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Kuwait's flag flutters high

Amir patronizes flag-hoisting ceremony in Crown Prince's presence



KUWAIT: HH the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah kisses the national flag during a flag-hoisting ceremony at Bayan Palace on Feb 1, 2023. — KUNA

KUWAIT: A Kuwaiti flag-hoisting ceremony took place at Bayan Palace on Wednesday under the patronage of HH the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, in presence of his representative, HH the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, National Assembly Speaker Ahmad Abdulaziz Al-Saadoun, HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Ahmad Al-Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah and senior state officials attended the event.

The motorcade of HH the Amir's representative arrived at the venue and was given a 21-gun salute and warm welcome by the personnel of the army, police and National Guard. HH the Amir's representative then hoisted the flag and the national anthem was played.

Later on Wednesday, HH the Amir Sheikh Nawaf received a cable of congratulation from HH the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal on the flag-hoisting ceremony. The ceremony, held under the motto of "dignity and pride", commenced celebrations marking the 62nd National Day and 32nd Liberation Day. In his cable, HH the Crown Prince said: "Your Highness Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, I had the honor to attend the flag-hoisting ceremony at Bayan Palace under your patronage to kick off the celebrations of the 62nd National Day and the 32nd Liberation Day.

"It's my pleasure to express sincere congratulations to Your Highness and express the best wishes for the sons of our dear homeland and the residents living on its land. We recall, in dignity and pride, the selfless sacrifices offered by our dauntless martyrs for the sake of the dear homeland. We pray to Almighty Allah to bestow His mercy upon their souls and lodge them in Paradise." HH the Crown Prince wished HH the Amir everlasting wellbeing, and the homeland more prosperity and progress under the wise leadership of HH the Amir.

HH the Amir sent a reply cable to HH the Crown Prince to thank him for his sincere sentiments on his national occasion. Recalling the sacrifices of martyrs, he said they will remain in the memory of the homeland and prayed to Almighty Allah to have mercy on their souls. HH the Amir expressed his best wishes for the homeland. — KUNA

News in brief

Manila suspends accreditation
MANILA: The Philippine government has suspended the accreditation of foreign recruitment agencies in Kuwait following the brutal killing of Filipina domestic helper Jullebee Ranara, the Manila-based Philstar reported. Kuwait-based Migrant Workers Office officer-in-charge Catherine Duladul announced new regulations for the process of accreditation, job orders and employment contracts by foreign recruitment agencies, effective Jan 29. Only foreign recruitment agencies with a clean record or those without residents at shelters and no requests for assistance will be allowed to submit applications for processing, according to Duladul.

GCC chief thanks leaders
RIYADH: The new Secretary-General of the Gulf Cooperation Council Jassem Al-Budaiwi expressed his deepest thanks and gratitude to the leaders of GCC countries for their great confidence in him to helm of the GCC General Secretariat. Budaiwi started his duties as Secretary-General of the GCC on Feb 1. — KUNA

KCCI attacks hurt private sector
KUWAIT: Chairman of Kuwait Chamber of Commerce and Industry (KCCI) Mohammad Al-Sager said that the chamber is under an "unjustifiable and fierce attack launched in a clear attempt to undermine its role in supporting the private sector". He added \$2 billion in claims have been subjected to commercial arbitration at the chamber. (See Page 9)

Kuwait launches bivalent COVID jab

KUWAIT: The ministry of health launched a bivalent COVID-19 vaccination for individuals 18 years of age and older at 15 medical centers from Wednesday. The bivalent COVID-19 vaccines are boosters that aim at providing better protection against the original coronavirus strain and a component of the Omicron variant, the ministry said in a press statement. People can get vaccinated with the new booster at least a couple of months after the last vaccine dose, be it the second shot or the booster, regardless of the type of vaccine, the ministry added.

Security forces hone skills in combat drills

By Khaled Al-Abdulhadi

KUWAIT: The interior ministry held a mock drill titled "Decisive Deterrence 6" on Wednesday at the special forces headquarters in Sulaibiya in the presence of Interior Minister Sheikh Talal Al-Khaled Al-Sabah and senior officials. "Servicemen in the special forces are an important example of sacrifice. We aim to deter any attempts that may destabilize national security. The special training has intensive technical challenges that increase coordination and cohesiveness," the special forces said.

The training allows servicemen to boost skills related to quick response, leadership, coordination between team, and upgrading deterrent services. A video presentation included an overview of the training, including parachuting techniques and violent situations faced by special forces. The exercises replicated chaotic events and assaults on important institutions, as servicemen used strategic positioning and movement to stop terrorist attacks. (See Page 2)

comes a day after more than 1.27 million took to the streets in France, increasing pressure on the French government over pension reform plans. British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has called for pay rises to be "reasonable" and "affordable", warning that big pay hikes would jeopardise attempts to tame inflation.

But unions have accused millionaire Sunak of being out of touch with the challenges faced by ordinary working people struggling to make ends meet in the face of low-paid, insecure work and spiraling costs. Teachers and train drivers were among the latest groups to act, as well as Border Force staff at UK air and seaports.

Continued on Page 6

in Shamiya, Jassem Al-Wazzan Clinic in Mansouriyah and Jaber Al-Ahmad Clinic I in the Capital health zone; Salwa Specialized Clinic, Mahmoud Hajji Haidar Clinic and Rumatthiya Clinic in Hawally health zone; Omar-iyah Clinic, Abdullah Al-Mubarak Clinic and Al-Andalus Clinic in Farwaniya health zone; Fintas Specialized Clinic and Fahahel Specialized Clinic in Ahmadi health zone; Al-Adan Specialized Clinic in Mubarak Al-Kabeer health zone; Al-Nacem Clinic and Al-Oyoun Clinic in Jahra health zone; Jleeb Youth Center and Abdulrahman Al-Zaid Clinic in West Mishref. — KUNA



KUWAIT: The interior ministry holds mock exercises at the special forces headquarters in Sulaibiya on Feb 1, 2023. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat



LONDON: Teachers hold placards and flags while shouting slogans during a protest on Feb 1, 2023, as part of a national strike day. — AFP



Mock drills demonstrate combat skills of Kuwait's security forces

Sheikh Talal attends 'Decisive Deterrence 6' training program



KUWAIT: Interior Minister Sheikh Talal Al-Khaled Al-Sabah and other officials attend the mock drill titled "Decisive Deterrence 6" on Wednesday at the special forces headquarters in Sulaibiya. — Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat

By Khaled Al-Abdullahi

KUWAIT: In the presence and sponsorship of Interior Minister Sheikh Talal Al-Khaled Al-Sabah, the interior ministry, represented by the special security department, correctional institutions department and the department of execution of sentences, held a mock drill titled "Decisive Deterrence 6" on Wednesday at the special forces headquarters in Sulaibiya.

"Servicemen in the special forces are an important example of sacrifice. We aim to deter any attempts that may destabilize national security. The special training has intensive technical challenges that increase coordination and cohesiveness," the special forces said during the opening of the drills. The "Decisive Deterrence 6" training program lasted from Jan 15 till Feb 1 to train and teach servicemen on tasks allocated to them and take right decisions during intense situations.

The training allows servicemen to gain or enhance skills related to quick response, leadership, coordination between team, and upgrading deterrent services. A video presentation was also displayed that included an overview of the training, including parachuting techniques and other violent



Interior Minister Sheikh Talal Al-Khaled Al-Sabah during the exercises.

situations faced by special forces.

During the training, a mock terrorist organization was formed to replicate chaotic events and assaults on important institutions, as servicemen used strategic positioning and movement to stop the terrorist attack. The first phase lasted for 14 workdays split into two weeks. The first week was designated



for strategic workshops and the second week included realistic applications throughout all institutions of the interior ministry.

The training also included situations related to conflict in the women's prison, airplane hijacking, embassy terror assault, terrorist activity in residential areas, chaos while transferring prisoners as well as deterring violent protests. The training also included stopping the entry of illegal substances in the Central Jail, protecting oil reserves at Ahmadi port, protecting a VIP guest during movement from one place to another and stopping attempts to bring explosives inside the special forces camp. Also in attendance at the Decisive Deterrence 6 exercise was the Undersecretary of the Interior Ministry Anwar Al-Barjas as well as other senior officials of the ministry.



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Local



KUWAIT: Ahmadi Governor during the celebrations. — Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat and Fouad Al-Shaikh.



Flag-hoisting at Hawally governorate.



Ahmadi Governor with the national flag.

Kuwait governorates hoist flag, kick start national celebrations

National Days an occasion to recall Kuwait's accomplishments

KUWAIT: Kuwait's six governorates commenced Wednesday flag-raising ceremonies in celebration of 62nd National Day and 32nd Liberation Day. Farwaniya Governor Sheikh Mishal Al-Jaber Al-Abdullah Al-Sabah spoke to KUNA saying that flag-raising ceremonies are a symbol of renewing vows to continue down the road forefathers forged.

On his part, Al-Jahra Governor Nasser Al-Hajraf said that the National and Liberation days are an opportunity to recall the achievements Kuwait had accomplished over the years whether on local or international fronts. Governor of Mubarak Al-Kabeer retired Major General Mahmoud Bushehri stated that such ceremonies reinvigorate a sense of belonging and loyalty to this country.

As for Al-Ahmadi Governor Sheikh Fawaz Khaled Al-Sabah, he mentioned, during his speech, that the sacrifices of ancestors are what made Kuwait a country to be proud of, wishing the state further peace, prosperity and security under the wise guidance of its leadership. Governor of Hawally and Al-Asimah acting governor Ali Al-Asfar gave a speech in which he spoke of the meaningful sentiments this ceremony sparks, adding that its significance lies in reinforcing the unification and solidarity of the people.

All the governors congratulated His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, and the people of

Kuwait on this joyous occasion. A host of government officials attended the event alongside a number of families. Hawally and Asimah governor hoisted the flag signifying the beginning of 2023 National Day celebrations. —KUNA



Sheikh Mishal Al-Jaber Al-Abdullah Al-Sabah with the national flag.



Jahra Governor Nasser Al-Hajraf raising the flag.



Mubarak Al-Kabeer celebration.



Celebration at Capital governorate.



Children wave flags on the occasion during the celebrations at Ahmadi governorate.



Dignitaries attend the celebration at Jahra governorate.

Surgeons Society members meet health minister

By Abdellatif Sharaa

KUWAIT: Members of Kuwait Surgeons Society met Health Minister Dr Ahmad Al-Awadhi and explained its role in all surgical projects in the country and its vision for the future to support surgeons in all specialties in the field of education and training. The society was represented by President Dr Shihab Akrof, Secretary Dr Khalid Al-Yaqout, Vice President Dr Suleiman Al-Mazidi, and board members Dr Suad Abul

and Dr Ayoub Dikson.

The society presented its proposals to Dr Awadhi, including adopting and approving the new recommendations for bariatric operations by the American Society for Metabolic and Bariatric Surgery (ASMBS) and International Federation for the Surgery of Obesity and Metabolic Disorders (IFSO), and have a representative from the society in any committee formed to discuss this subject.

The society lauded the government's role to approve allowing public sector employees to also work in the private sector, and asked the minister to make a preemptive move to cancel the decision that deducts the specialty and rare specialty allowance in case a doctor wants to work in the private sector, and also not deduct



KUWAIT: Members of Kuwait Surgeons Society with Health Minister Dr Ahmad Al-Awadhi.

any allowances if the doctor works in the private sector.

The society also asked to have a

representative in meetings regarding the discussion of work mechanisms in any surgical specialties.

In my view

Arabizi phenomenon: Double-edged sword

By Fadia Alrefai

Local@kuwaittimes.com

In the last two decades, a new phenomenon called the Anglo-Arab alphabet (Arabizi) has spread throughout the Arab world and reached Arabs all around the world through smartphones and social media of many (if not all) age groups, especially the youth.

This modern alphabet uses English numbers and letters to write Arabic words and sentences and started appearing in the late '90s, when the devices that were newly invented at that time did not have the technological capacity for the Arabic alphabet. At that time, the use of this language was understandable, but now, with the technological advancements we have today, the question of why this alphabet is still being used must be asked.

At the time this alphabet began to expand, the term "global village" was hard to believe and denied by many of the older generation, as each identity wanted to take care of its uniqueness and independence. But today, as the wave of globalization brushes past every country on this planet, and especially intellectual globalization, the world has truly been reshaped to that of a global village.

There is no doubt that this intellectual tidal wave of globalization has a strong impact on the Arab world, especially in countries like Kuwait, where students who go to non-Arabic schools represent almost 20 percent of the population, while English is a mandatory subject in school. Thus, because language is nothing but a cradle of its speaker's mentality, way of thinking, identity, costumes and traditions, the reshaping of our language has evidently altered our mentality and identity, which is a double-edged sword.

In my humble opinion, with the strong role globalization plays, as well as the power of media that has witnessed its strongest period in history because of social media and because of the weak Arabic language syllabus in schools which makes it difficult to love or enjoy the Arabic language, the youth are now holding on to the English language like never before. Not only are they doing that, but they are incorporating it into different languages such as Arabic so it can match the global simplicity of the modern world even more.

Now, the incorporation of different ideas into any society is key for it to progress, and the development of language cannot happen unless new variables are introduced, but the issue arises when the language does not match its identity anymore, as Arabizi sounds like Arabic but nowhere in the Arabic language does the number three have a meaning other than the number three!

In addition to that, because there are very minor components of modern societies that have not been drastically changed due to globalization, it is important, rather vital, to hold on to the Arabic language and the symbolism it holds. Whether this is through restructuring the Arabic syllabus to attract students rather than repel them, or by making sure every young family is raising their kids to value, appreciate and almost sanctify their language, which at the end of the day is their identity!

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News in brief

Oil minister visits OPEC

KUWAIT: Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Oil Dr Bader Al-Mulla was briefed Wednesday on the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) General Secretariat's most important activities during the last three years. OPEC Secretary-General Ali bin Sabt and Minister Al-Mulla held a meeting at OPEC's headquarters where they discussed enhancing joint Arab cooperation, especially in the fields of energy. Issues that require follow-up from the past three years in relation to the energy sector were also reviewed. — KUNA

Oil prices drop in Kuwait

KUWAIT: The price of Kuwaiti oil went down by \$2.15 to \$82.50 per barrel on Tuesday, compared to \$84.65 per barrel on Monday, said Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) Wednesday. Globally, the price of the Brent crude went up by 96 cents to \$85.46 per barrel. West Texas Intermediate jumped by 97 cents to \$78.87 per barrel. — KUNA

British sterling pound falls against dinar

KUWAIT: The British sterling pound went down by 0.2 percent to reach KD 0.375, according to The Central Bank of Kuwait's (CBK) daily bulletin. The US dollar stabilized on Wednesday at KD 0.305 and the euro at KD 0.331. The Swiss franc rose to reach KD 0.333 and the Japanese yen stood at KD 0.002. The CBK daily average exchange rates do not necessarily reflect actual buying and selling prices for the day. — KUNA

Kuwaiti pavilions witness heavy turnout at Cairo book fair



CAIRO: Crowds flooded Kuwaiti pavilions at the 54th Cairo International Book Fair to purchase books and stay up-to-date on the latest Kuwaiti publications. — KUNA

KUWAIT: The pavilions of Kuwaiti institutions and publishing houses at the 54th Cairo International Book Fair have been popular among visitors of various nationalities keen on acquiring distinguished Kuwaiti publications. Abdulaziz Al-Khatib with the Research Center for Kuwaiti Studies said the center has a special audience of readers and researchers interested in the history of Kuwait and the region in general, referring to the keenness of universities and scientific centers to follow-up on new publications "first-hand".

He praised the level of organization and the

provision of all amenities for readers to roam and acquire books and various publications. Director of the Scientific Publishing Council at Kuwait University, Sami Al-Wahibi, said Kuwait University is participating in the exhibition with a number of "interesting and useful" publications, including the "Journal of Sharia and Islamic Studies", "the Journal of Social Sciences", "the Arab Journal of Human Sciences", "the Journal of Administrative Sciences", "the Journal of Gulf Studies and the Arabian Peninsula", as well as legal books and the "Annals of Arts and Social Sciences". "The

Kuwait University pavilion has made its mark and gained an advanced position on the map of Arab culture," he said.

Mohammed Al-Hassan, from the "Scientific Progress for Publishing and Distribution" pavilion at the fair, expressed his happiness with the great turnout for the Cairo Book Fair in general and the pavilion, specifically. The activities of the book fair kicked off on Jan 25 with the presence of Egyptian Prime Minister Mostafa Madbouly and the participation of 1047 publishers from 53 countries from around the world. The fair will conclude on Feb 6. — KUNA

stc hosts panel on 'International Day of Education'

KUWAIT: Kuwait Telecommunications Company - stc, a world-class digital leader providing innovative services and platforms to customers and enabling the digital transformation in Kuwait, hosted a panel discussion on sustainable education as part of its strategic partnership with the online educational platform, dawrat, and in commemoration of the "International Day of Education" that is celebrated on Jan 24. The panel discussion, featured representatives from select entities and institutions who shared their views on the importance of sustainable education.

The informative event was hosted by stc at the company's headquarters in Olympia Tower, welcoming educational leaders in Kuwait to discuss and cover important topics related to the local educational system. Panelists included representatives from dawrat, the Kuwait Association for

Learning Differences (KALD), Advocates Group Academy, Dasman Bilingual School, Kuwait University, and the Ministry of Education. Following their background and knowledge within the industry, each of the panelists shared their views and opinions regarding topics discussed during the panel, which also reflected one of the key pillars behind stc's extensive CSR program, education.

Joining the panel discussion from dawrat were the company's CEO Mohammad Al-Surayea and Instructor Abdullah Al-Sanae. Vice Chairman Dr Issa Jassem and Instructor Fatima Al-Dhafeeri participated in the panel discussion from KALD. From Advocates Group Academy, CEO and Attorney Mohamed Jamil participated in the panel alongside the Executive Vice President of Advocates Group Academy Hessah Al-Ouda. Superintendent Samar Dizmen, Middle School Principal Rihab Abdel Khalek and PR & Marketing Executive Rana Massouh participated from Dasman Bilingual School. Student Maryam Al-Kandari joined the panel from Kuwait University. The final panelists included teacher Faisal Al-Baridi as well as the students Hadeel Al-Shammari and Abdullah Al-Jimaz, who represented the Ministry of Education in the discussion.

Considering the critical role education plays in economic development, stc actively participates in initiatives that aim to strengthen and enhance the local education system. Aside from the sustainable education panel discussion, stc recently contributed to other initiatives that support the local education system, such as participating in graduations, honoring students that achieve academic excellence and sponsoring nationwide programs that support education. The company's active support towards Kuwait's

education system aligns directly with the core objectives stc aims to achieve through its extensive CSR framework.

Danah Al-Jasem, general manager of corporate communications at stc, said: "We are proud to have hosted this informative panel discussion in the presence of academic leaders to shed light on the importance of enriching the local education system through ideal development techniques. Through our role as digital pioneers in Kuwait's telecom sector and as enablers of digital transformation, we believe that it is essential to set a sustainable plan that proves to be fruitful and supportive of the younger generation. Whether it is through education, economic development, or other factors that impact society, we must raise awareness on the necessity of implementing sustainable strategies today for a brighter tomorrow."

Al-Jasem added: "On behalf of stc, I would like to thank all the academic leaders that participated in this educational and strategic initiative. We are proud to continue building and strengthening our relationship with various entities and institutions in Kuwait. It is important to involve several educational institutions in this purposeful initiative that focuses on the importance of education due to the impact it has on the society to ultimately achieve the high-level objectives set under our dynamic CSR framework. This goes together with stc's commitment to actively support the economy and look out for the public's best interests by spreading awareness on issues that impact the community. As part of our corporate and individual duty towards the nation and people of Kuwait, stc will continue to explore innovative ways to contribute effectively to the society and economy."



KUWAIT: The stc PR team are pictured with representatives from the educational institutions who participated in the panel organized by stc in collaboration with dawrat on Jan 24.



