for the Pharaohs to gain revenge after the Africa Cup of Nations final last month, which the Lions of Teranga won 4-2 on penalties in Cameroon after 120 goalless minutes. But instead it was disappointment again. "We didn't expect this," Emad Ramadan sullenly told AFP from a coffee shop in eastern Cairo where some 300 supporters gathered around televisions in a small garden, an urban phenomenon that has grown exceedingly rare over the past few years.

The sounds of the crowd were deafening - mothers teaching their children household cheers, fans playing red-white-and-black kazoos, and many a backseat-coach yelling instructions at the TV. Three hundred voices cheered as star goalkeeper Mohammed El-Shennawy blocked goal after goal. A couple of botched penalties, including a wayward spot kick from Egyptian superstar Mohamed Salah,

and one decisive kick by Senegalese forward Sadio Mane later, the hundreds of voices went completely silent.

"We've always said that one team gets to be the African champion, the other gets to go to the World Cup," Ramadan said. "Now they've done both." Egypt is a seven-time African champion - a record on the continent - but has only qualified for the World Cup three times, the latest in 2018. The first leg of the playoff in front of a 75,000-strong stadium in Cairo last Friday, proved a lacklustre victory.

Liverpool forward Salah was the architect of the only goal when he turned inside the box, slammed the ball against the crossbar, with the rebound hitting Saliou Ciss and rolling into the net. Senegalese forward Boulaye Dia scored in the fourth minute Tuesday, making the aggregate score 1-1 for 116 nailbiting minutes. For the third time in two months, the titans of Liverpool found themselves on opposite sides. Once again Salah's club teammate Mane came out top.

No relief for Egyptians

EgyptAir chartered 300 supporters to the Senegalese capital Dakar on Tuesday. Back home in Cairo, those not able to make the trip were cheering and groaning in unison. What was once an urban tradition of large crowds gathering to watch football matches together has been reduced to small pockets across the capital Cairo in recent years.

In many areas of the city - particularly central Cairo - traffic and police officers regularly shut down gatherings, citing Covid-19 restrictions and social distancing requirements in a country where restrictions have been lax and unevenly enforced,

Mohammed al-Balushi provided the assist with a headed pass and after a 40-yard run Suhail found the bottom right corner of the South Korean net with a fine left-footed shot. The rattled South Koreans tried their utmost to find the equaliser but the hosts held firm to keep their hopes alive via the playoff route.

Iraqi hopes evaporate

Iraq faced Syria a few kilometres across Dubai at the Rashid Stadium but the Iraqis fell behind in the third minute to an Alaa al-Dali goal before Aymen Hussein's 31st minute strike helped them restore parity. Iraq would have made the playoff only if they had beaten Syria and the UAE drew with or lost to South Korea. Earlier Iran beat Lebanon 2-0 to finish in top spot with Sardar Azmoun and Alireza Jahanbakhsh on target at the Imam Reza Stadium in Mashhad.

Lebanon too had an outside chance of qualifying for the playoff if they had won and the UAE and Iraq lost on Tuesday but the hosts were too strong for them as they crashed to their sixth defeat in Group A. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia topped Group B after a 1-0 win over Australia saw them finish on 23 points, one point ahead of Japan. Australia had a goal disallowed by VAR late in the first half after Martin Boyle was ruled offside in their last match in Group B in the port city of Jeddah.

against Australia last week, but they ended their campaign on a flat note at home to a Vietnam team that had taken just three points from nine games in Group B.

Moriyasu said he wants his side to reach at least the last eight for the first time in Qatar, but he is looking for improvement after fielding an experimental line-up against Vietnam. "I have to look at the future but I also need to make sure that we take each game as it comes," said Moriyasu, who watched his captain Maya Yoshida miss a gilt-edged chance late in the game. "We clinched our World Cup place last week in Australia but there are still things that we need to work on. We have a



CAIRO: Egypt supporters watch the second leg of the 2022 Qatar World Cup African Qualifiers football match between Senegal and Egypt on March 29, 2022. —AFP

but large public gatherings of any kind are discouraged by authorities. A victory would have been a rare chance for Cairo's streets to fill with the familiar sounds of cars honking and an air of celebration to cushion what has been a difficult month for Egyptians across the country.

