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Cabinet approves four-year program with key reforms

Govt amnesty panel meets again to prepare lists of pardoned prisoners



KUWAIT: HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Ahmad Al-Nawaf Al-Sabah chairs the Cabinet's weekly meeting on Nov 28, 2022. — KUNA

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: The Cabinet on Monday approved its four-year program of action that pledges massive economic, political and social reforms and a plan to cut the number of expats in the country. Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs Barrak Al-Sheetan said the Cabinet approved the program during its weekly meeting on and asked the finance minister to deliver the program to the National Assembly.

The program, which runs until 2026, pledges to cooperate with the National Assembly to issue dozens of laws to introduce major political, economic, social and demographic reforms, calling for imposing corporate tax, amending the population structure to reduce the number of expats, changing the electoral law and system, and many other issues. A number of lawmakers have said they will strongly oppose any government plan to impose

taxes on citizens, adding they are ready to confront the government.

The program pledges to issue legislation that would cut the number of expats in the country, who currently make up around 70 percent of the 4.5 million population, besides implementing a program to replace expat employees in the government and private sectors to create more jobs for nationals. Under the political reforms, the program pledges to set up an independent body to oversee elections, amend the electoral constituencies and the election system and revise laws governing public freedoms.

The program calls to revise charges on public services and impose taxes on profits of Kuwaiti and foreign companies operating in the country. The program also pledges to fundamentally resolve the problem of tens of thousands of stateless people, locally known as bedoons.

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Monkeypox to be renamed mpox

GENEVA: Monkeypox is to be renamed mpox, the World Health Organization announced Monday, in a bid to avoid stigmatization stemming from the existing name. Monkeypox received its name because the virus was originally identified in monkeys kept for research in Denmark in 1958, but the disease is found in a number of animals, and most frequently in rodents. A surge in monkeypox infections has been reported since early May, outside the African countries where it has long been endemic.

"When the outbreak of monkeypox expanded earlier this year, racist and stigmatizing language online, in other settings and in some communities was observed and reported to WHO," the UN health agency said in a statement. "Following a series of consultations with global experts, WHO will begin using a new preferred term 'mpox' as a synonym for monkeypox. Both names will be used simultaneously for one year while 'monkeypox' is phased out."

The disease was first discovered in humans in 1970 in the Democratic Republic of Congo, with the spread among humans since then mainly limited to certain West and Central African nations. But in May, cases of the disease, which causes fever, muscular aches and large boil-like skin lesions, began spreading rapidly around the world. The WHO triggered its highest level of alarm on July 24, classifying it as a public health emergency of international concern, alongside COVID-19.

Some 81,107 confirmed cases and 55 deaths have been reported to the WHO this year, from 110 countries. Where the given dataset was known, 97 percent were men, with a median age of 34 years old, according to the WHO's case dashboard. The 10 most affected countries globally are: United States (29,001), Brazil (9,905), Spain (7,405), France (4,107), Colombia (3,803), Britain (3,720), Germany (3,672), Peru (3,444), Mexico (3,292), and

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Saudi unveils plan for new Riyadh airport

RIYADH: Saudi Arabia on Monday announced plans for a new airport in Riyadh intended to spur rapid growth in the capital while advancing the kingdom's ambitious aviation goals. The airport, set to accommodate 120 million travelers by 2030 and 185 million travelers by 2050, will be named after King Salman and was announced by Crown Prince Mohammed bin

Salman, according to the official Saudi Press Agency.

"The airport project is in line with Saudi Arabia's vision to transform Riyadh to be among the top ten city economies in the world and to support the growth of Riyadh's population to 15-20 million people by 2030," SPA said. The city's current population is fewer than eight million. Saudi Arabia's aviation goals, part of Prince Mohammed's wide-ranging "Vision 2030" reforms, include more than tripling annual traffic to 330 million passengers by the end of the decade.

It also wants to draw \$100 billion in investments to the sector by 2030.

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Artist's impression of the new King Salman International Airport.

Palestinian flags fly at World Cup

DOHA: Palestinian flags are flying everywhere in Qatar but Zionist fans are staying low-key as the Zionist-Palestinian conflict makes its presence felt at the first World Cup on Arab soil. Despite moves by some Arab countries, not including Qatar, to normalize relations with the Zionist entity, the Palestinian cause is being embraced by many Arab fans and some officials.

Terse interactions between Arab

supporters and Zionist media have gone viral, including footage shot by an AFP journalist of a Saudi fan berating a Zionist TV reporter that has been viewed more than 5.2 million times on Twitter. "There is only Palestine, there is no (Zionist entity)... you are not welcome here," the fan shouts at Moav Vardi, a reporter for Zionist public broadcaster Kan.

The Arab fans flooding Qatar have been refusing to speak with Zionist media, while some yell "Long Live Palestine" in front of Zionist television cameras. "We find it very difficult to work here," Vardi told AFP, adding that he understood the Arab anger.

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DOHA: Fans of Tunisia with a Palestinian and Tunisian flags cheer on the stands ahead of a Qatar 2022 World Cup match at the Al-Janoub Stadium on Nov 26, 2022. — AFP

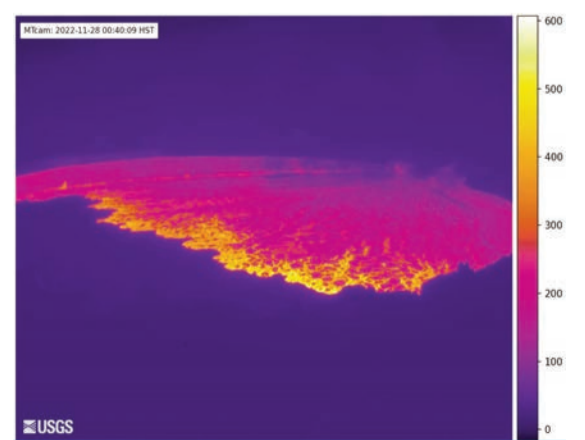
Hawaii volcano erupts for first time in decades

LOS ANGELES: Hawaii's Mauna Loa, the largest active volcano in the world, has erupted for the first time in nearly 40 years, US authorities said, spewing lava and ash Monday as emergency crews went on alert. Flows of lava remained mostly contained within the summit's massive caldera, but the eruption could pose a threat to nearby residents should conditions change, the United States Geological Survey reported at 11:45 pm local time Sunday (9:45 GMT Monday) some 15 minutes after the eruption inside Hawaii Volcanoes National Park.

Mauna Loa has been showing signs of building to an eruption for years, according to the USGS, which said the ongoing eruption was visible from Kona, a town on the west coast of Hawaii's main island some 72 km from the volcano. "Lava is still erupting from the summit & is overflowing from the caldera," the USGS said on its website, referring to the basin at the top of a volcano. While it added there were "no threats to populated areas currently," it urged area residents to review preparedness procedures.

"If the eruptive vents migrate outside its walls, lava flows may move rapidly downslope," according to the USGS. The agency said the Hawaiian Volcano Observatory was in consultation with emergency management personnel and its staff would conduct an aerial reconnaissance over the 13,674-foot (4,168-meter) volcano as soon as possible.

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This webcam image released on Nov 28, 2022 shows the lava in the summit caldera of Mauna Loa in Hawaii, which is erupting for the first time in nearly 40 years. — AFP



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Zain hosts sports, entertainment programs for NUKS USA students

Company strategic partner of 38th annual conference in Los Angeles

Kuwait 'safe', Health Ministry reassures after cholera case

KUWAIT: The Health Ministry reassured the public that Kuwait is "safe" after a case of cholera from a neighboring country was spotted, spokesman Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad said on Monday, pointing to water safety and safe sanitation as factors that prevent the disease's spread. The case recently monitored is a single incident and travel-related, explained the official in an interview with KTV, adding that the case's contacts were "traced and examined by following the protocols in force."

He referred to "some precautions that should be observed when traveling to some endemic areas," including the constant thorough washing of hands and drinking bottled water and juices. Also, the use of boiled or bottled water when preparing food, avoiding foods of an unknown origin, cooking food well and avoiding undercooked seafood.

Cholera is a disease that occurs due to a bacterial infection, mostly caused by eating contaminated food or drinking water contaminated by bacteria, he further explained. The disease causes severe diarrhea, but is not transmitted through breath. He pointed out that "the protocol followed in Kuwait is through taking an accurate medical history for people coming from countries where the disease is prevalent."

This is in the case that one of the specific symptoms appears within seven days of arrival, such as diarrhea, vomiting, nausea, dehydration, or sunken eyes, extreme thirst, or painful muscle spasms in advanced cases. He stated that if one of these symptoms appears, a sample is taken from the returning traveler and sent to the laboratory, and at the same time, the results of the sample are followed up and communication is made with those in contact. —KUNA



Zain awarded the winners of its padel tournament in LA.

KUWAIT: Zain, Kuwait's leading digital service provider, hosted an array of social, entertainment, and sports programs for Kuwaiti students in the United States as part of its presence as a strategic partner of the 38th annual conference of the National Union of Kuwaiti Students in the United States of America (NUKS USA). The event took place in Los Angeles, California under the patronage of H.H. the Prime Minister Sheikh Ahmad Al-Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah.

Zain is proud to continue its strategic partnership with NUKS USA, as it is considered a main supporter of the union for nearly 20 years. NUKS USA is considered the largest gathering of Kuwaiti students abroad, and Zain's support comes in line with its mission to contribute to the youth and education sectors. The company is proud to have become an integral part of the union's success, through which it connects with the country's youth abroad.

Every year, Zain strives to bring the best programs for Kuwait's students in the US, and this year the company presented several new activities throughout the conference's three-day period. Zain held a sports seminar through which it hosted many Kuwaiti

sports figures who traveled to the US to speak and meet with the students, including member of the Kuwait Olympic Committee Fatima Hayat, local sports figure and ex-president of Al Tadamun Sports Club Yousef Al Baidan, and Kuwaiti MMA champion Mohammed Al Aqraa.

Zain also sponsored a special talk named "Create Your Own Opportunity", which featured a number of prominent young Kuwaiti entrepreneurs who have launched their own startups and worked at some of the world's biggest tech companies, including co-founder and CEO of CODED Academy Ahmad Marafi, Industry Lead for Education and Research at Microsoft Kuwait Naser Al Abduljalil, Head of Engineering and Analytics at Amazon Abdullah Al Attal, and Ex-Senior Product Manager and Senior Vendor Manager at Amazon and co-founder of Ordable Salem Marafi. The guests shared their success stories, experiences, and leadership and entrepreneurship tips with the students.

In addition to Zain's special talks, NUKS students always wait for the company's sports tournaments in the US every year, usually football competi-



Waleed Al Khashti with the guests of the entrepreneurship seminar.



Al Khashti with the guests of the sports seminar.

tions full of excitement and thrill. This year, Zain thought of bringing something entirely new, and organized an all-new padel tournament for the students, especially since this emerging sport has been so popular among youth in Kuwait and the world. In addition, Zain also hosted a special on-stage entertainment segment with valuable prizes for the students during the conference.

The National Union of Kuwaiti Students in the United States of America (NUKS USA) serves nearly 14,000 Kuwaiti students studying in the United States. The union aims,

through its events and programs, to connect Kuwaiti students with each other on one level, and with their nation and the latest updates of the Kuwaiti community on another.

NUKS USA was publicized in the USA and was granted the recognition of the United States government. The achievement is considered a proud milestone for Kuwait's youth and is a direct result of the great relations between the State of Kuwait and United States. Such a recognition is a clear reflection of the strategic relations between the two nations.



> Livestock salesman offers sheep before Eid al-Adha (2018).

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Local

Kuwaiti army, KNG conduct Pearl of the West 2022 drills

Top officer calls for upgrading joint Arab military training



KUWAIT: The Kuwaiti army and Kuwait National Guard (KNG) co-launched on Monday the "Pearl of the West 2022" drills, which will last until December 7 in cooperation with the French forces. The exercise aims to unify the joint command system and coordinate efforts in order to reach a correct understanding of the planning and implementation of joint operations, the General Staff of the Kuwaiti Army said in a press statement.

It also aims to enhance the concept of exchanging experiences and improving the level of performance and combat readiness of the participating forces. It's important to have a joint cooperation between the Kuwaiti and French forces through group training to ensure the level of performance and achieve desired goals to raise the combat efficiency of the armed forces, according to the statement. The exercise (Pearl of the West 2022) will witness some shootings with live ammunition in the shooting ranges complex.

Joint military training

The security developments in the region require upgrading training amongst the Arab armies to raise their preparedness and combat ability, said Chief of Kuwait Military Education Authority of Ministry of Defense Major-General Fahad Al-Turaiji. Al-Turaiji made the statement to KUNA on Sunday on the sidelines of the 26th symposium of chiefs of military training authorities of the Arab countries being held at the Arab League's Secretariat. The chiefs will approve a comprehensive study on the best methods to plan and carry out the joint Arab training with a unified strategy, said Al-Turaiji, who is leading the Kuwaiti delegation to the symposium.

As soon as the study is approved, all Arab armies will benefit from it and implement its content during military trainings and exercises in a way that includes consensus on unifying the methods of common training, Al-Turaiji elaborated. This will facilitate implementing any common future military operations among the Arab armies, he pointed out. The Arab



Chief of Kuwait Military Education Authority of MOD Major-General Fahad Al-Turaiji.

peace and security council and the military administration organize annual symposiums for chiefs of the Arab training authorities to prepare comprehensive studies, with the aim of raising combat readiness and defense integration, he stated. —KUNA

Kuwait FM receives heads of diplomatic missions

KUWAIT: Kuwait's Foreign Minister Sheikh Salem Abdullah Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and his wife Sheikhha Rima Al-Sabah received Sunday heads of diplomatic missions and international organizations based in Kuwait. During the reception held at the ministry on occasion of taking the post, Sheikh Salem Abdullah lauded the deep-rooted bonds between Kuwait and all international organizations accredited in Kuwait.

He expressed pride for Kuwait's foreign policy and its goals aiming to build bridges with all countries all over the world, in establishment of the principles of Kuwait's diplomacy based on neutrality, and backing communication and humanity amongst the world's countries. The minister welcomed Dean of the Diplomatic Corps and Tajikistan Ambassador to Kuwait Zubaydullo Zubaydzoda, and conveyed the greetings and wishes of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-



Kuwait FM receives heads of diplomatic missions, int'l organizations. —KUNA photos

Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Ahmad Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah.

Meanwhile, Zubaydzoda delivered a speech, on behalf of the diplomatic missions, and offered congratulations to Sheikh Salem Abdullah on his new post. The minister recalled the positive imprint of Kuwait's foreign policy and its presti-



Kuwait's Foreign Minister Sheikh Salem Abdullah Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and his wife Sheikhha Rima Al-Sabah.

gious status that made it a center of humanitarian acts, a hub for international and regional conferences, and a haven for the resolving of conflicts and reconciliation across the globe. He said all diplomatic missions present in Kuwait look forward to work and make further efforts to achieve common interests with Kuwait. He also prayed to Allah Almighty to help the minister in his new mission, under the wise political leadership. —KUNA

MoH, MoE in health awareness campaign

KUWAIT: The Patients Helping Fund Association continued its activities within its national health awareness project in schools (My School Rises with My Health) for the fifth year in a row in cooperation with several departments of the Health Ministry and the Education Ministry in various educational regions.

The director of the Social Development Department at the PHFA, Jassem Al-Rubaye, confirmed that the association ensures its effective role in spreading health awareness among all segments of society in line with the vision of New Kuwait 2035 - one of the most important of which is the promotion of healthy lifestyles to improve the quality of life of citizens.

Al-Rubaye revealed a number of activities and events that

the association will hold - including a series of awareness lectures such as: (1) Obesity prevention lectures especially since Kuwait, ranks tenth in the world and first in the Arab countries and the Arabian Gulf with more than 40% of the Kuwaiti population suffers from obesity. (2) Personal Hygiene and Preventing Infections as constant washing is one of the most important ways to prevent viral diseases in our modern era.

(3) Lectures on misuse of social media and digital devices. (4) Lectures on physical activity and public health as wrong behaviors is the main and quick entrance to infecting members of society with diseases, and one of the most important of these behaviors is lethargy and lack of exercise. (5) Mental health lectures.

Moreover, further subjects will be discussed such as, the dangers of smoking, addictive behavior, first aid, dangers of energy drinks among others. During the month of November, a total of 35 lectures have been executed in all governorates for different school level. Al-Rubaye ended by thanking the health and education ministries as well as its different departments for participating in the project and distributing awareness.



In my view

Listen to the patient



By Dr Khalid Al-Saleh

local@kuwaittimes.net

The patient has the right to find someone to listen to him, as the human being is not a deaf machine, or his spare parts can be replaced to restart working again. The human being is a mix of three elements - body, soul and nafs. The soul's nature is known only to my Lord, as Allah Almighty said: "They ask you O Prophet about the spirit. Say its nature is known only to my Lord, and you O humanity have been given but little knowledge". (17:85).

If the soul (spirit) is as such, then the body and nafs are the creation of Allah Almighty, and he made them understandable by the human being. The doctor, regardless of his specialty, is not responsible for the patient's body only, otherwise he will find himself dealing with one third of the human being, and will not get the outstanding grade regardless of how skilled he is.

The successful doctor is one who deals with what went bad and mend it, and what goes sick and remedy it, and in the case of the human being, only the body gets sick and tired. "And by the soul and the one who fashioned it, (91:7), then with the knowledge of right and wrong inspired it! (91:8). Successful indeed is the one who purifies their soul (91:9) and doomed is the one who corrupts it! (91:10).

That is why the elders of medicine were keen on listening to the patient, and they made the patient's complaint the most important and first step taken by the doctor when he meets his patient for the first time, as listening to him does not only mean taking the history of his illness: rather it is to take his time to understand the complaint and its complications, so the doctor can understand the psychological links of the illness, then move to examine the body, and get into it with laboratory tests and X-rays to reach the final decision. Many are patients whose problem is in their minds, and if the doctor was not listening carefully, diagnosis would be wrong and may lead to unpleasant results.

Today, we see some doctors, with regret, surrounding the patient's body from all sides with tests and X-ray dates, and you find patients roaming in hospital departments. There are blood analyses and x-rays, and the patient may reach a point of tests that invade his body or cut part of him. At the end, the problem may be discovered, and this journey of torture may end with a psychological problem, which if the doctor picked up from the start, he would have saved the patient and health services much exhaustion, effort and loss.

