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Manila suspends deployment of first-time helpers to Kuwait

No plan for total ban • Labor office union chief says move to affect families



MANILA: Relatives of Julebee Ranara, a domestic helper who was killed in Kuwait, grieve during her funeral at a cemetery in Las Pinas, Metro Manila on Feb 5, 2023. — AFP

By Khaled Al-Abdulahdi

KUWAIT: The Philippines Department of Migrant Workers (DMW) has temporarily suspended the deployment of first-time applicants for jobs in Kuwait amid ongoing discussions to ensure the safety and welfare of overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) following the brutal death of domestic worker Julebee Ranara last month. The decision, effective as of Wednesday, Feb 8, only covers contracts of Kuwait-bound first-time domestic workers.

"The applications of first-time migrant workers, specifically for household services in Kuwait, shall be deferred until after significant reforms have been made and more safeguards are in place for their protection and welfare," DMW Secretary Susan Ople said. Ople, however, explained that a total deployment ban is not being considered since it would affect around 260,000 Filipinos, around 195,000 of them household service workers, currently in Kuwait.

The charred remains of Ranara, 35, were discovered in the Salmi desert last month. It was reported she was pregnant and had been subjected to blunt-force trauma. The 17-year-old son of her employer has been arrested by police on murder charges. The Philippine Embassy in Kuwait said it is still awaiting official confirmation of the ban from Manila. It is also monitoring the judicial process in Kuwait, adding it will respect any decision that will be taken.

Meanwhile, the Head of Kuwait Union of Domestic Labor Offices Khaled Al-Dakhnan told Kuwait Times the ban on deployment of Filipino domestic helpers will affect local families. "The decision came after the recent murder of the Filipina worker. While only the murderer is responsible for this horrific act, innocent people - who are the majority in Kuwait - have sadly been affected by the murder which they did not commit. We should not generalize to include innocent people

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Microsoft sees 'new day' in war over AI search

REDMOND, Washington: Microsoft's long-struggling Bing search engine will integrate the powerful capabilities of language-based artificial intelligence, CEO Satya Nadella said on Tuesday, declaring what he called a new era for online search. "It's a new day for search... The race starts today," Nadella said at a launch event, marking the start of what Microsoft hopes will be an unprecedented challenge to Google's two-decade dominance of the search engine market, using the technology created by the developers of AI bot ChatGPT.

"This technology is going to reshape pretty much every software category," Nadella added at the event at Microsoft's Redmond, Washington, headquarters. ChatGPT has sparked a gold rush in artificial intelligence technology (AI) with more than 100 million users testing the bot's capabilities, receiving essays, speeches, or law exam results within seconds to the consternation of educators and school authorities worried about cheating.

Microsoft hopes that beefing up Bing with ChatGPT-like qualities will radically update online search by providing ready-made answers using multiple sources instead of the familiar list of links to outside websites. In its new format, Bing would review results from across the web and summarize them instead of merely presenting a list of links that the user must click and choose from.

"We applied the AI model to our core search ranking engine, and we saw the largest jump in relevance in two decades," said Yusuf Mehdi, a Microsoft vice president. On more complex searches, like planning a trip or buying a TV, an interactive chat mode would appear, asking for details on what is being requested.

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Kuwait condoles Turkey as quake toll hits 11,700

KUWAIT: Kuwait's Foreign Minister Sheikh Salem Al-Abdullah Al-Sabah called his Turkish counterpart Mevlut Cavusoglu on Wednesday to reiterate, on behalf of Kuwait's political leadership, government and people, sincere condolences to the government and people of sisterly Turkey over the victims of the recent earthquake. He prayed to Almighty Allah to lodge the deceased in Paradise and grant the wounded a quick recovery.

The conversation also dealt with the instructions of HH the Amir Sheikh

Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah regarding the dispatching of urgent assistance, including medical and security teams, to Turkey. The Turkish foreign minister conveyed the regards of Turkish leaders to Kuwaiti leaders, government and people, expressing gratitude for the disaster relief. Cavusoglu appreciated the launch of a lifeline for airlifting humanitarian aid from Kuwait, saying these assistances materialize the deep-rooted friendship and cooperation between both nations and Kuwait's distinctive humanitarian role around the globe.

In a message he inscribed in the condolence book at the Turkish Embassy, Sheikh Salem expressed deep sorrow and sincere solace on this grave calamity.

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KUWAIT: Kuwait's Foreign Minister Sheikh Salem Al-Abdullah Al-Sabah signs a book of condolences as Turkish Ambassador Tuba Nur Sonmez looks on on Feb 8, 2023. — KUNA

Biden hits road after fiery State of Union speech

WASHINGTON: US President Joe Biden hit the road Wednesday with trips to the election battlegrounds of Wisconsin and Florida, after a barnstorming State of the Union speech reinforcing expectations that the 80-year-old will seek a second term. Biden hasn't announced a reelection bid yet and given his age, many - even from his own party - feel he should step aside in 2024.

But his Tuesday night address to

Congress and tens of millions of television viewers laid out what amounted to a campaign platform, which he will now pursue in DeForest, Wisconsin, with a speech on the economy, before heading Thursday to the increasingly Republican stronghold of Florida. Standing before a packed chamber on Capitol Hill, Biden appeared to be energized as he delivered a carefully focused message aimed at what he called "forgotten" working class voters and everyday issues like the price of healthcare.

Casting himself as a centrist in an era where partisan politics has become something of a bloodsport, his sunny optimism, complete with jokes

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WASHINGTON: US Vice President Kamala Harris and US Speaker of the House Kevin McCarthy listen as US President Joe Biden delivers the State of the Union address in the House Chamber of the US Capitol on Feb 7, 2023. — AFP

China balloons seen over five continents: US

WASHINGTON: The United States on Wednesday said it has been in touch with allies over a global "fleet" of Chinese espionage balloons similar to the one shot down last week by the US Air Force. "These balloons are all part of a (Chinese)... fleet of balloons developed

to conduct surveillance operations," White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre told reporters aboard Air Force One. "Over the past several years, Chinese balloons have previously been spotted all over countries across five continents," she said. "We have been in touch with allies and partners on this issue."

A huge white balloon carrying sophisticated equipment traversed the continental United States last week before President Joe Biden ordered the military to shoot it down just off the east coast in the Atlantic. China insists that the balloon was merely conducting weather research but the Pentagon described it as a high-tech spying operation.