KUWAIT: Participants engage in deep discussion on the importance of education during the panel held on the "International Day of Education", which falls on Jan 24.



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Over one million faithful attend pope's mass

Syrians fear IS resurgence as Kurdish-led forces sweep Raqa



BANGKOK: Protesters during a demonstration outside the Embassy of Myanmar in Bangkok on February 1, 2023, to mark the second anniversary of the coup in Myanmar. —AFP

Myanmar junta extends state of emergency

Around 400 protesters gather outside Myanmar's embassy in Bangkok

YANGON: Myanmar's junta was granted a six-month extension to a state of emergency, state media reported Wednesday, likely delaying elections the military had pledged to hold by August. The country has been in turmoil since the army's power grab in 2021, and a subsequent crackdown on dissent has sparked fighting across swathes of the nation while tanking the economy.

On the second anniversary of the putsch, state media reported that the National Defence and Security Council had agreed to junta chief Min Aung Hlaing's request to prolong the state of emergency declared when the generals toppled Aung San Suu Kyi's government.

The "state of emergency will be extended for another six months starting from February 1", Acting President Myint Swe was quoted as saying. "Sovereign power of the state has been transferred to commander in chief again." The announcement came as streets emptied and shops closed across Myanmar in protest on the anniversary and Western powers launched a fresh broadside of sanctions against the generals.

Streets in the commercial hub Yangon were largely deserted from late morning, AFP correspondents said, after activists called for people across the country to close businesses and stay indoors. Roads leading to the famous Shwedagon pagoda—a Buddhist shrine that dominates Yangon's skyline and is usually thronged by worshippers—were largely deserted.

Most buses on roads elsewhere in the city were

empty and there was a heavy security presence. It was similarly quiet in the second city of Mandalay, a resident told AFP. "There are a few people walking here and there in neighbourhoods but almost no activity on the main roads," the resident said, requesting anonymity. Local media images also showed empty streets in the eastern city of Mawlamyine.

Around 200 supporters of the military marched through Yangon's historic downtown in the early afternoon, escorted part of the way by soldiers, correspondents said. The US embassy in the city warned of "increased anti-regime activity and violence" in the days around the anniversary. Around 400 protesters gathered outside Myanmar's embassy in Bangkok, some chanting slogans against the military and holding portraits of Suu Kyi.

'Unrest and violence'

The military justified its February 1, 2021, power grab with unsubstantiated claims of widespread fraud in elections that democracy figurehead Suu Kyi's party won in a landslide. The state of emergency was due to expire at the end of January and the military had been widely expected to announce on Wednesday that it would prepare for the polls.

But on Tuesday the junta-stacked National Defence and Security Council met to discuss the state of the nation and concluded it "has not returned to normalcy yet". Junta opponents, including anti-coup "People's Defence Forces" and a shadow government dominated by lawmakers from Suu Kyi's

party, had tried to seize "state power by means of unrest and violence", the military's information team said in a statement.

'We lost everything'

The United States, Canada and Britain announced a new round of sanctions on the anniversary, targeting members of the junta and junta-backed entities. Myanmar's former colonial ruler Britain targeted, among others, companies supplying aviation fuel to the military and enabling its "barbaric air raiding campaign in an attempt to maintain power".

Australia also announced its first sanctions, aimed at 16 members of the junta "responsible for egregious human rights abuses" and two sprawling, military-controlled conglomerates. More than 2,900 people have been killed in the military's crackdown on dissent since it seized power and more than 18,000 have been arrested, according to a local monitoring group.

The junta recently wrapped up a series of closed-court trials of Suu Kyi, jailing its longtime enemy for a total of 33 years in a process rights groups have slammed as a sham. "The main wish for 2023 is we want freedom and to go back home," Thet Naung, an activist in northern Sagaing region, where the military and anti-coup fighters have regularly clashed, told AFP.

"We have gone through many difficulties. We wanted to be happy and live freely but we lost everything. We have spent most of our time in jungles and stayed away from cities." —AFP

"more probable". A senior EU official cautioned that there was a need to "manage expectations" among Ukrainian counterparts pushing to start the next stage-formal accession negotiations—this year.

Brussels set out seven initial steps for Kyiv to fulfil when it was granted candidate status, focused on strengthening the judiciary, fighting corruption and curbing the clout of powerful oligarchs. "I'm not sure when it will happen, because it's a merit-based process," said the EU official, speaking to AFP on condition of anonymity.

"We cannot have Ukraine as it was before the war. We need reforms. We have billions going into the country and that's a key message we need to send." Even as it is engulfed in an existential fight with Russian forces, Ukraine has managed to make progress on some of the demands.

But a string of high-profile corruption scandals that erupted in January highlighted the challenges it faces—even if there was a quick reaction in dismissing implicated officials. The EU's executive arm is set to issue its first full report on Ukraine's progress in the autumn.

Among EU member states, there are widely divergent views on how fast the process can go. Ukraine's strongest cheerleaders in the east of the bloc—spearheaded by Poland and the Baltic states—insist Kyiv is making big strides and progress could come quicker than expected.

"I've seen in the last 11 months so much happening that was impossible before and looked like it could never be achieved," said an EU diplomat. "But they did happen and that makes me optimistic." But others insist that while making Ukraine a candidate sent the right symbolic message of support, working through the nitty-gritty of the major reforms needed would be long and arduous.

"We don't want to discourage them but at the same time there needs to be a sense of realism," another EU diplomat said.

'Progressive integration'

Regardless of the complexities of the membership process, almost a year of war has already pushed



LIMA: Policemen grab a woman during a demonstration against the government of Peruvian President Dina Boluarte in Lima. —AFP

Peru's Congress still undecided on early poll

LIMA: Peruvian lawmakers on Tuesday once again failed to agree on a plan to bring forward elections in a bid to end weeks of deadly protests that have brought parts of the South American country to a standstill. Peru has been embroiled in a political crisis with near-daily demonstrations since December 7, when then-president Pedro Castillo was arrested after attempting to dissolve Congress and rule by decree.

In seven weeks of demonstrations, 48 people—including one police officer—have been killed in clashes between security forces and protesters, according to the human rights ombudsman's office. Fresh clashes between protesters and government forces erupted Tuesday evening, prompting police to fire tear gas, as demonstrators demanded the dissolution of Congress, a new constitution, and the resignation of President Dina Boluarte, who as his vice president took over with Castillo gone.

Last month, lawmakers moved elections, originally due in 2026, up to April 2024 — but as protesters dug in their heels, Boluarte called for holding a vote this year instead. On Tuesday, lawmakers again failed to reach an agreement on a potential 2023 vote, and adjourned until Wednesday, after first rejecting Boluarte's proposal on Friday and then on Monday.

As lawmakers debated Tuesday, demonstrators gathered for new protests in central Lima, only a few blocks from Congress. The so-called Great March, called by union leaders and rural organizations, saw protesters chanting and waving banners reading "Dina resign now."

'No political will'

For union leader and protest coordinator Geronimo Lopez, the stalemate at the political level was indicative of a Congress "clinging to stay in office." "There is no political will to listen to the platform of struggle of the people," he said.

Roadblocks erected by protesters have caused shortages of food, fuel and other basic commodities in several regions of the Andean nation. And early Tuesday, police gathered in large numbers to keep protesters out of the capital's airport. The unrest is being fueled mainly by poor southern, Indigenous Peruvians who perceived Castillo, who is also from that region and has Indigenous roots, as an ally in their fight against poverty, racism and inequality. —AFP

Russia invasion pushes Ukraine closer to EU

BRUSSELS: Russia's invasion has seen Ukraine hurtle towards joining the EU, but the path to full membership remains long and complex despite bullishness in Kyiv. Before Moscow's forces launched their all-out assault last February, few in Brussels or Kyiv saw Ukraine's accession as a pressing issue.

But just four months later, Kyiv had been granted "candidate status" to become a member as the horrors of the conflict pushed EU leaders to start the ball rolling. Now, as top EU officials head to Kyiv for a summit this week that Prime Minister Denys Shmygal described as "extremely important" for his country's bid to join, Ukraine is urging the bloc to maintain the momentum.

"No games or narrow political interests should stand in the way," Ukraine's Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said. French President Emmanuel Macron warned last May it could take "decades" before Ukraine meets the criteria and achieves full membership.

That estimate resonated with Turkey and countries in the Balkans which have seen their applications going nowhere fast for years. But officials in Kyiv insist the dynamics of the war and sacrifices their country is making mean the usual playbook has been torn up.

"We can discuss any date today, but it will be very close once Ukraine wins the war," Ukrainian presidential advisor Mykhailo Podolyak told AFP. "It will be symbolic. This will be very important for Europe above all."

'Manage expectations'

Sebastien Maillard, director of the Paris-based Jacques Delors Institute, said that while Kyiv was pushing to join in five years, a timeframe of 10 to 15 years seems



BORODYANKA: Austrian Federal President Alexander Van der Bellen (L) walks in a street in Borodyanka, Ukraine on February 1, 2023, during a visit in Ukraine. —AFP

Ukraine far closer to the EU in major practical ways. Brussels and member states have committed tens of billions of euros to the country since February, helping to keep its government running and arm its troops.

Millions of Ukrainians displaced by the fighting have set up home in the EU and access to the bloc's treasured market has been eased as import tariffs were suspended. Officials hope to make progress on concrete steps to bind Ukraine closer, mentioning further possibilities for "progressive integration" in an early draft of the summit declaration.

These range from bolstering access to the EU's internal market to establishing tariff-free mobile phone roaming. "Something material will have to be given to Ukraine this year by the EU," said Andre Haertel from the German Institute for International and Security Affairs.

"Currently talk in Brussels includes smaller things such as roaming and bigger things such as heading towards full inclusion into the single market." He said it was difficult to see accession talks starting this year, "but it will be hard for the EU to push that further than 2024". —AFP

International

Syrians fear IS resurgence as Kurdish-led forces sweep Raqa

Recent attacks and search for militants has heightened fears of a jihadist resurgence

RAQA: From his rooftop in the Syrian city of Raqa, Youssef Nasser watches nervously as hundreds of heavily armed Kurdish-led fighters sweep the streets of what was once the de facto capital of the Islamic State group. The fighters are on guard against another guerrilla-style ambush after six of their comrades were killed in an IS attack in December on a local security complex that aimed to free hundreds of fellow jihadists from a prison there.

As the fighters go house to house, their blaring loudspeakers warning Raqa's people to stay put, 67-year-old Nasser said he hopes for "stability and security" in his home city which is still recovering from the horrors of IS rule. The Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, with support from the United States, in 2017 routed IS from Raqa, which the group had used to spread their reign of terror, perpetrating mass executions, including decapitations, and other crimes.

For traumatised residents of the former IS heartland in Syria, the recent attacks and the search for militants has heightened fears of a jihadist resurgence. "If IS returns, it will be a disaster," Nasser, dressed in a traditional robe and headpiece, told AFP. "It's normal to be afraid for your family, your children, your friends."

'Worried' constantly

The Kurdish-led fighters patrolled the streets of Raqa on foot, in trucks and armoured vehicles, in the operation that began last week, under the gaze of worried parents and fearful children. Before its 2019 military defeat, IS's once sprawling, self-proclaimed "caliphate" incorporated swathes of Iraqi and Syrian

territory, but the group has not held fixed positions since then. Instead, they have launched sporadic attacks against Syrian government and Kurdish-led forces in the north and east, and strikes against Iraqi troops and their allies across the border. Authorities in Raqa declared a lockdown and a state of emergency after the security complex assault, and set up checkpoints at the entrances to the city.

As Syria's war approaches its 12-year mark, residents said they were fearful of a return by IS. "I'm worried every time my children leave the house," Faiza Hassan, 45, told AFP after police searched her house. "The situation at the moment is very difficult."

Sixty-year-old Umm Mohammed, bearing the traditional facial tattoos of the region, said the mere sight of armed men scared her, as she held a cigarette in her trembling hand. "Look how my hands are shaking," she said. "I'm scared," she repeated several times, as children gathered around her.

'Plan to create chaos'

Brigadier General Ali Hassan of the Kurdish police said about 150 suspected jihadists, some of them high-level officials, had so far been arrested in the sweep. He said IS had "switched up its strategy, moving away from individual attacks to launch collective assaults", targeting detention centres holding its members.

The recent Raqa attack was the most significant jihadist assault since IS fighters in January 2022 attacked the Ghwayran prison in the Kurdish-controlled city of Hasakeh, in what was their biggest offensive in years. Hundreds were killed in the week-long assault that sought to free jailed jihadists.

His worsening health has triggered outrage among anarchists across Europe, with last weekend alone seeing Italy's consulate in Barcelona vandalised, a diplomat's car in Berlin set ablaze and a molotov cocktail hurled at a Rome police station.

On Tuesday, Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's government called a press conference to announce that Cospito's 41-bis status would not be revoked, but said the prisoner had been transferred to a Milan prison with an on-site health clinic.

"It is unthinkable for the state to give in," said Justice Minister Carlo Nordio, saying the wave of violence in support of Cospito further justified the 41-bis.

Isolation, few visits

First created as an emergency measure amid mafia bombings in the 1980s and 90s, Article 41-bis of the penal code has become a key weapon in the state's arsenal against organised crime.

It can also be applied to other violent crimes and terrorism.

"In Western and Northern Europe this regime is the strictest for dangerous and organised criminals," Anna Sergi, a professor of criminology at the Uni-



RAQA: A member of the Syrian Kurdish Asayish security forces walks past a house during a raid against suspected Islamic State group fighters in Raqa, the jihadist group's former de facto capital in Syria. — AFP

Hassan said the group was trying to "rebuild itself with these operations". "It seems there is a big plan to take over prisons and create chaos," he said, adding that the sweep aimed to prevent such a scenario. But some residents fear the efforts are not enough to stop IS.

"No matter how many security campaigns they launch, they won't be able to confiscate all their

weapons," said 30-year-old Ahmed Hamad. He said the region, which was barely getting back on its feet after years of war, has very limited financial means to fight back against the militants.

The local prison, overcrowded with jihadists, was a big source of concern for Hamad, who lives close by. "We are afraid of everything because we have nothing," he said. — AFP

Jailed anarchist renews scrutiny of Italy's prison

ROME: The failing health of an incarcerated anarchist has rekindled debate in Italy over hard prison time usually reserved for mafia bosses, with the new right-wing government vowing not to cave in.

Around 730 people behind bars in Italy are subject to the country's highly restrictive detention regime known as "41-bis" — among them anarchist Alfredo Cospito, 55.

Cospito, sentenced to a total of three decades in jail for two separate attacks, has been on a hunger strike for more than 100 days at a prison in Sardinia to protest his 41-bis.

Amnesty International is among those concerned by his fate, while supporters say his treatment, which includes near-total isolation and severe restrictions on family visits, amounts to torture.

versity of Essex, told AFP.

Restrictions include isolation in single cells away from the main prison population, limited yard time in small groups, and one short monthly visit with family members, separated by a glass wall.

Books and newspapers sent from outside prison are prohibited.

In cutting off prisoners' communication with the outside, the goal is to stop mafia bosses from running their organisations from behind bars.

It also aims to convince them to turn state's witness — only by collaborating with authorities can inmates be put under a less harsh regime.

Despite campaigns to abolish it, many in Italy "associate this regime with mafiosi, and there is a strong feeling that mafiosi deserve it no matter what", said Sergi. But it remains controversial.

In 2019, the Council of Europe's anti-torture committee said the restrictions "pose a threat to the subtle balance between the fight against organised crime and the preservation of a tenuous sense of the concept of rehabilitation".

Both the European Court of Human Rights and Italy's Constitutional Court have upheld 41-bis but called for modifications, such as prohibiting the cen-

torship of inmate-lawyer correspondence and allowing inmates to cook in their cells.

Matteo Messina Denaro, the Cosa Nostra boss arrested on January 16 in Sicily after 30 years on the run, is among those placed under 41-bis.

But prisoner rights group Antigone says the decision to apply the regime to Cospito is "an exaggeration".

He was put under 41-bis last May, for four years, after being found to have maintained contacts with anarchists from jail. Judged to be the leader of Italy's Informal Anarchist Federation, Cospito was sentenced in 2014 to nearly 11 years in prison for shooting in the knee the chief executive of a nuclear power company two years earlier.

He was later handed a separate 20-year sentence for setting two homemade bombs outside a police barracks in 2006, a crime the courts deemed terrorist in nature.

In a front-page editorial Monday, La Stampa daily acknowledged the government did not want to bow to threats by Cospito's supporters to amend his status. But it said the state should not "wash its hands", warning that the prisoner could die while Italy's courts weigh the issue. — AFP

Half a million strike in UK...

Continued from Page 1

The NEU teaching union estimated 85 percent of schools in England and Wales had been hit by walk-outs, adding that this indicated the "level of anger" in the profession. "The workload is always bigger and bigger and with the inflation our salary is lower and lower," London teacher Nigel Adams, 57, told AFP as he joined thousands of teachers marching through central London. "We're exhausted. We're paying the price and so are the children," he added as protesters held up placards reading "Pay Up" and "We can't put your kids first if you put their teachers last".

Britain has witnessed months of strikes by tens of thousands of workers - including postal staff, lawyers, nurses and employees in the retail sector - as UK inflation raced above 11 percent, the highest level in more than 40 years. Job center worker and union representative, Graham, who preferred not to give his last name, said workers had no choice but to strike faced with soaring costs. "Some of our members, even though they are working, still have to make visits to food banks," he said.

Train stations in the capital were deserted or completely closed. At the shuttered London Bridge Station, a major commuter hub, one train driver who gave his name as Tony, 61, said the sort of pay rises on offer were insulting, especially in the wake of the pandemic. "We worked all through Covid. We were being praised as key workers and then there is this slap in the face," he said.

"I was leaving (home) at 3:00am to go to work. People were having barbecues, you could hear the bottles. I think we deserve a pay increase that keeps up with inflation." Combative RMT union leader Mick Lynch, who has been representing many rail workers, told teachers who marched through London to parliament "every worker needs a pay rise, every worker needs a square deal... We are demanding change".

Joint NEU teaching union chiefs Mary Boustad and Kevin Courtney meanwhile warned that schools would be hit by more strikes unless the government came up with "concrete and meaningful proposals". Government and company bosses are standing firm, however, over wage demands. Education Minister Gillian Keegan told Times Radio she was "disappointed" teachers had walked out.

But Mark Serwolka, head of PCS, the largest trade union in the civil service, said the govern-



LONDON: A teacher holds a placard during a protest on Feb 1, 2023 as part of a national strike day. — AFP

ment's position was "unsustainable". "It's not feasible that they can sit back with this unprecedented amount of industrial action growing, because it's half a million today," he told Sky News. "Next week, we have paramedics, and we have nurses, then will be the firefighters," he added, warning that unions were prepared to strike throughout the summer.

Asked what Prime Minister Sunak was doing to resolve the strikes, his official spokesman said inflation remained the "biggest risk" to pay packets and that the government was ready to hold more talks with unions to avert further strike action. But he said ministers had to balance union demands with the need not to further fuel inflation and be fair to all taxpayers.

The latest official data shows 1.6 million working days were lost from June-November last year because of strikes - the highest six-month total in more than three decades - according to the Office for National Statistics (ONS). A total of 467,000 working days were lost to walkouts in November alone, the highest level since 2011, the ONS added. Alongside the strikes, unions also staged rallies across the country against the Conservative government's plans to legislate against public sector strike action. — AFP

Lebanese villagers try to stem illegal logging scourge

AINATA, Lebanon: Braving the bitter cold, Lebanese villagers have been patrolling a mountainside in the country's north, trying to protect trees from loggers who roll in under the cover of darkness. Near his village of Ainata, "nearly 150 centuries-old oak trees have been felled" in the past year, said Ghandi Rahme, pointing at the tree stumps in the rocky ground around him.