My dear doctors, all of you know that psychology has a direct effect on our bodies, a positive effect that makes the body stronger and more beautiful and a negative effect that may paralyze the body, exhaust it, and may cause pain that medicines will not have effect on. And if it was not for Allah Almighty's mercy, and for Him to remove the nafs from us when we go to sleep, many of us would not get rest even during sleeping.

"Allah, who calls back the souls of people upon their death as well as the souls of the living during their sleep. Then he keeps those for whom he has ordained death, and releases the others until their appointed time. Surely in this are signs for people who reflect. (39:42)

For that the nafs must be given what it deserves. It is a must to hear from the patient and listen to him patiently in a calm atmosphere, because he comes to the doctor to complain about his illness, so let us listen to him, as many are the problems that were solved by listening, and many are the patients whose suffering lasted long because they did not find one who listens to them.

In 2019, there was one person out of eight, or 970 million persons around the world, suffering from psychological disorders, with anxiety and depression the most prominent among others (report by WHO). The comprehensive work plan for psychological health 2013-2030 issued by WHO recognized the importance of the role of psychological health in bringing health to all people.

Psychological health, despite its importance, does not get full interest by all doctors, and there are some of those who make a medical decision not understanding the importance of taking interest in psychological health in every site of treatment and not limit it to one hospital. There must be in every clinic and in every ward a counseling room to listen to and discuss with the patient. This is the true medicine - its core is the human being and its end is the human being, in his body and soul.



Operating company shares may see upward mobility

CBK issues new bonds, related tawarruq

KUWAIT: Operating company shares are anticipated to see upward mobility in December, buoyed by individual and corporate purchases targeting higher price levels by the end of the year, according to economists. The operating stocks of leading companies listed on the stock exchange have made considerable gains over the first nine months of this year, two economists told Kuwait News Agency (KUNA) on Monday. Dealers are always keen on stepping up their purchase orders for the shares of banks, consumer services and logistics in December of every year in the hope of year-end closures with good returns, Sorooh Holding Company Board Member Suleiman Al-Wugayyan told KUNA.

The mobility of deals at the stock exchange during the first nine months of 2022 is due to a set of technic factors that have culminated in growing trading, primarily speculations in "cheap

stocks" and profit-taking involving selected stocks, he said. Wugayyan predicted this high demand for operating shares to continue during December, given year-end closure for many banks and service companies.

For his part, Kuwait Dealers Association Chairman Mohammad Al-Tarrah believed that December trading would be in the interest of corporate shares that made better financial results during the first nine months of this year than the same period last year. Predicting rising main indexes during the last quarter of 2022, Al-Tarrah said that trading in the reporting period mostly went to the banking sector thanks to "flexible orders" from financial portfolios and some investment funds that prefer speculation-free stocks.

He cited 11 bourse-listed banks' profits of KD 270.7 million (around \$881.3 million) during the third quarter of this year ending on September 30

as a clear-cut paradigm in this regard, reflecting an expected rise with year-end closure. Some 148 listed companies, making up 94.3 percent of a total of 157, have already disclosed their financial findings for the first nine months of this year, making combined net profits of KD 1.643 billion (around \$4.9 billion), down 39.8 percent, compared to the same period last year.

In another development, the Central Bank of Kuwait (CBK) announced Monday new CBK bonds and related tawarruq valued at KD 240 million (roughly \$792 million). The new securities bear a maturity term of six months and a return rate of 4.25 percent, according to a CBK statement received by KUNA. Last Monday, CBK issued bonds and tawarruq worth KD 240 million (about \$792 million) with a three-month maturity term and a return rate of 4.125 percent. —KUNA

News in brief



KUWAIT: Chief of General Staff of the Kuwaiti Army Lt-Gen Staff Khaled Saleh Al-Sabah on Monday discussed with the Commander of the Egyptian Navy Vice Admiral Ashraf Mujahed the defense cooperation. —KUNA

GCC -China relations

RIYADH: Secretary-General of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Nayef Al-Jarraf said on Monday that the GCC member states are keen on promoting cooperation and friendship with China in all fields to serve their common interests. The GCC chief made the remark while welcoming Chinese Ambassador in Riyadh Chen Weiqing, the GCC Secretariat said in a press statement. During the meeting, both sides discussed a host of issues and subjects of mutual interest, chiefly bilateral free trade negotiations and mutual willingness to promote trade and economic relations and ways of boosting investment opportunities in all domains, it said. They also exchanged views on the latest regional and international developments, according to the statement.

KOC kicks off 'Fun Run'

KUWAIT: To promote the upcoming Asian Games (ASIAD), which will be held in Hangzhou, China next September, the Kuwait Olympic Committee (KOC) on Monday kicked off the "Fun Run" event, with the participation of students from the General Administration for Private Education Department at the Ministry of Education. The event, which took place at KOC's headquarters at the Youth Center in Jaber Al-Ahmad city, was in collaboration with the Olympic Council of Asia containing a blissful atmosphere among partakers showing an emphasis on its significance. —From KUNA



KUWAIT: Kuwait's sports fans watch the World Cup matches as they support their favorite teams. —KUNA photos



Kuwait fans throng malls, cafes for WCup matches

KUWAIT: Diwanys, malls and cafes in Kuwait have been drawing large numbers of sports fans to watch World Cup games since the 2022 Qatar championship kicked off on November 20, amid even higher attraction in the final rounds of the event. With football fans showing much enthusiasm during the live broadcast of FIFA matches, malls and cafes seek to provide better visual services including big screens, and very attractive food and drinks menus. —KUNA



KRCS delivers winter aid to 650 families

KUWAIT: A total of 650 families in need in Kuwait have received winter aid including heating devices, blankets and domestic supplies, Kuwait Red Crescent Society (KRCS) announced on Monday. KRCS is keen on supporting families in need as the winter supply project comes as part of the society's

efforts in helping those in need living in Kuwait to alleviate winter burdens, said KRCS director of public relations and media Khalid Al-Zaid.

This campaign strengthens social solidarity inside Kuwait within the framework of humanitarian aid provided by KRCS and individual donors, government and private agencies, added Al-Zaid. In addition to the campaign, KRCS receives alms and zakat from companies and citizens, noted Al-Zaid, stressing the importance of supporting these campaigns that contribute to community service and helping families in need, to achieve joint cooperation and activate social values as a national strategy. —KUNA



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Iranian Kurds in Iraq in Tehran crosshairs

US former Marine 'high risk' inmate in Australian prison

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BEIJING: Protesters march along a street during a rally for the victims of a deadly fire as well as a protest against China's harsh COVID-19 restrictions in Beijing. — AFP

Protests in China speak to deep political frustrations

Authorities clamping down on outbreaks with strict lockdowns

BEIJING: Protests spreading in China have been catalyzed by fury at the government's hardline zero-COVID policies but have also exposed deep-rooted frustration against the country's wider political system. People took to the streets across China on Sunday to call for an end to lockdowns and for greater political freedoms, in a wave of widespread protest not seen since pro-democracy rallies in 1989. A deadly fire last week in Urumqi, the capital of northwest China's Xinjiang region, sparked public anger, with many blaming COVID-19 lockdowns for hampering rescue efforts.

China remains the only major economy with a strict zero-COVID policy, with local authorities clamping down on even small outbreaks with strict lockdowns, mass testing campaigns, and lengthy quarantines. While many had expected the policy to be relaxed after the ruling Communist Party's five-yearly congress last month, Beijing instead doubled down. That fuelled the public rage now playing out on the streets of some of China's biggest cities.

"People have now reached a boiling point because there has been no clear path to end the zero-Covid policy," Alfred Wu Muluan, a Chinese politics expert at the National University of Singapore (NUS), told AFP. Yasheng Huang, a professor at MIT, said on Twitter the party's new top leadership comprised of Xi Jinping loyalists was committed to zero-COVID. "Before the 20th Congress there was hope of policy change, but the leadership lineup of the Congress completely derailed this expectation, forcing people to take actions into their own hands," Huang said.

4 dead as militants lay siege to a hotel in Somalia

MOGADISHU: Somali forces closed in on Monday on Al-Shabaab militants laying siege to a popular hotel in the capital, Mogadishu, where at least four people have been killed in an ongoing attack. The crackle of gunfire could still be heard coming from the besieged Villa Rose 18 hours after the Islamists stormed the hotel in central Mogadishu in a hail of bullets and explosions. Mohamed Dahir, an official from the national security agency, told AFP that government forces had taken control of the hotel and pinned the insurgents down in a top-floor room. "The terrorist gunmen are trapped inside a room in the hotel and the security forces are close to ending the siege very soon," he told AFP. "So far we have confirmed the death of four people", he said, adding that government officials were among those wounded.

The Villa Rose is frequented by members of parliament and located in a secure central part of the capital just a few blocks from the office of Somalia's President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud. Al-Shabaab, a militant group affiliated to Al-Qaeda that has been trying to overthrow Somalia's central government for 15 years, claimed responsibility for the attack. Police said the gunmen rushed into the hotel in Bondhere district at around 8:00 pm on Sunday and an operation was under way to "eliminate" them.

Retaliatory attacks

Witnesses near the scene described still hearing loud explosions and gunfire on Monday morning. "I saw several military vehicles with special forces heading towards the hotel, and a few minutes later there was heavy gunfire and explosions," said witness Mahad Yare. In a statement late on Sunday, the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS), a 20,000-strong military force drawn from across the continent, praised the "swift" security response to the attack. The Villa Rose website describes the hotel as

'Freedom to write!'

Anger over COVID lockdowns has also transformed into calls for broader political change, with some in Shanghai early on Sunday even chanting "Xi Jinping, step down! CCP, step down!" Students protesting at Beijing's elite Tsinghua University on Sunday chanted "democracy and the rule of law, freedom of expression". And demonstrators in Beijing on Sunday night shouted slogans demanding "freedom of art" and "freedom to write!" Demonstrators across China have also held up blank sheets of paper symbolizing censorship. "I don't recall public protests directly calling for press freedom in the past two decades," political scientist Maria Repnikova said in a tweet.

"What is very intriguing about these protests is how single-issue focus on #covidlockdown quickly transpired into wider political issues," she said. Largely young and social media savvy, protesters have organized on the web and used canny tricks to protest against state censorship—from holding up blank papers to online articles consisting of nonsense combinations of "positive" words to draw attention to the lack of free speech. "The protesters are very young, and anger from the bottom is very, very strong," the NUS's Wu said.

Scale and intensity

What will particularly spook the party's leadership, analysts said, is the protesters' rage at China's top brass. This, they argue, is unprecedented since the pro-democracy rallies in 1989 that were ruthlessly crushed. "In terms of both the scale and intensity, this is the single largest protest by young people in China since the

student movement in 1989," Willy Wo-Lap Lam, Senior Fellow at The Jamestown Foundation, told AFP. "In 1989, students were very careful not to attack the party leadership by name. This time they have been very specific (about wanting a) change in leadership."

The scope of the protests—from elite universities in Beijing to central Chinese cities such as Wuhan and Chengdu—is notable, Lam said. Other analysts cautioned against comparisons to the bloody events of 1989. "There may not be overarching demand for political reform beyond ending zero-COVID," Chenchen Zhang, an assistant professor at Durham University, tweeted. "The urban youth today grew up with economic growth, social media, globalised popular culture." "The past should not limit our imagination."

Rare public protests in China are typically focused on local officials and firms, with Beijing "cast in a benevolent light to come in and rescue people from local corruption", said one expert. "In these protests, the central government is now being targeted because people understand that zero-Covid is a central policy," Mary Gallagher, Director of the Center for Chinese Studies at the University of Michigan, told AFP. Experts were divided on whether Beijing will respond with the carrot or the stick. "Anger is very strong, but you can't arrest everyone," Wu said. Peter Frankopan, Professor of Global History at Oxford University, described the role of police as delicate. "There will be considerable sympathy, especially with younger officers, for the protesters. So giving the order to crackdown brings risks too," he told AFP. The leadership will likely be forced to confront the unrest publicly.—AFP

the "most secure lodging arrangement in Mogadishu" with metal detectors and a high perimeter wall.

Al-Shabaab has intensified attacks against civilian and military targets as Somalia's recently elected government has pursued a policy of "all-out war" against the Islamists. The security forces, backed by local militias, ATMIS and US air strikes, have driven Al-Shabaab from central parts of Somalia in recent months, but the offensive has drawn retribution. On October 29, two cars packed with explosives blew up minutes apart in Mogadishu followed by gunfire, killing at least 121 people and wounding 333 others. It was the deadliest attack in the fragile Horn of Africa nation in five years.

Closely guarded zone

At least 21 people were killed in a siege of a Mogadishu hotel in August that lasted 30 hours before security forces were able to overpower the militants

inside. The latest hotel siege has raised questions as to how the militants managed to reach the closely guarded heart of Mogadishu's administrative district undetected. Armed checkpoints block roads into the area, which also hosts a detention facility for high-value terror suspects overseen by the National Intelligence and Security Agency. Somalia's environment minister, Adam Aw Hirsi, who lives in the Villa Rose, said the attack was not a demonstration of an "emboldened" Al-Shabaab.

"To the contrary, the desperate move shows that the terror kingpins running for dear life are throwing their last kicks. We'll not let up the war," he posted on Twitter. The United Nations said earlier this month that at least 613 civilians had been killed and 948 wounded in violence this year in Somalia, mostly caused by improvised explosive devices (IEDs) attributed to Al-Shabaab. The figures were the highest since 2017 and a rise of more than 30 percent from last year.—AFP



MOGADISHU: Photo shows destroyed cars after a car bombing targeted the Education Ministry in Mogadishu.— AFP

Iran summons German envoy

TEHRAN: Iran on Monday summoned the German ambassador to protest last week's UN Human Rights Council decision, based on a resolution co-sponsored by Berlin, to probe Iran's response to nationwide protests. It is the third time since the demonstrations started more than two months ago that Tehran has called in Berlin's representative to the Islamic republic. The nationwide protests followed the September 16 death in custody of Mahsa Amini, 22, after her arrest by morality police for an alleged breach of Iran's strict dress rules for women.



TEHRAN: A handout picture provided by the office of Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, shows him in the capital Tehran, addressing a group of Iranians from the central city of Isfahan. — AFP

At an urgent session requested by Germany and Iceland, the United Nations' highest rights body voted on Thursday to create a high-level investigation into Iran's deadly crackdown. The state news agency IRNA said Iran's Ministry of Foreign Affairs had called in Germany's ambassador, Hans-Udo Muzel, "following the initiative of Germany to hold a special session" of the UN rights council "about the recent events in our country."

Iran on Friday said it "totally rejects" the "useless" resolution and would not recognize the fact-finding mission created by the rights council. The foreign ministry reiterated this argument on Monday. "The hasty and instrumentalised use of the human rights question and the adoption of political approaches to pressure independent countries should definitely be condemned," ministry spokesman Nasser Kanani said at his weekly press conference.

"These actions will not contribute to the promotion of human rights." In late October Iran's foreign ministry summoned Muzel to protest comments by German officials which "incite riots" in the Islamic republic, IRNA reported previously. Earlier this month, the ministry again called in Berlin's representative following remarks by German Chancellor Olaf Scholz who asked: "What kind of government are you that shoots at its own citizens?"

An Iranian foreign ministry official condemned those remarks and protested Germany's "destructive attitude". Iran labels the protests "riots" which it says were encouraged by Western countries. Other ambassadors, including from France and Britain, have also been called in over the past few weeks. During Thursday's session in Geneva, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Turk said more than 300 people had been killed since Amini's death.—AFP

International

US former Marine 'high risk' inmate in Australian prison

Military pilot fighting secretive extradition battle

SYDNEY: A former US military pilot has been placed under "extreme" restrictions inside an Australian prison while fighting a secretive extradition battle with the Department of Justice in Washington, his lawyer said following a court hearing Monday. Ex-Marine Daniel Edmund Duggan was arrested in New South Wales on October 21, the same week Britain and Australia issued unusually candid warnings about China's attempts to recruit retired military pilots.

Duggan, 54, lived and worked in China for about

five years before his arrest, corporate records showed, although the details of his alleged offences have been sealed by the US government. Defense lawyer Dennis Miralis said Duggan, an Australian citizen, had been classified as an "extreme high-risk restricted inmate" inside a maximum-security facility in Sydney, and had been denied access to writing materials and medical treatment. "He's presently not even able to access pens for the purposes of writing the nature of his complaint," Miralis told the court.

"This is unprecedented to have an Australian citizen

placed on the most strict inmate restrictions, akin to people convicted of terrorist offences," he later told reporters outside. Miralis suggested outside court that "foreign interference" by the US government could explain the treatment. "We are concerned there may have been some foreign interference encouraging corrective services to take this dramatic course of action," he said. Duggan has been detained under Australia's Extradition Act, pending an official request from the US government.

Lawyer Trent Glover, appearing for the US govern-

ment, said the Department of Justice would file an extradition request before December 20. "From the United States' point of view, this is nothing more than a usual extradition process," he told the court. Duggan moved to Australia after leaving the US Marines, running the Top Gun adventure flight company from the southern island of Tasmania. Top Gun's website said Duggan spent more than a decade flying in the US Marine Corps, reaching the rank of major and working as a tactical flight instructor. Duggan's case will return to court in late December.—AFP



IBADAN: Labor Party's Presidential candidate Peter Obi (center), flanked by wife Margaret and his running mate Yusuf Datti Baba-Ahmed, greets supporters during a campaign rally at Adamingba Stadium in Ibadan, southwestern Nigeria.—AFP

Nigerian ex-governor tries 'outsider' upset with presidential bid

IBADAN: Horns blaring from the crowd, Nigerian candidate Peter Obi makes his pitch, repeating a mantra that he offers youth a chance for change in February's election. For 35-year-old footwear seller Joseph Nwankwo it was what he wants to hear. "I never voted for any party. They believed our vote never counted. This time round we believe our vote will," said Nwankwo at the rally in southwest Ibadan city. "We are the youth. If we don't do it, who will do it for us?" Backed by the Labour Party, Obi is emerging as a rare third challenger to the two mainstream parties who have governed Africa's most populous country since the end of military rule in 1999.