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Sailors recover a high-altitude surveillance balloon off the coast of Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, in the Atlantic Ocean on Feb 5, 2023. — AFP



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KUWAIT: (Top) Kuwaiti Deputy Foreign Minister Mansour Al-Otaibi on Wednesday met with the Vice-President of International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) for the Asia Pacific region and Secretary-General of Kuwait Red Crescent Society (KRCS) Maha Al-Barjas. During the meeting, both sides explored ways to strengthen the bilateral relation between the Kuwaiti Foreign Ministry and IFRC as well as various humanitarian projects locally and internationally. (Below) Kuwaiti Deputy Foreign Minister also met Bahrain's Ambassador to Kuwait Salah Al-Malki. During the meeting, they discussed bilateral relations. —KUNA photos



Kuwait University, National Guard ink cooperation deal

KUWAIT: Kuwait University and the National Guard have signed the activation of a timeline for a joint cooperation protocol between them in the presence of acting university director Dr Fahad Al-Shammeri and Colonel Omar Eisa from the National Guard. Shammeri welcomed the cooperation with National Guard. "This cooperation will strengthen the ties of bilateral cooperation between the two sides and consolidate the interdependence between them in order to ensure the advancement and development of scientific, cultural and technical knowledge to reach the desired goals, as we are keen to enhance cooperation between the university and all of Kuwait's institutions," he said.

Deputy director for academic development affairs Dr Fahad Al-Fadhli expressed his thanks to the National Guard for being keen on renewing the cooperation on a yearly basis, as the university is ready to provide all facilities and needs to develop and strengthen cooperation to advance scientific, cultural and technical knowledge between the two parties as well as all state agencies and institutions.

Col Eisa said this cooperation is a



KUWAIT: Kuwait University and the National Guard sign the activation of the time plan for the joint cooperation protocol in the presence of acting university director Dr Fahad Al-Shammeri, Colonel Omar Eisa and other officials.

roadmap for 2023. "It included various fields of cooperation such as studies, research, missions and training courses provided by Kuwait University to the National Guard. We are looking forward to

adding more areas of cooperation, most notably in the field of cybersecurity, especially after the National Guard obtained the ISO 27001 certification, the first military entity to obtain it," he said.

Gulf Bank participates in INJAZ Innovation Camp

KUWAIT: As part of its various initiatives to embed the principles of sustainability in society, and as part of its strategic partnership with INJAZ Kuwait, Gulf Bank participated in INJAZ Innovation Camp, which was recently held at the American Academy for Girls (AAG). A number of Gulf Bank employees from various departments participated as mentors and judges in the innovation camp, to share their expertise and experiences with the students, to help them develop their ideas and projects, and contribute towards building their entrepreneurship, creativity, teamwork, time management and problem-solving skills.

The Innovation Camp is an exciting one-day workshop that will challenge students to find innovative solutions to a real business challenge using creativity, analysis, and teamwork. The workshop was an intensive learning experience for students, where they get a chance to compete against each other through a

set of educational activities and games lead by a Gulf Bank trained facilitator. Students were given a business challenge for which they proposed a solution for in the form of a business plan.

On this occasion, Manager of Corporate Communications at Gulf Bank, Lujain Al-Qenaei said, "It was a great experience for Gulf Bank employees to share their expertise and experiences with the students from the American Academy for Girls. The students were divided into groups and were given a set of questions to help motivate and guide them to solve problems, which resulted in them presenting impressive ideas ranging from applications to products and services."

Al-Qenaei indicated that Gulf Bank is keen to fulfill its social responsibilities towards youth empowerment and their education, by providing them with basic concepts related to exploring professional interests and business opportunities. The Bank also focuses on developing job skills and providing field trainings as the youth represent one of the main pillars in Gulf Bank's 2025 Strategy and Kuwait Vision 2035.

She further noted that the strategic partnership with INJAZ has led to a variety of successes in 2022 – including training 8,830 local high school and univer-



sity students from both genders, through 14 international training programs. Around 50 volunteers from Gulf Bank also participated in the various training activities provided by INJAZ Kuwait.

Gulf Bank's vision is to be the leading Kuwaiti Bank of the Future. The Bank is constantly engaging and empowering its employees as part of an inclusive and diversified workplace in recognition of every employee's role in delivering customer excellence and serving the community at large. With its extensive network of branches and innovative digital services,

Gulf Bank is able to give its customers the choice of how and where to conduct their banking transactions, all while ensuring a simple and seamless banking experience.

Gulf Bank is committed to maintaining robust developments in sustainability at environmental, social and governance levels through diverse sustainability initiatives, strategically selected to benefit both the internal and external community. Gulf Bank supports Kuwait Vision 2035 "New Kuwait" and works with various parties to achieve it.



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KUWAIT: Minister of Social Affairs and Community Development and Minister of State for Women, Childhood Affairs Mai Al-Baghli is pictured during the ceremony. Ministry of Social Affairs and Community Development on Wednesday held a flag-raising ceremony to mark the launch of the celebration of the 62nd anniversary of the National Day and the 32nd anniversary of Liberation Day under the slogan (Glory and Pride). —Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat

'Glory and Pride': Ministry organizes flag-raising ceremony

By Majd Othman

KUWAIT: The Ministry of Social Affairs held on Wednesday a flag-raising ceremony to mark the launch of the ministry's celebrations of the 62nd National Day and 32nd Liberation Day under the slogan 'Glory and Pride' in the presence and sponsorship of Minister of Social Affairs and Minister of State for Women and Childhood Affairs Mai Al-Baghli. Baghli said in a press statement the flag "represents a symbol of national unity among the people of the country, represents loyalty to the wise leadership in our beloved country and enhances belonging to the homeland", expressing her joy on this great occasion.



She added raising the Kuwaiti flag in various fields is a source of pride for the efforts and sacrifices made by previous generations, which had a great impact on Kuwait's prestigious position globally, as well as the youth's efforts to move forward towards a prosperous future for the country. Baghli expressed her thanks and appreciation to all sectors of the ministry of social affairs, which has played a key role in providing services to citizens.