The municipal police officer, 44, is among around a dozen locals who make the rounds on a volunteer basis, seeking to deter loggers who arrive in off-road vehicles and take to the trees with chainsaws. Lebanon, whose flag bears a cedar tree, is known for its greenery, with forests covering 13 percent of the Middle Eastern country's territory, according to official data.

But since late 2019, an economic meltdown has plunged much of the population into poverty, and the local currency has lost more than 95 percent of its value. Electricity outages can last up to 23 hours a day, and fuel costs have skyrocketed as the state has gradually lifted subsidies. The crisis has left many people without incomes or winter heating, while public services - including forest rangers - are severely underfunded.

Residents and officials whom AFP spoke to in Ainata and other mountain villages blamed "organized" gangs for felling centuries-old oak and juniper trees. Rahme

said residents of "surrounding areas" were responsible, adding that he had scared off a group in September. The Ainata volunteers said they have financial support - mainly from worried expatriate villagers who send money from abroad - to pay for fuel and vehicle maintenance.

Rahme's cousin Samir, who is also a volunteer, called the tree fellings "terrible" but said the patrols were effective. "We haven't seen a single case of illegal felling" since they began, said the farmer, 58. In nearby Barqa, mayor Ghassan Geagea told AFP loggers acting with impunity had cut down scores of trees, including junipers believed to be thousands of years old. "The state now allocates us a measly budget," leaving the municipality with few means to tackle the problem, Geagea said.

But he expressed doubt that the existing volunteer patrol would be able to prevent felling in his district's harder-to-reach areas. Paul Abi Rached, who heads activist group Terre Liban, has decried rising numbers of "environmental massacres" in Lebanon and sounded the alarm over the felling of juniper trees in particular. Lebanon has the largest juniper woods in the Middle East, according to the environment ministry, and is also home to pine, oak, cedar and fir forests.

Junipers are among "the few trees that can grow at high altitudes", and they play an important role in replenishing groundwater reserves, Abi Rached said. "If we don't stop juniper felling, we will be headed for water shortages and drought," he warned. In Bsharre, west of Ainata, doctor and activist Youssef Tawk said "it takes 500 years for juniper to grow into a tree" in the wild. — AFP



BARQA, Lebanon: A municipality policeman walks past a felled oak tree in a mountainous area near this village in Lebanon's eastern Baalbeck district on Jan 11, 2023. — AFP

International

Over one million faithful attend pope's mass in DR Congo capital

Pope Francis to meet victims of the conflict in eastern Congo in Kinshasa

KINSHASA: Over a million worshippers turned out for a papal mass in DR Congo's capital Wednesday, organisers said, on the second day of Pope Francis's visit to the conflict-torn country. Many of the faithful in Kinshasa, a deeply observant megacity of some 15 million people, began to arrive at Ndolo airport on Tuesday night to assure themselves of a spot.

Francis entered the airport grounds aboard his popemobile and was greeted by singing and dancing crowds before the mass began at around 9:30 am (0830 GMT). Organisers said that over one million people were on the airport tarmac. Adrien Louka, 55, told AFP he had arrived before dawn.

"As our country has many problems, it is reconciliation that we are looking for and the Pope will give a message so that the countries around us leave us in peace," he added. The attendees included Kinshasa residents as well as the Democratic Republic of Congo's president, Felix Tshisekedi, and leading opposition politicians.

Francis wished the crowd peace in Lingala, one of the DRC's four national languages and the everyday language of Kinshasa. The pope delivered the rest of his homily in Italian—which was translated into the DRC's official language French—in which he urged the faithful "not to give in to divisions."

The 86-year-old pontiff had arrived in the DRC on Tuesday, on the first leg of a six-day trip to Africa that will also include troubled South Sudan. Huge crowds had also thronged the streets for a glimpse of the popemobile as Francis drove past.

'Massively plundered'

A former Belgian colony the size of continental western Europe, the DRC is Africa's most Catholic country. About 40 percent of the population of some 100 million people follows the church of Rome, according to estimates. Another 35 percent of the population is Protestant of various denominations, nine percent is Muslim and 10 percent Kimbanguist—a Christian movement born in the Belgian Congo. Official Vatican statistics put the proportion of Catholics in the DRC at 49 percent of the population.

During a speech to politicians and dignitaries in Kinshasa's presidential palace on Tuesday, Francis denounced the "economic colonialism" he suggested



KINSHASA: Pope Francis (C) arrives by popemobile for the mass at the N'Dolo Airport in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), on February 1, 2023. — AFP

had wreaked lasting damage in the DRC. "This country, massively plundered, has not benefited adequately from its immense resources," he said, to applause. Despite abundant mineral reserves, the DRC is one of the poorest countries in the world. About two-thirds of Congolese people live on less than \$2.15 a day, according to the World Bank.

Meeting conflict victims

Francis is also due to meet victims of the conflict in eastern Congo in Kinshasa on Wednesday following the mega-mass. After that, he will talk to representatives from charitable organisations. The DRC's east has long been plagued by dozens of armed groups. Since late 2021, M23 rebels have also captured swathes of territory in North Kivu province, coming close to its capital Goma. The trip to DRC and South Sudan had originally

been planned for July 2022, but it was postponed due to the pontiff's knee pain that has forced him in recent months to use a wheelchair.

Security concerns were also said to play a role in delaying the trip, and a stop in Goma—a city of over a million people on the border with Rwanda—is no longer on the itinerary. "I would have liked to go to Goma too, but with the war, you can't go there," Francis told reporters on the plane from Rome.

The Argentine pontiff, in his speech in Kinshasa on Tuesday, urged the need to address the conflict and said he supported regional peace efforts. Francis also underlined the need for investment in education, and free-and-fair elections, among other issues. On Friday, the pope travels to South Sudan's capital Juba. This visit is Francis's 40th foreign trip since being elected in 2013. — AFP

News in brief

Xi condemns mosque attack

BEIJING: China's President Xi Jinping strongly condemned an attack at a mosque in neighbouring Pakistan, state media reported Wednesday, after rescue work ended with the death toll at 101. The suicide blast on Monday in Peshawar struck inside a police compound as hundreds of officers gathered for afternoon prayers. The city's police chief said Tuesday that the attack was revenge for the force's frontline operations against Islamist militants. In a call with Pakistan's President Arif Alvi on Wednesday, Xi said China "opposes all forms of terrorism and strongly condemns the incident", according to state broadcaster CCTV. Beijing "will continue to firmly support Pakistan in promoting its national counter-terrorism action plan, maintaining social stability and protecting the safety of the people," Xi said. China and Pakistan are longtime allies, with their leaders frequently hailing what they call an "iron brotherhood".

German police nab suspect

BERLIN: German police said on Wednesday they had arrested a Serbian man accused of two murders and a series of other violent attacks against the elderly. The suspect is accused of killing a 77-year-old woman in December and an 89-year-old woman in January in or near the southwestern city of Schwabisch Hall. Investigators also believe the same assailant is behind the armed mugging of an 83-year-old man last month and possibly a further killing in 2020. "We were able to arrest a 31-year-old Serbian citizen yesterday morning," regional police chief Reiner Moeller said, adding that any motive was still unclear. "He has declined to answer questions about the crimes." The suspect told investigators that he only arrived in Germany in December, with his family, prosecutor Harald Lustig told a news conference.

Singapore detains student

SINGAPORE: Singapore has detained an 18-year-old, accusing him of supporting the Islamic State group and planning to carry out attacks, security officials said Wednesday. Muhammad Irfan Danyal bin Mohamad Nor, a Singaporean student, was detained in December under the Internal Security Act, which allows for detention without trial for up to two years. He became radicalised after viewing Islamic State group propaganda online, authorities said in a statement, adding that he wanted to use social media to gather fighters to conduct attacks in Singapore. Authorities said his plans included recruiting a suicide car bomber to attack a military camp as well as bombing a grave site. "At the point of arrest, he was determined to commit violence," said Minister for Law and Home Affairs K. Shanmugam. Such cases are rare in the multicultural and multi-racial city-state. — AFP

6.0-magnitude quake rocks Philippines

GENERAL SANTOS: A 6.0-magnitude earthquake rocked the southern Philippines on Wednesday, the US Geological Service said, with local authorities warning of aftershocks and possible damage. The quake struck at 6:44 pm (1044 GMT), near Monkayo municipality in Davao de Oro province on Mindanao island.

There were no immediate reports of major damage in the remote and mountainous gold mining region. Monkayo police Staff Sergeant Harvey Asayas told AFP the quake was strong in the beginning but gradually weakened and stopped after 40 seconds.

"The authorities are now conducting patrols around to assess damage including the fire personnel and disaster officers," Asayas said. Police Corporal Lucita Ambrocio, who is based in the nearby municipality of New Bataan, described the quake as "quick".

"After 10 minutes, our colleagues went back to the building," said Ambrocio, who raced outside with her colleagues when the police station started shaking. "I checked the premises and I saw a small crack in the barracks." But in nearby Montevista municipality, Maricar Melgar said the quake was so strong she feared the building she was in would collapse. "This was probably the strongest earthquake I experienced. My body is still shaking," the 51-year-old told AFP.

In Tagum city, in Davao del Norte province, about 40 kilometres south west of the epicentre, residents also fled their homes and power was knocked out by the force of the quake. "We were eating when (the house) began to shake—it was strong," said Grace Jao, 40. "We ran outside—we had to take safety measures. We did not see any damage inside the house when we got back." Quakes are a daily occurrence in the Philippines, which sits along the Pacific "Ring of Fire", an arc of intense seismic as well as volcanic activity that stretches from Japan through Southeast Asia and across the Pacific basin.

Most are too weak to be felt by humans, but strong and destructive ones come at random with no technology available to predict when and where it will happen. The nation's civil defence office regularly holds drills simulating earthquake scenarios along active fault lines. The last major one was in October in the northern Philippines. The 6.4-magnitude quake hit the mountain town of Dolores in Abra province, injuring several people, damaging buildings and cutting power to most of the region.—AFP



LAHORE: Civil society activists shout slogans and carry placards during a protest in Lahore on February 1, 2023, against the mosque suicide blast inside a police headquarters in Peshawar. — AFP

Pakistan detain 23 suspects after deadly mosque blast

PESHAWAR: Police in Pakistan have detained 23 people in connection to a blast at a mosque inside a police headquarters that killed 101 people, a senior official who asked not to be named said Wednesday.

Authorities are also probing the possibility that people inside the compound helped to coordinate the attack, the senior provincial police official told AFP on condition of anonymity. A suicide bomber slipped undetected into a highly sensitive compound in northwest Peshawar and detonated explosives among a row of worshippers in the compound's mosque on Monday, causing a wall to collapse and crush officers.

"We have detained people from the police line (headquarters) to get to the bottom of how the explosive material made its way in and to see if any police officials were also involved in the attack," the senior official said. "The attacker and facilitators might have had links outside Pakistan."

He said some among the 23 detained were also from the city and nearby former tribal areas which border Afghanistan. Authorities are investigating how a major security breach could happen in one of the most tightly controlled areas of the city, housing intelligence and counter-terrorism bureaus, and next door to the regional secretariat.

Low-level militancy, often targeting security checkpoints, has been steadily rising in the areas near Peshawar that border Afghanistan since the Taliban seized control of Kabul in August 2021. The assaults are claimed mostly by the Pakistani Taliban, as well as the local chapter of the Islamic State, but mass casualty attacks remain rare.

Moazzam Jah Ansari, the head of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province police force, on Tuesday told reporters that a suicide bomber had entered the mosque as a guest, using 10-12 kilogrammes (about 22-26 pounds) of explosive material earlier brought to the site in bits and pieces.

He added that a militant group that was on-and-off affiliated with the Pakistani Taliban could be behind the attack. Pakistan is already being hobbled by a massive economic downturn and political chaos, ahead of elections due by October.

"The main fear is a second attack, another blast ... a suicide bomber may blow himself in a market," said 55-year-old Naemullah Jan, a building contractor in the city. "Life in the city has become difficult. Police are stopping us at every checkpoint," said Faisal Khan, 39, a salesman who said he is now avoiding going to mosque and praying at home.

Years of attacks on schools, civilians and places of worship, finally ended with a military clearance operation that began in 2014, pushing the insurgents into the mountainous border and Afghanistan. Violence drastically declined until the withdrawal of US and Nato troops in Afghanistan in 2021 led to the return of the Taliban in Kabul, emboldening militant groups in the border region.

The Pakistani Taliban, known as the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), are back with a new strategy—targeting stretched security forces in low level attacks. The group have distanced themselves from this week's mosque blast but police are investigating whether an on-off TTP affiliate was the culprit.

"Earlier I used to feel safe near the police, now when a police car or officers pass near me, I fear in my heart that they might be attacked and I will also be hurt," 55-year-old Muhammad Haneef Awan told AFP. Defence Minister Khawaja Asif said the government's National Security Committee will meet soon to discuss another military operation against the insurgent groups. — AFP

Relief as Australia finds lost dangerous radioactive capsule

SYDNEY: A tiny but dangerously radioactive capsule that fell off a truck on a remote Australian outback highway has been found, relieved authorities said Wednesday. The silver-coloured cylinder—smaller than a human fingernail—was recovered by the side of the road near the town of Newman, Western Australia, state emergency services said.

The capsule disappeared from a truck travelling along the Great Northern Highway from a remote mine operated by Rio Tinto to the southwestern city of Perth sometime in mid-January. Its disappearance went unnoticed until later in the month. For the last week, vehicles carrying radiation detection equipment have been scouring a strip of Australia larger than the distance between Madrid and Paris, or New York and Chicago. Although just eight millimetres by six millimetres, it contains enough Caesium-137 to cause acute radiation sickness. "It's a good result," minister Stephen Dawson told reporters. "It's certainly a needle in a haystack that has been found, and I think West Australians can sleep better tonight." The capsule is part of a gauge used for measuring the density of iron ore.

It was part of a package picked up on January 12 from Rio Tinto's Gudai-Darri iron ore mine and delivered to the Perth suburb of Malaga on January 16. But the package was not opened until January 25 when the gauge was found "broken apart" with the radioactive capsule missing. State police were informed the same day. It was ultimately found a few hours drive from the mine. On Wednesday a team—including members of the Australian military—identified the capsule before loading it into a lead-lined container to shield people from radiation. It was now being transported to a "secure location" and will begin another journey to Perth on Thursday.

"The site has been surveyed and cleared of any residual radiological contamination," state emergency services said. Rio Tinto welcomed the capsule's recovery and repeated an earlier apology over the "extremely rare" incident. "I'd like to apologise to the wider community of Western Australia for the concern it has generated," Rio Tinto Iron Ore Chief Executive Simon Trott said in a statement. According to the mining giant, the capsule was being transported by a certified contractor when it was lost.—AFP



NEWMAN: Handout from the Government of Western Australia's Department of Fire and Emergency Services shows crew near the site where a radioactive capsule, which had fallen off a truck, was found along a desert highway south of Newman. — AFP

Business

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 2, 2023

Zain completes first cohort of 'We Succeed' succession planning program

Bader Al-Kharafi: This exceptional learning experience for talented upcoming leaders makes Zain a sustainable and successful organization now and in the future

- Program built on years of research by global consultancy into 'adaptability'
- Affirms Zain's objective to build aspirations and confidence while equipping people with core skills and mindsets to be successful leaders

KUWAIT: Zain announced the successful completion of its inaugural 'We Succeed' initiative: a Group-wide middle management succession planning program that saw over 90 talents undertake eight months of development on Awareness and Perspective, Personal Purpose, Connection, and Psychological Safety.

Under the auspices of Zain's Diversity, Equity and Inclusion department and delivered in collaboration with a leading management consulting firm, the program is built on years of research into "adaptability", enables self-awareness, especially of people's default mindsets under stress. Moreover, it equipped the participants with tools to deepen relationships, including those that they experience as "difficult" and encourage them to create psychologically safe, empowered teams.

Commencing with 360-degree profiling of participating middle managers, the 'We Succeed' program extended over the course of eight months with workshops, fieldwork assignments, local meetings among managers from the same operation, and cross-operational discussions, as well as coaching for the top performing members in the program.

Starting 2023, the top 50 percent of 'We Succeed' participants will be assigned to a senior Zain sponsor to accelerate their careers in 2023 and beyond, thereby supporting Zain's Gender Diversity WE target to create a more equal leadership team.

Commenting on the completion of the initial 'We Succeed' program, Bader Al-Kharafi, Vice-Chairman and Zain Group CEO said, "I would like to congratulate the talented upcoming leaders who participated in this inspiring new initiative. They will grow to be the executive management of the future, and it is through such programs that we are developing impeccable succes-



sion planning, which will make us a sustainable and successful organization now and in the future."

Al-Kharafi added, "This exceptional learning experience solely catered to middle managers and built on years of research into "adaptability" continues to affirm the company's overall objective to build aspirations and confidence while equipping our people with core skills and mindsets to be successful leaders."

Personal assessments of participants upon completion of the program reflected significant personal growth and development in areas including Reframing, Self-Awareness, and Articulating Purpose. This is in line with Zain's recently uplifted diversity and inclusion

activities to incorporate equity. Programs such as 'We Succeed' affirm the company's overall objective to make employees as skilled and included as possible, without bias or favor.

'We Succeed' encompassed 97 participants group-wide, who completed the program, improving all behaviors from pulse 1 to pulse 2 as indicated by self-reflection and colleague feedback. Participants reported on average a 7 percent improvement across all behaviors, and self-reported the greatest growth in reframing skills, which they originally self-reported as their lowest scores.

The 'We Succeed' ongoing sponsorship and men-

toring program will help high-performing middle management participants to access development opportunities that would otherwise not be available to them, while expanding the mentees' perceptions of what the mentors can deliver.

The initiative will also allow participants to make connections with other senior executive leadership members, promoting their visibility in the company, all the while receiving constructive feedback on how best to navigate their careers.

We Succeed is another critical component that will support and ensure the success of Zain's ambitious and profitable growth '4SIGHT' strategy.

CBK announces 14th session of HBS in-person program

KUWAIT: The Governor of the Central Bank of Kuwait (CBK) and Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Institute of Banking Studies (IBS), Basel A Al-Haroon, announced that IBS shall organize the 14th session of Harvard Business School Program. The program is specifically designed to develop executives in GCC banks and financial institutions, in light of the changes in the business world, and the needs of the banking and financial sectors.

Al-Haroon pointed out that the program, held under the title "Strategic Leadership in a Changing World", will be held in Kuwait and covers two correlated themes: "Financial Markets Strategy" and "Leadership." The program will focus on the crucial role of leadership and management in setting and implementing financial, technical and leadership strategies that address the emerging challenges, and help keep pace with the accelerated advancements of digital transformation in the financial sector. Relevant case studies related to the financial and banking sectors in addition to other sectors will be provided to enhance analytical skills of the executives and provide them

with the tools, techniques and methodologies that boost performance, innovation and organizational culture.

Al-Haroon added that the program targets manager level executives or the equivalent, and will run over 6 days from 11 to 16 March 2023. Upon completion, participants will receive a certificate of attendance from Harvard Business School. The governor explained that this program is one of the programs under "Kafa'a" initiative launched by CBK in September 2019 in collaboration with the local Kuwaiti banks, and organized and managed by IBS, to develop cadres and executives in different sectors in general and in the financial and banking sector in particular. The Governor also indicated that cooperation with Harvard Business School began in 2009 to offer the first custom designed program offered by Harvard Business School in GCC countries.

The governor added this program is held in GCC countries alternately though the 13th session was virtual training. However, this year, the program will be held in person in Kuwait as CBK and Kuwaiti banks are keen to continue providing this program given the



Basel A Al-Haroon



rapidly changing business environment.

In conclusion, Al-Haroon stressed that strengthening the performance of the national workforce will remain a top strategic priority of CBK, given their crucial role in achieving sustainable growth of the banking and financial sector. He also reiterated his keenness to continue this cooperation between Kuwaiti and GCC banks and financial institutions in areas of shared interest such as creating new initiatives to maximize the benefits of training and knowledge exchange. He expressed his gratitude to the Kuwaiti and GCC banks and financial institutions for their participation.