Next February's election is set to be a tight race to replace President Muhammadu Buhari, who steps down with Nigeria facing huge security challenges and an economy hobbled by fallout from the pandemic and Ukraine's war. A former southeast Anambra state governor and one-time PDP vice presidential candidate, Obi has gained momentum with a vibrant social media following and what supporters see as a fresher voice over the other old guard rivals.

Ruling All Progressives Congress (APC) and main opposition Peoples Democratic Party chieftains dismiss Obi as a Twitter phenomenon devoid of a national party network to challenge their deep pockets. Obi, 61, may face many obstacles in his run to the Aso Rock presidential villa, but his message is resonating especially among younger, urban Nigerians who call themselves "Obi-dients". Whether he can win remains unclear—some local polls have him ahead. But analysts say Obi's challenge is already complicating the political outlook

for the PDP and APC.

APC is fielding Bola Tinubu, a 70-year-old former Lagos state governor known as the "Godfather of Lagos" for his political clout. Against him, the PDP has Atiku Abubakar, 76, a wealthy businessman on his sixth bid for the presidency. He was vice president in 1999. "All of the political and economic and social conditions have made him a palatable alternative," SBM Intelligence analyst Ikesemiti Effiong said of Obi. "It is beginning to dent the image of the traditional political parties."

Political geography

Wearing glasses and often dressed in a simple black traditional suit, Obi has run a grass-roots campaign where he touts his experience as governor and his outsider status. A wealthy trader, Obi says he is about turning Nigeria around—increasing production rather than consumption, governing responsibly and taking on insecurity. "The government we intend to form, will be the beginning of a new Nigeria," he told a crowd of thousands in Ibadan. "We will secure a united Nigeria."

But with little structure nationwide and no governors, rivals say the Labour party and Obi will struggle. In 2019, the Labor Party candidate won 0.02 percent of the vote. The party elected one lawmaker. "People say the Obidients, of course they will," said Edo State governor Godwin Obaseki, who is campaigning for PDP. "But they will run out of steam." Nigerian elections are often about geography calculations. To win the presidency, a candidate must get a majority of the votes and also 25 percent of the votes in two thirds of its 36 states. Almost equally split between predominantly Muslim north and the mostly Christian south, Nigeria is a patchwork of ethnic groups, including the largest Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo. In an unwritten agreement to promote informal power sharing, the presidency has rotated alternatively between candidates from the north and south. But 2023 is complex.—AFP

Cuba municipal polls close as opposition deplores pressure

HAVANA: Cubans voted Sunday in municipal elections amid a grave economic crisis that some feared would weaken turnout and with the opposition charging that several of its candidates faced unfair pressure. Polls closed at 7:00 pm, one hour later than expected and after a day of voting without incident, AFP journalists reported.

Elections officials said the extension was due to requests made by polling stations and voters themselves. As of 5:00 pm, according to the National Electoral Council, nearly 64 percent of Cuba's eight million eligible voters had cast a secret ballot, selecting more than 12,400 municipal delegates, or councilors, from the 27,000 candidates nominated by show of hands in neighborhood assemblies.

Earlier Sunday, President Miguel Diaz-Canel, fresh off a trip that took him to Algeria, Russia, Turkey and China, went with his wife Lis Cuesta to vote at a polling station in Playa, west of Havana. He later told reporters that the electoral process confirmed the political and social stability of the island, despite the "economic suffocation" he said the United States was imposing on Cuba.

The government had mounted an intense get-out-the-vote campaign on social media, as well as in the press and on television - both controlled by the ruling Communist Party, which oversees the election process but does not nominate candidates. But the opposition platform known as the Council for the Democratic Transition in Cuba (CDTC), which promotes change and pluralism in the country through legal means, called on people to abstain, citing unfair pressure by the government.

'Political police'

Its vice president, Manuel Cuesta, told AFP that three of the group's candidates had been prevented "by the political police" from participating in neighborhood assemblies because they appeared to have a good chance of winning. He said a fourth candidate, Jose Cabrera, was nominated in the southeastern city of Palma Soriano but never made it to the ballot over "threats of losing his job" and other difficulties.

The Cuban government has branded opposition members as US "mercenaries." These elections are the first step in a unique electoral system. Councilors elected Sunday will form municipal governments that will propose 50 percent of the candidates for provincial assemblies and the National Assembly, which in turn elects the Council of State and the Cuban president from among its members.—AFP



HAVANA: Cuban Foreign Minister Bruno Rodriguez votes during the first round of municipal elections for councilors in Havana on November 27, 2022.—AFP

Russia's invasion increases chemical weapons threat

THE HAGUE: Russia's invasion of Ukraine has increased the threat from weapons of mass destruction including chemical munitions, the head of the world's toxic arms watchdog said on Monday. The Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) was closely monitoring the situation in Ukraine, its chief Fernando Arias told the regulator's annual meeting. "The situation in Ukraine has again increased the real threat posed by weapons of mass destruction, including chemical weapons," Arias told the meeting in The Hague.

"It has exacerbated existing tensions to a point where unity of the international community on common global challenges related to international security and peace cannot be presumed." International disarmament bodies like the Nobel Peace Prize-winning OPCW "now have become places for confrontation and disagreement", Arias lamented. Threats and allegations about the possible use of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons have been traded since the war in Ukraine began in February, but with no evidence they have been deployed.

Arias reminded Russia and Ukraine that they were among 193 countries that have "solemnly and voluntarily committed never under any circumstances to ... use chemical weapons". He said the OPCW "continues to closely monitor this serious situation and remains in contact with the permanent representations of the Russian Federation and Ukraine". The OPCW has provided Ukraine, at its request, with training for first responders for chemical attacks and for the detection of chemical leaks, Arias said.—AFP

Cabinet approves four-year...

Continued from Page 1

In a related development, MP Saleh Ashour sent a series of questions to Interior Minister Sheikh Tala Al-Khaled Al-Sabah asking for details about bedoons. The lawmaker said based on reports, the number of bedoons has increased to around 150,000 from the previously estimated figure of 120,000, and that the number is projected to grow to 300,000 by 2035.

Ashour asked the minister about the government's plan to resolve the bedoon crisis and inquired about the number of bedoons who are children of Kuwaiti women who qualify for citizenship but have not been naturalized, and the reasons for that. He also demanded the number of bedoons who work as

servicemen and holders of doctorate and master's degrees. The lawmaker said during a closed session by the Assembly, the government acknowledged that 20,000 bedoons are entitled for citizenship, asking what the government plans towards this section of the populace.

Meanwhile, a government panel studying amnesty for political prisoners held its second meeting on Monday to prepare lists of names of prisoners and convicts to be pardoned by HH the Amir. The committee is headed by minister Sheetan and includes the attorney general and the interior ministry undersecretary. Under an Amiri decree issued last week, the amnesty panel will pardon people who were convicted for insulting HH the Amir, spreading false news about the country, undermining the interests of friendly countries and insulting the judiciary and judges. Former MP Abdulhameed Dashti, who had been jailed in absentia for over 70 years, said on his Twitter account that he is included in the amnesty list and thanked HH the Amir. He did not say how he knew he was being pardoned.

ring now on Mauna Loa, "the fact that it is a hazardous mountain that hasn't erupted since 1984 - the longest eruptive pause in its recorded history - is why we should all keep an eye on it," Andrews posted on Twitter.

The largest volcano on Earth by volume, Mauna Loa, whose name means "Long Mountain", covers half of the Big Island and is larger than the rest of the Hawaiian islands combined. The volcano's submarine flanks stretch for miles below sea level to the ocean floor, which in turn is depressed by Mauna Loa's great mass - making its summit some 17 km above its base according to the USGS.

One of six active volcanoes on the Hawaiian islands, Mauna Loa has erupted 33 times since 1843, according to USGS. The most recent eruption, in 1984, lasted 22 days and produced lava flows which reached to within about seven kilometers of Hilo, a city to the northeast which is home to about 44,000 people today. Kilauea, a volcano on the southeastern flank of Mauna Loa, erupted almost continuously between 1983 and 2019, and a current minor eruption there has been ongoing for months.—AFP

Monkeypox to be renamed...

Continued from Page 1

Canada (1,449). They account for 86 percent of the global number of cases.

A total of 588 cases were reported last week. Over the past four weeks, 92 percent of cases were reported from the Americas and six percent from Europe. Seventy-one countries have reported no new cases in the past 21 days. It is down to the

Saudi unveils plan for new...

Continued from Page 1

establish a new national flag carrier and move up to five million tons of cargo each year. The new airport is expected to be able to process 3.5 million tons of cargo by 2050, SPA said. It "will boost Riyadh's position as a global logistics hub, stimulate

Palestinian flags fly at...

Continued from Page 1

Many Qataris have put the Palestinian flag next to their own national emblem, hanging from the windows of their luxury cars. Some Qataris sitting in a stadium VIP section have worn armbands showing the Palestinian keffiyeh head-dress, while the Palestinian song "Ali Al-Keffiyeh" (Raise Your Keffiyeh) is regularly played in fan zones.

"Some foreigners do not know the Palestinian flag and ask us about it," said Yahya Abu Hantash, a 33-year-old Palestinian living in Doha. "This is a golden

WHO to assign names to diseases, as it did with COVID-19. The WHO announced in August it was looking for a new name for the virus, seeking suggestions from experts, countries and the public.

According to WHO best practices in disease naming adopted in 2015, names should aim to minimize unnecessary negative impact. Considerations include scientific appropriateness, pronounceability, and usability in different languages. "WHO will adopt the term mpox in its communications, and encourages others to follow these recommendations, to minimize any ongoing negative impact of the current name," it said. The one-year transition is to avoid confusion caused by changing the name in the midst of a global outbreak.—AFP

transport, trade and tourism, and act as a bridge linking the East with the West," SPA said.

The announcement did not provide information about the cost of the project, which has been designed to cover 57 sq km. "With sustainability at its core, the new airport will achieve LEED Platinum certification by incorporating cutting edge green initiatives into its design and will be powered by renewable energy," SPA said, referring to the green building certification program. The kingdom's busiest international airport is currently in the Red Sea coastal city of Jeddah, the self-avowed "Gateway to Makkah" for millions of Muslims performing the hajj and umrah pilgrimages.—AFP

opportunity to introduce our cause," said Hantash, who wore a Qatar football shirt while holding a Palestinian flag. Qatar has no relations with the Zionist entity and remains a supporter of the decades-long Palestinian cause for statehood.

Doha supports Hamas, the Palestinian Islamist group that rules the Gaza Strip, and provides vital financial aid to residents of the coastal enclave blockaded by the Zionist entity since 2007. Qatar criticized moves by other Arab nations - including the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Morocco - to normalize relations in 2020.

About 10,000 Zionists are expected in Qatar for the football tournament, according to diplomat Alon Levy who was in Doha to organize consular coverage. FIFA hailed a deal allowing Palestinians and Zionists to travel to the Gulf emirate on special charter flights from Tel Aviv.—AFP

Hawaii volcano erupts for first...

Continued from Page 1

Hawaii authorities said no evacuation orders have been given, although the summit area and several roads in the region were closed, and two shelters have been opened as a precaution.

An ashfall advisory has been issued for downwind of the volcano, with a light accumulation of ash expected on ships in ocean waters along the Big Island's southeast. A USGS webcam on Mauna Loa summit's north rim showed long bright eruptive fissures within the volcanic crater, contrasted against the dark of night.

Robin George Andrews, a scientist and volcanologist, said a larger threat exists if magma begins to pour out of so-called rift zones along the volcano's flanks. While there is no evidence yet of this occur-

International

'It's not over': Iranian Kurds in Iraq in Tehran's crosshairs

12 PDKI members killed, 20 wounded in latest attacks

KOYSINJAJQ: The roof is caved in, a wall has exploded and broken glass litters the floor at a base of the exiled Kurdish-Iranian opposition in mountainous northern Iraq. "These are the regime's missiles," said Karim Farkhapour, a leader of the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (PDKI), with a revolver strapped to his traditional belt. "The Iranian regime has bombed us three times in less than two months." The Islamic Republic of Iran has been torn by over two months of protests sparked by the death in custody of Kurdish-Iranian woman Mahsa Amini, 22.

As Iranians have vented their anger at the regime, Tehran has blamed outside forces, and exiled Kurdish groups on whose bases it has rained down missiles and so-called suicide drones. The PDKI's headquarters, dubbed "the Castle", near the town of Koysinajq, or Koya in Kurdish, looks like a desert mountain fort straight out of an adventure novel.

The movement settled there in 1993 during the era of former dictator Saddam Hussein, who was toppled in the 2003 US-led invasion and executed three years later.

Twelve PDKI members were killed and 20 wounded in the latest attacks on the site, said Farkhapour. PDKI members have evacuated the fort, which remains heavily damaged, with cables dangling from the library roof and books scattered on the floor. In another room, Farkhapour stepped gingerly through the rubble to reach a Kurdish flag that remained unscathed. "The Tehran regime is going to target us again," he predicted grimly. "It's not over, you'll see."

'Hide the truth'

It was not the first time Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps has launched strikes against the PDKI or other groups in Iraqi Kurdistan. The Iranian government labels these factions "terrorists" accusing them of fuelling

the civil unrest since the September 16 death of Amini, who had been arrested for allegedly breaching Iran's strict dress code for women. Iran has accused the groups of importing weapons from Iraq across the porous border long used by smuggling networks.

"False", retorted Moustafa Mouloudi, another of the leaders of the PDKI in Koysinajq. "There is absolutely no evidence that we have smuggled weapons from Iraq to Iran," he said. "It's a lie that the regime has made up to hide the truth from the people. The regime is the terrorist." Iranian Kurdish groups such as the PDKI and Komala have long been in Tehran's sights. Based in Iraqi Kurdistan since the 1980s with the blessing of Saddam, who was then at war with Iran, many follow a socialist doctrine.

"We are a secular party and we fight for women's rights," said Farkhapour. Although analysts believe they have largely refrained from armed activities in recent years, they continue to actively campaign from exile. The PDKI denounces the discrimination suffered by Iran's Kurdish minority, who make up some 10 million out of the country's 83 million people. The group has demanded a fully democratic and federal Iran in which Kurdish provinces would have considerable autonomy.

'Living in fear'

The group is tightly organized in a rigid hierarchy and demanded that AFP reporters stick closely to an official program for the visit. Within the PDKI, "we are free", said Shaunem Hamzi, a 36-year-old activist who lives in Koysinajq with her parents. Before the latest attacks, she lived in a PDKI camp about 500 meters from the citadel where some 200 families resided in single-storey cinderblock or concrete houses.

However, the latest attacks, she said, "have been much stronger than the previous ones. The children, the families



KOYE: A Kurdish man walks amidst the rubble in a school following Iranian cross-border attacks in the town of Koye (Koysinajq), 100km east of Arbil, the capital of the autonomous Kurdish region of northern Iraq. —AFP

were very scared. The fear of getting killed is among us now." Like the other inhabitants, Hamzi had to leave the camp and now frequently switches sleeping places. As an Iranian Kurdish woman, she strongly identifies with the

protest movement rocking Iran. "If the regime even temporarily makes us stop, the protest will surface again, because it is in our hearts," she said passionately. "The protesters will never obey the regime's rules." —AFP

Obiang: E Guinea's iron-fisted leader

LIBREVILLE: Confirmed for a sixth term as president, Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo has ruled oil-rich Equatorial Guinea since August 1979, overseeing a regime notorious for crushing dissent and fearing coups. The 80-year-old's 43 years in power are the longest of any leader alive in the world today, with the exception of monarchs.

He seized power from Francisco Macias Nguema, who in 1968 had become Equatorial Guinea's first president upon independence from Spain and later declared himself president for life. Macias - Obiang's uncle - was executed by firing squad two months after the coup. Obiang's opponents say that under his iron-fisted, hermetic tenure, the country has become the "North Korea of Africa".

The regime's ruthlessness is regularly condemned by rights watchdogs, who have documented mass, arbitrary arrests, dissidents held in nightmarish prison conditions and frequent sweeps against suspected plotters. In a country where there is just a single authorized opposition party, Obiang exercises near-total political control. In 2016, he was re-elected with 93.7 percent of the vote; this time, the official result gave him 94.9 percent, on a turnout of 98 percent.

Son in the wings

Obiang's son, Teodoro Nguema

Obiang Mangué, known as Teodorin, is widely seen as his successor, and has ascended the ranks to the position of vice president today. In an interview ahead of the 2016 vote, the elder Obiang told the French-language *Jeune Afrique* magazine that this would be the last time he would run. "I have been in power for too long, but the people want me to be their president," he said. Asked whether Teodorin was being groomed for power, he said: "Equatorial Guinea isn't a monarchy... but if he's got talent, there's nothing I can do."

Speculation that he would hand over the reins in the upcoming vote gained pace as his public appearances became rarer. But those expectations were quashed after Teodorin was enveloped in scandals abroad and a conviction in France for ill-gotten gains - state assets acquired illegally. France, Britain and the United States have ordered him to forfeit millions of dollars in assets, from mansions to luxury cars, while France also handed him a three-year suspended sentence and a fine of 30 million euros.

The storm, coinciding with a downturn in oil revenue and the economic blow inflicted by COVID, may have prompted the elder Obiang's inner circle to advise against leadership change. The PDGE unanimously chose Obiang as its candidate "because of his charisma, his leadership and his political experience", Teodorin wrote on Twitter. The party's election slogan, seen universally on posters and state TV, was "continuity".



MALABO: A general view of a campaign billboard for Equatorial Guinea President, Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo in Malabo. —AFP

Fear of coups

Obiang graduated from military school while the country, as Spanish Guinea, was still under the rule of Spain's fascist dictator, General Francisco Franco. He then held a string of key jobs, including head of the notorious Black Beach prison - a place of "living hell", in the words of Amnesty International. His violent path to power has bequeathed a deep fear of coups.

His bodyguard comprises soldiers who are members of his clan, but - for additional security - he has a close-protection unit who are reputedly Israelis. Zimbabweans and Ugandans have also been brought in to help guard the presidential palace. Obiang says he has foiled at least 10 attempted coups and assassinations during

his long spell in power, often blaming dissidents living in exile or "foreign powers". The authorities closed the borders ahead of the elections to thwart suspected plotters.