Local

Zain 'strategic sponsor' of Kuwait Tech Expo 2023

Company showcases latest digital solutions at Kuwait's biggest technology event

KUWAIT: Zain, Kuwait's leading digital service provider, announces its strategic sponsorship of the third edition of Kuwait Tech Expo & Summit 2023, the biggest technology event of its kind in the nation. The expo runs from 8-11 February at Kuwait International Fairground in Mishref and features some of the biggest local and global ICT companies and government entities.

Zain is always present at the biggest projects that contribute to pushing the national economy wheel and achieve the country's developmental goals, especially those centered around the ICT sector. Companies and government institutions around the world are undergoing digital transformation and focusing more on digital channels, and the third edition of this unique expo aims at providing a space for local entities to network, connect, and share experiences, while also attracting shoppers and tech enthusiasts.

Zain has set up its own booth at the expo, where it showcases its latest and most advanced digital solutions from the world's biggest tech brands. Zain's solutions include Internet of Things (IoT) devices like CCTV cameras, smart lights, smart smoke detectors, and more, as well as the latest gaming consoles and accessories for gaming enthusiasts.

Zain also showcases its latest digital products and services, original accessories, and latest offers, including the all-new MAX Internet plans that fea-

ture the biggest library of entertainment and sports content from 6 leading streaming partners on Kuwait's biggest 5G network. Kuwait Tech Expo 2023 is considered Kuwait's biggest ICT-dedicated event, offering effective tech and digital solutions to the country's governmental bodies as well as serving the community's needs.

The expo is divided into two events held simultaneously; the first event, 'Kuwait International Technology Show', is the largest B2B show that offers companies the opportunity to showcase their latest products and applications, paving the way to discuss and exchange ideas and information about the telecommunications and technology industry's key topics. This includes information systems, smart applications, the latest strategies, as well as building partnerships with the major participating companies through face-to-face meetings with leading decision makers, researchers and professionals within the sector.

The second event, the 'Kuwait Tech Shopper', is the only exhibition of its kind that specializes in direct sales of gadgets, smartphones, electronic devices, and their accessories. This event provides a unique opportunity for all companies to be present and interact directly with the public to present exciting offers. In addition, attendees will experience a unique platform to compare between brands and benefit from special and exclusive offers.



Zain officials at the company's booth.

MoI records over 65,800 cases in 2022

KUWAIT: The General Department for Investigations at the Ministry of Interior recorded 65,897 investigation cases in 2022, according to the department's annual statistics released Wednesday. Total violations recorded throughout 2022 amounted to 53,485 offences and 12,412 traffic violations. The data was broken down by department as follows: Al-Asimah Governorate investigation department recorded 3,705 offences and 3,374 traffic violations totaling to 7,079 registered cases.

Hawalli Governorate investigation department recorded 4,338 offences and 2,702 traffic violations for a total of 7,040 registered cases. Mubarak Al-Kabeer Governorate investigation department recorded 1,592 offences and 1,305 traffic violations totaling to 2,897 registered cases. Al-Ahmadi Governorate investigation department recorded 3,549 offences and 1,950 traffic violations totaling to 5,499 registered cases. Al-Farwaniya Governorate investigation department recorded 3,730 offences and 1,696 traffic violations, reaching 5,426 registered cases. Al-Jahra Governorate investigation department recorded 3,171 offences and 1,385 traffic violations, for a total of 4,556 registered cases. The Special Offences Investigation Department recorded 33,400 offences in total.

30 Kuwait charities partaking in quake campaign

KUWAIT: The Ministry of Social Affairs and Community Development has approved applications from 30 charities and agencies to contribute to a nationwide campaign to raise donations for quake-affected people in Turkey. The Social Affairs Ministry has asked the Ministry of Defense to help secure a plane to transport the emergency aid to Turkey, the Ministry spokesperson Ahmad Al-Enezi said in a press statement Tuesday.

Al-Enezi added that Minister Mai Al-Baghli ordered full cooperation and integration with relevant

government agencies to accelerate the aid dispatching. The ministry exerts efforts to ensure a quick response to the emergency to alleviate the suffering of the affected people, including the Syrian refugees in Turkey.

Meanwhile, Kuwait's military has sent a pair of planes carrying urgent aid for the victims of an earthquake that struck Turkey's southeastern border region with Syria. The outpouring of aid comes a day after Kuwait opened an air bridge for the transfer of relief assistance for the victims of the devastating earthquake, said an army statement.

Kuwait's rapid delivery of aid to Turkey in the wake of the natural calamity is a testament to the "breadth" of bilateral relations, the statement underlined. Thousands of people were reported killed and thousands of others injured in the wee hours of Monday when an earthquake rattled southeastern Turkey and parts of Syria, leaving heaps of rubble in its wake.—KUNA

Contractors 'must' adhere to deadlines

KUWAIT: Director of the Public Authority for Housing Welfare Nasser Khuraibet inspected the east Sabah Al-Ahmad housing project to check on the progress of the project and its adherence to timelines. Khuraibet met representatives of contracting companies in charge of the project to follow up the implementation of the contract.

He stressed the importance of adhering to the implementation of the project according to the technical aspects agreed upon and the importance of finding solutions to all observations as soon as possible according to the agreed deadline, as the authority will take action if any delay occurs or if the construction is not up to standards.

Khuraibet also met with the project's resident engineers, reviewing the work that took place over the past period, calling at the same time to overcome all obstacles to complete the project according to the timetable. The authority's team was briefed on the implementation of some work at the project site and listened to a detailed explanation of sample houses, as engineers were instructed to fulfill the observations in the sample houses that are going to be implemented in all houses.

Khuraibet reassured that work at the project is noticeably advancing, and the authority is ready to provide the necessary services for residents of the area. "The authority is keen to expedite the implementation of projects for citizens, stand up to any shortcomings by the executing company, apply all penalties in the event of failure to implement the project, and oblige them to deliver it in a timely manner to save time and effort of the citizens who benefit from them," Khuraibet said.

He stressed that these visits by the authority's officials will be repeated routinely for all construction projects to follow up on the implementation of the work and the percentage of completion in housing project contracts.



KUWAIT: Director of the Public Authority for Housing Welfare Nasser Khuraibet meets representatives of contracting companies in charge of projects.