Price war

Electric cars are on average much more expensive than their petrol equivalents, starting from about 35,000 euros (\$38,000). This puts them out of reach for many drivers, despite heavy subsidies. But Tesla announced price cuts of up to 20 percent in Europe and the US in early January, quickly followed by a similar move from Ford. In Europe, manufacturers could follow a similar route to gain market share, but also in order to comply with increasingly stringent European CO2 emission standards, according to German analyst Matthias Schmidt.

"2022 was a problem of supply, (but) we're likely to see a complete switch," he said. "If (manufacturers) start to panic, we're likely to see more and more cuts." Producers could also react to Chinese manufacturers ramping up production, with plans to produce in Europe at a cheaper price.

Charging

Concern about battery life remains one of the main factors that deters drivers from switching to electric vehicles. Most are limited to a few hundred kilometers and recharging can take anything from 20 minutes to several hours depending on the terminal. This means the development of a network of fast and accessible terminals for charging is crucial for longer journeys.

The EU will need 3.4 million charging points by 2030, according to a report by consulting firm McKinsey, with updated power grids to cope. This could cost some 240 billion euros, with companies including Fastned and Ionity ramping up investment in charging stations. —AFP

Electric car sales gain pace despite hurdles

PARIS: The electrification of the car industry is gathering pace, particularly in Europe, where the sale of new cars running on petrol and diesel will end in 2035. But challenges remain around their production, affordability and whether enough infrastructure can be put in place to persuade drivers to make the switch.

China in pole position

China is a leader in the electrification of cars, with favorable policies helping sales to double in 2022.

But experts have warned they could slow. "China's BEV (battery electric vehicle) growth will moderate in 2023, after a meteoric rise in 2022 of more than 100 percent year-on-year," said Al Bedwell, director of Global Powertrain at LMC Automotive. "The country's slowing economy and unavoidable retail price increases will dampen Chinese BEV and plug-in hybrid demand, though much volume will still be added." Automakers were hobbled in 2022 by a lack of semiconductors, the computer chips that are key for all types of cars.

But more than 1.1 million electric cars were sold in the European Union last year, up by a quarter to a record 12.1 percent share of the

market. Bedwell said the growth "will accelerate to 50 percent in 2023 as the chip crisis eases". In North America, electric cars could represent seven percent of the market this year, with 1.3 million vehicles sold, according to industry analysts LMC Automotive.

The United States is giving its electric car industry a major boost with a \$370 billion green energy bill that includes tax cuts for US-made electric cars and batteries. In total, one in eight cars sold worldwide in 2023 could be electric.

Tesla dominance

Elon Musk's Tesla remains the biggest seller of electric cars globally, shifting 1.3 million units in 2022, driven by its Model Y SUV. It predicts a 37 percent increase this year. But Chinese firm BYD has it in its sights. The manufacturer almost tripled sales last year to 900,000 cars, and intends to develop in Europe and North America.

Chinese manufacturers like BYD or rival carmaker NIO are "the most competitive in the world, work harder and smarter", Musk said himself in January. Traditional auto giants like Volkswagen and Stellantis group—which owns Peugeot and Jeep—are also stepping up their launches of electric models. Luxury brands such as Rolls Royce and Ferrari are also planning to launch their first battery-powered models soon.

Even so, Japanese automaker Toyota has continued to defend hybrids, presenting them as more accessible and the only concrete solution for the energy transition.

US Fed set to slow rate hikes but signal inflation fight not over

WASHINGTON: The Federal Reserve starts the second day of its policy meeting Wednesday, on growing expectations that it will step down to a smaller interest rate hike as red-hot inflation shows signs of cooling. But the US central bank is likely to push on with efforts to rein in costs, concerned about the risks of taking its foot off the gas too quickly.

The Fed cranked up the benchmark lending rate seven times last year, including four consecutive 0.75 percentage point increases, lifting borrowing costs in hopes of dampening demand. The aim is to rein in inflation, which surged to its fastest pace in decades in mid-2022 but has since come off a peak. Policymakers are widely expected to announce a 0.25 percentage point rate hike at the end of their two-day meeting, slowing from a half-point increase in December and steeper hikes before that.

Not done yet

But Ryan Sweet, chief US economist at Oxford Economics anticipates this will be accompanied by signals that the Fed is not done yet. "They want concrete evidence that they've killed inflation, and they haven't yet," he told AFP. An easing of supply chain stress and shift from spending on goods to services allows the cost of goods to moderate.

"However, it is sticky services prices that will keep the Fed on its rate-hiking course," he said in a recent report. Analysts expect that the Fed is looking for labor market conditions to ease, reducing wage pressures and services inflation. For now, data released Tuesday showed that a measure of pay and benefits rose less than expected in the fourth quarter last year, adding to signs that the labor market is cooling.

Time to halt?

Ian Shepherdson, chief economist of Pantheon Macroeconomics, argues it is time to pause the Fed's rate hikes, saying in a tweet on Tuesday that "their work is done." "They have suppressed inflation expectations; the COVID distortions to rents and margins are working through and will drive inflation down," he added.

"Every further Fed rate hike from here just increases the chance of an entirely unnecessary recession," said Shepherdson. Some Democrats in Congress have also expressed concern over rate increases, with Senator John Hickenlooper urging this week for the central bank to "proceed with caution." But Fed officials have expressed determination to stay the course, with Fed Chair Jerome Powell telling reporters in December that "the historical record cautions strongly against prematurely loosening policy." Sweet of Oxford Economics told AFP: "If they signal that they're done and then have to reverse course, that's going to be very disruptive to financial markets."

In a speech this month, Fed Governor Christopher Waller cautioned against being "head-faked" by a temporary trend of positive data. He added that he will be looking for recent improvements in inflation figures to continue. "We still have a considerable way to go toward our two percent inflation goal, and I expect to support continued tightening of monetary policy," Waller said in the earlier speech. —AFP

Business

KCCI chief calls on private sector to stand by Chamber

Attack on Chamber will hurt Kuwait's private sector: Al-Sager

KUWAIT: Chairman of the Kuwait Chamber of Commerce and Industry (KCCI) Mohammad Al-Sager called on the private sector to stand by the Chamber against the fierce and unjustified attack it is currently exposed to. He said the attacks will harm the private sector and Kuwait in general. He pointed out that the Chamber's team reviewed the pivotal role played by the Chamber in developing the private sector and it was presented before the National Assembly 10 days ago.

Sager estimated the value of the claims that were subject to commercial arbitration by the specialized center at about \$2 billion. "The commercial arbitration processes which began its activities 64 years ago were

carried out in accordance with specified technical standards. Since its inception, the center has received nearly 300 arbitration cases," he added. The arbitration activities and the specialized committee were the beginning of the Chamber's achievements, he said.

Since its early days, the commercial arbitration and tariffs committee performed its role in settling commercial disputes, until 1999, when the Kuwait Center for Commercial Arbitration was established. It operates under the umbrella of the KCCI and is supervised by an independent board of trustees. It provides all technical and logistical facilities to resolve commercial disputes through out-of-court settlements. At the same time, it does not interfere in the arbitration process itself, he clarified.

On the sidelines of the legal economic forum held between Europe, Kuwait and investors of the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, Sager said: "It is not a surprise that KCCI accepted the invitation to participate in the forum. The law is the reason for the emergence of chambers of commerce in the world and growth of the economy is the goal of their existence." Sager explained that Wednesday's meeting provided an appropriate opportunity for the Chamber to confirm what it has previously put forward and Kuwait and many other countries have initiated to develop and rationalize the process of formulating economic legislation.



Mohammad Al-Sager

Seminar discusses progress on Kuwait development plan

By Majd Othman

KUWAIT: The Kuwaiti Society for the Defense of Public Money, in cooperation with the Kuwaiti Economic Society, held a seminar titled "Future Legislation and the Development Plan 2035". President of the Kuwait Association for the Defense of Public Funds Abdullah Al-Bakr was the moderator. The speakers discussed the New Kuwait 2035 vision, which was issued in 2010 and approved by the late Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, and the goals, visions and aspirations of the strategic plan to make Kuwait an economic, commercial and cultural center compatible with the past, heritage, customs and traditions of the Kuwaiti society.

Secretary General of the Supreme Council for Planning Khaled Mahdi spoke about the draft laws that resulted from this vision, according to the plan drawn up. However, poor implementation and mismanagement thwarted the work of this plan. "The main reason for this was not assigning issues and tasks to elements with competencies and experience," he said.

Member of the Board of Directors of Kuwait Direct Investment Promotion Authority Muhammad Al-Sane said what attracts foreign investors to any country is the existence of key elements, which include a serious governmental desire to adopt an economic identity, presence of a parliament capable of drafting the required legislation, presence of



KUWAIT: During the seminar titled "Future Legislation and the Development Plan 2035".

a mature, aware and active civil society, and finally, presence of a private sector prepared and ready for this stage with specialized national cadres to ensure the process of economic integration to achieve the goals of the vision.

MP Abdulwahab Al-Essa clarified the government should work more seriously in implementing its vision in any economic reform process, especially as it seeks to adopt the digitization of services. On the other hand, the government has stated the number of employees in 2035 will be at least 600,000, while Kuwait's vision seeks to have only 180,000 employees.

Director of the Office of Research and Strategic Planning at the Authority for Partnership Projects between the Public and Private Sectors Nayef Al-Haddad spoke about the importance of strengthening the role of the private sector in adopting public projects and attracting investors towards partnership with the private sector, and

not only investing in major government projects. He stressed the importance of having a clear vision for the government regarding the development of its entities.

Deputy President of Kuwait Lawyers Association Adnan Abul said that the current reality indicates the importance of political reform to ensure stability in the country, in addition to the importance of having appropriate and necessary laws to activate executive tools to implement Kuwait's 2035 vision.

Vice President of Kuwait Economic Society Muhammad Al-Joan said the development plans in the country are limited to simple efforts that do not amount to being part of a development plan, indicating that economic and accountability standards must be established to measure the effectiveness of the plans that are being drawn up and what are the obstacles they face and what are the solutions for them.

Modi woos voters with infrastructure push and tax cuts

NEW DELHI: India's government announced a huge infrastructure program, increased welfare spending and tax cuts Wednesday as Prime Minister Narendra Modi seeks to boost the economy and voters' incomes ahead of elections next year. It will spend around \$122 billion in the next financial year—an unprecedented 33 percent increase—on ambitious road, port and railway projects, finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman said in her budget announcement.

The investments could create millions of jobs and boost Asia's third-largest economy. Welfare spending will rise, including on providing all households with piped water and health insurance for the poor, and the finance minister extended a scheme distributing free food grains to about 800 million struggling Indians. Modi looks set to seek a third term as premier in a general election due before May 2024.

The loudest cheers in Sitharaman's near 90-minute speech to parliament came when she announced

around \$4.2 billion of direct tax incentives for the middle classes—some of the most vocal supporters of Modi and his ruling right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party. But only about 80 million people and companies pay direct taxes in India, despite its population of 1.4 billion.

The vast majority of people earn less than the income tax threshold, and tax under-reporting remains a major issue. Despite the tax cuts, Sitharaman said India's budget deficit would be reduced from 6.4 percent of GDP to 5.9 percent. Finance Secretary TV Somanathan told journalists the government's expectations were based on growth projections and an increased total tax take. New Delhi's deficit and growth targets were hit after Covid-19 restrictions in 2020 but the country has since recovered to become the world's fastest-growing major economy. The International Monetary Fund last week projected India would grow 6.1 percent this year.

Meanwhile, India announced a double-digit increase in its annual defense budget Wednesday with an eye on its increasingly assertive geopolitical rival China, with which it shares a tense and disputed northern border. New Delhi—already the world's third-biggest military spender according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute—will increase its expenditure to \$73 billion, a 13 percent rise, Sitharaman told parliament in her budget announcement.

white Tesla S, the 38-year-old salesman for a cosmetics company clocks between 20,000 and 25,000 kilometers (12,400 and 15,500 miles) a year.

Like most new electric vehicle owners, he had moments of panic in the beginning when he saw the battery gauge drop quickly, with the prospect of it falling to zero on a deserted country road.

"I didn't know the car well enough. But after all these years, I have a pretty good idea of how many kilowatts it needs and I know that it varies a lot depending on whether the car has spent the night outdoors or in a garage," he told AFP. The car uses much more battery when it is parked outside in temperatures that can reach minus 15 degrees Celsius (five degrees Fahrenheit), Benassi said. "It takes quite a while for it to go back to normal consumption," he added. In the cold season, how much range electric cars lose depends on the model and how low the temperature gets.

"But the following rules of thumb apply: a frost of around minus 10C will reduce the operating range by around a third compared to summer weather, and a severe one (minus 20C or more) by up to half," said Finnish consultant Vesa Linja-aho. "By storing the car in a warm garage, this phenomenon can be mitigated somewhat," he added.

Charging stations

Drivers must plan their routes before long journeys, but car applications and Norway's vast network of more than 5,600 fast and superfast charging stations help make the process easier. Electric cars accounted for 54

Relations between the world's two most populous countries are strained over border, trade and technology disputes, and India has tried to decouple itself from Chinese supply chains since a deadly frontier military clash in Ladakh in 2020.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government has been building up its military, including its border defenses and armaments industry, with a nuclear-powered submarine of its own, and also unveiled its first locally made aircraft carrier last year—milestones Beijing passed years ago.

India still relies on longstanding partner Russia for most of its arms imports—other suppliers include the US, France and Israel—and Sitharaman told parliament the government was committed to promoting self-reliance in military equipment.

Domestic procurement would go up by 10 percentage points to 68 percent, she added.

The allocation to defense is more than 13 percent of the total government budget, Defense Minister Rajnath Singh tweeted. India has also become increasingly assertive in its efforts with multilateral groupings such as the so-called Quad. India joins Japan, Australia and the United States in the alliance, which is a grouping of regional powers increasingly concerned about China's military and economic influence. The country participated in its first joint fighter jet exercise with Japan in January as the two countries—which both count China as a neighbor—upgrade defense and security ties. —AFP



JESSHEIM: Tesla owner Philip Benassi is seen at a charging station in Jessheim, southeast Norway. —AFP

percent of new car registrations last year in Finnmark, Norway's northernmost region in the Arctic where the mercury has at times fallen to minus 51C—a sign that the cold issue is not insurmountable. Other Nordic countries that regularly experience chilly temperatures also top world rankings for electric vehicles—they accounted for around 33 percent of new car sales in Sweden and Iceland in 2022.

"Now more and more new electric cars have systems for pre-heating the batteries, which is very smart because you get more range and because if your car is heated before you charge, it will also charge faster," said Christina Bu, head of the Norwegian Electric Vehicle Association. —AFP

US manufacturing activity contracts, private hiring slows

WASHINGTON: Activity in the US manufacturing sector shrank for a third straight month in January, hovering at the lowest levels since May 2020 as new orders and production slumped, according to survey data released Wednesday. The gloomy figure comes as demand softens on the back of the central bank's rapid interest rate hikes.

The Institute for Supply Management's (ISM) manufacturing index slipped one percentage point to 47.4 percent in January, from 48.4 percent in December. This was a touch below analyst expectations and also lower than the 50 percent threshold indicating growth in the sector.

"The January composite index reading reflects companies slowing outputs to better match demand in the first half of 2023 and prepare for growth in the second half of the year," said ISM manufacturing survey chair Timothy Fiore in a statement. In recent months, the manufacturing Purchasing Managers Index has been at its lowest levels since the pandemic recovery began.

In January, the new orders index and production index remained in contraction, both retreating from December's readings, as demand eased, the report said. But companies "are indicating that they are not going to substantially reduce head counts as they are positive about the second half of the year," Fiore added.

Of the six biggest manufacturing industries, only one—transportation equipment—registered growth in January, said ISM. "Business is still strong, but we have begun to see softening in some pricing, and lead times seem to be improving," said a respondent in the computer and electronic products sector.

Another respondent in the chemical products sector added that "there have been a lot fewer supply disruptions so far this year." US central bankers are due to conclude a two-day policy meeting on Wednesday, at the end of which analysts expect a further but smaller interest rate hike.

Meanwhile, private employers in the United States slowed their hiring pace in January, payroll firm ADP said Wednesday, in the latest sign that economic activity is cooling on efforts to rein in inflation.

Companies added 106,000 jobs last month, sharply down from 253,000 in December and below analyst expectations, but ADP cautioned that numbers in its reference week were affected by weather disruptions. "Hiring was stronger during other weeks of the month, in line with the strength we saw late last year," said ADP chief economist Nela Richardson in a statement.

As the impact of the central bank's interest rate hikes ripple through the world's biggest economy, labor market strength has been a key focus in the inflation fight.

Policymakers are eyeing wage gains as companies competed to find and retain workers, concerned that this could lead to rising costs for services and make price increases more stubborn.

Annual pay was up 7.3 percent last month, the same rate as in December, said ADP in its recently revamped report which includes wage data. But for those who changed jobs, pay growth surged to 15.4 percent. "Employment was soft during our Jan 12 reference week as the US was hit with extreme weather," said ADP on Wednesday.

Sectors where employment slipped included construction, along with trade, transportation and utilities. Meanwhile, hiring in leisure and hospitality formed the lion's share in the service-providing industry. —AFP

Arctic cold 'no sweat' for electric cars in Norway

JESSHEIM, Norway: Norwegian electric car owners have a word for the way they feel when they look nervously at their battery indicators while driving in sub-freezing weather: "rekkevideangst", or "range anxiety". Tesla owner Philip Benassi has experienced it on cold winter days, but like other Norwegians, he has learned to cope with it.

With temperatures often falling below zero, rugged terrain and long stretches of remote roads, Norway may not seem like the most ideal place to drive an electric car, whose battery dies faster in cold weather. Yet the country is the undisputed world champion when it comes to the zero-emission vehicles. A record four out of five new autos sold in Norway last year were electric, in a major oil-producing country that aims to end the sale of new fossil fuel cars by 2025 — a decade ahead of the European Union's planned ban. By comparison, electric cars accounted for 12.1 percent of new car sales in the EU in 2022, up from 9.1 percent a year earlier, according to data published Wednesday by the European Automobile Manufacturers' Association.

Benassi took the plunge in 2018. In his gleaming

Markaz Monthly Market Review

Kuwait's real GDP could grow at 2.8%; inflation at 3.2% in 2023

GCC and global markets rise on back of cooling inflation

KUWAIT: Kuwait Financial Centre (Markaz) recently released its Monthly Market Review report for the month of January 2023. Central Bank of Kuwait (CBK) raised its policy rate by 50 bps from 3.5 percent to 4.0 percent in January, a few days ahead of the scheduled monthly meeting of the US Fed. According to forecasts by the United Nations, Kuwait's real GDP is expected to grow at 2.8 percent while the country's inflation is estimated at 3.2 percent in 2023. Kuwait's inflation (CPI) eased in the month of December to 3.15 percent y/y, which was mildly lower compared to November at 3.18 percent y/y. Fitch has affirmed a stable outlook on Kuwait with a credit rating of AA-, citing exceptionally robust fiscal and external balance.

Regionally, GCC Markets were mixed with S&P GCC composite index, rising 1.7 percent for the month. The Abu Dhabi equity index decreased the most, losing 3.9 percent over the month, primarily

driven by the sharp decline in the country's largest lender - First Abu Dhabi Bank, whose Q4 earnings were below market expectations. Saudi Arabia and Qatar indices gained the most, rising 3.0 percent and 2.4 percent respectively for the month on the back of slightly higher than expected earnings results from blue-chip companies.