Obiang has been buttressed by the discovery of oil in territorial waters in mid-1996. The bonanza has turned Equatorial Guinea into sub-Saharan Africa's third-richest country, in terms of per capita income. But the wealth is very unequally distributed - four-fifths of the population of 1.4 million live below the poverty threshold according to World Bank figures for 2006, the latest available. The country has a long-established reputation internationally for graft, ranking 172 out of 180 nations on Transparency International's 2021 Corruption Perceptions Index. —AFP

Man's agony after five relatives died in Urumqi fire

BEIJING: When a deadly fire broke out in China's northwest Xinjiang region, triggering a wave of public anger over the country's zero-COVID policy, Abdulhafiz Maimaitimin initially could not believe that it claimed five of his relatives' lives. Ten people were killed and nine injured when the blaze ripped through a residential building in the regional capital Urumqi on Thursday night, with many blaming lengthy lockdowns for hampering rescue efforts.

The tragedy spurred an outpouring of anger in Urumqi which has since swelled into a wave of large-scale protests and candlelit vigils in several major cities across China. Much of Xinjiang has been locked down for three months, as the remote region battles an uptick in COVID cases that have also surged nationwide. Maimaitimin, 27, now living in exile in Switzerland, was stunned when he heard through a friend about the deaths of his 48-year-old aunt, Haiernishahan Abdurehman, and four of her children aged between four and 13.

"My arms and legs shook and I felt dizzy. I wanted to throw up. I couldn't understand it," Maimaitimin, a member of the Muslim Uyghur minority, told AFP from his home in Zurich. He lost contact with his aunt in May 2017, while

Xinjiang was in the grip of a widespread security crackdown which saw an estimated million Uyghurs arbitrarily detained in prisons and internment camps, some simply for speaking to relatives overseas.

"She was a housewife, her whole life was devoted to taking care of her kids and educating them well," he said, bursting into tears. "Five years later I really could not imagine I would hear about my relatives in this way." A photo of his aunt verified by Maimaitimin shows her sitting beside her four young children on a couch in a beautifully decorated living room. "Now I still feel terrible, I can't cope," he said.

Three-hour blaze

Online posts circulating on both Chinese and overseas social media platforms since Friday have claimed that lengthy Covid lockdowns in Urumqi hampered rescue attempts. Social media videos show water sprayed from a fire engine parked outside the compound barely reaching the burning windows, while in another the dying screams of residents trapped inside can be heard. State media said the fire took three hours to be extinguished.

City officials later claimed the apartment was in a low-risk area where residents could leave their homes freely, but acknowledged there were cars and bollards blocking the fire engine's path. "Some residents had a weak ability to rescue themselves ... and did not carry out effective fire fighting or escape in time to rescue themselves," Li Wensheng, head of the city fire rescue



URUMQI: People ride bicycles past barricades on a street next to Wulumuqi street (named for Urumqi in Mandarin) in Shanghai on November 28, 2022, a day after protests against China's COVID-19 restrictions following a deadly fire in Urumqi, the capital of the Xinjiang region. —AFP

service, said Friday. However, some witnesses and social media users later claimed the building's doors were locked shut.

In one viral screenshot of a residents' chat group, Maimaitimin identified his other male cousin begging neighbors to save his mother and siblings. "I can't contact the people in (flat) 1901 and don't know their circumstances, they can't open the door. Can you break open the door? There are children inside," read the texts from his surviving cousin, who was not in Urumqi at the time. Maimaitimin believes that his family were not rescued in time because

they were Uyghur and lived in a Uyghur-majority neighborhood in the city's Tianshan district.

Chinese officials have not yet revealed the identities of the deceased, but there is widespread online speculation that the real death toll was higher. A photo circulating on social media of the building's charred remains showed blackened, destroyed windows on six floors of the building. "I will never trust the Chinese government. If Uyghurs protested, they would choke them dead," he said. "I think that protesters will be caught, and (Uyghurs) will be put under even stricter control. —AFP

Who are Iranian Kurdish rebels in northern Iraq?

BAGHDAD: Iranian-Kurdish rebel groups have for decades sought refuge in northern Iraq's autonomous Kurdistan region, but they have recently come under fresh fire amid weeks of protests in the neighboring Islamic republic. In the wake of demonstrations sparked by the September 16 death in custody of Mahsa Amini - an Iranian woman of Kurdish origin - Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps has launched missile and drone strikes on the bases of Kurdish groups in northern Iraq.

At least 17 people have been killed in these strikes since September, according to an AFP tally based on reported tolls. After previously waging an insurgency against the clerical state in Iran, the groups have largely abandoned combat activities in recent years to focus on political campaigning for long-sought rights for Kurds.

Long-standing opposition

Since the 1980s, Iranian Kurdish factions have made a home for themselves in Iraqi Kurdistan - often with the blessing of former dictator Saddam Hussein. Tehran classifies these groups as "terrorist" and "separatist" organizations, accusing them of launching attacks on Iranian forces. But after decades of armed insurrection, they have heavily scaled back any military activity, while continuing to train fighters at bases in Iraqi Kurdistan's mountainous regions.

The oldest is the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (PDKI), which has repeatedly denied using Iraqi territory to launch attacks on Iran.

Rather, it says its political leadership is headquartered in Iraq's Kurdistan region. The party "fights to realise the national rights of Kurds through a federal and democratic Iran", according to its website. The second-largest is the Komala Party of Iranian Kurdistan, founded in 1969 by intellectuals and students in Tehran and Kurdish cities in Iran. Another target of the cross-border strikes is the Kurdistan Freedom Party (PAK), whose fighters were among the forces that helped drive out the Islamic State group from its former strongholds in Iraq. Also based in Iraq is the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK), affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). The PKK has waged an insurgency in Turkey and is considered a terrorist group by Ankara and its allies. Despite a fragile ceasefire in 2011, sporadic clashes have pitted the Kurdish rebels against Iranian forces.

Political struggle

The groups have supported demonstrations that broke out in Iran following the death of Mahsa Amini, after her arrest by the morality police for allegedly violating the Islamic republic's strict dress code for women. Much of the activism has shifted to social media, where the Iranian-Kurdish factions in Iraq have been vocal in their support of the protests, sharing videos and relaying calls for general strikes. Before the demonstrations kicked off, there were frequent border crossings, says Adel Bakawan, director of the French Research Center on Iraq (CFRI). When these factions "wanted to carry out military action", they would send smaller units across the border to Iran, he added.

Today, the "PDKI and Komala are doing everything to avoid militarizing the protests", as Tehran could use this to "justify" an even harsher crackdown, he said. The groups have long denounced discrimination faced by Iran's Kurdish minority - about 10 million of the 83-million-strong population - who adhere to Sunni Islam rather than the Shiite branch prevalent in the country. Iranian Kurds complain of a lack of local political representation and an absence of economic development in the country's Kurdish regions. Authorities have also banned them from teaching their language in schools.

Iran's foreign ministry spokesman Nasser Kanani has previously stressed that the Islamic republic wants "no threat to Iran's security from Iraqi territory". Iranian officials, who describe the recent protests as "riots", have accused Kurdish rebel groups of participating in the unrest and of crossing into Iran to stage attacks. "Iran is looking for a scapegoat," said analyst Fabrice Balanche. —AFP

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 29, 2022

Business

China COVID lockdowns shut delivery workers out of homes

Demand for deliveries has soared under tightening curbs

BEIJING: Overworked, underpaid and thoroughly fed up, Wang's troubles deepened even further when authorities abruptly locked down the delivery driver's Beijing apartment block earlier this month. Officials in the Chinese capital have doubled down on the country's hallmark zero-COVID policy in recent weeks, one of an array of cities to impose sweeping shutdowns, mass testing and teleworking mandates as caseloads have hit all-time highs.

Wang is not alone in feeling frustrated. The ruling Communist Party's uncompromising zero-COVID strategy - now in force for about three years - has stoked anger and resentment, with widespread and sometimes violent protests kicking off across China's major cities. Pandemic fatigue has been on the rise for some time, as a recent lightening of virus curbs has coincided with record infection tallies, prompting a patchwork of onerous restrictions in multiple major cities.

China is the last major economy wedded to a zero-COVID strategy, but maintaining relatively low numbers of cases and deaths has constrained its economic recovery, disrupted supply chains and hammered employment.

'I have no choice'

Demand for deliveries has soared under the tightening curbs as millions of housebound urbanites have turned to an army of low-paid couriers - mostly migrants from other provinces - to supply takeaway lunches and grocery orders. But this time the restrictions have crept deep into places where drivers live, shutting many inside without pay and forcing others to choose between having a place to sleep and earning enough money to survive.

Wang, who scoots back and forth across a wealthy financial district delivering food orders for internet giant Meituan, said his housing compound was cordoned off on Nov 7 after two COVID cases were discovered. Desperate not to lose his income - about 250 yuan (\$34) a day - the 20-year-old broke lockdown rules by vaulting a fence to make his shifts, sneaking back in under cover of darkness.

"I have no choice. If I don't make money, I can't pay rent," said the native of the industrial northern province of Shanxi. "Lots of delivery guys don't have



BEIJING: A food delivery man rides a scooter full of orders along a street on Nov 25, 2022. — AFP

anywhere to live at the moment," he told AFP outside a deserted office block on a cold winter afternoon last week. "I'm really dissatisfied with the Chinese government, because other countries aren't strict about COVID anymore," he said. "We're going to such great lengths... and I don't feel it's necessary, because nobody is dying from it." AFP withheld Wang's full name to protect him from potential repercussions for breaking lockdown and criticizing the state.

Sleeping rough

When a shutdown loomed over Gu Qiang's hous-

ing compound last week, the Meituan driver chose to sleep in his car. "Spending 30 yuan to keep the engine running all night is still cheaper than getting a hotel," the gruff northeast China native said. "Some of my friends are living outside - they dare not go home."

Several couriers interviewed by AFP described heavier workloads in recent weeks as lockdowns have left their companies short of labor. While some said they were happy to take on money-spinning extra orders, most said they had endured longer working hours, extra stress and more negative interactions with customers.

They also said they had not received any additional support from Meituan or the companies to which delivery services have been outsourced. Authorities last year launched an investigation into food delivery platforms following claims of exploitative labor practices including algorithms that effectively forced couriers to drive dangerously to meet tight delivery times. Meituan did not respond to an AFP request for comment prior to publication. But the company told the state-run China Daily newspaper last week that it had paid for hotel rooms for some stranded workers and welcomed calls for help from couriers in similar situations. — AFP



MOSCOW: Russian President Vladimir Putin shakes hand with his Kazakhstan's counterpart Kassym-Jomart Tokayev after a signing ceremony in the Kremlin on Nov 28, 2022. — AFP

Kazakhstan eyes energy takeovers

ALMATY: Kazakhstan warned Monday it could nationalize struggling energy companies in the oil-rich Central Asian country after the latest blackout there left thousands without electricity in freezing temperatures. The vast ex-Soviet country is a net exporter of energy, but high gas prices this year fueled historic and bloody protests, and ageing infrastructure leads to persistent electricity disruptions.

Thousands of people since Sunday are without heating in northern Kazakhstan with temperatures around -30 degrees Celsius, after an accident at the power plant supplying the city of Ekibastuz. "President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev has instructed Prime Minister Alikhan Smailov to study the issue of nationalizing problematic energy assets," presidential spokesman Ruslan Zheldibay said on Facebook.

"Their mismanagement causes accidents and breakdowns in the supply of electricity," he said adding that those responsible for the accident in the city should be "brought to justice". Kazakhstan gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991 but it relies on an electricity system linked with four other ex-USSR Central Asian states. Kazakhstan as well as neighboring Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan suffered a huge blackout in January, ahead of the unrest.

Last month, Kazakh authorities said 65 percent of regional electricity networks needed repair. Kazakhstan derives almost all its electricity from gas and coal but also imports some electricity to supply regions in the south. Tokayev was re-elected this month winning 81 percent of votes, according to authorities but international election monitors said he faced no real competition. Under former leader, authoritarian Nursultan Nazarbayev, in power for three decades, the energy sector was liberalized and passed into the hands of powerful oligarchs. — AFP

Debt-hit developer China Evergrande sells land for \$1bn

BEIJING: Embattled property giant China Evergrande has sold land earlier earmarked for its headquarters in the southern tech hub Shenzhen for \$1 billion, according to an official document, as it fights for survival. The real estate behemoth has been involved in restructuring negotiations after racking up \$300 billion in liabilities following Beijing's crackdown on excessive debt and rampant speculation in the property sector.

The 10,377-square-metre (111,700-square-foot) land in Nanshan district was sold to Shenzhen Anhe

No. 1 Real Estate Development Co. for 7.5 billion yuan, according to land transaction records published by the city's Public Resource Exchange Centre on Saturday. Evergrande has scrambled to offload assets in recent months and its financial situation has worsened considerably since last year.

Its troubles are emblematic of the crisis rippling across China's massive property sector, with smaller companies also defaulting on loans and others struggling to raise cash after Beijing imposed widespread lending curbs in 2020. Major developers including Evergrande have failed to complete projects, sparking mortgage boycotts and protests from homebuyers. China's banking regulator earlier this month unveiled sweeping measures to support the property sector, including credit support for distressed developers to ensure the completion and handover of projects to homeowners. — AFP



BEIJING: This file photo taken on July 28, 2022 shows children playing basketball in front of a housing complex constructed by Chinese property developer Evergrande. — AFGP

Barclays bank CEO has cancer, to remain in post

LONDON: British bank Barclays on Monday said its chief executive C S Venkatakrisnan is suffering from cancer and will remain in the top post while undergoing treatment. The lender announced the news in a brief statement alongside a letter by Venkatakrisnan to staff that presented an upbeat prognosis for his non-Hodgkin

lymphoma, a cancer affecting the lymph system. "The good news is that the matter has been detected early, with scans and biopsies confirming it to be very localized," he wrote. "The doctors have advised that my prognosis is excellent, and my condition is curable with their prescribed regimen."

Venkatakrisnan said his treatment, at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in New York, would likely last 12 to 16 weeks. "During this period, the company will run normally, and I will continue to be actively engaged in managing it," he added. Barclays last month announced a 10-percent lift in net profit for the third quarter but also revealed rising impairment charges owing to an uncertain economic environment. — AFP

Canada unveils new Asia-Pacific strategy with eye on China

OTTAWA: Canada on Sunday unveiled its new economic and diplomatic strategy for the Asia-Pacific region, allocating 2.3 billion Canadian dollars (US\$1.7 billion) over the next five years to the plan aimed at mitigating risks posed by China. The government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has based its strategy on five major planks: promoting peace and security, notably by sending a warship to the region; bolstering trade and investment; boosting "feminist international assistance"; financing sustainable infrastructure; and increasing its diplomatic presence.

"The future of the Indo-Pacific is our future; we have a role to play in shaping it. To do so, we need to be a true, reliable partner," Foreign Minister Melanie Joly said in a statement introducing the policy paper. She said the new strategy "sends a clear message to the region that Canada is here, and they can trust we are here to stay." In an interview with the French-language daily La Presse to coincide with the introduction of the new policy, Joly said the message being sent was specifically aimed at Beijing, with which Ottawa has had fraught ties. "There is a fundamental problem with the fact that China currently does not respect international norms and tries to change or interpret them to its own advantage," Joly told the newspaper.

While the minister said the government would not go so far as to advise Canadian companies not to do business in China, she said: "My job is to explain the risk. And I'm saying there is a geopolitical risk in doing business in China." The government said the strategy "presents a comprehensive road map to deepen our engagement in the Indo-Pacific over the next decade, increasing our contributions to regional peace and security."

The announcement comes on the heels of Trudeau and Joly's trip to Asia for the Group of 20 summit in Indonesia, the ASEAN summit in Cambodia and a meeting of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum in Bangkok. At the G20 summit, Chinese President Xi Jinping scolded Trudeau in an unusual public dressing-down, caught on video.

Relations between the two countries plunged into the deep freeze when Canadian authorities arrested Huawei executive Meng Wanzhou in 2018 for allegedly flouting US sanctions on Iran. Beijing later detained two Canadian citizens in China, Michael Spavor and Michael Kovrig, in what critics called a tit-for-tat response. — AFP

Business

Equities and oil prices slide as China hit by protests

Investors also looking ahead to release of US jobs data

LONDON: Stocks and oil prices slid Monday on concerns about protests across China calling for political freedoms and an end to the government's hardline zero-COVID policy, fueling uncertainty in the world's number-two economy. "Unrest in major cities in China has destabilized risk-on markets including oil which is under pressure, pushing BP and Shell towards the bottom of the UK index," noted Victoria Scholar, head of investment at Interactive Investor.

China-linked stocks took the brunt of selling in Asia, with Hong Kong's Hang Seng Index closing down more than one percent and Shanghai off 0.8 percent. The yuan slipped more than one percent. Europe's main stock markets were all lower nearing the half-way stage. "Sentiment has turned sour as unrest across China grows," said SPI Asset Management's Stephen Innes. "Risk of the situation escalating from here and short-term volatility remains high."

Hundreds of people took to the streets in China at the weekend in the country's biggest demonstrations since pro-democracy rallies in 1989 were crushed. A deadly fire in the Xinjiang region Thursday served as the catalyst for the public anger, with many blaming virus lockdowns for hampering rescue efforts.

People have taken to the streets in Beijing,

Shanghai, Guangzhou and Chengdu calling for an end to lockdowns, after an easing of some measures had fueled hopes of a lighter pandemic approach. Some demonstrators were even demanding the resignation of China's President Xi Jinping, who was recently re-appointed to a precedent-breaking third term as the country's leader. The latest targeted containment measures have been introduced as the country sees record-high infections.

The prospect of a hit to demand in the world's biggest crude importer hammered oil prices, with both main contracts down around three percent. The selling has taken a bit out of recent gains across markets sparked by hopes of a slowdown in the Federal Reserve's interest rate hikes, with inflation finally showing signs of softening.

However, some observers said the protests could provide long-term benefits as they could force President Xi to shift away from his strict, economically damaging measures sooner. Investors were also looking ahead to the release of US jobs data at the end of the week, which could provide clues about the Fed's next moves, while speeches by central bank boss Jerome Powell and other key policymakers will also be pored over. — AFP



HONG KONG: A pedestrian passes a sign showing the numbers for the Hang Seng Index on Nov 28, 2022. — AFP

Ireland fines Meta €265m for data breach

DUBLIN: Ireland's data regulator on Monday slapped Facebook owner Meta with a 265-million-euro (\$275-million) fine after details of more than half a billion users were leaked on a hacking website. The Data Protection Commission (DPC) said it had reached the decision following a "comprehensive inquiry process, including cooperation with all of the other data protection supervisory authorities within the EU".