KUWAIT: (Top) Kuwait Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sheikh Salem Abdullah Al-Jaber Al-Sabah on Wednesday received the head of the Kuwaiti-British Friendship Society, Abdullah Bishara. During the meeting, they touched on the strong historical friendship between Kuwait and United Kingdom and the role of the Friendship Society in promoting constructive cooperation and coordination between the two sides at all levels. (Below) Kuwait's Foreign Minister also received the visiting Secretary of the Lebanese Parliament Hady Al-Hassan to discuss a range of bilateral and regional issues. —KUNA photos



8th Gulf cancer awareness week

By Abdellatif Sharaa

KUWAIT: Activities of the joint 8th Gulf cancer awareness week concluded under the patronage of Health Minister Dr Ahmad Al-Awadhi on Sunday. Secretary General of Gulf Association for Cancer Control Dr Khaled Ahmad Al-Saleh thanked all those who participated in the activities of this week, which showed the importance of cooperation between the government and private sectors that contributes to the success of such important initiatives and positively reflects on our Gulf societies. The theme of this year - An Aware Gulf National (Khaleeji Waaei) - was achieved due to the joint efforts in Kuwait and at the level of GCC countries, in which a large number of events were held to coincide with this important week.

Dr Saleh said consecutive studies over the past seven years showed a significant improvement in the health awareness culture with regards to cancer, as awareness of risk factors of cancer rose from 40 percent to 65 percent, while wrong impressions and nega-

tive view towards cancers and that they are not curable reduced from 87 percent to 47 percent. These are important indicators on the role of awareness in promoting health culture with regards to cancer diseases at the GCC level.

Dr Saleh thanked Kuwait's health minister and the ministry's media department for its role in promoting the activities and events held with its effective participation. He also thanked the media for their help in promoting awareness. He also conveyed thanks of the higher advisory committee of the Joint Gulf week to chairwoman of the executive committee of the week Dr Hussa Al-Shaheen for her efforts to ensure the success of the activities.

Dr Shaheen expressed her pleasure for the renewed meeting of all partners in making the week's activities a success. She said the coordination committee prepared an integrated program, during which 40 activities were held, including scientific, art and sport activities, in addition to posters and awareness booklets, in addition to media interviews.

Dr Shaheen lauded the effective participation of those who recovered from cancer in this week, adding that these successes are repeated every year in every GCC country, thanking the Gulf Association for Cancer Control for this opportunity, which showcased voluntary work.

News in brief

Kuwait oil gains \$2.12

KUWAIT: Kuwait crude oil rose \$2.12 during Tuesday's trading sessions to close at \$81.48 per barrel compared with \$79.36 pb the day before, Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) said Wednesday. Brent futures also gained \$2.70 to \$83.69 pb and West Texas Intermediate gained \$3.03 to \$77.14 pb. —KUNA

Reforming union work

KUWAIT: Chief of the Association of Joint Sector Unions, Mahdi Al-Sayrafi on Wednesday affirmed keenness on reforming union work in both public and private sectors. This came in a statement to KUNA on sidelines of the joint sector workers conference; the first conference of its kind. The conference's agenda aims to organize and fortify worker's rights, address union work issues, and includes three draft projects. Al-Sayrafi stated that a conference of this kind is a priority towards achieving the sought after results, adding that agendas are set to expand to ensure further progress and development. On his part head of the education technology union as well as association treasurer, Fawaz Al-Fawaz, called on concerned bodies to work together and coordinate towards bolstering union work, saying that this would in return promote production.

Fraudulent medical reports

KUWAIT: The Public Prosecution has ordered the detention of four people for creating counterfeit medical reports which was given to a relative for job application at the Justice Ministry. Authorities searched the suspect's residence and found medical report samples and stamp seals of the Health Ministry. The prosecution has filed a lawsuit against the suspects. Investigation procedures are currently ongoing. In related news, the Criminal Court has jailed a Sheikh for two years for fabricating official memo. A complaint was filed by the Sheikh's brother. In other news, the Criminal Court fined 21 defendants, citizens and bedoons between KD 100 and KD 500 for an unlawful gathering in Taima area.

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KUWAIT: Visitors flocked to the Nuwair Market on Wednesday to support local farmers and buy fresh produce. — Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat and Fouad Al-Shaikh

From farm to fork: Nuwair Market promotes local produce, farmers

Initiative contributes to the economy and supports food security



By Ghadeer Ghloom

KUWAIT: Al-Nuzha Co-operative Society held the Nuwair Market on Wednesday under the sponsorship of the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Union of Consumer Co-operative Societies to highlight local farmers' production. Participating farmers displayed their products to the visitors, who came to buy local produce for their freshness, quality and variety.

Abdul-Mohsen Al-Abdullah, public relations and media officer of the Union of Consumer Co-operative Societies, told Kuwait Times that people like to support local farmers because their products are affordable and of high quality. Expressing his pride in the products displayed, he called for supporting Kuwaiti agriculture because it contributes to the economy and supports self-sufficiency. Local farmers, he said, are also the only source of fresh products that come from the farm straight to the consumer. Abdullah said the market will be held in other governorates too.

Zain Al-Barjas, an engineer who voluntarily designed Nuwair Market, took part in encouraging local farmers through creating a positive and encouraging atmosphere. "The aim of the (Nuwair) market is

to elevate the design of the existing farmers' market, to create a more environmentally-friendly platform with a unified design that gives the place its own unique identity. Moreover, holding the market in public parks encourages residents to interact directly with local farmers in a friendly, urban environment."

Dalal Al-Thukair, a local farmer participating in the market, told Kuwait Times: "This initiative is wonderful as it introduces people to local products and gives them a glimpse of what Kuwaiti farmers can produce. Our local farms are getting noticed for producing a variety of excellent produce. We see that Kuwaitis are beginning to head towards food sufficiency. As farmers, we need even more support, but what is currently happening is setting us up for a promising future."

Another local farmer, Bader Al-Azmi, emphasized the importance of keeping such markets going for the benefit of both farmers and consumers. "Such markets can also be considered as a form of local tourism; therefore, we hope that they take place on a regular basis so that we can improve our work and increase the benefits."

He further elaborated to Kuwait Times, saying: "This initiative is a new trend and is quite similar to a



bazaar. In the past, we dreamed of delivering our produce directly to the consumers; and today with such markets, we can directly deliver affordable and

fresh food to people." The market is located in Al-Nuzha Park and will be open on Feb 8-9 from 9:00 am to 9:00 pm.