Egyptians are gearing up for the month of Ramadan, which starts in April, with tightened purse strings. Inflation is at a three-year high of 10 percent, a 17 percent currency devaluation bodes more price hikes, and the war in Ukraine threatens the country's wheat - and therefore bread - in a country where a third of the population is under the poverty line. "Football can make people so happy," Abdelaziz Mohamed told AFP. "It could have brought us out of this terrible mood we've been in for a while." —AFP



MASHHAD: Lebanon's defender Maher Sabra (left) attempts a header during the 2022 Qatar World Cup Asian Qualifiers football match between Iran and Lebanon, at the Imam Reza Sports Complex in the city of Mashhad on March 29, 2022. —AFP

The Socceroos crashed to their third defeat as they conceded a penalty in the 65th minute and Salem al-Dawsari made no mistake with his effort. In other matches Oman finished on a high by beating China 2-0 while Japan, who have already qualified for Qatar, and Vietnam played out a 1-1 draw. For China, who have played in the finals only once before, it was yet another disappointing qualifying campaign as they finished fifth in Group B with just one win and six defeats. —AFP

target but that doesn't mean that we won't look at the things in the near future."

Vietnam went in front in the 19th minute when Nguyen Thanh Binh headed in direct from a corner, and the visitors held their lead going into half-time. Yoshida equalized in the 54th minute but Japan could not find a winner despite fierce second-half pressure, and had a goal disallowed by the video assistant referee. "The players did their best but we needed to function as a team," said Moriyasu. "It was a little bit difficult for the players on the pitch today. We didn't really have much time to prepare with this line-up, but all the players need to be ready." —AFP

Opponents bury biennial World Cup campaign

DOHA: FIFA is slowly burying a plan to hold a World Cup every two years, which will not even be discussed at the global body's annual congress this week, and leaders are now seeking other ways to feature top national sides. While no "concrete talks" have been started, regional confederations are considering a new version of the Confederations Cup featuring teams from Europe and South America, according to a source close to the negotiations. An idea to enlarge Europe's League of Nations to take in South American countries has also been mooted, sources said.

Talks are expected on the sidelines of the FIFA Congress to be held on Thursday in Doha. But the alternatives are moving slowly as FIFA's agenda is dominated by sanctions imposed on Russian football after the country's invasion of Ukraine. Russia has been expelled from the race to secure places at this year's Qatar World Cup. Members will be called upon to back the exclusion at the congress. The biennial World Cup has been left off the agenda, with only changes to the women's football calendar scheduled for a vote by the 211 member associations.

'Never happen'

FIFA president Gianni Infantino had proposed holding a world championship every two years from 2026. While Africa and Asia was tempted, the European and South American federations came out strongly against. Even the International Olympic Committee expressed concerns about the competition calendar and Infantino's references to two years have dried up. "It will never happen," one top football official told AFP, on condition of anonymity.

UEFA president Aleksander Ceferin said this month that a biennial World Cup was a "no go" and that FIFA recognizes this. FIFA launched a massive campaign to persuade its members that a World Cup every two years would bring them extra cash and prestige. In December it promised an extra 19 million dollars every four years for each national federation while its "solidarity" payments would "potentially" rise from six to 25 million dollars-if the reform was passed.

FIFA denied it was simply aiming to make more revenue, however, insisting that it would give more chances for players to shine on the world stage, while being organized with fewer breaks in national championships. It could potentially double the six billion dollars it makes every four years, according to a study it commissioned. But the European Clubs Association and the World Leagues Forum, which takes in 42 top national championships, were also against.

Players and supporter groups expressed concern about the mental and physical impact on players and the dent in the savings for fans who save up to be able to travel to the finals every four years. The Confederations Cup, which was played from 1992 until 2019, had featured the eight top nations from each continent playing in a tournament one year before the World Cup. Europe's League of Nations features has featured 16 countries since being launched by UEFA in 2018. Ceferin said he was confident that a solution with FIFA will be reached "soon". —AFP

UAE stun South Korea to earn WCup playoff

DUBAI: Harib Abdalla Suhail scored the all-important goal as the UAE stunned South Korea 1-0 on Tuesday to advance to an Asian qualifying playoff against Australia on the road to the World Cup in Qatar. South Korea and Iran had already made the cut directly from Group A in the final round of qualifying, leaving the UAE and Iraq in a crunch battle to clinch the third spot in order to earn the right to meet Australia, who finished third in Group B.

The winners of that match will meet a South American team in an inter-continental playoff with the victors advancing to the World Cup proper. The loss in Dubai on Tuesday was South Korea's first defeat in 10 matches as they finished second in Group A with 23 points, two behind top side Iran.

The Emiratis have been in the finals of the quadrennial showpiece only once, in 1990, and although they were allowed only a miserly 23 percent ball possession, they managed to sneak a goal through the South Korean defense in the 54th minute to grab a crucial victory and finish on 12 points.