Meta's European operations are based in Dublin, along with a number of other major global tech companies including Google, Apple and Twitter. As a result, Ireland's data protection agency is the lead regulator responsible for holding them to account.

The watchdog found the social media behemoth led by Mark Zuckerberg had breached two articles of the EU's data protection laws. In addition to the fine, the DPC said it had "imposed a reprimand and an order" requiring the Facebook owner to "bring its processing into compliance by taking a range of specified remedial actions within a particular timeframe". There was no immediate reaction to the fine from Meta.

The Irish watchdog launched its probe in April 2021 to determine whether the EU-wide General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) charter on data rights and the corresponding Irish legislation had been infringed. Under the GDPR, which came into effect in 2018, social media users have a wider range of rights relating to their data.

Facebook has previously said that the data was "scraped" from the site by hackers in 2019, who took advantage of a feature designed to help people easily find friends using contact lists. The fine follows a landmark decision by the Irish watchdog to fine Meta a record 405 million euros in September after its Instagram platform was found to have breached regulations on the handling of children's data.

In recent weeks, the European Union has voiced its fears over a fall in standards in data privacy and content moderation amid widespread job losses in the tech sector. Meta said earlier this month it planned to lay off more than 11,000 staff amid an advertising slump.

The micro-blogging platform Twitter, which also has its European headquarters in Dublin, has attracted similar criticisms following its acquisition by Elon Musk. Tech entrepreneur Musk cut around half of Twitter's 7,500 workforce, including many employees tasked with fighting disinformation, when he bought the firm. — AFP



MENLO PARK, California: A man takes a selfie at Meta (formerly Facebook) corporate headquarters on Nov 9, 2022. — AFP

European broadcasters condemn Chinese 'intimidation' of media

GENEVA: The European Broadcasting Union on Monday condemned the "intolerable" intimidation of news crews in China reporting on the rare protests that have broken out across the country. "The EBU condemns in the strongest terms the intolerable intimidation and aggression directed against EBU member journalists and production crews in China," the world's biggest public service media alliance said in a statement. The Geneva-based union said the situation in China was becoming increasingly volatile.

Seeking political freedoms and an end to COVID-19 lockdowns, people have taken to the streets in

major cities and gathered at university campuses across China in a wave of protests not seen since pro-democracy rallies in 1989 were crushed. The BBC said one of its journalists was arrested while covering Covid protests in Shanghai and beaten by police while being held.

A journalist for the Swiss broadcaster RTS was harassed while reporting live, while other EBU member journalists have been threatened and some prevented from filming or going on air, the alliance said. "The aggression and intimidation of journalists by police and other authorities in China is unacceptable and these latest incidents mark a new low," said Liz Corbin, the EBU's head of news.

She said EBU members played a critical role in providing the public with trusted news and information, "yet the authorities in China have made it increasingly difficult for reporting teams to operate there. We urgently call on the Chinese authorities to respect the

rights of EBU member journalists who live and work in China to help foreign audiences better understand what is happening there," she said.

The campaign group Reporters Without Borders has also condemned what happened to the BBC's journalist, Eric Scherer, who chairs the EBU's news committee, voiced its "dismay" at the "unjustified arrests of several foreign journalists, officially accredited to work in China, during the course of their work". "We hope to receive an official explanation of these disturbing incidents from the appropriate authorities, in order to understand how we can continue to guarantee safe working conditions for journalists based in China," he said.

Founded in 1950, the EBU has 112 member organizations in 56 countries, plus 31 associates in Asia, Africa and the Americas. Together they reach an audience of more than one billion people, broadcasting in 153 languages. — AFP



VIENNA: (Above) Trains of Austrian railway operator OeBB stand on the tracks at the Westbahnhof railway station on Nov 28, 2022 during a warning strike by railway workers over a wage dispute. (Below) An empty waiting room is seen on a platform at the Westbahnhof railway station. — AFP photos

Austrian trains grind to halt as workers strike

VIENNA: Trains across Austria ground to a halt Monday as rail workers went on a 24-hour strike to demand higher pay. Usually bustling train stations were left deserted with about a million travelers left stranded. "The railway union vida is on strike today from 00:00 to 24:00. For this reason, no trains can run all day throughout Austria and across borders,"

UK U-turns over energy-saving publicity drive

LONDON: Britain on Monday unveiled an energy-saving campaign to encourage lower consumption this winter - a policy U-turn - and increased financial help for home insulation. Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's Conservative government announced the publicity blitz just two months after his short-lived predecessor, Liz Truss, ruled out such a move and ran into immediate criticism from opposition politicians and the green lobby.

The government is already partially subsidizing

rail operator OeBB wrote on its website.

Vida said that negotiations to increase the salary of 50,000 railway workers had failed, accusing employers of "mocking" employees with a "bogus offer". Vida wants salaries to increase by 400 euros (\$415) - instead of the 208 euros offered - to cushion the effects of surging inflation, which stood at 11 percent year on year in October.

Night train workers earn from 1,356 euros net per month, according to the union. Strikes are rare in Austria. Wage increases are usually set by collective bargaining between the Austrian Economic Chambers and unions representing different branches. In rail transport, the last strike lasting several days dates back to 2003. — AFP

rocketing electricity and gas bills after prices soared following the invasion of Ukraine by key fossil fuel producer Russia. The publicity drive, costing £18 million (\$22 million), will "demonstrate how consumers can make significant savings", the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy said. Advice will include measures such as lowering the temperature on boiler water heating systems, turning down radiators in unoccupied rooms and installing draught proofing on windows and doors.

"Our new public information campaign will also give people the tools they need to reduce their energy use while keeping warm this winter," added Business and Energy Secretary Grant Shapps. The government pledged another £1.0 billion in funds to help with home insulation. That will be on top of its existing £6.6-billion insulation help scheme.

The main opposition Labour party however criti-



cized Monday's news as a "reheated announcement with no new resources" that was "far too little, too late". Greenpeace UK energy campaigner Georgia Whitaker also warned the funding was not nearly enough. "This is a drop in the ocean compared to what people actually need to stay warm and well this winter and in the winters to come," Whitaker said.

Seven million households in Britain are currently in fuel poverty and unable to adequately heat their homes, according to the green pressure group. Greenpeace also estimates that 19 million homes in England and Wales are poorly insulated. Truss's administration had insisted it would not give instructions on saving energy because she wanted to avoid accusations of running a "nanny state". Energy regulator Ofgem, however, has urged consumers to curb their energy usage as the colder northern hemisphere winter approaches, amid lingering fears of possible blackouts. — AFP

Business

Celebrated Greek cheesemakers brought low by soaring inflation

Social pressure rising in the face of surging energy prices



NAXOS, Greece: Shepherd Yannis Vavoulas, 42, feeds his animals at his farm on this Aegean island on Nov 11, 2022. —AFP photos

NAXOS, Greece: On his bougainvillea-covered farm on the Greek island of Naxos, Yannis Karganis milks his sheep, wondering anxiously how he will cope with soaring costs and keep his cheesemaking business afloat. After the war in Ukraine sparked an inflationary spiral in the price of cereals, fuel and other goods, farmers on Naxos and across the country have been left fearing for their survival. "I earn nothing from my cheeses," says the septuagenarian, who makes Naxos graviera, a hard yellow cheese popular throughout Greece and beyond. "I work day and night and despite this, I still cannot live."

Inflation in Greece rose to 12 percent in September before dropping to 9.1 percent in October. Even though the government announced nearly 280 million euros (\$291 million) in support benefits for young farmers earlier this year, there is still heavy pressure on the country's agricultural sector which employs 11 percent of the workforce. "Last year, a bag of feed cost 14 euros. This year it's 21 euros. Gasoline has skyrocketed to 2.30 euros per litre at the moment," the greying Karganis sighs, stirring a large cauldron to make cheese in his small kitchen.

Social stress

Throughout the country, social pressure is rising in the face of soaring energy prices. In November, a general strike on the issue paralyzed Greece. Dimitris Kapounis, head of the union of Naxos agricultural cooperatives, warns that if nothing changes "in the medium term, there will be no more milk on the Greek market, no meat, potatoes, or anything else". Naxos graviera - made from 80 percent cow's milk and 20 percent sheep or goat's milk - is one of Greece's most popular cheeses.

The Greeks like it sprinkled on pasta, fried or

as a table cheese. But even carrying the vaunted European Protected Designation of Origin label, and exporting to a dozen countries including the United States and Germany, hasn't helped stem the slide in output as costs ramp up. This year, the usual annual production of more than 1,250 tons has already fallen by 130 tons, the cooperative said.

Lack of milk

The squeeze on animal feed and fuel has resulted in a fall in milk production, explains local shepherd Yannis Vavoulas. "We can't maintain feeding them properly," the 42-year-old says. "We feed them two or three times (a day) with little food," which means the animals produce less milk. The crisis is so acute that some farmers have had to slaughter part of their herd, further reducing milk production.

Yorgos Margaritis, who owns 250 cows, is one of the local farmers to have already made this painful decision. He gestures to some of his nearby animals which he says would normally have been inseminated by now for producing calves. "(Instead), they will be slaughtered," he says. The cost of transporting goods from the Greek mainland is also becoming prohibitive - it takes more than five hours by boat to get from the main Greek port of Piraeus to Naxos.

In an act of desperation, the Naxos cooperative in April went as far as neighboring Bulgaria to buy animal feed, where prices are lower. "If the milk producers are not helped... then we are all lost," warns Yannis Kavouras, head of the largest cheese factory in Naxos. And as the EU's protected status regulations permit only the use of local milk, shipping it in from elsewhere is not an option either. "If the producers don't bring any more milk, what am I going to use - water?" wonders Kavouras. —AFP

chance for the government to address the issue was its Annual Climate Report in October but that still lacked the necessary "assessment on measures to protect the sinks", Aho said. "Logging has not been restricted, even though it is known to be the most important factor affecting the size of carbon sinks," she added.

The organizations petitioned the country's Supreme Administrative Court to overrule the government's decision to submit the report without "additional measures to enhance carbon sinks". The groups said the report should be sent back to the drawing board because it was not in line with the Climate Change Act. "Prime Minister Sanna Marin's government's inaction is in stark contrast to the obligations of the Climate Change Act," Aho said. It will be up to the court to decide whether or not to hear the case.

In recent years, Finland has struggled to balance its climate ambitions with its forestry industry, which is an important part of its economy. In 2020, Finnish forestry product exports were worth 10.4 billion euros, amounting to 18 percent of the country's total exports. A growing number of organizations and individuals around the world have turned to the courts to challenge what they see as government inaction on the climate. More than 600 activists in neighboring Sweden, including Greta Thunberg, filed a lawsuit on Friday accusing the state of climate inaction, also a first in the country. —AFP

Activists file legal challenge over Finnish climate inaction

HELSINKI: Environmental organizations in Finland on Monday filed a legal challenge accusing the government of breaking its own commitments to protect the climate, the first challenge of its kind in the country. In July, Finland passed the Climate Change Act, which aims to make the country carbon-neutral by 2035. But the environmental groups say the government had ignored its own laws by failing to protect the Nordic nation's carbon sinks.

Carbon sinks are natural systems, such as forests, that absorb carbon from the atmosphere and store it in, for example, vegetation and soil. "The government has violated its own Climate Change Act by not taking a decision on additional measures to meet Finland's climate targets," Hanna Aho, Policy Officer for the Finnish Association for Nature Conservation (FANC), told AFP. "As a result, it seems very unlikely that climate targets will be met," Aho said.

The FANC and Greenpeace, which jointly mounted the legal challenge, say carbon sinks in Finland have "collapsed" due to an increase in logging and to slower tree growth. The most recent



STOCKHOLM: Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg attends a climate demonstration called by youth-led organization Auroras before submitting its lawsuit against the state for their lack of climate work on Nov 25, 2022. —AFP



Employees work to produce Graviera cheese at a cheese factory.



Shepherd Yannis Karganis milks his animals at his farm.



Employees work to produce Graviera cheese at a cheese factory.



Cows eat at a farm.

Australia falls short in Great Barrier Reef efforts: Experts

PARIS: Despite warnings, Australia's efforts to save the Great Barrier Reef still fall short of protecting the world's largest coral reef system from pollution and climate change, experts said Monday. Australia had taken unprecedented steps towards the protection of the Great Barrier Reef, which the United Nations has designated a world heritage site, but more was needed to avoid the site being declared "in danger" by UNESCO, the UN agency which compiles and manages a list of heritage sites.

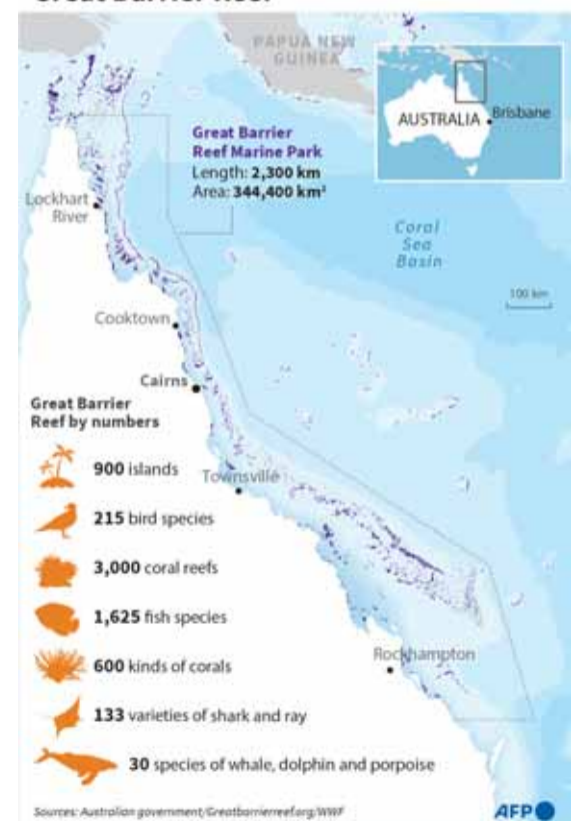
Such a designation puts a government on notice that a site could be removed from the World Heritage list altogether, a very rare event. "Despite the unparalleled science and management efforts" made by Australia over recent years, the Great Barrier Reef is "significantly impacted by climate change factors", Eleanor Carter at the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and UNESCO representative Hans Thulstrup said in a report based on a mission to the Reef. "The resilience of the property to recover from climate change impacts is substantially compromised," they said.

Carter and Thulstrup recommended that the reef should be added to the "World Heritage in Danger" list. The Australian government in January announced a billion-dollar package to protect the reef, seven years after its "Reef 2050" plan, already a response to a UN downgrade threat. The Climate Council pressure group said this latest package of funding was like putting "a Band-Aid on a broken leg".

Monday's report echoed that assessment, saying the reef's ability to recover from climate change impacts was "substantially compromised". In particular, Australian strategies were "lacking clear climate change targets", while some measures were not fully implemented, especially concerning "water quality and fisheries activities", it said. Australia reported in May that 91 percent of the reef's coral had been damaged by bleaching after a prolonged summer heatwave, a process that increases the mortality rates of the affected corals.

After intense lobbying, Australia narrowly avoided the Reef being placed on UNESCO's "in danger" list in the summer of 2021. The then-government of conser-

Great Barrier Reef



vative prime minister Scott Morrison was voted out this year in favor of a center-left government under Anthony Albanese who has promised greener policies. A UNESCO spokesperson told AFP that "a constructive dialogue is ongoing with the current government".

A source close to the matter called Monday's report "a roadmap submitted to the Australian government which should say what it intends to do with it and produce results". The source added: "The path to saving the Great Barrier Reef is narrow, but it exists. Strong and rapid action can produce results."

To be included on UNESCO's world heritage list, a site must have "outstanding universal value". An spot on the list usually means boosted tourism, and improved access to funds and to scientific expertise. Those benefits are threatened when a site is declared "in danger" - which is currently the case of about 50 sites worldwide. Only three sites have ever been dropped from the heritage list completely. —AFP

DANCE CLASSES GIVE HOPE TO PORTUGUESE PRISONERS



Inmates attend a contemporary dance class of the project 'Corpo em Cadeia' ('body in chain') at Linho prison in Alcabideche, near Cascais.—AFP photos

Inside a high-security Portuguese prison, six inmates are moving gracefully around in a series of improvised dance moves, clutching props and following the rhythm of the music. Outside, the high walls of Linho prison in the western suburbs of Lisbon are lined with barbed wire and a loudspeaker barks instructions for prisoners in a metallic voice. But in the contemporary dance studio, in a converted former chapel, inmates are dancing freely to classical music with an object of their choice: a scarf, ball, plastic bags or a light bulb. "Dance-with poetry!" calls out the teacher, 47-year-old dancer Catarina Camara.

She hopes the classes-part of a social dance project that began in April 2019 — can help change the mindset of some of the young prisoners. "When we are here, it feels like we are not in prison," says 30-year-old inmate Manuel



Ballet dancer Catarina Camara (center) joins with inmates for a contemporary dance class, at Linho prison.



Inmates attend a contemporary dance class at Linho prison.



Inmate Manuel Antunes 'Beto' (left) performs with inmate Fabio Tavares during a contemporary dance class at Linho prison.

Antunes. "We can let ourselves go, carried by the moment and by what we feel." There are around 500 prisoners in Linho, many of them young men who have committed serious offences and been handed sentences of 15 years or more. Around a dozen are now taking part in the dance project. "It would be very naive to say that artistic practice saves people," Camara tells AFP. "But art, combined with other factors, can be decisive in changing someone's life."

'Completely transformed'

She says many of the prisoners are "boys who grew up on the street and

who had to fend for themselves very early." "They messed up. Some seriously messed up, and they really need to be supported." Fabio Tavares, 28, says he is one such person. Never interested in



Inmate Manuel Antunes 'Beto' (left) performs with inmate Fabio Tavares during a contemporary dance class, at Linho prison.

contemporary dance before Camara's class, he believes it has "completely transformed" him. "I thought it would be useless... (but) the dance and discussions that we have here help me to see things differently," he says.