Zelensky in UK ahead of invasion 'versary'

LONDON: Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky arrived in Britain on Wednesday for only his second overseas trip since Russia's invasion began nearly a year ago. After receiving a hero's welcome in Washington in December, Zelensky was due to be feted in a speech to the UK parliament alongside meetings with Prime Minister Rishi Sunak and King Charles III.

Zelensky, dressed in his usual green fatigues, was hugged by Sunak after landing on a military transport plane at Stansted airport north of London, before the pair met for talks at 10 Downing Street. "The United Kingdom was one of the first to come to Ukraine's aid," Zelensky said on social media.

"And today I'm in London to personally thank the British people for their support and Prime Minister Rishi Sunak for his leadership," he said. The UK government said it would offer advanced training for Ukrainian fighter jet pilots and marines, as Western allies debate stepping up military aid for Kyiv against a feared Russian offensive in the east.

After London, EU officials hope Zelensky will visit Brussels on Thursday, in the buildup to the one-year anniversary on February 24. Ahead of the trip, President Joe Biden promised that the United States would support Ukraine for the long haul.

“We’re going to stand with you, as long as it takes,” Biden said in the president’s annual State of the Union speech. “Our nation is working for more freedom, more dignity, more peace—not just in Europe, but everywhere,” Biden said, addressing Ukraine’s ambassador to Washington, Oksana Markarova, who was in attendance.

Britain announced a fresh round of sanctions targeting organisations relied on by the Russian military—but President

Vladimir Putin's regime remains defiant. Updated maps of Russia have gone on sale in Moscow bookstores that include four annexed Ukrainian regions: Zaporizhzhia, Kherson, Lugansk and Donetsk. Putin regularly refers to them as "our historical lands".

NATO fighter jets

After the Downing Street talks and his speech in parliament's historic Westminster Hall, Zelensky was due to join Sunak on a visit to Ukrainian troops receiving training by the British military in southwest England.

Britain says it has already trained 10,000 Ukrainian troops "to battle readiness" over the past six months and will train a further 20,000 this year. The new UK training will "ensure pilots are able to fly sophisticated NATO-standard fighter jets in the future", the UK said, although Western countries have so far ruled out sending jets themselves.

Moscow said Tuesday that Russian forces were advancing towards Bakhmut and Vugledar-two key centres of fighting in the eastern Donetsk region of Ukraine, now the flashpoint of the war. On Tuesday, Denmark, Germany and the Netherlands promised that Ukraine would get at least 100 tanks in the “coming months”, as the German defence minister visited Kyiv. The three European governments also said training and support would be sent for the Leopard 1 tanks, ahead of the delivery of more advanced tanks in the future.

‘Months if not years’

Last week, Sunak said sending the UK's Typhoon and F-35 fighter jets to Kyiv would require "months if not years" of training and that he was looking for the most effective way of helping Kyiv secure



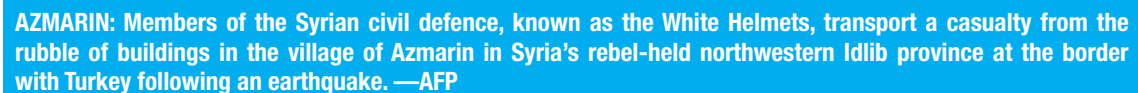
victory. British Defence Secretary Ben Wallace has also warned that supplying fighter jets to Ukraine would not be a “magic wand” in the war, although he refused to rule out the idea.

The United States has so far rejected any deliveries of F-16 warplanes to Ukraine, but other partners, including Poland, have shown themselves more open to the idea. Zelensky stopped off in

Poland on his way home from Washington in December.

Germany recently gave the green light for Leopard battle tanks to be sent by allies but while Berlin has now moved, other nations that previously committed to sending the tanks now appear to be stalling. Zelensky last week urged Western countries to speed up deliveries of weapons—particularly long-range mis-

siles—so his forces can fend off Russian advances in the Donetsk region. Ukraine's Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said he had held a "focussed" call with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on the need for more sanctions and military aid ahead of the anniversary. "Russia would be making a grave mistake if it thought anyone would get tired of fighting the evil it brings," Kuleba tweeted. — AFP



Syria's White Helmets rescuers urge quake help

BEIRUT: The White Helmets leading efforts to rescue people buried under rubble in rebel-held areas of earthquake-hit Syria appealed Wednesday for international help in their “race against time.” First responders from the group that was formed a decade ago to save the lives of civilians during Syria’s civil war sprung into action early Monday when a 7.8-magnitude quake rocked Syria and Turkey.

They have been toiling ever since to pull survivors out from under the debris of dozens of flattened buildings in northwestern areas of war-torn Syria that remain outside the government's control. In a video widely shared on social media, crowds of people surrounding the White Helmets cheered loudly as they lifted a young girl and her entire family from a collapsed building in Idlib province.

"International rescue teams must come into our region," said Mohammed Shibli, a spokesperson for the group known formally as the Syria Civil Defence. "People are dying every second; we are in a race against time," he told AFP from neighbouring Turkey.

Monday's earthquake devastated entire sections of major cities in Turkey and Syria, killing more than 9,500 people, injuring thousands more and leaving many more without shelter in the winter cold. In Syria alone at least 2,597 people have been killed, according to the government and the White Helmets.

Shibli said it was “impossible” for the group to respond to the large-scale calamity alone in the rebel-held northwest, home to more than four million people. “Even states can’t do that,” he said, adding that the group’s volunteers have not had time to reach all of the disaster-struck places.

Digging with bare hands

Britain announced Wednesday that it would release an additional 800,000 pounds (\$968,000) to aid the rescue group. The White Helmets emerged in 2013, when Syria's civil war was nearing its third year, and operates in battered opposition-held zones.

They have been internationally praised for their work, with a Netflix documentary called "The White Helmets" winning an Academy Award in 2017, while a second film focused on the group, "Last Men in Aleppo", was a 2018 Oscars nominee.

Their volunteers include 3,300 young men and women, including 1,600 dedicated to search and rescue operations. "After 56 hours of continuous work... hundreds of families are still missing or trapped under the rubble," Shibli said.

"People's chances of survival are declining" in the biting cold, he said. The rescue group needs heavy machinery, spare parts for the ones they already have, and equipment, "but when will we get them", Shibli asked.