WCup-bound Japan end on flat note with Vietnam draw

SAITAMA: Japan manager Hajime Moriyasu warned his team they will need to shape up if they are to meet their target of reaching the World Cup quarter-finals after drawing 1-1 with Vietnam in their final qualifier on Tuesday. Japan booked their place at a seventh straight World Cup with a win



DALLAS: Talen Horton-Tucker #5 of the Los Angeles Lakers drives to the basket during the game against the Dallas Mavericks on March 29, 2022. —AFP

LeBron-less Lakers fall to Mavs

Sixers drop two places to fourth

LOS ANGELES: Milwaukee star Giannis Antetokounmpo scored 40 points and rejected a Joel Embiid shot with seconds remaining to propel the NBA champion Bucks to a key 118-116 victory over the Philadelphia 76ers on Tuesday. Khris Middleton scored 22 points and Jrue Holiday added 18 for the Bucks, who moved a half-game behind the Miami Heat for first place in the Eastern Conference.

The Sixers dropped two places to fourth, but still just 1 1/2 games behind the Heat. As the top of the table clash dominated Eastern Conference action, the Los Angeles Lakers slid out of Western Conference post-season position with an embarrassing 128-110 loss to the Mavericks in Dallas. With LeBron James and Anthony Davis sidelined by injury, the Lakers trailed by a shocking 82-56 at halftime. It was the second-most first-half points allowed by the Lakers in franchise history after the 83 conceded to the Celtics in 1959. "Not good enough in any way," was Lakers coach Frank

Vogel's assessment after watching Mavs star Luka Doncic ride roughshod over his players.

Doncic scored 34 points with 12 rebounds and 12 assists, posting his 10th triple-double of the season. Doncic said the Mavs knew they needed a quick start against the Lakers, who with seven games remaining are fighting just to get into the play-in tournament for teams in seventh through 10th place. "They're fighting for the playoffs so we had to get out with aggressiveness and energy," he said. Meanwhile the Bucks and Sixers continued their battle for position in the East in a game that came down to the wire.

James Harden scored 32 points and grabbed nine rebounds for Philadelphia and Embiid shook off a slow start to score 29 points with 14 rebounds and seven assists. Down by as many as 11 in the first quarter, the 76ers led by 10 at halftime and by 14 in the third quarter. But the Bucks took control in the fourth, opening the final period on a 13-4 scoring run and taking a 94-93

lead on a three-pointer from Middleton. It was a back-and-forth battle from there, with an Antetokounmpo free throw putting Milwaukee up by two with 13.2 seconds remaining. Out of a timeout Harden missed a three-pointer and Embiid grabbed the rebound for a put-back attempt that Antetokounmpo blocked with 1.6 seconds left. An initial goaltending call on Antetokounmpo—which would have given a basket to Philadelphia—was overturned on review, and on the ensuing jump ball the 76ers ran out of time. "I just tried to jump as high as I can and make a play," said Antetokounmpo, who also had 14 rebounds and six assists.

Durant fuels Nets

Chicago's DeMar DeRozan scored 32 points to lead the Bulls to a 107-94 victory over the Washington Wizards and into sole possession of fifth place in the East. Brooklyn superstar Kevin Durant scored 41 points and grabbed 11 rebounds as the Nets erased a 12-point

second-quarter deficit to beat the Detroit Pistons 130-123 at Barclays Center.

Kyrie Irving scored 24 points and Andre Drummond added 14 for Brooklyn, who had six players score in double figures. The victory kept the Nets a game ahead of the Charlotte Hornets for eighth place in the East. In Los Angeles, Paul George returned from a three-month injury absence to score a game-high 34 points and help the Clippers rally from a 25-point third-quarter deficit for a 121-115 victory over the Utah Jazz.

George, sidelined since December 22 with a torn ligament in his right elbow, made six three-pointers, handed out six assists and came up with four steals. Reggie Jackson added 21 points for the Clippers, who took the lead for the first time, 110-109, with 3:24 left to play. Donovan Mitchell scored 33 points for the Jazz, who saw guard Trent Forrest depart early with concussion-like symptoms after taking an inadvertent shot to the head from teammate Rudy Gobert. —AFP

Poland punch WCup ticket

CHORZOW: Robert Lewandowski slotted home a second-half penalty as Poland booked their berth at the World Cup finals with a 2-0 win over Sweden in Tuesday's play-off. After the Poland captain converted a spot kick, Piotr Zielinski put the game beyond doubt with a superb second goal for the hosts in Chorzow. "We had many problems before this match," said Lewandowski.

"A lot of our players were injured, including me. I had a problem with my knee," he added, having sat out Thursday's 1-1 draw with Scotland. "We suffered, but now we can celebrate. I am proud and happy." Veteran Zlatan Ibrahimovic came on for the final 10 minutes of the match, but the 40-year-old striker was unable to influence the result and will miss out on a third appearance at a World Cup final. "Everyone is disappointed - that's normal when losing," Ibrahimovic told TV4. "Everyone wants to play in the World Cup, but unfortunately that won't happen."