The results have been positive beyond the direct impact of the classes too, according to prison director Carlos Moreira. Prisoners participating in the dance project are "more tolerant towards others" and less likely to breach prison rules, he says. Camara hopes that because "dance offers this experience of freedom", it can help the men "prepare for the space of freedom" they will find

on their release from prison.

When he has finished his sentence, Tavares plans to continue dancing and has already been offered training by choreographer Olga Roriz. Roriz, who works with Camara, staged a performance with the prisoner-dancers last summer in Lisbon. The dancers are now preparing for their own show inside the prison. "I feel light when I'm here," says Tavares. "Sometimes it even feels like I'm not in prison but out, in a normal dance class." — AFP



Inmates attend a contemporary dance class at Linho prison in Alcabideche, near Cascais.



Inmates attend a contemporary dance class at Linho prison in Alcabideche, near Cascais.

'Open your soul': Ukraine refugee stories on stage in Warsaw

As a refugee herself, Anna Lysenko finds it cathartic to be playing the character of a Ukrainian woman forced to flee her homeland in a new production in Warsaw. "You open your soul. Those emotions, the pain that is in you, you let it out on to the surface," Lysenko, 21, told AFP as she finished her make up before the play. Lysenko had to escape with her child,

leaving behind her husband who is serving in the armed forces and forcing her and look for a job in theatre in a new city. "Little by little, I came out of my cocoon, out of my depression," she said.

The play "Six Ribs of Anger"—a reference to different levels of trauma—tells the stories of five Ukrainian women living in a refugee centre in Poland. The plot documents their grief, fear and anger as well as their fantasies and how they help each other through the trauma. It is based on extensive interviews carried out by the directors in a sprawling refugee centre near Warsaw soon after Russian troops began their invasion.

The play is being staged at the Komuna Theatre—a short walk from the central train station which saw millions of people transit through at the start of the war. Lysenko plays the character of Lesia, a ballerina

from Bucha—a town near Kyiv that has become synonymous with the alleged atrocities carried out by Russia. In one scene, she imagines herself in a tutu with a sword interrogating the Russian soldier who killed her mother.

There is also a scene in which another character re-lives her last moments with her missing husband and daughter in Mariupol, a city that was devastated while being taken over by Russian troops. "The aim of this play is to give strength to Ukrainians, show what they have endured and how strong they are, and how they can persevere," said the director Benjamin Koc. The director remembered entering the refugee centre for the first time.

"I got shivers. It was a huge space under black sky, a black ceiling," he said, remembering the smell "like in a train when you travel for a long time". "It was quite shock-

ing. Children were playing, roller skating all over the centre so life was continuing there but this life was unbelievably unreal".

'Theatre involves you more'

The play has only ever been staged in Warsaw so far but Koc hopes he will be able to take it on tour, also to raise awareness about the war and its victims. Koc said it was "important" for the actors to take part in the production "because they are themselves in this situation" but it was not always an easy process. "It's impossible to work with them like with people who have a place to live, have comfort. You have to keep it in mind".

The production is deeply moving but there are lighter moments too—such as jokes about Polish cuisine and a scene in which the characters perform dressed up as Eurovision winners Kalush Orchestra.

Mariya Severylova, 33, said she also hoped the play would connect to people in a way that watching the news could not.

"Theatre involves you more. You're sitting face to face. There is a living person in front of you," said Severylova, who was dressed in a brightly-colored tracksuit. Severylova plays Sniezhna, a loud but vulnerable single mother who fantasizes about President Volodymyr Zelensky coming to her aid and one day moving to Italy. The actress said she fled 10 days after the war started and calls it "a terrible tragedy that affects everyone forever". "Every time I perform I know that we are talking about the thing that is most important—there is a war going on and everyone should know about it." —AFP



Edible bubbles called "Oohos" are seen at the end of the production line at Notpla in Hackney, east London. — AFP photos



Edible bubbles called "Ooho" are seen at the end of the production line.



A secret solution biodegradable membrane containing seaweed extract that makes edible bubbles "Oohos" is held up by an R&D chemist at Notpla.

UK start-up behind algae-based packaging bids for Earthshot glory

A British start-up founded by two ex-students from France and Spain, crafting biodegradable packaging from marine plants, is aiming to seal royal approval this week when Prince William unveils his latest Earthshot prizes. Notpla-whose mantra is "we make packaging disappear"-is competing with 14 other firms for five prestigious awards, to be dished out by the prince and a star-studded cast at a ceremony in US city Boston on Friday.

even edible-packaging from seaweed and other marine plants, says they have already felt the competition's benefits.

"Just being there is a massive boost to our visibility," French co-founder Pierre Paslier, 35, told AFP. "So that's already a huge asset to be part of the finalists and I think that if we win, it's just going to be that on a much larger scale." Together with fellow former Royal College of Art student and co-founder Rodrigo Garcia Gonzalez, 38, the duo

engineer at French cosmetics giant L'Oreal who created Notpla with Gonzalez in 2014. "Now we have a flexible film, we make seaweed paper, we have rigid materials. So it's really the beginning of a family of seaweed-based technologies that hopefully can help us stop using so much plastic." He said their early kitchen exploits had eventually led to the secretly-formulated "Ooho" creation. An edible bubble membrane made from seaweed-holding water, sports drinks or other flavored liquids including cocktails and sauces-it is marketed as a replacement for single-use plastic cups, bottles and sachets.

Tasting like a gelatinous candy, it can be consumed whole-like a cherry tomato-or from a larger sachet, making it ideal at sporting events and festivals. It has been widely used at marathons across the UK, including the 2019 London run. Viral online interest has helped attract the attention of investors, with Notpla expanding rapidly to boast more than 60 employees and finding itself on the verge of manufacturing its products on an industrial scale. Production of "Ooho" takes place at the firm's offices in a large warehouse, a stone's throw from the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park in east London. Notpla's growing young team also has laboratories there as it continues to develop new algae-based products.

'Very renewable'

Among the more recent results: a naturally biodegradable coating protecting takeaway food boxes from grease and liquids. The company now supplies industry giant Just Eat in Britain and five other European countries. It also provid-



In this arranged photograph ground down seaweed, "Oohos" and takeaway food packaging with "Notpla Coating" are pictured at Notpla.

ed the packaging for all the food sold during the final of the women's European football championships at London's Wembley Stadium in July. Another of its new innovations is a transparent package for dry goods, such as pasta. Paslier noted that although his products may currently cost more than plastic alternatives, the latter's sales price fails to account for "the impact on societal ecosystems, health for humans or for marine life".

"This is basically going to be paid for [by] the next generations and that doesn't come into the price of plastic that you buy on the market today," he added. "So what we want is to be the most affordable, sustainable packaging

solution that takes into account its whole lifetime costs." Paslier believes seaweed can become the most affordable packaging option, in large part due to its fast growth rate which can top one metre (3.3 feet) a day in the lab.

"It's a very, very renewable resource," he added, noting it doesn't require any fresh water or fertilizers. Its emergence is undoubtedly timely. A recent OECD report found, at the current rate, worldwide plastic waste will triple by 2060 to one billion tons per year, much of which will pollute the oceans and threaten many species. — AFP



A secret solution biodegradable membrane containing seaweed extract that makes edible bubble "Ooho" is poured onto a surface by an R&D chemist.



An employee poses for a photograph with an edible bubble "Ooho".

In its second year, the initiative to reward innovative efforts to combat climate change will then be broadcast on UK and US television on Sunday and Monday, respectively, as well as online. The five winners will each receive a £1 million (\$1.2 million) grant. The co-creator of Notpla, which rather than using environmentally damaging plastics makes various naturally degrading-and

began their eco-business adventure in a small London kitchen. They were intent on finding natural alternatives to petrochemicals-based packaging, sampling a variety of materials from tapioca seeds to other starches.

Seaweed 'family'

"Eventually, we found seaweed," explained Paslier, a former packaging



Seaweed that has been made into powder form is pictured.



French co-founder Pierre Paslier poses for a portrait at Notpla in Hackney, east London.

'Wakanda' still reigns on weak Thanksgiving weekend in N America

"Black Panther: Wakanda Forever" again ruled the North American box office this weekend, while two new high-budget releases had "weak" openings, analysts said. Disney and Marvel's "Wakanda" took in an estimated \$45.9 million for the Friday-through-Sunday period, or \$64 million for the full Thanksgiving weekend starting Wednesday, industry watcher Exhibitor Relations reported Sunday. But the dropoff was sharp after that popular superhero tale, despite the holiday weekend. Overall, the weekend's top dozen films had 12 percent less in ticket sales than the top 12 of a year earlier.

In second place was Disney's computer-animated sci-fi movie "Strange World," at \$11.9 million for three days and \$18.6 million for five days. Variety.com called that a "catastrophic" result for a film with a \$180 million budget. And in third was another new release, Sony's "Devotion," which took in \$6 million for three days (\$9 million for

five). David A. Gross of Franchise Entertainment Research called that "a weak opening for a war action movie." The story about the friendship of two US fighter pilots during the Korean War had a \$90 million budget.

Fourth place went to Searchlight's horror-comedy "The Menu," at \$5.2 million (\$7.3 million). Ralph Fiennes plays a celebrity chef with some dark surprises on the menu. And in fifth was superhero film "Black Adam" from Warner Bros., which took in \$3.4 million (\$4.7 million). Dwayne Johnson stars. Netflix has not released numbers for another much-anticipated film, "Glass Onion: A Knives Out Mystery," but

Gross said the sequel to 2019's "Knives Out" took in an estimated \$9 million in limited release over just three days—a terrific result." Rounding out the top 10 were:

"The Fabelmans" (\$2.22 million for three days; \$3 million for five)

"Bones and All" (\$2.20 million; \$3.6 million)

"Ticket to Paradise" (\$1.9 million; \$2.6 million)

"The Chosen Season 3: Episodes 1&2" (\$1.5 million; \$2.1 million)

"She Said" (\$1.1 million; \$1.5 million)

— AFP



UK retailer Boohoo denies 'slave' labor claims

British online fashion retailer Boohoo denied allegations that staff in a UK warehouse worked in harrowing and health-threatening conditions and regarded themselves as "slaves". The Times newspaper, in an undercover investigation, reported that workers at Boohoo's facility in Burnley, northwest England, complained of racism, sexual harassment, poor safety equipment, inadequate training and "grueling" targets.

However, a Boohoo spokesperson said that it "does not believe the picture painted is reflective of the working environment at our Burnley warehouse". Boohoo "is taking every claim very seriously", the spokesperson said, adding that making sure workers are safe and comfortable is the company's "highest priority".

The Times, whose undercover reporter worked at the warehouse for one month, said each staff member walked the equivalent of a half-marathon (13 miles, 21 kilometers) per shift. Night-time summer temperatures reached up to 32 degrees Celsius (89.6 degrees Fahrenheit) and frequently collapsed, it alleged.

The daily added that Burnley employees are paid £11 (\$13.25) per hour in shifts that are up to 12 hours long. Each staffer must fetch 130 items every hour, it said. The online retail group has annual sales of almost £2.0 billion per year, and its chief executive was paid a £1.3 million bonus this year. Boohoo had already been rocked last year by allegations that one of its suppliers in Leicester, central England, paid workers much less than the national minimum wage.



The group's suppliers were meanwhile accused also of underpaying staff in Pakistan. Boohoo benefited from an online sales boom during the pandemic, during which it expanded aggressively to snap up brands belonging to collapsed UK retail giants. It bought fashion labels Burton, Wallis and Dorothy Perkins from Arcadia, as well as assets of failed UK department store Debenhams. The company employs about 5,000 people worldwide, according to its website. — AFP

Lifestyle | Features



People take selfies while riding camels in Mesaieed, Qatar. — AFP photos



People ride camels in Mesaieed, Qatar.

World Cup frenzy puts strain on Qatar's camels

Shaheen stretched out on the sand and closed his eyes, but there was little time to rest for the camel. World Cup fans coming in droves to the desert outside Doha were ready for their perfect Instagram moment: riding a camel on the rolling dunes.

As Qatar welcomes more than a million fans for the monthlong World Cup, even its camels are working overtime. Visitors in numbers the tiny emirate has never before seen are rushing to finish a bucket list of Gulf tourist experiences between games: ride on a camel's back, take pictures with falcons and wander through the alleyways of traditional markets.

On a recent Friday afternoon, hundreds of visitors in soccer uniforms or draped in flags waited for their turn to mount the humpbacked animals. Camels that did not rise were forced up by their handlers. When one camel let out a loud grunt, a woman from Australia shrieked, "it sounds like they're being violated!" Nearby, a group of men from Mexico dressed in white Qatari thobes and head-dresses took selfies.

"It's really an amazing feeling because you feel so tall," 28-year-old Juan Gaul



A camel waits for the next group of riders in Mesaieed, Qatar.

said after his ride. The Argentine fan was visiting Qatar for a week from Australia. Cashing in on the opportunity are the animals' handlers who, thanks to the World Cup, are making several times more than they normally would. "There's a lot of money coming in," said Ali Jaber al Ali, a 49 year-old Bedouin camel herder from Sudan. "Thank god, but it's a lot of pressure."

Al Ali came to Qatar 15 years ago but has worked with camels since he was a child. On an average weekday before the World Cup, Al Ali said his company would offer around 20 rides per day and 50 on weekends. Since the World Cup started,

Al Ali and the men he works with are providing 500 rides in the morning and another 500 in the evening. The company went from having 15 camels to 60, he said. "Tour guides want to move things fast," Al Ali said, "so they add pressure on us."

As crowds formed around them, many camels sat statue-like with cloth muzzles covering their mouths and bright saddles on their bodies. The smell of dung filled the air. Like other Gulf cultures, camels once provided Qataris a vital form of transport and helped in the exploration and development of trade routes. Today, the ungulates figure into cultural pastimes: camel racing is a popular sport that takes place on old-school tracks outside the city.

Al Ali said he knows when an animal is tired - usually if it refuses to get up or sits back down after rising to its feet. He can identify each camel by its facial features. "I am a Bedouin. I come from a family of Bedouins who care for camels. I grew up loving them," Al Ali said. But the sudden rise in tourists means there's less time to rest between rides, he said. A short ride lasts just 10 minutes while longer ones run 20 to 30 minutes long.

Normally, Al Ali said a camel can rest after five rides. "Now, people are saying we can't wait ... because they have other plans they need to go to in the middle of the desert," he said. Since the World Cup started, the animals are taken for 15 to 20 - sometimes even 40 rides - without a break.

Al Ali's day starts around 4:30 a.m., when he feeds the animals and gets them ready for customers. Some tourists have been arriving at dawn, he said, hoping to get the perfect sunrise shot, "so we have to work with them and take photos for them." From midday until 2 pm, both handlers and camels rest, he said. "Then we start getting ready for the afternoon battle."

But not every visitor has been taken by the experience. Pablo Corigliano, a 47 year-old real estate agent from Buenos



A man takes a selfie while riding a camel in Mesaieed, Qatar.



A camel sits in the sand between tour groups in Mesaieed, Qatar.

Aires, said he was hoping for something more authentic. The excursions start on a stretch of desert by the side of a highway, not far from the industrial city of Mesaieed and its vast oil refineries. "I was expecting something more wild," said Corigliano. "I thought I would be crossing the desert,

but when I arrived, I saw a typical tourist point." Soon after, Corigliano and a group of friends looked for a dune buggy to race into the desert. — AFP



People pose for a photo atop camels in Mesaieed, Qatar.

Wordplay, blank signs, music: How China is protesting zero-COVID

Holding up blank pieces of paper, co-opting the national anthem, complicated wordplays: protesters in China are devising a myriad of creative ways to voice dissent against the government and its zero-COVID policy. Here's how many Chinese have attempted to evade censorship to demonstrate their anger and show support for protests:

Blank signs

Protesters in multiple cities, including Beijing on Sunday, held up blank A4-sized sheets of white paper in a sign of solidarity and a nod to the lack of free speech in China. Others posted white squares on their WeChat social media profiles. Viral photos also appeared to show students from top Chinese university Tsinghua holding up signs showing Friedmann equations-chosen for the similarity between the physicist's name and the phrase "freed man" or "freedom". And after authorities

blocked more obvious keywords and place names from internet searches, nonsensical posts comprising repeated characters with "positive" meanings went viral on the WeChat super-app and the Twitter-like Weibo, including some that simply read "right right right right right" and "good good good".

By Monday, many of the earlier nonsense posts and references to "A4 paper" had been wiped from social sites, though similar posts continued to spread. Social media users also turned to advanced wordplay to discuss the protests, using terms like "banana peel", which has the same initials as President Xi Jinping's name in Chinese, and "shrimp moss", which sounds similar to the phrase "step down".

Sarcasm

Some crowds over the weekend called explicitly for Xi to step down, and yelled slogans like "No to Covid tests, yes to freedom," referencing a banner hung up by a solo protester in Beijing just before the Communist Party Congress in October. Others were more cautious, holding what appeared to be silent protests and offering flowers and candles to commemorate victims of a deadly fire in

Xinjiang last week that prompted the latest wave of anger.

In Beijing, a crowd at the Liangma River on Sunday night shouted "I want to do Covid tests! I want to scan my health code," inspiring Weibo users to post similarly sarcastic phrases. Video clips of Xi as well as quotes from the president have been repurposed to support mass demonstrations, including one clip of him saying: "Now the Chinese people are organised and aren't to be trifled with."

Music, football

Groups in multiple locations across China sang the national anthem and the Internationale at their gatherings, preempting accusations by Beijing that protests were unpatriotic or instigated by foreign forces. And one viral video that was swiftly taken down by censors purportedly showed students at a university dormitory singing the song "Boundless Oceans, Vast Skies" by Cantonese pop band Beyond-an ode to freedom also adopted by pro-democracy protesters in Hong Kong before the pandemic.

Netizens also spread memes about the ongoing World Cup in Qatar, using images of unmasked football fans to mock China's strict zero-Covid policy. In one widely

shared video that has since been censored, a social media user overlaid audio of people screaming "put your mask on!" and "do a Covid test" on scenes of cheering World Cup spectators.

Jumping the firewall

International social media platforms like Twitter and Instagram are blocked by China's virtual Great Firewall, but tech-savvy residents have been able to post information on the protests using special Virtual Private Network (VPN) software. To get the message out beyond China's borders, anonymously run Twitter accounts are opening up their inboxes to video submissions from across the country, while several protest live streams have been hosted on Instagram.