AFP correspondents across the war-ravaged country said rescue workers and residents have had to sift through the rubble with their bare hands. White Helmets volunteer Fatima Obeid told AFP teams were busy at work despite exhaustion. "Being able to pull survivors brings them indescribable joy and excitement," she said from Sarmada in Idlib. —AFP

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International

US says helping quake-hit Syria but not president Assad

We're committed to provide assistance to help people in Syria recover from this disaster

WASHINGTON: The United States said Tuesday it was working with partners to provide earthquake relief in Syria but would stand firm against working with the Damascus government. The United States also said it expected to send further assistance to Turkey after sending two rescue teams to the NATO ally, which suffered heavily as well in Sunday's earthquake.

"In Syria itself we have US-funded humanitarian partners that are coordinating lifesaving assistance," Secretary of State Antony Blinken told reporters as he met his Austrian counterpart. "We're committed to providing that assistance to help people in Syria recover from this disaster, just as we have been their leading humanitarian donor since the start of the war in Syria itself," Blinken said.

"I want to emphasize here that these funds, of course, go to the Syrian people-not to the regime. That won't change." The United States has refused normalization of relations with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad or any direct reconstruction aid, seeking accountability for abuses during the brutal nearly 12-year civil war.

Assad has wrested back most of the country and over the past year has been restoring relations with other Arab nations as well as Turkey. Stephen Allen, who is leading the response on the ground for the US Agency for International Development, said that

most of the damage was in areas not under Assad's control and that USAID had local partners there.

USAID is reorienting assistance that was already in place to help war-hit Syrians, instead focusing on rescue efforts and other immediate needs including providing shelter and food, Allen said. "We've got the full gamut of humanitarian response going in northwest Syria right now," Allen told reporters.

He declined to name the non-governmental groups working with the United States, citing operational security. The United States has announced that it was sending two rescue teams to NATO ally Turkey. Allen said the teams would arrive Wednesday morning and head to the city of Adiyaman, where search efforts have so far been limited.

The teams, coming on two C-130 transport aircraft, are bringing 158 personnel, 12 dogs and 170,000 pounds (77,100 kilograms) of specialized equipment, he said. "What we're focused on right now in Turkey is getting those teams out and saving lives, to put it bluntly," Allen said from Ankara.

"If they need further assistance when it comes to populations who may be without housing or need immediate assistance, we are certainly ready to provide that," he said. The 7.8-magnitude earthquake has killed more than 7,100 people in the two countries, according to officials and medics. — AFP



KAHRAMANMARAS: A youth carries a tray after receiving a meal during a food distribution by Turkish army, two days after a strong earthquake struck the region, in the southeastern Turkish city of Kahramanmaraş on February 8, 2023. — AFP

S Africa awaits Ramaphosa's annual speech

CAPE TOWN: South African President Cyril Ramaphosa delivers his annual address to the nation on Thursday, facing mounting pressure over the country's energy crisis. His speech to the National Assembly will be scrutinised for how he plans to tackle power cuts that since mid-2022 have lasted for up to 12 hours each day.

The record outages have piled misery on a population of 60 million already battling high unemployment, poverty, rampant crime and rising cost of living. The state-of-the-nation address is traditionally held in pomp at the parliament building in Cape Town, where a red carpet is laid out for lawmakers and guests come dressed in glitzy designer outfits.

A military parade staged by the presidential guard signals Ramaphosa's arrival. But this year, for a second consecutive year, Ramaphosa will deliver his speech from the Cape Town City Hall, as the parliament building - gutted during an arson attack 13 months ago-is still being rebuilt.

At a time of austerity, the ceremo-

ny will cost taxpayers an estimated eight million rand, or nearly half a million dollars. Calls have been swirling on social media networks and talk radio for a low-key event to show solidarity with the real state of the nation and its people.

South Africans have vented their anger at Ramaphosa's government over the rolling outages. Some have taken to the streets, others to the law courts, and more protests are expected on Thursday. The crisis is braking growth just as South Africa, the continent's most industrialised economy, is hoping to recover after the COVID pandemic.

Growth is expected to be an anaemic 0.3 percent in 2023, down from 2.5 percent last year. "The energy crisis could short-circuit all plans for economic recovery and threaten social stability in the process," Dieter von Fintel, an economist at the Stellenbosch University, warned.

One option being mulled by the government is to declare a state of disaster, a move that would legally free up additional resources to tackle the crisis. The idea is the brainchild of the ruling African National Congress (ANC) party. The speech will also be broadcast live starting at 7pm (1700 GMT) but opposition parties have vowed to disrupt it over a scandal hanging over the president. — AFP

Energy scammers cast 'wide net' on Facebook

WASHINGTON: A Filipino consumer fumes as she rips open a portable charger to discover she has been conned - the batteries are choked with sand, making her yet another victim of scammers on Facebook.

AFP's fact checkers have uncovered a slew of energy-related scams proliferating on Facebook - from fake solar panel incentives in the United States to hoax electric bike giveaways in Indonesia and the sale of dud devices in the Philippines.

And the trend underscores how fraudsters worldwide profit off disinformation, casting a wide net across social media users, many of whom take the bait amid a cost of living crisis and high utility and energy costs.

"What they did was awful," the 24-year-old Filipino, Brenilyn Ayachock, vented in an online video that showed sand pouring out of the power bank as she opened it with a knife. "We were expecting a good product, but this is what they sent us."

Ayachock made the purchase on what appeared to be the Facebook page of a legitimate energy device retailer, with "special offers" and "flash sales" alongside environment-friendly messages such as "turn off unnecessary lights."

The page stopped responding to her, Ayachock said, after she bought the device

for 1,500 pesos (\$28), a small fortune at a time of galloping inflation. She immediately reported the page to Facebook, but it was still active as of this week.

Ayachock is far from the only victim as social media becomes a breeding ground for everything from bogus cryptocurrency ads, to "romance" scams and hoaxes aimed at extracting people's personal data. Last year, the Philippines government warned against "unscrupulous" money-saving offers as consumers grappled with backbreaking utility prices.

AFP debunked Facebook posts that used doctored news reports to promote a bogus "power saving" device they claimed could slash electricity bills. The warnings fell on deaf ears, with commercial data showing thousands of such gadgets are sold monthly. Activists say complaints in online reviews are drowned out by comments from people desperate to try anything to lower their expenses. "Scammers follow the headlines and there isn't a day that goes by that we don't hear about how to conserve energy, rising gas and utility prices and the need for renewable energy," Amy Nofziger, director of fraud victim support at the US-based nonprofit AARP, told AFP.