Juventus goalkeeper Wojciech Szczesny played a key role in Poland's victory with saves to deny Swedish playmaker Emil Forsberg in both halves. Poland go into Friday's draw for the group stages of the World Cup finals, from November 21 to December 18, after dominating the second half. The Poles were awarded the crucial penalty just after half-time. Attacking midfielder Sebastian Szymanski rolled the ball into substitute Grzegorz Krychowiak, who was fouled by Jesper Karlstrom.

The referee pointed straight to the spot and it was a trademark penalty kick by Lewandowski. The Bayern Munich ace casually arced his run, waited for Robin Olsen to move and then slotted the ball to the left of the Swedish goalkeeper. It was his 75th goal for Poland and arguably one of his most important. Zielinski put the result beyond doubt when he capitalised on a slip by Sweden defender Marcus Danielson and sprinted clear.

He slotted his shot past Olsen with 18 minutes left to spark wild celebrations from the home crowd. Only a superb save from Olsen denied



CHORZOW: Poland's forward Robert Lewandowski and Sweden's defender Marcus Danielson vie for the ball during the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 qualifying final first leg football match Poland v Sweden on March 29, 2022. —AFP

Lewandowski a second goal when the Poland striker was allowed a rare late chance in the area by the Swedish defense. "Nothing went our way," said Sweden coach Janne Andersson. "But one has to make sure that things go one's way - you can't blame other circumstances." Ibrahimovic may have missed out on the World Cup, but refused to say whether he will retire. "I hope to carry on as long as I'm healthy and can contribute," he added. —AFP

Portugal see off North Macedonia, qualify for WCup

PORTO: Bruno Fernandes fired Portugal to the 2022 World Cup by scoring twice in a 2-0 victory over Italy's conquerors North Macedonia on Tuesday. Italy's shock exit had North Macedonia dreaming of their first ever appearance at a World Cup final but Portugal and Fernandes proved a step too far in Porto. Fernandes eased Portuguese nerves at the Estadio do Dragao by finishing off Cristiano Ronaldo's pass in the first half and then made the win more comfortable in the second, latching onto an inch-perfect cross from the excellent Diogo Jota.

The victory means Portugal extend their run of qualifying for six out of six World Cups since the turn of the century while Ronaldo is on course for his fifth, aged 37. The striker's best previous result was reaching the semi-finals in 2006, when Portugal were beaten by Germany. North Macedonia, placed 67th in the world rankings, had defeated Germany to finish second in Group J before dumping out European champions Italy in the play-off semi-final on Friday, Aleksandar Trajkovski scoring a 92nd-minute winner to pull off a stunning result in Palermo.

Portugal, meanwhile, have yet to strike a balance between their traditionally conservative approach and an array of attacking talent that would be the envy of any country in the world. They were denied top spot in Group A by Serbia while Fernando Santos' side were relieved to see Turkey miss an 85th-minute penalty, with the score 2-1, in their semi-final win on Thursday. North Macedonia made a confident start too, their possession sustained enough to draw whistles from an agitated home crowd.

Portugal's first chance came in the 14th minute when Jota threaded Ronaldo through and the striker unleashed with his left foot, only to fire wide of the far post. Jota headed into the ground and over from



PORTO: Portugal's forward Cristiano Ronaldo (center) vies with North Macedonia's goalkeeper Stole Dimitrievski during the World Cup 2022 qualifying final first leg football match between Portugal and North Macedonia on March 29, 2022. —AFP

a Fernandes corner and then in the 32nd minute, Fernandes struck, capitalizing on an error from North Macedonian captain, Stefan Ristovski. Fernandes intercepted Ristovski's wild cross-field pass, taming the ball with a cushioned pass forward to his Manchester United teammate Ronaldo.

Ronaldo arrived at the edge of the area but instead of shooting nudged right, through the legs of Visar Mislui and back to Fernandes, who drove in. Jota might have doubled the advantage but hit the side-netting before half-time, which North Macedonia were relieved to reach without further punishment after Portugal's most assertive spell so far. The visitors regrouped and found their feet at the start of the second period but were undone again by a slick Portuguese break, and Fernandes.

Pepe dispossessed Enis Bardhi and Portugal were away, the ball spread left to Jota who arced a superb cross into the area. Fernandes arrived and caught the finish perfectly on the half-volley. North Macedonia wanted a late penalty when Danilo Pereira nicked the ball away from Bojan Miovski in the area before Ronaldo was prevented from reaching Fernandes' cross to the near post on another counter-attack. With the minnows beaten, Ronaldo can look to Qatar. —AFP