And Chinese students studying abroad have organized similar demonstrations around the world, including in several North American and European cities. In one Instagram video geolocated by AFP, singing protestors put up a mock street sign from Shanghai's Urumqi Road on a lamppost outside China's consulate in Toronto, Canada. — AFP



Prominent Iran actor freed on bail

A prominent Iranian actor has been released on bail more than a week after her arrest for having supported nationwide protests, local media reported. Hengameh Ghaziani "was released today based on an order from judicial authorities," state news agency IRNA reported late Sunday. Tasnim news agency added that she was let out on bail.

Her release came a day after two of the most prominent figures arrested over the demonstrations-former international footballer Voria Ghafouri and dissident Hossein Ronaghi-were also freed on bail, reports said. Iran's judiciary reported on November 20 that Ghaziani was among eight celebrities and politicians interrogated for their comments about the protest sparked by the September 16 death in custody of Mahsa Amini, 22.

Amini had been arrested for an alleged breach of Iran's strict dress rules for women. Thousands of people have been arrested and dozens killed in connection with what Iranian officials call "riots" fomented by Western enemies. Before her detention Ghaziani, 52, had already indicated she had been summoned by the judiciary, and then published a video on Instagram of herself removing the obligatory hijab head covering. She is a two-time winner, in 2008 and 2012, of the best female actor award at Tehran's Fajr film festival. — AFP



Students hold up placards including blank white sheets of paper on the campus of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, in solidarity with protests held on the mainland over Beijing's COVID-19 restrictions. — AFP photos



Members of the local Chinese community hold placards at a vigil in support of the protests against Beijing's zero-COVID policy taking place across China.

Sports

Eagles down Packers; Rodgers exits as Bengals topple Titans

Surging Cincinnati Bengals claim third straight victory

LOS ANGELES: Jalen Hurts and the Philadelphia Eagles ran over Green Bay on Sunday, knocking Packers quarterback Aaron Rodgers out in the third quarter of a 40-33 NFL victory. The Eagles improved their NFL-best record to 10-1 while the Packers, their playoff ambitions in tatters, fell to 4-8. "We got the GOAT!" Eagles quarterback Hurts said in a post-game television interview, though he was quick to wish four-time NFL Most Valuable Player Rodgers a speedy recovery. Rodgers, already nursing a broken thumb, said he suffered a rib injury in the first half, which was aggravated in the third quarter apparently when he absorbed one of three sacks on the night.

"I was just having a hard time breathing and rotating my upper body," Rodgers said. "I was worried about a punctured lung as well, so I wanted to get that checked out. I'll get a scan tomorrow." Rodgers said his lung was fine, and despite "intense" pain he envisioned playing next weekend "as long as I check out OK tomorrow." The Packers had trimmed the deficit to 34-23 with a field goal before Rodgers departed.

Backup Jordan Love connected with Christian Watson for a 63-yard touchdown and authored a field goal drive, but it wasn't enough against the formidable Eagles offense. Hurts piled on 310 total yards, completing 16 of 28 passes for two touchdowns. His 157 rushing yards set the Eagles' single-game record for a quarterback as the team gained a whopping 363 yards on the ground. Hurts connected with Quez Watkins for a 30-yard touchdown to make it 27-20 at halftime, and pushed the lead to 34-20 midway through the third with a six-yard scoring pass to A.J. Brown.

Bengals claim victory

Elsewhere on Sunday, the suddenly surging Cincinnati Bengals claimed a third straight victory on Sunday as the Miami Dolphins and Kansas City Chiefs both took their win streaks to five games. The Bengals, who fell to the Los Angeles Rams in last season's Super Bowl, beat the AFC South-leading Tennessee Titans, 20-16, in Nashville.

Quarterback Joe Burrow hit Tee Higgins with a 27-yard touchdown pass in the fourth quarter to secure a fifth win in six games for the 7-4 Bengals. "This is the kind of game that great teams win," Burrow said. "It's not always going to be pretty. This is the NFL. You're playing really, really good teams on the opposing end. You've got to find ways to win, and we're starting to do that."

In Kansas City, the Chiefs notched a 26-10 win over the Rams in a game quarterback Patrick Mahomes called "ugly." Mahomes threw one TD. Isiah Pacheco ran for another and Harrison Butker kicked four field goals as the Chiefs failed to convert five of their six red-zone scoring chances into touchdowns. "I felt like we didn't execute at a high level in the red zone," Mahomes said. "I threw a dumb, dumb interception there at the end of the game. But it's a team game. The defense stepped up—they played great."

Browns down Bucs

Miami's fifth straight victory was a comfortable 30-15 decision against the hapless Houston Texans. Dolphins quarterback Tua Tagovailoa threw for 299 yards and one touchdown and extended his run without an interception



PHILADELPHIA: Fletcher Cox #91 of the Philadelphia Eagles sacks Aaron Rodgers #12 of the Green Bay Packers during the second quarter at Lincoln Financial Field on November 27, 2022. —AFP

to four games. The Las Vegas Raiders won a shootout in Seattle in overtime, beating the Seahawks, 40-34.

In Cleveland, Nick Chubb ran in an overtime touchdown to give the Browns a 23-17 comeback win over Tom Brady and the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. Tampa Bay had led

17-10 going into the fourth quarter after Brady had found Ko Kieft with a five-yard pass in the third. But with 32 seconds left on the clock, Browns quarterback Jacoby Brissett found David Njoku in the endzone to take the game into overtime. —AFP

Warriors stun Timberwolves, Celtics cruise

LOS ANGELES: Stephen Curry scored 25 points and the Golden State Warriors parlayed a hot start into a comfortable 137-114 NBA win over the Minnesota Timberwolves on Sunday. Curry added 11 rebounds and eight assists while Draymond Green posted his first double-double of the season with 19 points and 11 assists as the reigning NBA champions put together three straight victories for the first time this season. It was just their second away victory of the campaign and moved them to 11-10, the first time in a month they have been above .500.

The Warriors, seemingly determined to turn around their dismal fortunes on the road, exploded out of the gate, engineering a 17-0 scoring run on the way to 47 first-quarter points and a 20-point lead after the first period. They were up by 20 going into the fourth although the Timberwolves, led by 26 points from Anthony Edwards with 21 from Karl-Anthony Towns, cut that by half with 5:31 remaining. Golden State responded, with Curry draining a three-pointer before Klay Thompson delivered a trey, a steal and another three-pointer to push the lead back to 19.

Six Warriors players finished in double figures, Thompson posting 21 and Jordan Poole adding 24 off the bench. "I think what really propelled us that first half, especially defensively, is not fouling," Thompson said. "As simple as it sounds, it has us playing at such a higher level. "Our defense obviously fuels our offense, getting out in transition, hitting the open man. And it's crazy how when we play simple basketball, it's a thing of beauty." The Warriors will try to build more momentum on the road when they travel to Dallas for a Western Conference finals rematch on Tuesday.

Mavs fall to Bucks

The Mavs will be looking to rebound at home after falling 124-115 to the Bucks in Milwaukee on Sunday. Giannis Antetokounmpo scored 30 points with 11 rebounds for the Bucks and Grayson Allen, who was a perfect seven-for-seven from three-point range in the first half, added 25. Luka Doncic scored 27 points to lead Dallas, who suffered a fourth straight defeat.

It was no surprise to see the league-leading Boston Celtics cruise to a 130-121 home victory over the Washington Wizards. Even with MVP candidate Jayson Tatum sidelined with a sore ankle, the Celtics offense was explosive. Boston connected on 16 of 34 three-point attempts and shot 55 percent from the field overall in a game that was more lopsided than the final score indicated. —AFP

Kuwait's athletes developing and executing new skills

By Faten Omar

KUWAIT: Kuwaiti athletes are developing and executing new skills. Kuwait Times spoke with Lujain Al-Mulla, captain of 'Pampered Cats', a Kuwaiti ultimate frisbee team, to learn more about the sport.

Kuwait Times: Tell us more about yourself.

Lujain Al-Mulla: I have been playing ultimate frisbee for four years. It became serious at the end of 2020, when a seasoned player from Colombia, Christian Varon, moved to Kuwait and began training the community on a more advanced level. My team formed officially at the beginning of 2021 after winning as an unofficial team in a local league. After consistent training, we built a lineup we could send internationally to play in our first regional tournament at the end of 2021. Since then, we have continued to train and take part in regional tournaments both as a team and individually.

Kuwait Times: What is ultimate frisbee?

Al-Mulla: Ultimate Frisbee is a team sport played worldwide. It is familiar in that it is played on a field the size of a football pitch with two end-zones marked by horizontal lines that span across the field at each end; there are seven against seven players on the field, with players having to pivot around one leg when they have possession of the disc. The game aims to pass the frisbee down the field until a player receives it inside the opponent's endzone; that's how a point is scored. The sport has three divisions, which are mixed, women's, and open (the latter is predominantly a men's division), with Middle Eastern clubs playing exclusively in the mixed division. The sport was not always steadily practiced in Kuwait and has only been played on a serious level since 2020.

Kuwait Times: What tournament did you participate in?

Al-Mulla: Pampered Cats participated in the Middle East North Africa Championships both in 2021 and in November 2022, winning first place in only our second participation in the biggest regional tournament, one which hosted 16 teams from across the Middle East and was held this year in Jeddah. The victory was one we had dreamed of the entire year we'd been preparing for it with consistent training and hard work. After placing 7th last year in our first MENA Championships and winning the Spirit of the Game Award, we were hungry for the podium win that we finally achieved this year.

Kuwait Times: Do you find the needed support for the game in Kuwait?

Al-Mulla: Unfortunately, we are not supported at all locally, which is a great shame. We have faced issues finding appropriate fields to train on since we are a mixed team, and due to the lack of official recognition of the sport in Kuwait.

Kuwait Times: What was the biggest challenge in building a Kuwaiti national team?

Al-Mulla: Due to the lack of recognition of the sport, we cannot put together a national team, so we represent Kuwait as an independent club made up of both Kuwaitis and expatriates. One of the biggest challenges we face is finding women to join and commit to the sport - especially Kuwaiti women. We provide weekly, free community training, and I train women at the Gulf University for Science and Technology with a very minimal female turnout. This is a challenge we are currently struggling with, and we hope



that more exposure to our team and sport can encourage more female interest and participation.

Kuwait Times: What are the players' experiences with this kind of sport?

Al-Mulla: Locally, most players have now played regionally in the Middle East North Africa Championships and the Egypt Open. I've also had the opportunity to play in the Spanish Nationals with a team from Mallorca, in the US Nationals with a master's team from Texas, and in one of the world's biggest ultimate frisbee tournaments in Amsterdam with team Ultimate Palestine. Besides these tournaments, we try to put together local tournaments, but it is difficult with the limited number of local teams.

Kuwait Times: While preparing for a game, do you emphasize athletic preparation?

Al-Mulla: Year-round, Pampered Cats train up to three times a week. This includes one day a week of intensive physical training to improve our stamina, agility, speed and overall physical performance. This training, both physical and technical, is led by our incredible team coach, Christian Varon, who has helped prepare us for the physicality of playing on the international stage.

Kuwait Times: Are there any long-term goals or plans for the future?

Al-Mulla: Our upcoming goal, now that we have won the biggest regional tournament, is to get Pampered Cats in more international championships. There are many amazing tournaments around the world that we have our hearts set on, and we are hoping we catch the eye of a sponsor that can help us achieve these aspirations. Pampered Cats' long-term plans include recruiting more young people who



can keep this sport alive in Kuwait.

We want to reach out to schools and universities and harness the energy of the youth in a sport virtually untapped in Kuwait - one that can open many doors and opportunities for Kuwait's young athletes to excel up to the international level. I welcome any young women reading this to reach out to me about the women's-only training that I am holding for free every week. I also invite young men to contact Pampered Cats and be a part of the mixed team's training. We have a great foundational structure to get anyone new to the sport of ultimate frisbee started.

Kuwait Times: Your last message to our readers.
Al-Mulla: You do not need to be an established athlete to play ultimate frisbee; you just need the right spirit!

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Germany salvage World Cup 1-1 draw with Spain

Fuellkrug digs Germany out of World Cup hole

AL KHOR: A wildcard selection in Germany's World Cup squad, journeyman striker Niclas Fuellkrug—nicknamed 'Gap' due to a missing front tooth—may have plugged coach Hansi Flick's biggest hole in Qatar. Stalked by misfortune in an injury-hit career, Fuellkrug's late equalizer against Spain on Sunday revived Germany's spluttering World Cup campaign and offered a lesson in perseverance.

Nothing has come easy for the 29-year-old Fuellkrug, who 12 months ago was toiling away in the second division, far from the national team radar after four major knee operations. It was around that time Fuellkrug hit a rich vein of form which propelled Werder Bremen back into the top flight. A return to the elite has not slowed Fuellkrug, who is the top German scorer in the Bundesliga this season with 10 goals in 14 matches.

With Germany in danger of a second successive World Cup group-stage exit, Flick turned to Fuellkrug to come off the bench against Spain and the striker delivered what could prove a turning point for the four-time world champions. Speaking after the 1-1 draw at the Al Bayt Stadium, Flick summed up Fuellkrug's value to the team, saying "he showed us how to score goals".

While Flick's statement may have been made partly in jest, it does strike at the heart of a problem German football has had since the retirement of all-time top scorer Miroslav Klose after their World Cup win in 2014. Germany scored 18 goals on their way to the 2014 title, seven of which came in the semi-final demolition of Brazil. In 2010, the Germans scored 16 on their way to a third-place finish. When they crashed out in the first round in 2018, their earliest World Cup elimi-

nation in 80 years, they found the net only twice.

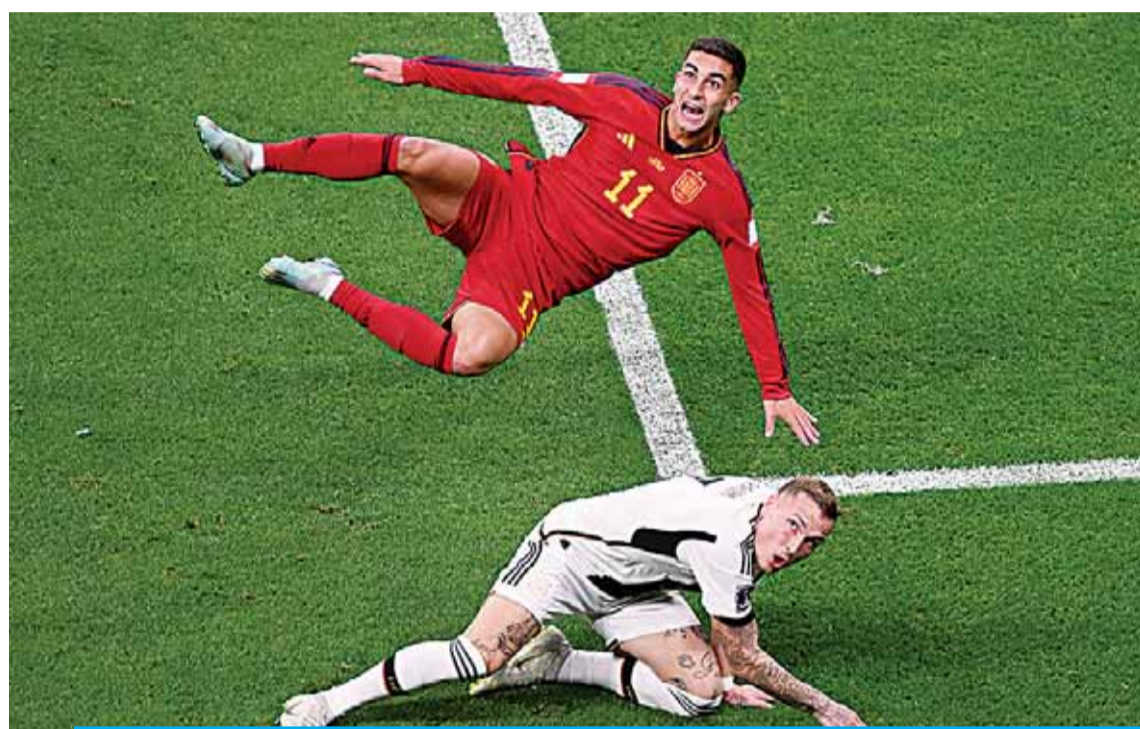
After losing 2-1 to Japan in their opening game in Qatar, Germany were again teetering on the precipice. Enter Fuellkrug, whose last Germany appearance before he made his senior debut in a pre-tournament friendly against Oman had come for the Under-20 side eight years ago. He became Germany's oldest outfield debutant for 20 years as he scored against Oman hours before arriving in Qatar and his well-timed purple patch has thrust him onto the big stage.

'A good lad'

With goal difference potentially crucial in Group E, where each team can still qualify with one game to play, the inclusion of a sure-fire goalscorer in the starting XI may seem logical, particularly for a team without one. Flick would not be drawn on Sunday whether his striker's heroics have earned him a starting spot against Costa Rica.

"It is too early after the game to make a statement, but we are very happy - he showed his determination. He gives a lot to the team not just his goals, but he's also a good lad. He has his heart in the right place and we are very happy to have him." It was a sentiment shared by the unheralded striker's more illustrious teammates, including Thomas Mueller who was subbed off for Fuellkrug and may have the most to lose by his inclusion. "It was outstanding the way Fuellkrug nailed it in like that. It's a great story."

Manchester City midfielder Ilkay Gundogan said "you can see from Niclas' goal the quality that he has. It was a brutally important goal", while Leon Goretzka praised his teammate's "pure determina-



AL KHOR: Spain's forward #11 Ferran Torres flies over Germany's defender #03 David Raum during the Qatar 2022 World Cup Group E football match between Spain and Germany on November 27, 2022. —AFP

tion" to score. Fuellkrug himself tried his best to make sure his teammates did not get too carried away. "We really wanted to pull (this game) back.

That was really important for the atmosphere," Fuellkrug told ZDF. "But we shouldn't lose our heads. We still have room for improvement." —AFP

Top scorer Valencia back in World Cup spotlight

DOHA: Journeyman Ecuador striker Enner Valencia has drifted in and out—mainly out—of planet football's consciousness. The striker skirts the periphery of relevance until arriving at the World Cup, where suddenly he is in his element. Ecuador's 33-year-old captain burst into the limelight in Brazil 2014, scoring three in the group phase against Switzerland and Honduras, although his team were eliminated.