"It's a wide net for scammers. Most social media sites do not thoroughly vet the ads placed on their sites, however many users do not know this and they put their full trust in these advertisements." The ease with which fraudsters pelt users with disinformation raises questions about the capacity of platforms like Facebook to police paid-for scam advertising that is a lucrative revenue source.



CENTREVILLE: This illustration photo taken on February 6, 2023 shows a phone screen displaying a story about scam ads promoting fake tax breaks for solar in front of a screen showing some of the Facebook archived fake ads luring people into the scam. — AFP

Critics, including Patricia Schouker, a fellow at the Colorado-based Payne Institute, say algorithms that prioritize content based on preferences have let scam ads prey on users most likely to engage.

A spokesperson for Meta, Facebook's owner, said it views the "threat of scams seriously" and had taken action including disabling many of the ad accounts responsible for fraud reported by AFP's fact checkers. "The people who push these kinds of ads are persistent, well-funded, and are constantly evolving," the spokesperson said. AFP has a global team of journalists who debunk misinformation as part of Meta's third-party fact-checking program. — AFP

Manila suspends deployment...

Continued from Page 1

for the act of one murderer. The decision resulted from the uproar in the Philippines, which led to the ban of labor from the Philippines to Kuwait," he said.

On the consequences of the decision, Dakhnan

said: "We will suffer a decrease of 80 percent workers. As a union, we asked the Public Authority of Manpower and the foreign ministry for agreeing to a memorandum of understanding on the labor force, but sadly we do not have a clear understanding of who is responsible or in charge for the short-fall of workers. The decrease in Filipino workers will cause many to suffer, especially since Ramadan is approaching. Families who have great need for household workers, especially during the holy month of Ramadan and the holidays, will be the most affected by the decision."

of web pages or ideas for social media posts based on a few inputs.

OpenAI, which developed ChatGPT, is a California-based startup founded in 2015, with early funding from Elon Musk among others. Microsoft invested \$1 billion in OpenAI in 2019 and just inked a new multi-billion deal with the firm. Search is Google's golden cash cow and any serious challenge to its dominance seemed unthinkable until ChatGPT burst onto the scene two months ago.

Google's search engine holds 84 percent of the global market share, bringing in tens of billions of dollars in ad sales every quarter and making up more than two thirds of the tech giant's total revenue. Bing's market share stood at nine percent last year. "Competition is what really breeds innovation. And at the end of the day, that's what we're doing today," said Jordi Ribas, a Microsoft vice president who has been working on Bing for 15 years. — AFP

man Biden defeated in 2020 and who has already opened a bid to stage a rematch and win back the White House in 2024. Meanwhile Trump himself, a fierce Biden critic, offered a rare compliment. "I disagree with him on most of his policies, but he put into words what he felt, and ended up the evening far stronger than he began. Give him credit for that," Trump wrote on his Truth Social platform.

The Biden team quickly sought to profit from the Republicans' behavior, seeing it as a way to highlight the president's message of normalcy and seriousness that worked against Trump in 2020 - and which Biden evidently hopes to use again in a reelection bid. Biden spokesman Ian Sams went on Fox News - the network that was crucial to Trump's rise - to castigate Republicans in Congress for holding a hearing Wednesday on their allegations that Twitter and the Democrats colluded to suppress damaging news about the president's son, Hunter, during the 2020 campaign. — AFP

Kuwait condoles Turkey as quake...

Continued from Page 1

He reiterated Kuwait's sympathy and solidarity with the Turkish people and its support to help them overcome the ramifications of this crisis. He also offered Kuwait's condolences to the families of the victims, wishing those injured a swift recovery, and for those missing to be found.

Turkish Ambassador to Kuwait Tuba Nur Sonmez expressed her sincere appreciation and gratitude to all the brotherly and friendly countries that are supporting Turkey financially and emotionally, praising the great role played by Kuwait and the minister of foreign affairs, who came to offer condolences in person and was in constant contact with her from the first moment of the earthquake, emphasizing the Kuwaiti political leadership's support for Turkey during this painful crisis.

Foreign Minister Sheikh Salem also said the wellbeing of nationals is the utmost priority. He underlined Kuwait's "rapid response" to the calamity, citing HH the Amir Sheikh Nawaf's instructions to provide immediate aid to the affected areas. Kuwait stands in solidarity with Turkey in the wake of the disaster, the minister underlined, hoping Ankara will get through this painful tragedy.

Meanwhile, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Wednesday conceded "shortcomings" after criticism of his government's response to the massive earthquake that killed over 11,700 people in Turkey and Syria. The sprawling scale of the disaster that flattened thousands of buildings, trapping an unknown number of people, has swamped relief operations already hampered by freezing weather. Survivors have been left to scramble for food and shelter - and in some cases watch helplessly as their relatives called for rescue, and eventually went silent under the debris.

Still, searchers kept pulling survivors from the debris three days after the 7.8 magnitude quake that is already

one of the deadliest this century, even as the death toll continues to rise. As criticism mounted online, Erdogan visited one of the hardest-hit spots, quake epicenter Kahramanmaraş, and acknowledged problems in the response. "Of course, there are shortcomings. The conditions are clear to see. It's not possible to be ready for a disaster like this," he said.

Twitter was also not working on Turkish mobile networks, according to AFP journalists and NetBlocks web monitoring group. The window for rescuers to find survivors is narrowing as the effort nears the 72-hour mark that disaster experts consider the most likely period to save lives. Yet on Wednesday, rescuers pulled children from under a collapsed building in the hard-hit Turkish province of Hatay, where whole stretches of towns have been levelled. Officials and medics said 9,057 people had died in Turkey and 2,662 in Syria from Monday's 7.8-magnitude tremor, bringing the total to 11,719 - but that could yet double if the worst fears of experts are realized.

The World Health Organization chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus has warned that time was running out for the thousands injured and those still feared trapped. Due to the scale of the damage and the lack of help coming to certain areas, survivors said they felt alone in responding to the disaster. The White Helmets, leading efforts to rescue people buried under rubble in rebel-held areas of Syria, have appealed for international help in their "race against time".