World Bank has revised its 2023 GDP outlook for the UAE upwards to 4.1 percent, underpinned by strong growth in the non-oil sector. UAE PMI dropped to 54.2 in December 2022 from 54.4 in the previous month, marking the lowest reading since January 2022. According to the Securities and Commodities Authority (SCA), UAE has 11 IPOs in the pipeline worth more than AED 8 billion, following a record year in 2022 from an IPO perspective. Inflation in Saudi Arabia increased by 3.3 percent y/y in December 2022, majorly driven by the increase in housing rents. Saudi Central Bank (SAMA) has proposed to launch

open banking services in Q1 2023, which is expected to boost the country's banking and financial services sector. Qatar's inflation surged to 5.9 percent y/y in December 2022, its highest level since September 2022. The increase was driven by recreation and hospitality segments, which were boosted by the FIFA World Cup 2022 held in the country.

Developed markets' performance was positive during January with MSCI World and S&P 500 gaining 7.0 percent and 6.2 percent respectively. Economic data on moderating inflation and the anticipation of a short-lived recession in the near term bolstered positive sentiment among the investors. U.S. Core CPI rose 5.7 percent y/y during December, the slowest increase in the year.

US manufacturing output declined by 1.3 percent m/m in December. Eurozone's CPI rose 9.2 percent y/y in December, which was lower than market expectations. European Central Bank

(ECB) has affirmed its stance to continue the interest rate hikes to keep inflation under control. UK inflation increased 10.5 percent y/y in December. MSCI EM index gained 7.9 percent for the month. Chinese equities were positive in November owing to the ease of COVID-19 restrictions in China. The country's GDP expanded by 3 percent in 2022, beating the consensus estimates.

Oil prices marked a decline of 1.7 percent in January 2023, due to indications of strong oil supply increase from Russia. The strong supply forecasts have offset the increase in oil demand from China and possible slowdown in the pace of interest rate hikes by the US Fed.

According to the IEA, oil demand from China is expected to remain high in Q3 and Q4 2023, while oil supply is anticipated to be tight. Gold prices rose 5.7 percent in January to 1,928 \$/oz on account of moderating inflation in the US coupled with the weakness in US dollar.

Adani shares tank as Indian tycoon drops down rich list

MUMBAI: Shares in Gautam Adani's empire nosedived again on Wednesday as the Indian tycoon dropped off the Forbes top 10 rich list following allegations of massive accounting fraud. The five-day rout has now wiped out around \$92 billion of the value of the conglomerate's listed units, Bloomberg News said, while Adani's fortune has collapsed by more than \$40 billion.

The share price of flagship firm Adani Enterprises suddenly dropped further on Wednesday afternoon, closing 28.45 percent lower on the Mumbai stock exchange. The trigger was news that Swiss banking giant Credit Suisse had stopped accepting Adani bonds as collateral for loans it advances to private banking clients, Bloomberg reported. The slide in Adani's personal wealth on the real-time Forbes rich list meant that the school dropout billionaire was overtaken as Asia's richest man by fellow Indian Mukesh Ambani. Adani Total Gas—in which French giant TotalEnergies owns 37.4 percent—dropped another 10 percent on Wednesday, forcing the Bombay Stock Exchange to suspend trade in the stock soon after the market's open.

Adani Ports dropped almost 18 percent, while Adani Power and Adani Wilmar fell five percent each. The sudden sharp drop in Adani Enterprises came despite a \$2.5-billion stock sale in the firm that concluded on Tuesday and was oversubscribed. Smaller retail investors largely steered clear from the follow-on public offering, however, impeding Adani's plans to expand his shareholder base to include "the average, normal Indian mom and dad as shareholders".

Large buyers instead propped up the share sale, including fellow Indian tycoons Sajjan Jindal and Sunil Mittal, Bloomberg News reported, citing unidentified sources.

1,000 percent

Publicity-shy Adani, 60, has seen his empire expand at breakneck speed, with shares in Adani Enterprises soaring by more than a thousand percent over the past five years.

This helped make him, as of last week, the world's third-richest man behind Elon Musk and Bernard Arnault and family. According to US short-seller investment group Hindenburg Research, Adani has artificially boosted the share prices of its units by funneling money into the stocks through offshore tax havens. This "brazen stock manipulation and accounting fraud scheme" is "the largest con in corporate history", Hindenburg said in its explosive report issued last week. Even before the report there were concerns that Adani had taken on too much debt.

Adani said it was the victim of a "maliciously mischievous" reputational attack and issued a 413-page statement on Sunday that said Hindenburg's claims were "nothing but a lie". Hindenburg, which makes money by betting on stocks falling, said in response that Adani's statement failed to answer most of the questions raised in its report.

Opposition heckles

Critics say Adani's close relationship with Prime Minister Narendra Modi has helped him win business and avoid proper regulatory oversight. Modi, who like Adani is from Gujarat state, has not commented publicly since the Hindenburg claims, which analysts say has hurt India's image just as it seeks to woo overseas investors away from China. The firm's many interests include ports—the firm took control of one of Israel's biggest this week—telecoms, airports, media and energy, both in coal and renewables.

India's opposition Congress party called this week for a "serious investigation" by the central bank and regulator into Adani's firms following the Hindenburg allegations. "For all its posturing about black money, has the Modi government chosen to turn a blind eye towards illicit activities by its favorite business group?" Congress said. Opposition lawmakers mockingly chanted "Adani! Adani!" on Wednesday as Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman talked about ports during a budget speech. —AFP

A US corporate scourge deflates the empire of Indian tycoon Adani

WASHINGTON: Nathan Anderson sees himself as a scourge of corporate manipulation, but some investors and business leaders see short-sellers like him as engaging in tactics more akin to Wall Street gunslinging for profit. Anderson heads the New York-based short-seller Hindenburg Research, which profits as its attacks on Indian business tycoon Gautam Adani gain steam.

A week ago, Hindenburg released a 106-page report on the Adani Group, calling it "The Largest Con in Corporate History." Since then, Adani's seven listed companies have shed more than \$60 billion in the stock market. Hindenburg's report did not attack Adani's business activities so much as accuse the conglomerate's managers of stock price manipulation, accounting fraud, tax evasion and money laundering.

As a short seller, Hindenburg is betting on—and profiting from—the fall of Adani's share price. The strategy entails borrowing shares, selling them on the open market, then buying them back when the price falls before transferring them back to the lender and pocketing the difference.

"Hindenburg is a reputable short-seller. It is legal short-selling while issuing accusatory claims on a company," Wuyang Zhao, of the University of Texas's McCombs School of Business, told AFP.

"The statements that you make about a company can be positive and they can be negative. The goal is simply that they are true," added Jill Fisch of the

Pakistan inflation rises to 48-year high as IMF visits

ISLAMABAD: Inflation has risen to a 48-year high in crisis-hit Pakistan, where the International Monetary Fund is visiting for urgent talks, according to data released on Wednesday by the country's statistics bureau. Year-on-year inflation in January 2023 was recorded at 27.55 percent, the highest since May 1975, with thousands of containers of imports held up at Karachi port.

Pakistan's economy is in dire straits, stricken by a balance of payments crisis while it attempts to service high amounts of external debt. The world's fifth-biggest population has less than \$3.7 billion in the state bank-enough to cover just three weeks of imports.

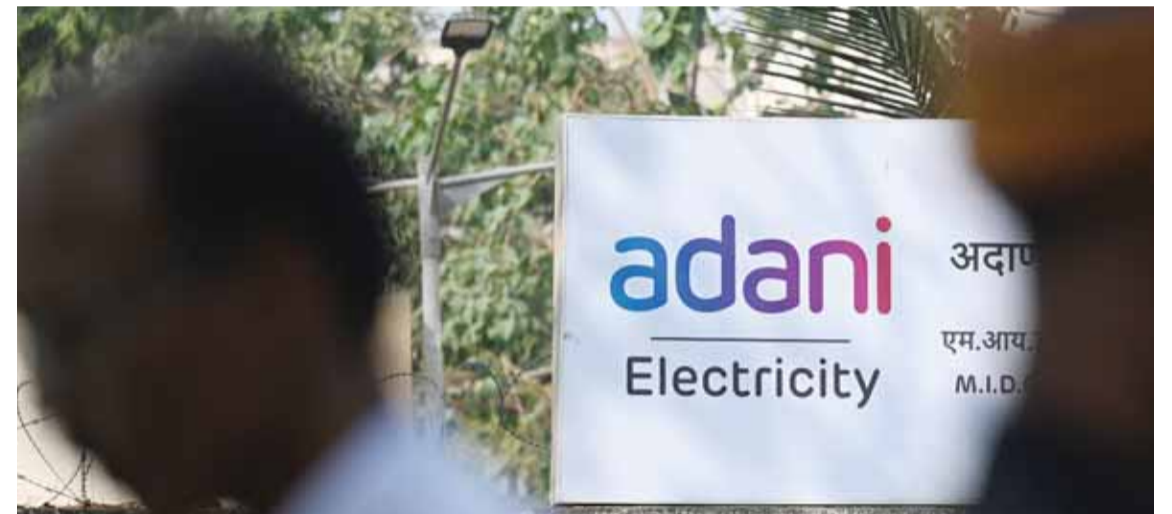
On Tuesday, an IMF delegation arrived in Islamabad to revive negotiations over a stalled bailout package with the government, which has so far held out from meeting the global lender's tough conditions. But in recent days, with the prospect of national bankruptcy looming and no friendly countries willing to offer less painful bailouts, Islamabad has started to bow to pressure.

The government loosened controls on the rupee to rein in a rampant black market in US dollars, a step that caused the currency to plunge to a record low. Artificially cheap petrol prices have also been hiked. The state bank is no longer issuing letters of credit, except for essential food and medicines,

EU unveils plan to counter US green subsidies

BRUSSELS: The EU on Wednesday unveiled proposals to counter the threat to European industry from US green subsidies and unfair competition from China, with measures including a controversial expansion of state aid. The bloc is racing to compete with the United States and China to avoid businesses relocating to Asia or North America where energy costs are cheaper, but there has been division among EU member states on how to respond.

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen outlined the bloc's proposals but said there would be no immediate new EU funding. "At the moment being we need to work with what we have



MUMBAI, India: A pedestrian walks past Adani electricity office in Mumbai on January 31, 2023. Investors dumped more Adani shares on January 31, deepening the carnage at India's biggest conglomerate which has already lost around \$70 billion in value after allegations of "brazen" corporate fraud. — AFP

University of Pennsylvania Law School.

Deflating corporate claims

"If (the published claims) are false, you can be challenged" by regulators or the company in question, said Usha Rodrigues, a securities law expert at the University of Georgia. Hindenburg, which takes its name from the German airship that crashed in New Jersey in 1937, is not new to puncturing corporate misstatement. Founded in 2017 by Anderson, the firm of fewer than 10 employees has already pushed several companies to admit accounting errors or misrepresentations.

Its biggest success has been against electric truck maker Nikola, which was accused in June 2020 of lying about the status of its technology. The company agreed to pay \$125 million to the US Securities and Exchange Commission, and last October its founder, Trevor Milton, was found criminally guilty of misleading his company's shareholders.

In a rare interview with the New York Times, Anderson, who did not respond to requests from AFP, said that revealing corporate misinformation could "make a real-world dent" beyond finance. "If the only impact was stock prices moving around, the work would be far less satisfying." —AFP



KARACHI, Pakistan: People buy pulses and grains at a wholesale market in Karachi on February 1, 2023. —AFP

causing a backlog of thousands of shipping containers at Karachi port stuffed with stock the country can no longer afford.

Industry has been hammered by the imports block and massive rupee devaluation. Public construction projects have halted, textiles factories have partially shut down and domestic investment has slowed. The National Consumer Price Index for January 2023 rose by 2.88 percent from the previ-

ous month, the figures released on Wednesday showed.

In downtown Karachi on Monday, dozens of day laborers including carpenters and painters waited with their tools on display for work that never comes. "The number of beggars has increased and the number of laborers has decreased," said 55-year-old mason Zafar Iqbal, who was eating biryani from a plastic bag donated by a passerby. —AFP

right now. And focus it on the clean tech industry," she said. The majority of the EU's response involves repackaging already existing funds, a stop-gap measure that has earned much criticism.

German MEP Markus Ferber described the proposals on Wednesday as "old wine in new bottles" and "predictably disappointing". Von der Leyen left the door open to a new EU sovereignty fund being created in the future. But that idea has already been strongly opposed by some member states including Denmark and Finland which oppose throwing money at the problem, or boosting borrowing to resolve it. "If you have state aid, the other side of the coin has to be funding at the EU level," von der Leyen said during a news conference. The new measures give flexibility on providing aid to companies in the green and renewable energy sector and those involved in the decarbonisation of industry.

There will also tax benefits available for investments in production facilities in defined, strategic net-zero sectors. —AFP



BRUSSELS: European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen gives a press conference on presented proposals to support industry in face of energy crisis and US, Chinese subsidies after a college meeting at the EU headquarters in Brussels on February 1, 2023. — AFP

Lifestyle | Features

Does Asterix have the magic potion to save French cinema?

“Asterix” returns to the big screen Wednesday as France tries to match Hollywood by weaponising nostalgia in the battle for box office success. Critics may bemoan the crushing lack of originality in Hollywood in recent years, as risk-averse studios fall back on their catalogue of familiar superhero and sci-fi franchises. But there is no doubting that it works: the top 10 of almost every country’s box office last year comprised nothing but Hollywood sequels, reboots and video game adaptations.

That is particularly frustrating for France, where ministers wonder whether they are getting a return on vast state subsidies lavished on the film industry.

Roselyne Bachelot, culture minister from 2020 to 2022, was scathing about her country’s filmmakers in a recent book. “Direct subsidies, advances on receipts, tax exemptions... have created a protected industry which not only doesn’t care much about audiences’ tastes but even expresses contempt for ‘mainstream’ and profitable films,” she wrote. Paris-based Pathe wants to be an exception, not least because it also runs a large chain of cinemas.

Borrowing from the Hollywood playbook, it has thrown large budgets at “Asterix and Obelix: The Middle Kingdom”, and “The Three Musketeers” which follows in its wake. A reworking of “The Count of Monte Cristo” and a



Charles de Gaulle biopic are also in the pipeline. Pathe president Ardavan Safaee told AFP last year that the French system of producing hundreds of small, arty films “isn’t viable in the long-term” and that France needs “more spectacular” fare to compete with Hollywood blockbusters and streaming platforms.

‘The joy, the celebration’

The strategy will likely work at home: the four previous live-action Asterix movies (between 1999 and 2012) sold some 35 million tickets in France and

almost the same again around Europe. The latest takes no chances, with popular stars (including Marion Cotillard and Vincent Cassel as Cleopatra and Julius Caesar) alongside cameos from rappers, YouTubers and even footballer Zlatan Ibrahimovic designed to tempt younger viewers back to cinemas.

“Big films like this represent the joy, the celebration of making cinema in a very free and very broad way,” said Gilles Lellouche, who inherits the large bristles of Obelix from previous star Gerard Depardieu.

Outside Europe, the prospects are less clear.

The makers had hoped for success in China, where the film is set. Director Guillaume Canet (who also stars as Asterix) travelled with President Emmanuel Macron to Beijing in 2019 to win the right to film on the Great Wall. But the pandemic ultimately scuppered the plan, and the film has yet to find a Chinese distributor.

Britain and the United States are also tricky markets since audiences are unaccustomed to dubbed or subtitled family fare. It has been more than a decade since “The Artist” and “The Intouchables” broke records abroad. But despite occasional blockbusters like “Lucy” and “Valerian and the City of a Thousand Planets” from Luc Besson, overseas ticket sales have been on a downward trend.

That could change. It’s no surprise that “Asterix” is being released on Netflix in the US—the streamer has done much to overcome traditional American aversion to subtitles with hit foreign shows, including France’s “Lupin” and “Call My Agent”. “The time is right for updates of ‘The Three Musketeers’ and ‘Asterix’ to find success in America where fans are hungry for movies and shows with diverse and exciting points of view,” said Paul Dergarabedian, of US media analysts Comscore.—AFP



Juliette Binoche

Juliette Binoche to be honored at Spain’s Goya awards

French actor Juliette Binoche will be honored at Spain’s top film month, the Goya awards, later this month, the Spanish Film Academy said Wednesday. The 58-year-old will receive an International Goya at the nationally televised awards ceremony in the southern city of Seville on February 11, it said in a statement.

The academy praised Binoche, who reached global stardom in films such as “Chocolat” and “The English Patient” for which she won an Oscar, for her “extraordinary trajectory”. It also hailed her as “one of the most admired and recognized names in European cinema”.

The film academy awarded its first ever International Goya to acclaimed Australian actor Cate Blanchett at last year’s film honors. Born in Paris in 1964, Binoche has worked with top directors such as Jean-Luc Godard, the godfather of France’s New Wave cinema, and Canada’s David Cronenberg in a career spanning four decades.—AFP

Cozy Osbourne cancels UK, Europe tour over poor health

Heavy metal legend Ozzy Osbourne on Wednesday announced he was cancelling tour dates in his native UK and Europe, saying his body was “still physically weak” after a spinal injury. The Birmingham-born 74-year-old singer announced on Twitter that he was cancelling long-delayed tour dates in Europe and the UK “as I know I couldn’t deal with the travel required”. The tour had already been postponed several times due to Osbourne’s state of health and the COVID-19 pandemic.

He said that he was still suffering health problems after falling at his Los Angeles home in 2019 during a bout of pneumonia. Since then, “My one and only purpose during this time has to be to get back on stage,” he wrote. “My singing voice is fine. However, after three operations, stem cell treatments, endless physical therapy sessions, and most recently groundbreaking Cybernics (HAL) treatment, my body is still physically weak,” he said.

Marketed as the world’s first “cyborg-

type” robot, HAL is a hybrid assistive limb developed in Japan that helps people in wheelchairs walk again using sensors connected to the unit’s control system. Osbourne added that “in all good conscience, I have now come to the realization that I’m not physically capable of doing my upcoming European and UK tour dates.” “Never would I have imagined that my touring days would have ended this way” he added, thanking his fans “for giving me the life that I never ever dreamed I would have”.



Ozzy Osbourne

A former frontman for the Black Sabbath group, Osbourne was fired from the group in 1979 due to concerns including substance abuse and then launched a successful solo act. He also gained notoriety for his antics, including biting off the head of a live bat at a show in 1982. In the early 2000s he found success among a new generation as a reality star-starring as himself, an endearing if shambolic father figure-on the MTV music channel show “The Osbournes.”—AFP

Boom times for francophone Africa’s TV and film industry

Standing in a barren schoolyard surrounded by baobab trees at the end of a dusty road in central Senegal, Leila Sy takes a look around and smiles. “The light makes all the difference,” she says. “Everything is beautiful—the colour, the people, the energy.” The film director is shooting “Banlieusard 2”, the sequel to a 2019 French hit starring French rapper Kery James. The movie is scheduled for release on Netflix later this year.

The American streaming giant is making its mark in francophone West Africa, part of a broader surge in audiovisual production in the region following years of sluggishness. Outside Nollywood in anglophone Nigeria, production has been rising fast, driven by Senegal and Ivory Coast.

On the “Banlieusard 2” set, it is the last day of filming. The cast and crew are tired-and ready for a hearty lunch of yassa chicken, a traditional Senegalese dish. “The teams are there, the skills are there, Senegal is in the process of repositioning itself in this ecosystem and offers a possibility to international producers to come and develop projects without worries”, said Ousmane Fall, a co-producer on the picture.

Soap operas

In a cramped room of a medical clinic in Senegal’s capital Dakar, a smaller but equally motivated team is busy finishing filming an episode of the television series “Karma”, broadcast locally on the TFM channel. The whole team learned the trade on the job.

Souleymane Camara, 29, an actor in the series, works for Marodi, a major regional production company. Launched in 2015, the company—which produced the hit series “Mistress of a Married Man”—has gained more than 4.8 million subscribers on YouTube and claims to have more than 20 million views each month.