Eight years later, in the Qatar curtain-raiser on November 20, Valencia spoiled the party for the hosts with a brace to secure a 2-0 win and saw another ruled out. Valencia's spot-kick opener made him the oldest player to score the tournament's opening goal. Ecuador thrilled against the Netherlands in their second match and deserved more than a 1-1 draw, in which Valencia struck again, emphasizing his penchant for the big occasion.

Valencia is the tournament's joint top goalscorer, along with France's Kylian Mbappe, on three goals from two games. "We know what a spectacular captain we have," said left-back Pervis Estupinan. "He is always fighting to improve." Valencia is only the fourth player to score six consecutive goals for a nation at the World Cup, behind Portugal great Eusebio, Italy's Paolo Rossi and Russia's Oleg Salenko.

While coach Gustavo Alfaro rightly depends on Ecuador's exciting youngsters, including Brighton's Moises Caicedo, Estupinan and Jeremy Sarmiento, Valencia remains an essential presence. Formerly a winger, Valencia has developed into Ecuador's main goal threat and is their all-time top scorer with 38 goals. Ahead of the World Cup he suffered a barren spell, with just one goal in eight games, but right on cue, the goals are flowing again in Qatar.

Ecuador's main concern ahead is that Valencia has been

forced off injured in both games, because of a knee problem. "I did tests and it showed I have a knee sprain, which is annoying me a bit," said the striker after the Netherlands draw. "I played through the pain but the important thing is that I could help the team and we're still strong. The knee's improving, I have to do good recovery work and I hope to be able to play (against Senegal)."

Well travelled

After starting his career with Emelec in Ecuador's top flight, which he won in 2013, Valencia earned a move to Mexican side Pachuca. A prolific season with 18 goals in 23 league games earned him a call-up to Ecuador's 2014 World Cup squad, where performances attracted Premier League interest. West Ham pounced, splashing £12 million (\$14.5 million) on the forward, who scored a brilliant goal lashed in from range on his full league debut against Hull City. It proved a start impossible to live up to and he only managed four goals in 32 appearances in his first league campaign, and the same paltry contribution in his second.

West Ham loaned him to Everton, where he continued to struggle, putting a full stop on his Premier League adventure. During his time at Everton in 2016, Valencia made headlines when he was chased by police back in his homeland out of a stadium. The forward was appearing in a World Cup qualifier against Chile but after retiring injured, he sped off in a cart alongside the pitch while police plodded after him. They were trying to question him over unpaid alimony per allegations from his ex-wife, with the arrest warrant later revoked.

Valencia spoke out on Twitter after the incident, saying he had won custody of his then five-year-old daughter Beira. He headed back to Mexico in 2017 for a more profitable three years with Tigres, before Turkish side Fenerbahce signed him in the summer of 2020. With 13 goals in 12 games, Valencia is the division's top goalscorer this season, finding the kind of form Ecuador are now profiting from. The country's hopes are pinned to Valencia's mast once again, and if he delivers against Senegal he can fire them into the knock-outs for only the second time in their history. —AFP



TRIPOLI: Libyans watch the Qatar 2022 World Cup Group A football match in the capital Tripoli. Hundreds of football fans gather in front of a huge screen in a Libyan park to watch the day's World Cup matches, a welcome escape in a country wracked by conflict. —AFP

Libyans, divided by conflict, unite around football

TRIPOLI: Hundreds of football fans gather in front of a huge screen in a Libyan park to watch the day's World Cup matches, a welcome escape in a country wracked by conflict. Libya's public spaces agency has set up giant screens in parks across the capital Tripoli, allowing fans to watch matches for free under the autumn sun.

The biggest is in a seafront park next to the iconic Martyr's Square. "It's a great initiative," said Walid Al-Amari, a one-time parliamentary candidate who has watched every match since the tournament kicked off on November 20. "Libyans love sport," he said. Young Libyans "don't care about politics, which has only brought them division and chaos." Libyans have endured repeated conflicts and atrocities during more than a decade of political crisis since the 2011 revolt that overthrew dictator Muammar Gaddafi.

Sport is one of the few leisure activities available to bored young people - and football is by far the most popular. Perched on ubiquitous white plastic chairs or cross-legged on the floor, spectators glued their eyes to the screen while children munched on candyfloss or ran across the park. "I think this has a huge effect on our morale and is wiping away some of the negative things that have been weighing us down with the current political situation," Amari said.

Mohamad Trabelsi, a 68-year-old retiree, agreed. "Being able to watch it for free is beautiful," he said. "It brings together hundreds of young people in a friendly

atmosphere." He bemoaned the fact that "so many families and young people can't afford to watch the matches on paying satellite channels." Trabelsi also regretted the fact that unlike World Cup host Qatar, Libya - a fellow hydrocarbon export giant - was far from being able to host such a tournament. But that has not stopped Libyans enjoying the cup, along with other residents of the city.

Ghanaians, Cameroonians and Ivoirians, as well as Arabs from neighboring Tunisia, Algeria and Egypt attend the matches, and by nightfall, the park is heaving. Taher, a young Algerian on holiday visiting Libyan friends, says the matches showed that the security situation has improved. "The atmosphere is beautiful," he said. Khaled, a builder from Egypt, says he usually goes elsewhere to spend his time off. But, he says, "it's nicer watching the matches in the open air, by the sea, instead of being in a crowded, noisy cafe." —AFP

Today's matches

FIFA World Cup 2022	
Ecuador v Senegal	18:00
beIN Sports Connect	
beIN SPORTS	
Netherlands v Qatar	18:00
beIN Sports Connect	
beIN SPORTS	
Iran v United States	22:00
beIN Sports 2 FR	
Wales v England	22:00
BBC One	



DOHA: Netherlands' defender #05 Nathan Ake (left) and Ecuador's forward #13 Enner Valencia jump for the ball during the Qatar 2022 World Cup Group A football match between the Netherlands and Ecuador at the Khalifa International Stadium in Doha. —AFP

The last chance for Belgium's 'too old' golden generation

DOHA: Belgium's much vaunted team have one last chance to extend their final World Cup together this week after crashing to defeat by Morocco, with coach Roberto Martinez and his players under mounting pressure. Anything other than victory against Croatia on Thursday could see the world's second-ranked side heading home after the group stage. Kevin De Bruyne said in an interview with The Guardian before the 2-0

loss to Morocco that his team was "too old" and had "no chance" of winning the World Cup.

Martinez insisted after the game that it might have been a "double bluff" from the Manchester City star, but if he was being serious, it would have been hard to disagree based on their performances in Qatar so far. Spaniard Martinez has largely stuck by the experienced players who have reached at least the quarter-finals at each of the past four major tournaments. In the game against Morocco and the fortunate 1-0 win over Canada, Belgium were overrun, outpaced and offered no real threat going forward.

The absence of record goalscorer Romelu Lukaku through injury has been a blow, but even his introduction late on against Morocco was born of desperation and the Inter Milan man offered very little. The last six years have provided the best spell of sustained success in Belgium's

history, with the third-place finish at the 2018 World Cup in Russia the closest the current team have come to lifting a major title.

Ten of the 14 players who featured in the semi-final loss to eventual winners France four years ago are still in the squad. Seven of the starting XI against Morocco are in their 30s - Thibaut Courtois, Jan Vertonghen, Toby Alderweireld, Thomas Meunier, Axel Witsel, De Bruyne and captain Eden Hazard. The Red Devils' attacking style of play has vanished after cruising through qualifying unbeaten. The Belgian press has been extremely critical of the team, with website HLN saying "there must be new blood".

'Nothing to lose'

Martinez believes that being in a last chance saloon

will bring the best out of his ageing team. "In the last game we have to play to win it and as if we have nothing to lose," he said. "If we win against Croatia we're (still) in the World Cup and that's a big motivation." On the eve of the Morocco defeat, Hazard also said he thought Belgium's best chance of becoming world champions had been and gone.

There have been rumors of disharmony in the squad, with Vertonghen appearing to sarcastically hit out at the 31-year-old De Bruyne's comments. "A lot of things go through my mind now, but those are things that are best not said on camera," he told broadcaster TV Spozza. "Maybe also we attack badly because the guys (forwards) are too old." Martinez admitted his players were playing "without joy" and with a "fear of losing", but he has left many bright, younger talents sitting on the bench. —AFP

Brazil edge out Switzerland to book World Cup last 16

Vinicius' goal disallowed following a VAR check

DOHA: A Brazil side lacking spark without the injured Neymar needed a late strike from Casemiro to edge out Switzerland 1-0 on Monday as the five-time winners secured their place in the World Cup last 16 with one game to spare. The Brazilians had been frustrated by an obdurate Swiss side at Doha's Stadium 974 and it looked as if they would have to settle for a point after a Vinicius Junior strike in the second half was disallowed for offside following a VAR check.

But then, with seven minutes remaining, Bruno Guimarães flicked the ball on to Casemiro just inside the box and the Manchester United midfielder's volley flew into the net with the help of a slight but significant deflection off Manuel Akanji. Tite's side are just the second team to qualify for the last 16 after France and the only side apart from the holders to have won both group matches so far in Qatar. With six points they will be tempted to rest players for their final Group G game against Cameroon on Friday, when a draw will secure them top spot.

Switzerland, meanwhile, failed to muster a shot on target but remain on course to qualify too, with the 3-3 draw between Serbia and Cameroon earlier meaning a win against the Serbians will take Murat Yakin's side through and a draw may also suffice. They have made a habit of making at least the first knockout round at major tournaments, while Brazil are in Qatar to win a sixth World Cup and nothing less will do.

The Selecao were always going to miss Neymar, although coach Tite has said he is confident the Paris Saint-Germain superstar will recover from his ankle injury to play a part again at the finals. After the class of Richarlison made the difference in their opening win over Serbia, this was a reminder for the

habitually a centre-back for Real Madrid - stood in for the injured Danilo at right-back. There were only flashes of what Brazil could do in a frustrating first half, with the loudest cheers from the masses of supporters in yellow and green in the stands coming when the big screen showed two-time World Cup-winning striker Ronaldo in the stands.

Vinicius had the best chance of the opening period when he connected with a Raphinha cross at the back post in the 27th minute, but Yann Sommer tipped the Real Madrid winger's effort behind. Switzerland were without one of their main creative sparks in Xherdan Shaqiri, who was missing due to an apparent thigh problem and replaced by Fabian Rieder. That Tite was not satisfied with Brazil's first-half showing was clear

when he hooked Paqueta at half-time and sent on Rodrygo.

The 21-year-old was involved when Brazil thought they had taken the lead just after the hour mark, helping gain possession in midfield before Casemiro released Vinicius to run through and beat Sommer. But the celebrations were cut short as the goal was disallowed by VAR for an offside against Richarlison. Tite turned to his bench and sent on more fresh attackers in Gabriel Jesus and Antony, but the goal finally arrived from one of the least likely sources in Casemiro and Brazil saw out a deserved victory. —AFP



FIFA President Gianni Infantino talks with Qatar's Amir Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al-Thani during the Qatar 2022 World Cup Group G football match between Brazil and Switzerland at Stadium 974 in Doha on November 28, 2022. — AFP photos



South Korea's forward #09 Cho Gue-sung (left) fights for the ball with Ghana's midfielder #05 Thomas Partey during the Qatar 2022 World Cup Group H football match on November 28, 2022.



South Korea fans react after the Qatar 2022 World Cup Group H football match between South Korea and Ghana on November 28, 2022.



South Korean and Ghana supporters pose for a photograph in the Waqif souk on November 28, 2022 during the Qatar 2022 World Cup football tournament.



Serbia's forward #10 Dusan Tadic falls down during the Qatar 2022 World Cup Group G football match between Cameroon and Serbia on November 28, 2022.



A Brazil supporter kisses a replica of the World Cup trophy as he waits for the start of the Qatar 2022 World Cup Group G football match between Brazil and Switzerland.



DOHA: Brazil's defender #14 Eder Militao and Switzerland's forward #07 Breel Embolo fight for the ball during the Qatar 2022 World Cup Group G football match between Brazil and Switzerland on November 28, 2022. — AFP

Ghana stun South Korea in a thriller

DOHA: Mohammed Kudus scored twice as Ghana beat South Korea 3-2 in a pulsating World Cup encounter on Monday to keep their World Cup hopes alive and leave Paulo Bento's side facing an early exit. Mohammed Salisu opened the scoring against the run of play midway through the first half at Education City Stadium and Ajax midfielder Kudus doubled the Black Stars' lead.

But the Asian side, who looked toothless in the first half, roared back after the break, pulling level through a quickfire double from forward Cho Gue-sung either side of the hour mark. Ghana looked shell-shocked as the Korean fans celebrated wildly but they were back in front in the 68th minute when Kudus finished calmly at the back post after Inaki Williams failed to connect with a cross from the left. The result takes Ghana into second in Group H on three points.

Cristiano Ronaldo's Portugal will have six points and secure qualification for the last 16 if they beat Uruguay in the later kick-off in Qatar. Despite their efforts, South Korea look likely to crash out of the tournament at the group stage for the third straight World Cup. The Asian side, captained by Son Heung-min, were quicker to settle, forcing a succession of corners as they dominated possession but



AL-RAYYAN: Ghana's defender #04 Mohammed Salisu (right) scores his team's first goal during the Qatar 2022 World Cup Group H football match between South Korea and Ghana on November 28, 2022. — AFP

they were unable to fashion a shot on target in the entire first half.

Son looked uncomfortable in the black face mask he is wearing after having surgery for a facial injury he suffered while playing for Spurs, constantly readjusting it. Ghana, who lost their opener 3-2 to Portugal, struggled to gain a foothold in the game. But the match totally changed complexion in the 24th minute when the impressive Jordan Ayew, playing down the left for Ghana, swung in a cross following a free-kick.

South Korea failed to clear and Southampton centre-back Salisu finished with his left foot, spark-

ing wild scenes of celebration among the Ghana fans decked out in red, white and green. The goal revitalized the African nation, who reached the quarter-finals in 2010, with South Korea struggling to deal with their physicality and direct approach. Now playing with flair and confidence, Ghana poured forward and doubled their lead in the 34th minute when Kudus powered a header home after a pin-point Jordan Ayew cross from the left.

Captain Andre Ayew - the brother of Jordan - called his men into a team huddle on the pitch and the players got soaked by the sprinklers before they went off for their half-time break. The Koreans at last produced an effort on target in the 53rd minute, when goalkeeper Lawrence Ati Zigi punched away a header from Cho. But the Korean found the net just minutes later, heading home a cross from substitute Lee Kang-in, who had just been brought on by Bento. And they were level just three minutes later when Cho headed home Kim Jin-su's ball from the left, sparking scenes of delirium among the Korean fans.

Now Ghana were rocking but they restored their lead midway through the second half through Kudus. South Korea came back again. Zigi was forced into a scrambling save to push away a free-kick while Salisu cleared off the line. The fourth official held up a board for 10 minutes of added time. South Korea continued to pour forward but they could not find the net and a number of their players collapsed on the turf at the final whistle. Bento was sent off for protesting at the end of the match. — AFP

ahead as they play Brazil in their final match, which according to reports they will play without first-choice goalkeeper Andre Onana who was dropped from the matchday squad just hours before kick-off following an unspecified disciplinary issue.

Media reports suggest that Onana has been sent home from the World Cup after a disagreement with Song, but that pre-match turmoil didn't stop Cameroon putting in a fighting display against a Serbia team who probably deserved to win on the balance of play. Mitrovic was almost invisible in Serbia's defeat to Brazil but here he was involved from kick-off, the Fulham forward unlucky not to give Serbia the lead in the 11th minute when he crashed a shot off the post from a tight angle following a neat exchange of passes with Dusan Tadic.

But Mitrovic only had himself to blame for not opening the scoring six minutes later, shanking an awful first-time finish wide when, after a mix up in the Cameroon defense, the ball dropped at his feet with only Onana's replacement Devis Epassy to beat. And Castelletto punished the Serbs for Mitrovic's miss in the 29th minute with the simplest of finishes after ghosting in at the back post to meet Nicolas Nkoulou's flick-on at a corner.

Pierre Kunde then passed up a golden opportunity

to double Cameroon's lead in the 43rd minute when he first shot straight at goalkeeper Vanja Milinkovic-Savic and then smashed the rebound wide. It was Cameroon's turn to be undone at a set-piece as the half crept into first-half stoppage time when Pavlovic brilliantly headed home Dusan Tadic's floated free-kick. The Serbs' tails were up and Sergej Milinkovic-Savic flipped the match on its head two minutes later with a superb left-footed finish after Andre-Frank Zambo Anguissa sloppily gave the ball away just outside his own penalty area. Mitrovic finally had the goal his strong display deserved seven minutes after the break, tapping in Andrija Zivkovic's pass unopposed at the end of beautiful move guided by Milinkovic-Savic and Tadic. The match looked over but from nowhere Cameroon sprung back into life thanks to Aboubakar's odd goal.

The Al Nassr forward raced through onto Castelletto's launched pass over the top and scooped an improbable finish over the Serbia 'keeper, beaming with delight after his goal was awarded following a VAR check. Aboubakar's pace caused Serbia all kinds of problems and he laid on Choupo-Moting's leveller, bursting down the right and laying on a simple finish for the Bayern Munich forward which sparked wild celebrations on the pitch and in the stands. — AFP

Cameroon, Serbia draw 3-3 in World Cup thriller

DOHA: Cameroon kept their hopes of making the last 16 of the World Cup alive on Monday after fighting back from two goals down to draw a thrilling Group G encounter with Serbia 3-3. Rigobert Song's team looked almost dead and buried after goals from Strahinja Pavlovic, Sergej Milinkovic-Savic and Aleksandar Mitrovic gave Serbia a 3-1 lead early in the second half. But substitute Vincent Aboubakar and Eric Maxim Choupo-Moting snatched a draw with two quick-fire strikes just after the hour mark to leave both Cameroon and Serbia on a single point, two behind group leaders Brazil and Switzerland.

Had they lost, Cameroon would have been relying on the Swiss beating Brazil in order to not be eliminated with a game to spare, but instead the west Africans still have a chance of getting out of the group stage for the first time since 1990. Cameroon have a tough task