Its business model is based on local



French-Senegalese director Leila Sy (right) listens to her assistants, the Senegalese Fabacary Coly (left) and Valerie Arayges (center), on the set of Banlieusard 2 in the forest of Bandia in Sindhia, region of Thies west center of Senegal.—AFP photos

content and advertising spots that generate millions of views. Fifty-six percent of its viewers are women, and 70 percent are aged 18 to 34. Marodi’s partnerships with Senegalese TV channels and international distributors such as Canal+ and Amazon Prime have boosted its visibility.

“Marodi’s ambition is to be a content producer for all of Africa and the diaspora,” Julia Cabrita Diatta, its sales and marketing director, told AFP. Today, 60 percent of its consumers are in Senegal, 20 percent are elsewhere in Africa and eight percent are in France, she said.

“In French-speaking Africa, we are seeing a take-off in quantity production, driven by Senegal and Ivory Coast, and budgets that have increased enormously”, said Pierre Barrot, audiovisual program manager at the International Organization of La Francophonie (OIF).

Between 1992 and 2017, there were only a dozen 52-minute episodes of TV series made in francophone Africa, according to the OIF. But that rocketed to around 100 episodes between 2018 and 2022, driven mainly by Canal+ and TV5 Monde, which distribute the shows regionally. Still, the 52-minute format remains less popular than the classic 26 minutes, which tend to fall into the category of police comedies or sitcoms with family-related themes—often the polygamy/adultery-inheritance-witchcraft triptych, Barrot said.

New wave

Unlike Nigeria, French-speaking Africa produces very few feature-length films for TV, and few films for cinematic release. Last year, “Les Trois Lascars” (The Three Lascars) by Burkinabe director Boubakar Diallo became the most successful cinema release from francophone Africa so far this century. It notched up 56,652 paid admissions across 12 countries—an encouraging tally, but a pale shadow of the 1990s, when the region’s top box office hit drew half a million cinema-goers.

That was before the cinemas across French-speaking Africa went into headlong decline, and most of them closed. Today, though, cinemas are coming back and this could prompt an uptick in local production of comedies, Barrot said. A new generation of audiovisual makers is also emerging to meet demand.

The French school Kourtrajme opened in Dakar in 2022 to train screenwriters and directors. Its students appear confident about the future and the need to be multi-skilled and adaptable. “We’ve never had so many series, and soon, it will go even further,” said Kenza Madeira, 23, who wants to become both an actor and a director. “Personally, I’m very positive—lots of opportunities are coming.”—AFP

Baldwin formally charged over fatal ‘Rust’ shooting

Alec Baldwin was formally charged Tuesday with involuntary manslaughter over the accidental shooting of a cinematographer on the set of the low-budget western “Rust.” Baldwin was holding the Colt .45 during rehearsals for the film when it discharged, killing Halyna Hutchins in October 2021. New Mexico First Judicial District Attorney Mary Carmack-Altewies had already announced earlier this month that there was sufficient evidence to file criminal charges against the veteran US actor.



Alec Baldwin

“Today we have taken another important step in securing justice for Halyna Hutchins,” Carmack-Altewies said Tuesday. “In New Mexico, no one is above the law and justice will be served.” In their statement of probable cause, investigators said Baldwin had been “distracted and talking on his cell phone to his family” during a firearms training session. He only attended training for around 30 minutes, even though the session was scheduled to run for “at least an hour or more,” they wrote, citing the film’s armorer Hannah Gutierrez-Reed.

Gutierrez-Reed, who was responsible

for weapons on set, was formally charged Tuesday with the same crime as Baldwin. If convicted, they face up to 18 months in prison and a \$5,000 fine, but a firearm enhancement to the charge could take that sentence to five years. Former “30 Rock” star Baldwin has repeatedly said he was told by the crew that the gun was not loaded, and that he did not pull the trigger.

Baldwin’s attorney Luke Nikas has vowed to beat the charge, which he called a “terrible miscarriage of justice.” Lawyers for Gutierrez-Reed said Tuesday that prosecutors had “completely misunderstood the facts” and had “reached the wrong conclusions.”

“We will fight these charges and expect that a jury will find Hannah not guilty,” said Jason Bowles and Todd Bullion. Separately, “Rust” assistant director Dave Halls, who handed Baldwin the weapon and told him it was “cold”—industry speak for safe-pleaded no contest to negligent use of a deadly weapon. His plea agreement will be made public after a judge’s approval.

Baldwin, a co-producer of the movie, and Gutierrez-Reed have both been charged with two alternative counts of manslaughter, each involving different levels of negligence. Both counts entail a maximum 18-month jail term, but one of them—involuntary manslaughter in the commission of a lawful act—includes an added mandatory penalty of five years’ jail because a gun was involved in the death. New Mexico prosecutors will summon the accused to appear in court within a month of Tuesday’s filing.—AFP



French-Senegalese director Leila Sy (right) looks on during filming on the set of Banlieusard 2 in the forest of Bandia in Sindhia, region of Thies west center of Senegal.



French-Senegalese director Leila Sy speaks during an interview on the set of Banlieusard 2 in the forest of Bandia in Sindhia, region of Thies west center of Senegal.

Lifestyle | Features

Oscar-bound short lifts veil on Iranian women rejecting male domination

Short movies nominated for an Oscar often don't get wide public attention. But when one is about an Iranian girl seeking freedom from male domination by taking off her veil, interest is sure to spike. That's the premise of "The Red Suitcase", a 17-minute movie that, at the Oscar ceremony in Los Angeles on March 12, will shine a bright light on the protests that have gripped Iran since last September.



French-Algerian actress Nawelle Evad, poses during a photo session in Paris. — AFP photos

Set in Luxembourg's airport, it tells the story of a 16-year-old Iranian girl freshly arrived from Tehran who, with trepidation, takes off her veil to escape an unhappy fate dictated by men. For director Cyrus Neshvad, born in Iran but of Luxembourgish nationality, the Oscar nomination is a chance to highlight what the "virus" of the Islamic regime is doing to the "beautiful body" of his birth country.

"Once we get this virus out, the body will be flourishing again," he told AFP. The demonstrations in Iran were sparked by the September 16 death in custody of a young Iranian woman, Mahsa Amini, who was detained for incorrectly wearing the headscarf mandated by the country's religious rulers.

Since then they have spread to become one of the most serious popular

challenges to the hardline Islamic theocrats who took power in 1979. The regime has responded by cracking down on the protesters with arrests and executions-but also turning against those voicing support, among the country's sportspeople and filmmakers.

'Take your hijab off'
For Neshvad, "The Red Suitcase" wasn't born of the current uprising in



Cyrus Neshvad a Luxembourg director of Iranian origin poses in Luxembourg.

Iran-it was filmed a year before it started. But it has its roots in the injustices faced by his family-of the Bahai religion, systematically persecuted in Iran-as well as those long experienced by Iranian girls and women before Amini's death brought them to global attention. "For me, it (the movie) was about a woman, which are the women in Iran being under domination of the man," said the director, aged in his 40s.

In Iran, "If a woman wants to do something, or go visit something, the man (her father or husband) has to consent and write the paper and sign it," he said. For the girl in his movie to take her veil off, it was a moment of "courage"-for her to rebel against a path forced upon her, but also to inspire those watching. "It will be a message: 'Follow me-like me, take your hijab off,

don't accept this domination, and let's be free, at least have the free will to decide," Neshvad said.

His actress, Nawelle Evad, 22, isn't Iranian and used a dialogue coach to deliver the few lines in Farsi required. But as a French-Algerian, the issue of women and Islamic headscarves-and the debate in the West around them-was familiar to her.

"I had a Muslim upbringing and I used to wear it," she told AFP in Paris, where she lives. But for her "it was never an obligation" to wear one, she noted. And even for her character in the movie, when she takes her headscarf off, "It's not of her will, it's despite herself that she removes it-I think there are many women in Iran, and elsewhere, where the headscarf is an extension of themselves."

Criticism of West too
In the film though, by removing the headscarf, her character ultimately "chooses herself". "That's what I find so beautiful in this film... the doubts that anybody, in any country, in any culture, faces... What do I choose for myself? Do I listen to my family? Am I making my own choices?" Neshvad's French scriptwriting partner, Guillaume Levil, also suggested that the sexualized airport ads in the film underline that the West, too, can be criticized for exploiting women and their public image.

The final image of the movie, an ad showing a blonde model with abundant curly hair, was emblematic of both social diktats, the director said. "The closer we go with the camera on her face, slowly we see that she's not happy, and when we are very, very close, we see that (she) is even frightened," he said. "And with this, I wanted to finish the movie. So to have both sides, not only one side, but both sides." — AFP



Members of Ghetto Kids, a prominent dance group in Uganda rehearse a dance routine at Big Talent Entertainment studio during a music video dance rehearsal with Ugandan musician Edrisah Musuuzza, also known as Eddy Kenzo (center), in Makindye, a suburb in Kampala, Uganda.

Uganda Grammy nominee Eddy Kenzo triumphs over tragedy

Orphaned and homeless, Eddy Kenzo used to struggle to persuade DJs to play his songs, but Uganda's first Grammy contender said his success offers hope that even the poorest person can triumph. Nominated for a Grammy Award for Best Global Music Performance, Kenzo-whose real name is Edrisah Musuuzza-said the news left him "speechless". "I can't express my feelings. It is like I am dreaming," the 33-year-old told AFP during an emotional interview in his studio in the Ugandan capital Kampala.

"This nomination should give hope to the underprivileged," he said. "Even the poorest and the humblest can make it... if I made it, they can make it as well." Born to a Ugandan father and a Rwandan



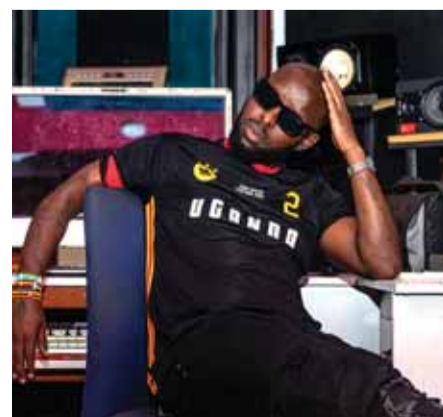
Ugandan musician Edrisah Musuuzza poses for a photograph inside his Big Talent Entertainment studio.

mother whose family were among the victims of the 1994 genocide, Kenzo's childhood was scarred by tragedy after he lost both his parents to illness. He was just four years old.

By the time Kenzo was a teenager, he was sleeping rough on the streets of Kampala, often going to bed hungry. "I suffered as a kid," he said. His love of sports and music kept him going and by 2008, he had scraped together the funds to get off the streets and release his first song-"Yannimba" ("Deceived me" in the Luganda language).

'Make people happy'
But he continued to face an uphill battle, with no financial backing and radio DJs scoffing at his requests to play his tracks on air. Two years after his debut though, he struck gold with the single "Stamina", which grew to dominate airwaves and became a staple at private parties and discotheques. In 2011, he won the Best New Artist award at the Pearl of Africa Music Awards.

His global profile rose with the release in 2014 of "Sitya Loss" ("I Don't Fear Loss") — a peppy number that harked back to his traumatic childhood and trumpeted the power of resilience. "My dream was to make people happy, when some-



Ugandan musician Edrisah Musuuzza, also known as Eddy Kenzo, poses for a photograph inside his Big Talent Entertainment studio.

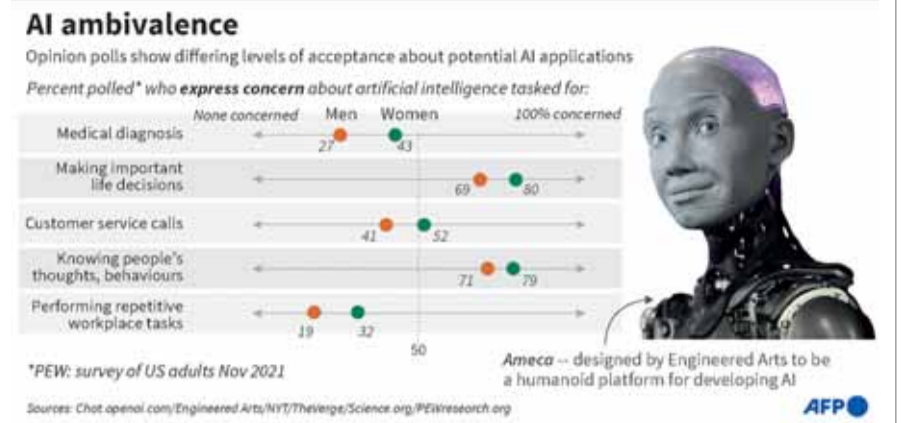
one dances he or she becomes happy, feels good, laughs, feels loved, shakes off stress and forgets depressing issues of the world," he said. "I also wanted to become a beacon of hope for those in despair that regardless of their current predicament, anyone can make it in life."

In the intervening years, he went on to win several prizes for his blend of dancehall and Afrobeat, including a Nickelodeon Kids' Choice Award in 2018, a BET Award in 2015, and multiple All Africa Music Awards. And now he could take home a Grammy for "Gimme Love", his 2022 Luganda-English collaboration with US musician Matt B, when the winners are announced on February 5.

He is facing off against Nigerian Afropop musician Burna Boy among others for the prize. "If I win, it is an honour to my fans, my culture and all those that have touched my life," said Kenzo, who is looking forward to attending the star-studded ceremony in Los Angeles.

Mentoring musicians
Despite his meteoric rise, the father of two hasn't forgotten his humble beginnings and said he is keen to pave the way for others like him. As founder of Big Talent Entertainment, a studio located in a densely populated and poor Kampala neighborhood, he trains and mentors boys and girls from nearby slums to develop their musical talent. On the day AFP visited, around a dozen children on a break from music practice helped themselves to rice, beef, green vegetables and groundnut stew, wheeled in on huge metal platters.

It's a long way from the glitz and glamour of the Grammys but Kenzo said he is determined not to let international success change him. For one thing, he plans to keep producing music in Luganda, despite English offering a wider audience. "I want to promote my culture and country through music," he said. "Not that I can't sing in English but I want to be who I am." — AFP

Clickbait or creativity?
The art world wrestles with AI

Online tools that can create wonderful, absurd and sometimes horrifying images using artificial intelligence (AI) have exploded in popularity, sparking soul-searching over the nature of art. Tech companies tout their inventions as a liberating force of art for all, but purists argue that the artist is still the central cog in the machine.

Art historian and AI expert Emily L. Spratt, whose forthcoming book tackles the ethics and regulation of AI art, told AFP that the art world has not yet found a response to the potentially transformative technology.

Are we all artists now?
Punch a few keywords into an AI art tool-something like "Brad Pitt in a rowing boat in space in the style of Mondrian"-and seconds later boldly colored line drawings will emerge of the Hollywood star, paddling in the stars. There are plenty of fans of tools like Midjourney, Stable Diffusion and DALL-E 2 who have proclaimed this as the democratization of art.

But Spratt reckons such tools are more about "entertainment and clickbait" than art. "It is a way to foster engagement with platforms, which is of course going to help these companies," she said. "The idea that it is solely a tool of empowerment or that it will democratize the space is overly simplistic-it's naive."

Rather, she sees the boundary between AI and other technology becoming blurred, pointing to the image manipulation programs already widely used. "I see the future of AI as being part of the omnipresent background architecture for all digital image-making processes," she said. "It will be hard to avoid it because it seeps into all of our digital interactions, often unbeknownst to us, especially when we create, edit, or search images."

Are there AI masterpieces?
Beyond the simple online tools that anyone can use, there are plenty of artists laboring over their own algorithms with bespoke datasets. These works sell for tens of thousands, sometimes hundreds of thousands. A standout practitioner, said Spratt, is German artist Mario Klingemann whose "Hyperdimensional Attraction Series, Bestiary" is a high point of the genre.

"It is a video of seemingly organic forms that morph from one physical entity to another and momentarily appear as recognizable animals," she said. "Honestly, it's a bit unnerving but it works well as a commentary on the dividing lines between the material and immaterial and the limits of generative AI to replicate the natural world." She said his art is constantly asking questions about AI as a medium, and more widely about the nature of creativity.

What does art world make of AI?
Until relatively recently, there was very little buzz around AI outside of video installations, largely because there was no bank of digital images with clear labels. Without the source material, there could be no AI art as we know it today. That changed a decade ago when several projects began to supply huge quantities of digital images, sparking an explosion in creativity.

A French collective called Obvious sold a work for more than \$400,000 in 2018 after keenly embracing the idea that the AI "created" the work. That sale became hugely controversial after it emerged that they had used an algorithm written by artist and programmer Robbie Barrat. "The reason that the Obvious artwork sold, especially at that price, was largely because it was advertised as the first AI artwork to be offered at a major auction house," said Spratt.

"It was really the art market experimenting with the offering of an AI artwork in step with long-established approaches to the sale of fine art." At that moment, she said, there was huge interest in bringing together the tech sector and the art world. But the

tech industry has since been hit by a dramatic economic slump and investment and interest have waned.

Major auction houses like Christie's and Sotheby's have since worked hard to create separate platforms for selling AI art. "It's like they don't want to sully fine art with these new digital explorations," Spratt said. And critics are yet to catch up with the field and really express what is good, bad or indifferent, she reckoned. "Unfortunately, the AI art discourse is not there yet, but I think it is on its way, and it should come from the field of art history," she insisted. —AFP

ChatGPT maker fields tool for spotting AI-written text

Creators of a ChatGPT bot causing a stir for its ability to mimic human writing on Tuesday released a tool designed to detect when written works are authored by artificial intelligence. The announcement came amid intense debate at schools and universities in the United States and around the world over concerns that the software can be used to assist students with assignments and help them cheat during exams. US-based OpenAI said in a blog post Tuesday that its detection tool has been trained "to distinguish between text written by a human and text written by AIs from a variety of providers."

The bot from OpenAI, which recently received a massive cash injection from Microsoft, responds to simple prompts with reams of text inspired by data gathered on the internet. OpenAI cautioned that its tool can make mistakes, particularly with texts containing fewer than 1,000 characters. "While it is impossible to reliably detect all AI-written text, we believe good classifiers can inform mitigations for false claims that AI-generated text was written by a human," OpenAI said in the post.

"For example, running automated misinformation campaigns, using AI tools for academic dishonesty, and positioning an AI chatbot as a human." A top French university last week forbade students from using ChatGPT to complete assignments, in the first such ban at a college in the country.

The decision came shortly after word that ChatGPT had passed exams at a US law school after writing essays on topics ranging from constitutional law to taxation. ChatGPT still makes factual mistakes, but education facilities have rushed to ban the AI tool.

"We recognize that identifying AI-written text has been an important point of discussion among educators, and equally important is recognizing the limits and impacts of AI generated text classifiers in the classroom," OpenAI said in the post. "We are engaging with educators in the US to learn what they are seeing in their classrooms and to discuss ChatGPT's capabilities and limitations." Officials in New York and other jurisdictions have forbidden its use in schools.

A group of Australian universities have said they would change exam formats to banish AI tools and regard them as cheating. OpenAI said it recommends using the classifier only with English text as it performs worse in other languages. —AFP

Lifestyle | Features



Five times freediving World Champion France's Arthur Guerin-Boeri swims next to an Orca (Killer Whale) in the Arctic Ocean in the Spildra Island northern Arctic Circle. — AFP photos

In Norway's icy seas, freediver dances with killer whales

Gliding stealthily through Norway's frigid Arctic waters, world champion freediver Arthur Guerin-Boeri defies the glacial temperatures and darkness to rub shoulders with one of the most fearsome sea predators—killer whales. A fin emerges from the gloomy depths off the island of Spildra in the Scandinavian country's far north. The

feet) through the icy waters of Kvaenangen Fjord to watch the whales, which come to the area to hunt herring. "I'm in the water next to two super-predators that accept me. It's majestic," the 38-year-old told AFP after his first such dive with the mammals. "They move in a synchronized way, in a kind of ballet. I'd like to follow them but it's impossible, they

a five-time world champion in the dynamic apnea category of competitive freediving, can swim more than 100 metres underwater and hold his breath for several minutes. On this dive, his main goal was simply to contemplate an awe-inspiring creature and pursue "the excitement of making a discovery". The dives, he said, are "about 30 seconds, no more."



Five times freediving World Champion France's Arthur Guerin-Boeri prepares to dives to spot Orcas (Killer Whales), in the Spildra Island northern Arctic Circle.

glimpse is all Guerin-Boeri was waiting for. The Frenchman is a holder of multiple world records in freediving under ice, but he hopes to push the perception of freediving beyond sport and performance.

The Frenchman takes a deep breath and plunges more than 15 meters (49

move too fast and rapidly leave me behind," he added.

Guerin-Boeri prepares for his dives beside a fire as he shelters from the unforgiving weather in a traditional Norwegian hut made from wood and covered with earth and grass. Guerin-Boeri,

'Unforgettable'

He spent a week diving from snowy Spildra, a tiny island above the Arctic Circle, but a violent storm delayed his quest to meet the killer whales by several days. Despite the poor visibility and the Arctic winds that push the temperature of the sea water below freezing, Guerin-Boeri said the dives were an "unforgettable memory". "In this environment, you forget the fatigue, the cold, the apprehension. And when I reach the surface to breathe again, there are ice-covered cliffs around me... you're surrounded by beauty," he said.

"I want to return to the essence of freediving: the exploration of the undersea world, making discoveries, and I have been given a treat," he enthused—so much so that he is already planning to return to Spildra next winter. — AFP



Five times freediving World Champion France's Arthur Guerin-Boeri poses on the Spildra Island northern Arctic Circle.



Five times freediving World Champion France's Arthur Guerin-Boeri poses prior to his dive to spot Orcas (Killer Whales), in the Spildra Island northern Arctic Circle.



Five times freediving World Champion France's Arthur Guerin-Boeri warm up in an old traditional arctic hut, before he dives in the deep to spot Orcas (Killer Whales).



Five times freediving World Champion France's Arthur Guerin-Boeri swims next to an Orca (Killer Whale) in the Arctic Ocean in the Spildra Island northern Arctic Circle.



In this picture birds fly along the shore of Spildra Island during a snowstorm.

Elvis Presley's widow disputes late daughter's will

Elvis Presley's widow Priscilla has disputed their late daughter's will, claiming that an amendment which would remove her as a trustee is invalid, court documents show. Lisa Marie Presley died suddenly in Los Angeles earlier this month from cardiac arrest at the age of 54. According to court documents, Lisa Marie had in 2010 named her mother Priscilla and former business manager Barry Siegel as co-trustees of her estate, both during her lifetime and in the event of her death.

But Lisa Marie appears to have amended that plan in 2016 to remove them, and to declare that her older children Riley and Benjamin Keough should inherit the trust in the event of her death. According to a filing last week by her lawyer, Priscilla Presley only "discovered" the changes after her daughter died on January 12.

The "purported amendment" should be declared invalid because it was never delivered to Priscilla Presley during her daughter's life, it misspells Priscilla's name, and Lisa Marie's signature

"appears inconsistent" with her usual signature, alleges the filing seen by AFP. The petition, filed last Thursday, calls on the Los Angeles superior court to rule the amendment invalid, and for the previous version of the will to be administered.

The financial stakes in a future court battle over Lisa Marie's inheritance would be high. Lisa Marie was Elvis's only child. She previously controlled Elvis Presley Enterprises, although she sold the bulk of shares in the company to a private equity firm in 2005. She retained control of Graceland, the estate her father owned and where he was found unconscious in August 1977.



Her son Benjamin Keough died by suicide in 2020. Her oldest daughter Riley Keough, 33, is an actor who has appeared in "Mad Max: Fury Road" and recent indie hit "Zola." Lisa Marie was also survived by teenage twin daughters Harper and Finley. They stand to co-inherit Graceland with Riley, a representative for the Tennessee mansion and fan pilgrimage destination told People magazine.

Priscilla Presley, who divorced Elvis in 1973 after six years of marriage, also had an acting career, including roles in the "Naked Gun" films, and television series "Dallas." On Tuesday, NBC News cited an email from an "unnamed friend" of Lisa Marie calling the court challenge a "money grab" and alleging that Priscilla "had no relationship" with her daughter at the time of her death. Priscilla Presley's representatives did not immediately respond to AFP's request for comment. — AFP

In this file photo Priscilla Presley (right) and her daughter Lisa Marie Presley (left) wait at the front portico entrance to greet US President George W. Bush and Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi of Japan for a private tour of Elvis Presley's Graceland Mansion in Memphis, Tennessee.

Flat owners overlooked by Tate Modern win privacy appeal

Owners of luxury flats in London on Wednesday won a legal battle to force the adjacent Tate Modern gallery to stop visitors peeping into their homes from a public viewing platform. The Supreme Court announced that by a majority of three to two judges had agreed their appeal due to "intense visual intrusion", after they lost at earlier hearings. The Tate Modern is a popular free gallery showing contemporary art in a former power station on the south bank of The River Thames.

In 2016 it opened an extension called the Blavatnik Building which includes a viewing gallery on the top 10th floor. Residents of residential block NEO Bankside found their mainly glass-walled flats to be just 34 meters (112 feet) away, and their interiors eyed and photographed by curious visitors.

Five flat owners took their fight to the courts, arguing that this amounted to a nuisance, and seeking an injunction requiring the Tate to prevent visi-

tors from seeing their flats from the viewing platform or award damages. They lost their case in 2019 and a further appeal in 2020, before victory at the Supreme Court.

In a 96-page judgment, judge George Leggatt said that hundreds of thousands per year could see into the flats, "much like being on display in a zoo". He said a further High Court hearing would decide what remedial measures would be required from the Tate. Tate Modern in a statement emailed to AFP thanked the court for "their careful consideration of this matter," adding that because the case was going back to the High Court, "we cannot comment further".

The judge said one of the flat owners no longer lived there and another had sold his lease. The viewing platform is currently closed. In 2019, a British teenager threw a six-year-old French boy off it onto a fifth-floor balcony, causing life-changing injuries. The residents lost their case in 2019 when a judge found that being overlooked did not amount to a nuisance, saying it was reasonable for Tate Modern to create the viewing gallery and the residents chose to live in flats with glass walls and could use curtains or blinds. The residents then lost an appeal, when judges ruled again that being overlooked was not a nuisance. — AFP

Sports

James' 28-pt triple-double sparks Lakers over Knicks

NEW YORK: LeBron James scored a 28-point triple-double as the Los Angeles Lakers dug deep to score a 129-123 overtime win against the New York Knicks on Tuesday. James is now just 89 points away from surpassing Kareem Abdul-Jabbar as the NBA's all-time leading points scorer after another superb performance in his 20th season. The 38-year-old passed two more milestones on Tuesday as he secured the third triple double of his career at Madison Square Garden.

James finished with 28 points, 10 rebounds and 11 assists, moving him ahead of both Mark Jackson and Steve Nash into fourth on the all-time rankings for assists. James' first triple double of the 2022-2023 campaign also makes him the only player in history to score a triple-double in their 20th season. The Lakers star was backed by Anthony Davis with 27 points and new signing Rui Hachimura, who finished with 19 points and nine rebounds. Russell Westbrook added 17 points off the bench.

"We played good ball throughout 48 minutes tonight," James said afterwards. "We were in tune with the game plan throughout 48 minutes and we did a good job of executing offensively and defensively." James meanwhile insisted he was not burdened by chasing down Abdul-

Jabbar's scoring record - stating bluntly that it was only a "matter of time" before he passed the mark of 38,387 points. "No, it's not getting heavier because I'm going to do it," James said. "I mean, it's just a matter of time when I'm going to do it."

James had looked to have done enough to secure victory for the Lakers after draining a 25-foot three-pointer with 1min 41sec remaining in the fourth to put Los Angeles ahead by 114-108. But Knicks ace Jalen Brunson, who finished with 37 points, led a late rally to force overtime at 114-114.

Bucks, Nuggets win

The experience of James, Davis and Westbrook proved too much for New York in overtime however. A three-pointer from Dennis Schroder put Los Angeles up 121-118 with 3:14 remaining, and then a superb assist by Westbrook set up Davis for a dunk to make it 123-118. Hachimura then came up with a huge defensive block to deny Brunson before a Westbrook layup put the Lakers seven points clear at 125-118 with just over a minute remaining, a lead which proved too much for the Knicks to overhaul.

In other games on Tuesday, Giannis Antetokounmpo finished with 34 points and 18

rebounds as the Milwaukee Bucks overpowered the Charlotte Hornets 125-115. Khris Middleton added 18 off the bench while Jrue Holiday finished with 15 points as five Bucks players finished in double-digits. Milwaukee improved to 34-17 with the win to remain in second place in the Eastern Conference. LaMelo Ball led the Charlotte scoring with 27 points.

In Cleveland, Jimmy Butler's 23 points helped the Miami Heat score a hard-fought 100-97 win over the Cavaliers. A game that saw the lead change hands 11 times also ended with three Miami players-Caleb Martin, Bam Adebayo and Tyler Herro - on 18 points each. Miami playmaker Donovan Mitchell was restricted to 16 points, making just six of 17 from the field. Evan Mobley led Cleveland's scoring with 19 points.

In Denver, Jamal Murray poured in 32 points and Nikola Jokic added 26 as the Western Conference-leading Nuggets sent the slumping New Orleans Pelicans crashing to their ninth straight defeat. The Nuggets improved to 35-16 following their 122-113 win. In Chicago, the Los Angeles Clippers improved to 29-25 to remain in fourth place in the Western Conference with a 108-103 win over the Bulls. Kawhi Leonard led the Clippers scoring with 33 points while Norman Powell added 27 off the bench. —AFP



NEW YORK: LeBron James of the Los Angeles Lakers heads for the net as Isaiah Hartenstein of the New York Knicks defends at Madison Square Garden on Jan 31, 2023. —AFP

'Matter of time' before scoring record falls: LeBron

NEW YORK: LeBron James said Tuesday it's only a "matter of time" before he passes Kareem Abdul-Jabbar as the greatest scorer in NBA history after edging closer to the long-standing NBA record. James' 28-point triple-double in the Los Angeles Lakers' win over the New York Knicks means the 38-year-old superstar needs just 89 more points to eclipse Abdul-Jabbar's mark of 38,387.

At his current rate of scoring, James is on target to pass Abdul-Jabbar next Tuesday when the Lakers host the Oklahoma City Thunder. James said Tuesday, however, that the prospect of making NBA history is not weighing heavily on him as his date with destiny looms ever closer. "No, it's not getting heavier, because I'm going to do it," James told reporters. "I mean, it's just a matter of time when I'm going to do it. I'm not going anywhere - I'm going to be in this league for at least a few more years, so I'm going to do it. It's not heavy at all."

James, meanwhile, said he had not allowed himself to be distracted by chasing the scoring record as he concentrates on helping the Lakers try to claw their up the Western Conference standings. "I didn't get to this point of my career by thinking about records or how many points I have," James said. "I just try and play the game the right way. I approach the game every night by trying to be a triple threat - scoring, rebounding and assisting. So let the chips fall where they may. I think maybe when I get super-duper close (to the record) it might be in the back or the front of my mind. But I don't put that kind of pressure on myself. I just go out and play." —AFP

New competitions open international doors to MLS clubs

MIAMI: The days when football clubs from the United States and Canada were largely restricted to domestic competition, barely noticed by the rest of the world, are about to end. When the Seattle Sounders take the field on Saturday in the Club World Cup, they will be 90 minutes away from a meeting, in official FIFA competition, with one of the greatest names in world football - Spanish giants Real Madrid.

The Sounders must beat the winners of the first round tie between Egypt's Al Ahly and New Zealand's Auckland City to make the clash with the 14-times European champions in Rabat, Morocco, a reality. Not surprisingly the prospect of facing Carlo Ancelotti's star-studded European champions, has captured the imagination in the Pacific North West city. "The players are excited for this. They love the fact that they have an opportunity to be on a world stage," said Sounders head coach Brian Schmetzer.

The Sounders are in the competition as winners of the CONCACAF Champions League, until recently the only official international competition open to clubs from

Major League Soccer. It is the first time a US or Canadian team has played in the FIFA tournament for continental champions. It is perhaps fitting that the Sounders are the ones to make history - next year they will celebrate the 50th anniversary making them the oldest American club in MLS having played in the now defunct North American Soccer League (NASL) and other leagues before MLS debuted in 1996.

Two new competitions

MLS teams have been far from successful in regional competition, with the Sounders victory last season only the third time a club from the US or Canada has triumphed in the Mexican-dominated tournament. But the volume of international fixtures for MLS clubs is about to significantly increase with the addition of two new competitions and changes to the Champions League.

In July, all MLS clubs will be involved in a new month-long 47-team, CONCACAF-sanctioned Leagues Cup, alongside teams from Mexico's Liga MX. The competition will be organised similar to a World Cup and feature a group stage before knockout fixtures. The competition winners will go straight into the round of 16 of the newly-expanded, 27 team CONCACAF Champions League (CCL) with the runners-up and third-placed teams going into the first round.

The Champions League will also feature teams from

the Caribbean, qualifying via a new Caribbean Cup and Central American clubs via their own sub-regional competition. That tournament in turn, feeds into the Club World Cup where it is likely there will be more spaces available to CONCACAF clubs with FIFA's planned expansion from eight to 32 teams for the 2025 edition featuring clubs from Europe, Asia, Africa and the Americas.

CONCACAF president Victor Montagliani has seen increased international competition as vital for the growth of the game in the region. "This will elevate clubs and leagues from CONCACAF and provide even more compelling regional rivalries. It will also provide more international relevance to our club competitions, and a very competitive pathway as clubs strive to qualify for the FIFA Club World Cup and succeed on the global stage," he said after announcing the changes.

If all those games aren't enough chances for MLS teams to test themselves against international opponents, last week Montagliani announced another competition. Currently under the working title of 'Final Four', the event will see two teams from CONCACAF take on two from the South American CONMEBOL region. While the exact details have yet to be worked out, it is likely that the two finalists from the CONCACAF Champions League will play either the finalists of the Copa Libertadores or the champions of that tournament and the winners of the secondary Copa Sudamericana. —AFP

Algeria crush Niger to set up CHAN final against Senegal

ALGIERS: African Nations Championship leading scorer Aymen Mahious bagged a brace as Algeria hammered Niger 5-0 in Oran on Tuesday to qualify for a final showdown against Senegal. While the host nation were ruthless when presented with scoring chances, Senegal were guilty of some incredible misses as they edged Madagascar 1-0 in Algiers in the other semi-final.

Algeria will face Senegal before an expected sell-out 40,000 crowd at the Stade Nelson Mandela in Algiers on Saturday, a day after Madagascar and Niger meet in Oran to decide who finishes third. Mahious, a 25-year-old forward from Algiers club USM, scored three of the goals that earned Algeria four 1-0 victories en route to the penultimate stage of a tournament known as the CHAN.

After captain Ayoub Abdellaoui nodded the host nation in front on 15 minutes, Mahious struck with a fierce shot, then a powerful header to take his tournament total to five goals. A nightmare first half for Niger got worse in the final minute when captain Boureima Karkore conceded an own-goal to leave the west Africans four goals behind at the break.

Niger fared better in the second half, partly because Algeria often cruised, but there was still time for a tap-in fifth goal from substitute Sofiane Bayazid. It was the widest winning margin in a CHAN semifinal, surpassing the 4-0 hiding Morocco gave hosts Cameroon in the last edition two years ago. Algeria also matched the biggest victory in the 15-year history of a unique national team competition as it is confined to footballers playing for clubs in their country of birth.

Niger were also the victims of the previous 5-0 thrashing - inflicted by Tunisia during the group phase of the 2016 edition in Rwanda. Algeria go into the final not having conceded in five matches with goalkeeper Farid Chaal, standing in for the suspended Alexis Guendouz, troubled only during a brief spell of second-half Nigerien pressure. —AFP



Tadhamon, Fatat set for futsal final

By Abdellatif Sharaa

KUWAIT: Kuwait Football Association (KFA) member Fatima Hayat was pleased over the continuation of women's futsal league for the fifth consecutive season. She said this is due to the interest and hard work of the clubs and players, in addition to the

support of KFA as well as the strategic sponsor URC. Hayat spoke during a press conference held Tuesday for the final match of the URC league to be held between Tadhamon and Fatat Club on Saturday. The conference was attended by media director at URC Salem Al-Khalaqi, coaches, players Fajer Ahmad from Tadhamon and Alaa Al-Shammari from Fatat.

Hayat thanked Chairwoman of URC Sheikha Bibi Nasser Sabah Al-Ahmad for their continued support and wished both teams good luck. Meanwhile, Khalaqi said supporting sports is part of URC's strategy, adding "we are keen on supporting women sports, particu-



larly futsal, as it has developed one season after another and there is hope for more in coming seasons".

Coach of women's team at Fatat Mohammad Al-Kandari said the final match will be difficult for both teams, adding "our team is ready physically and technically, and we worked on elevating the mental readiness of the players during the week". He said Tadhamon has many outstanding elements, which promise a balanced confrontation, hoping to retain the title.

Tadhamon women's team coach was proud of his team reaching the final match in its first participation in

the league. "We worked hard to be at our best in the final match and end the season in the best way possible." Player Fajer Ahmad was happy to participate in the fifth season. "I am pleased to see Tadhamon in the final for the first time and hope to give a performance that enables us to win the title," she said.

Alaa Al-Shammari said Fatat have reached the final for the third consecutive time. "We are ready for the competition and seek to win the title," she said, adding "we were able to maintain our concentration during the season." Shammari wished both teams good luck.

MacNeill: Sexton key to unlocking success

PARIS: Ireland winning the Six Nations title will not have a direct impact on their hopes of finally reaching at least the Rugby World Cup semi-finals, but the key to both is Johnny Sexton remaining fit, according to former Irish fullback Hugo MacNeill. Sexton will be 38 come the World Cup in France in September, but the Ireland skipper is as pivotal to his team's fortunes as he was in the 2015 and 2019 editions.

When Sexton took over at fly-half from Ronan O'Gara, he had earned it and it was a natural succession. And when not injured he has retained his world class form - he was world player of the year in 2018 - and those who were tried in his absence have failed to dislodge him. Sexton inspired the Irish to winning the Six Nations Triple Crown and an historic series win in New Zealand last year.

As a result they go into their opening Six Nations match with Wales on Saturday ranked world number one. Joey Carbery was seen as Sexton's likeliest suc-

cessor. So much so he moved to Munster in 2018 from Sexton's province Leinster but to general surprise the New Zealand-born playmaker has been omitted from the Six Nations squad.

"The Irish have more strength in depth in most positions than four years ago," MacNeill told AFP in an interview. "However, the biggest issue regarding the Six Nations and the World Cup is Johnny Sexton. Ireland are very dependent on Johnny both as a player and as a leader. Johnny is crucial to the team. It is a tough one for Joey Carbery but he just did not nail it down as he needed to. The problem is nobody apart from Johnny Sexton controls a game like he does."

'They have won nothing yet'

The 37-time capped MacNeill - a member of the 1982 and 1985 Triple Crown-winning teams - says the hurt felt by the Leinster players in their defeat by La Rochelle in last year's Champions Cup final served to motivate Ireland. However, he adds that although this is good mentally he is more concerned by the potential physical toll the Six Nations can take. "Of course it is a benefit to have a good Six Nations to establish a pattern of victories," he said.

"The key though is not losing too many players for

the World Cup especially in pivotal positions due to injuries in the tournament. "The Six Nations is grueling and attritional," MacNeill, however, believes that under head coach Andy Farrell the Irish will not get ahead of themselves if they win the title. Four years ago there were already ominous signs for the Irish who had a disappointing Six Nations a year after achieving the Grand Slam under Joe Schmidt.

They never recovered their vim and were outclassed by New Zealand in the World Cup quarterfinals. "I think Ireland's senses tell them a good tournament does not mean a good World Cup," said MacNeill. "They are a very different dynamic. Matches come thick and fast in a World Cup. "I would fancy Ireland to beat France at home in the Six Nations but then the opposite to happen should they play France on their home turf in the World Cup. They won't get carried away even if they won the Grand Slam. That is fine but then for a World Cup you throw in to the mix New Zealand, Australia and South Africa."

MacNeill - who also played three Tests for the British and Irish Lions on the 1983 tour of New Zealand - says that in Farrell the Irish have the ideal man to steer them through their challenges. "He epitomizes the best of Lancashire," said the 64-year-old. —AFP

Sports

Newcastle sink Saints to end 47-yr wait to reach League Cup final

NEWCASTLE: Eddie Howe hailed Newcastle as "a club on the up" after they reached the League Cup final for the first time in 47 years with a 2-1 win against Southampton in Tuesday's semi-final second leg at jubilant St James' Park. Sean Longstaff's first-half double ensured Howe's side finished the job after winning 1-0 in the first leg last week. Che Adams reduced the deficit before the interval and Magpies midfielder Bruno Guimaraes was sent off in the closing stages.

But Newcastle held on to clinch a 3-1 aggregate victory that booked a final date with Manchester United or Nottingham Forest at Wembley on Feb 26. United hold a 3-0 lead against Forest heading into Wednesday's second leg at Old Trafford. The Magpies' most recent domestic final ended in defeat against United in the 1999 FA Cup.

"You want to be in finals of competitions to increase your status and make yourself more desirable for people to join. This is a club on the up," Howe said. "It was an intense game. At 2-0, we were playing really well. We are going for everything. As much as we can achieve, we will go for." Newcastle, who have never won the League Cup, are aiming to lift a major domestic trophy for the first time since the 1955 FA Cup.

Their last major silverware in any competition came in the 1969 Inter-Cities Fairs Cup. On a cathartic night for Newcastle after decades of suffering, it was fitting that Longstaff, a boyhood Magpies fan, should be the one to send them to Wembley. With Newcastle legends Alan Shearer and David Ginola joining the celebrations in the stands, raucous Magpies fans were ready to keep the party going all night long in the football-crazy city's Bigg Market and Quayside bars.

Revitalized by Howe's astute leadership and the financial muscle of a largely Saudi-backed ownership group,

a club once regarded as the laughing stock of the Premier League can finally hold their heads high. They sit third in the Premier League and look set for a sustained period as contenders for the English game's top honors. Reaching their first domestic cup final this century is another significant landmark in Newcastle's rebirth.

"It is amazing. If you'd have said to anyone 12 months ago what was going to happen, they would have laughed," Longstaff said. "Since the takeover we have brought in quality players. It is really special and emotional for me what we are building here."

Black and white wave

Ramping up an already vociferous atmosphere, Newcastle's Anthony Gordon was paraded on the pitch before kick-off after completing his £45 million (\$51 million) move from Everton. Howe had labelled the second leg a "season defining" moment for Newcastle and it took his fired-up side just five minutes to raise the decibel levels even further.

Longstaff found Kieran Trippier on the right flank and sprinted onto the defender's return pass before guiding a low finish past Gavin Bazunu from 12 yards. Newcastle had all the momentum, sweeping forward in a black and white wave that left Southampton powerless to stem the tide. Once again it was Longstaff who provided the finishing touch to a breathtaking raid in the 21st minute.

Exposing Southampton's fragile wing-back system, Joe Willock sprinted into space behind James Bree and found Miguel Almiron, whose cutback was drilled home by Longstaff. Newcastle keeper Nick Pope had kept 10 successive clean-sheets, but his unbeaten streak ended in the 29th minute.

Completely against the run of play, Willock gifted possession to Adams and the striker smashed a superb



NEWCASTLE: Newcastle United's Swiss defender Fabian Schar takes a free kick against Southampton at St James' Park stadium on Jan 31, 2023. —AFP

shot into the far corner from outside the penalty area. In the past, Newcastle would have wilted when Southampton pushed hard in a tense second half, but they are made of sterner stuff now. Pope's brilliant save

from Adam Armstrong ensured Newcastle's long-awaited return to Wembley wasn't derailed despite Guimaraes' 82nd minute red card for stamping on Samuel Edozie. —AFP



BERLIN: Union Berlin's Surinamese forward Sheraldo Becker vies with Wolfsburg's French defender Maxence Lacroix on Jan 31, 2023. —AFP

Behrens sends Union through to quarters

BERLIN: A late strike from forward Kevin Behrens sent Union Berlin through to the quarter finals of the German Cup, with a 2-1 win at home over Wolfsburg on Tuesday. "It is a deserved victory," Behrens told German TV. "We have a great bunch. We're having fun." In lashing rain and hail, the visitors started stronger, taking the lead after four minutes.

Wolfsburg midfielder Yannick Gerhardt chopped a corner to forward Luca Waldschmidt, who sneaked in behind Union's defense line to tap the ball in and put the 2015 Cup winners in front. Union responded, scoring just seven minutes later through defender Robin Knoche, who latched onto a curling delivery from Croatian defender Josip Juranovic.

Juranovic, who played every minute in Croatia's run to the World Cup semi-finals before sitting out the third-place game, has two assists in two games since joining from Celtic in mid-January. Union continued to press after halftime, pinning the visitors back into their penalty box as they pushed for a winner. With ten minutes remaining, Dutch striker Sheraldo Becker headed a low cross from Rani Khedira goalwards, finding Behrens, who whacked the ball into the net from two meters.

Union lost Niko Giesselmann with three minutes remaining, the defender picking up a second yellow for diving in the box. The home side held on in the nervy

closing stages under attack from Wolfsburg to win 2-1. Goalscorer Behrens, who now has two goals in three games, said coming off the bench to score in front of Union's home fans was "an outstanding feeling - it's just like how you'd imagine it".

Union manager Urs Fischer said he was "incredibly proud of the squad" for the comeback victory. "It was enormously important that we scored the equalizer. We played a great second half and stayed calm, then we hit (them with) a lucky punch." Wolfsburg's manager credited his side's effort in the "intense game", but lamented losing focus in key moments. "We didn't pay proper attention on two occasions, which led to our defeat."

Stuttgart strike late

Earlier on Tuesday, Stuttgart scored two late goals to run out 2-1 winners at Paderborn in the opening Round of 16 clash. Second-tier Paderborn hit the lead early through an own goal. Former Arsenal defender Konstantinos Mavropanos tried to pass to goalkeeper Florian Mueller, but hit the ball too sharply, sliding it into his own net.

Paderborn, who have been promoted to the Bundesliga twice in the past 10 years before being immediately relegated one season later, held Stuttgart out and looked to be heading for a victory over their first-division opponents. With just four minutes remaining, the visitors equalized through Portuguese midfielder Gil Dias, with Mavropanos playing a key role in the lead-up. A last-gasp header from Stuttgart's Guinean striker Serhou Guirassy gave his side the winner in the fifth minute of injury time. The goal was the Guinean international's fifth in his last seven games. —AFP

dropped for the match, which was played just after the closure of the winter transfer window in Italy which left him at Inter until the summer. Slovakia captain Skriniar will leave at the end of the season as a free agent for Paris Saint-Germain.

Inter's attentions now turn to Sunday's Serie A derby with AC Milan, whose league title defence has crumbled after a series of bad results culminating with last weekend's 5-2 home hammering at the hands of Sassuolo. Defending champions Milan have dropped to fifth with Inter now the closest challengers to league leaders Napoli, 13 points off the pace. —AFP

Inter beat Atalanta to reach Italian Cup semifinals

MILAN: Inter Milan set up a potential Italian Cup semi-final clash with archrivals Juventus after the holders saw off Atalanta 1-0 on Tuesday. Matteo Darmian struck the only goal 11 minutes after half-time, his low strike across Juan Musso enough to put a tight quarter-final at the San Siro in Inter's favor. Simone Inzaghi's side will take on either troubled Juve or Lazio in April's two-legged semis, with the pair facing off in Turin on Thursday.

Inter beat Juve in last season's final to claim their eighth Italian Cup. The other side of the draw will be decided on Wednesday when Fiorentina host Torino and Roma welcome Cremonese to the Italian capital. Inter came through a tough test with Atalanta who are a direct rival for a place in next season's Champions League. Milan Skriniar was

Newcastle's rise fueled by Howe and Saudi cash

LONDON: After decades in the doldrums, Newcastle's progress to their first League Cup final in 47 years underlined the Saudi-funded club's emergence as a serious threat to the English football establishment. Sean Longstaff's double sealed a 2-1 win against Southampton in Tuesday's semifinal second leg at a raucous St James' Park, sending the Magpies to their first domestic final this century after a 3-1 victory on aggregate.

Manchester United are likely to be their opponents in the final at Wembley on Feb 26, holding a 3-0 lead over Nottingham Forest heading into Wednesday's second leg at Old Trafford. Revitalized by the astute leadership of Eddie Howe and the financial muscle of a Saudi-backed ownership group, a club once regarded as the laughingstock of the Premier League can finally hold their heads high.

Newcastle sit third in the Premier League and look to be on the cusp of a golden era as serial trophy contenders. "It is amazing. If you'd have said to anyone 12 months ago what was going to happen, they would have laughed," said Longstaff, a boyhood Newcastle fan. "Since the takeover we have brought in quality players. It is really special and emotional for me what we are building here."

Their previous domestic final ended in defeat against Manchester United in the 1999 FA Cup. That loss came in the dying embers of Newcastle's last sustained period of relevance. They finished second in the Premier League in 1996 and 1997, but memorably collapsed in the first of those title races when Kevin Keegan's acclaimed "entertainers" blew a 12-point lead. It was a meltdown that epitomized their chequered history.

Classifieds

Hospitals & Clinics

Sabah Hospital	24812000
Amiri Hospital	22450005
Maternity Hospital	24843100
Mubarak Al-Kabir Hospital	25312700
Chest Hospital	24849400
Farwaniya Hospital	24892010
Adan Hospital	23940620
Ibn Sina Hospital	24840300
Al-Razi Hospital	24846000
Physiotherapy Hospital	24874330/9

Clinics

Kaizen center	25716707
Rawda	22517733
Adaliya	22517144
Khaldiya	24848075
Kaifan	24849807
Shamiya	24848913
Shuwaikh	24814507
Abdullah Salem	22549134
Nuzha	22526804
Industrial Shuwaikh	24814764
Qadsiya	22515088
Dasmah	22532265
Bneid Al-Gar	22531908
Shaab	22518752
Qibla	22459381
Ayoun Al-Qibla	22451082
Mirqab	22456536
Sharq	22465401
Salmiya	25746401

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Today's matches

SPANISH LEAGUE		
Real Madrid CF v Valencia C.F		23:00
beIN Sports HD 1		
beIN Sports 1 HD Premium		

Saudi Arabia to host 2027 Asian Cup

Asian football chief elected for third consecutive term



MANAMA: Saudi Arabia is named as host of the 2027 Asian Cup at the AFC Congress in the Bahraini capital on Feb 1, 2023.

MANAMA: Saudi Arabia has won a bid to host the 2027 Asian Cup, the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) said on Wednesday. The announcement was made at the AFC Congress in the Bahraini capital of Manama. Saudi Arabia was the sole bidder after India withdrew in December. "We are excited to deliver the greatest tournament in the competition's history," the kingdom's sports minister Prince Abdulaziz bin Turki Al-Faisal said after the announcement.

"The kingdom is transforming before our eyes and we are filled with excitement for what it will look like in 2027." The world's biggest oil exporter, Saudi Arabia has thrown hundreds of millions at sports deals including the acquisition of Cristiano Ronaldo, Formula One in Jeddah and the lucrative LIV Golf tour. In the coming years the Saudis, who watched as

neighbors Qatar hosted the World Cup in November and December, will hold the women's Asian Cup, the Olympic-sized Asian Games and even the Asian Winter Games on artificial snow.

The desert kingdom is also eyeing a World Cup and Summer Olympics, perhaps even a Winter Olympics, together with a swathe of other major events. It is all part of grand plans by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to modernize the Saudi economy and end its reliance on oil before the world moves on to other fuels.

"I'm sure Saudi Arabia will host a fantastic Asian Cup," FIFA President Gianni Infantino said at the Manama congress. The 2023 Asian Cup will be hosted by Qatar. It was previously set to be held in China but the country withdrew because of COVID. The

Asian Cup is staged every four years. Qatar won the tournament's last edition, in 2019, which was hosted by the United Arab Emirates. Saudi Arabia has won three AFC Asian Cup titles.

Meanwhile, Asia's football chief and FIFA's second-in-command Sheikh Salman bin Ebrahim Al-Khalifa won a new four-year term on Wednesday. The Bahraini royal, who has led the Asian Football Confederation since 2013, was elected at the Asian Football Confederation Congress in his home country. "I'd like to thank you all for placing your faith in me for another four-year term," he said after the vote which saw him stand unopposed. "Asian football is entering a new era."

The Bahraini royal was a rival candidate to Infantino when the Italian-Swiss was elected FIFA pres-

ident in 2016 after a major corruption scandal ended the reign of Sepp Blatter. Sheikh Salman, whose confederation includes 47 of FIFA's 211 associations, has said he backs Infantino's bid for a fresh mandate this year. Infantino congratulated Sheikh Salman and praised the rise of Asian football, pointing in particular to the 2022 World Cup in Qatar.

"Obviously, the men's World Cup in Qatar was the best World Cup ever," Infantino said. "It will be difficult to meet this benchmark." The AFC was in chaos when Sheikh Salman took charge after predecessor, Qatari businessman Mohamed bin Hammam, was banned from football for life. After completing the last two years of bin Hammam's term, Sheikh Salman was re-elected unopposed in 2015 and 2019. — AFP

NFL superstar Brady announces 'retiring for good'

MIAMI: Record-breaking NFL quarterback Tom Brady announced on Wednesday that he was "retiring for good" at the age of 45, one year after reversing his decision to quit the sport. Brady, whose Tampa Bay Buccaneers lost in the wildcard round of the NFL playoffs last month, made his announcement calling time on his 23-year career in a social media video. "Good morning, I'll get to the point right away: I'm retiring for good," Brady said, sitting by a beach.

Widely viewed as the greatest quarterback of all time, Brady won a record seven Super Bowls, six of them with the New England Patriots before adding his final triumph with Tampa at the end of the 2020 season. The quarterback had announced he was retiring on Feb 1, 2022, but 40 days later changed his mind and said he was returning for the 2022 season with the Bucs.

"I know the process was a pretty big deal last time, so when I woke up this morning I figured I'd just press record and let you guys know first. So I won't be long-winded," he added. "I think you only get one super emotional retirement essay, and I used mine up last year. So, really, thank you guys, so much, to every single one of you, for supporting me."

"My family, my friends, teammates, my competitors, I could go on forever, there's too many. Thank you, guys, for letting me live my absolute dream. I wouldn't change a thing. Love you all," he said. Brady was due to enter free agency and already the rumor mill had begun with

several teams being linked with the veteran who threw for 4,694 yards and 25 touchdowns in the 2022 regular season.

The Californian leaves the game owning a host of records in the NFL. He is the league's all-time regular-season leader in pass attempts (12,050), completions (7,753), passing yards (89,214) and touchdown passes (649). He also owns all those records for the post-season. Brady won 251 regular season games and 35 playoff games, which are more than any player in the league's history.

Under coach Bill Belichick at New England, Brady became a specialist in orchestrating comeback victories with his trademark game-winning drives. Unflappable under pressure, he had the most game-winning drives (58) and fourth-quarter comeback wins (46) of any NFL quarterback. His celebrity surpassed the NFL - in November, Brady and Brazilian supermodel Gisele Bundchen announced they were divorcing after 13 years of marriage.

The divorce came after months of tabloid speculation concerning the couple's marriage, which reportedly came under strain when Brady reversed his retirement decision. Brady is expected to move into a career in broadcasting having already agreed a ten-year deal with television network Fox, reported to be worth \$375 million, to work as a commentator once his football career ended.

In a recent interview in July with Variety magazine he said he was looking forward to taking on the new role. "I have a very unique perspective on football and how it should be played, and what good plays look like and what bad plays look like. I feel like I can still have a great impact on the game. I could stay in the game, doing what I love to do, talking about this incredible sport," he said. —AFP

Chelsea pay €121m for Fernandez; PSG move for Ziyech fails

LONDON: Chelsea paid a Premier League record fee of 121 million euros to sign Enzo Fernandez as Joao Cancelo made a surprise move to Bayern Munich and Jorginho joined Arsenal on a frantic transfer deadline day in Europe. Premier League clubs have once again massively outspent their rivals in a desperate scramble to strengthen their squads for the second half of the season. Graham Potter's struggling Chelsea went on a staggering spending spree in January, bringing in a clutch of players including Mykhaylo Mudryk, Benoit Badiashile, Noni Madueke and Joao Felix, who joined on loan from Atletico Madrid. World Cup winner Fernandez, whose transfer was announced by Portuguese club Benfica in the early hours of Wednesday, is Chelsea's eighth signing of the January window.

The €106.8 million fee eclipses the previous record of £100 million that Manchester City paid Aston Villa for Jack Grealish in 2021. Fernandez, named Best Young Player of the World Cup for his displays during Argentina's successful campaign in Qatar, only joined Portuguese giants Benfica in July last year, for a reported fee of around £10 million. The 22-year-old is understood to have signed an eight-and-a-half-year deal that will run until 2031. Todd Boehly's consortium has spent hundreds of millions since buying Chelsea at the end of last season but the club are languishing in 10th place in the Premier League.

But Paris Saint-Germain's attempt to sign Morocco star Hakim Ziyech on loan from Chelsea failed after the French league (LFP) refused to ratify the player's contract, a source close to the deal told AFP on Wednesday. PSG had asked the LFP to approve the deal even though the required paperwork arrived after Tuesday's French transfer deadline.

Ligue 1 clubs had to send all contracts to the league by 11:00pm

on Tuesday (2200 GMT) before having a further hour to register moves in the FIFA system, which validates all international transfers. Ziyech had passed a medical and the clubs had reached an agreement for the player to be loaned to PSG until the end of the season. However, according to sources, the Premier League club failed to send the required documents in time for the 29-year-old winger's move to be completed by the deadline. PSG therefore asked the LFP for special approval, which was promptly rejected.

Cancelo joins Bayern

Bayern Munich signed Manchester City wingback Cancelo on loan until the end of the season and have an option to buy him for a reported 70 million euros. The 28-year-old Portuguese defender joined City from Juventus in 2019 but has been a peripheral figure in Pep Guardiola's team since the World Cup. "FC Bayern is a great club, one of the best in the world, and it's enormous motivation for me to now play alongside these extraordinary players," Cancelo said. Premier League leaders Arsenal snapped up Italy midfielder Jorginho from Chelsea for a reported fee of £12 million.

Jorginho, who is understood to have signed an 18-month deal at the Emirates Stadium, told Arsenal.com: "I'm very excited for this new challenge and I just can't wait to be on the pitch. "Everything has happened so fast. I was a bit surprised, but I took the opportunity of this amazing challenge."

The Gunners, bidding to win their first Premier League crown since 2004, signed Belgium forward Leandro Trossard from Brighton and Poland defender Jakub Kiwior from Italian side Spezia earlier this month. Arsenal's north London rivals Tottenham announced the signing of defender Pedro Porro from Sporting Lisbon minutes before the deadline. The right-back has signed on loan until the end of the season with an obligation to make the move permanent at the end of the season.

Manchester United announced they had signed Bayern Munich midfielder Marcel Sabitzer on loan early Wednesday. United were forced into deadline-day action on Tuesday following an ankle injury to Christian Eriksen, which is set to rule the Denmark midfielder out until early May. Manager Erik ten Hag completed the loan signing of Netherlands forward Wout Weghorst earlier in the month. — AFP



Tom Brady



Enzo Fernandez