They have been toiling since the quake to pull survivors out from under the debris of dozens of flattened buildings in northwestern areas of war-torn Syria that remain outside the government's control. "International rescue teams must come into our region," said Mohammed Shibli, a spokesperson for the group known formally as the Syria Civil Defense. "People are dying every second; we are in a race against time," he told AFP from neighbouring Turkey.

The issue of aid to Syria was a delicate one, and the sanctioned government in Damascus made an official plea to the EU for help, the bloc's commissioner for crisis management Janez Lenarcic said. — Agencies

sensitive US military site.

According to US officials, countermeasures were taken to prevent the balloon's instruments from collecting confidential information during its flight. They say that the decision to wait until the balloon reached the coast before it could be brought down by a fighter plane was the only way to ensure safety of people on the ground. Authorities are currently in the process of recovering debris out of the sea for analysis. — AFP

China balloons seen over five...

Continued from Page 1

The balloon floated at an altitude far higher than most airplanes and crossed directly over at least one

International

Australian school principal stands trial on rape charges

Malka charged with 29 offences stemming from her time as the principal of the school

MELBOURNE: The former principal of an ultra-orthodox Jewish school in Australia went on trial Wednesday over charges she sexually assaulted three female students. Malka Leifer, 56, has been charged with 29 offences stemming from her time as the principal of the Adass School in Melbourne, according to an indictment released by the court.

The school is part of an ultra-orthodox Jewish sect in Melbourne known for its reclusive nature. The charges, stretching from 2003 to 2007, included raping a student during a school camp, and sexually assaulting another girl inside a school office.

She was also accused of sexually assaulting one of the students after asking her to come over and clean her house. Leifer, a mother-of-eight who left Zionist entity in 2001 to teach at the school, has pleaded not guilty to each charge. According to the indictment, Leifer raped one student after inviting her home to "sleep over for kallah lessons"—a kind of pre-wedding etiquette class that includes sexual education.

On other occasions Leifer told the students she was preparing them to be wives, prosecutor Justin Lewis told the court in his opening statement. "This will help you for your wedding night," Leifer said after one sexual assault, according to Lewis.

"This is what is good for you," she allegedly said

during another incident. The 29 charges included 10 counts of rape, 10 counts of indecent assault, and three counts of sexually penetrating "a 16 or 17 year old child".

Sheltered upbringing

Lewis told the court the three students had a sheltered upbringing that made it difficult to raise the alarm about Leifer, who was a highly respected teacher. One of the students told Leifer that her mother had been physically and verbally abusive at home, the court heard. Leifer would later use this information to discourage the student from making a complaint, Lewis said, indicating that she would "tell everyone" about the student's family life in retaliation. The allegations finally came to light when one of the students confided in her therapist, Lewis told the court.

Defence lawyer Ian Hill said Leifer denied "all of the criminal conduct alleged by each of the complainants" and that her interactions with the students were "professional and proper".

"We deny that they are telling the truth," he said. Hill said Leifer told a fellow teacher in 2008 that she had "done nothing wrong". Australia has strict laws surrounding the reporting of sexual assault, and some details of the case have been suppressed. — AFP



MELBOURNE: A general view shows the County Court (R) in Melbourne on February 8, 2023, where Malka Leifer, the former principal of an ultra-orthodox Jewish school in Melbourne, went on trial over charges she sexually assaulted three female students.— AFP



SEOUL: South Korea's Interior and Safety Minister Lee Sang-min (C) attends an integrated defence council presided over by the South Korean President at the Blue House in Seoul on February 8, 2023. South Korea's parliament voted to impeach the country's interior minister.— AFP

S Korea parliament to impeach minister over crowd crush

SEOUL: South Korea's parliament voted to impeach the country's interior minister on Wednesday over a Halloween crowd crush in Seoul that killed more than 150 people, the first such effort to remove a cabinet minister. Interior Minister Lee Sang-min has come under pressure to resign following heavy criticism over his handling of the October 29, 2022 disaster, when scores of young costumed partygoers, mostly women in their 20s, were killed in the popular Itaewon nightlife area.

Lee will be suspended from official duty following the impeachment motion—which passed 179-109 along party lines in the opposition-controlled parliament—until the country's Constitutional Court rules on the matter.

The motion said that despite his responsibility as an interior minister, Lee had "failed to take crisis prevention measures for large crowd events." The parliamentary vote followed a months-long special investigation that concluded in January and said there had been massive planning and response failures—but stopped short of blaming any top government or national police agency officials. The impeachment motion said Lee's immediate response to the crowd crush had contributed to a delayed and poorly-coordinated deployment of emergency responders. It also criticised his claim immediately after the disaster that deploying more fire and police personnel would not have prevented it. Lee later apologised for the remark.

"Not only did he fail to carry out his role bestowed by the Constitution he also breached the basic integrity demanded of senior officials with his inappropriate remarks," the impeachment motion reads. President Yoon Suk-yeol's office, which has staunchly defended Lee's handling of the disaster, slammed the motion, saying it would be a "shameful episode in parliamentary history." The move comes as Seoul city officials tussle with the families of Itaewon disaster victims over a memorial they have set up, which authorities say is illegal and have threatened to demolish. The grieving families have set up an altar near City Hall in downtown Seoul, but authorities want them to move it to a basement in a subway station in Itaewon. Then-president Park Geun-hye was impeached in 2017, but the country has never taken such action against a cabinet minister before. — AFP

Bulgaria accused of brutal border pushback, beatings

ELHOVO: Bulgaria faces mounting accusations that it is abusing people trying to cross its border with Turkey, with asylum seekers saying they have been pushed back, locked up, stripped and beaten. The EU member serves as a gateway into the bloc and is trying to tighten the border to stop a rising number of people seeking to cross, which has reached levels unseen since 2015.

"Since the beginning of last year we have been seeing very intensive and brutal pushbacks of people," a practice that is illegal in the EU, said Diana Dimova, head of Bulgarian refugee help group Mission Wings.

Asylum seekers' testimonies collected by AFP and reports by the European border guard agency Frontex

Thai children facing charges over protests

BANGKOK: More than 200 children in Thailand are facing serious criminal charges, including sedition, for their role in largely peaceful pro-democracy protests that shook the kingdom in 2020, Amnesty International said Wednesday.

Youth-led demonstrations calling for political change and reform to Thailand's untouchable monarchy drew tens of thousands onto the streets of Bangkok at their peak in late 2020. Amnesty accused

the Thai authorities of having "arrested, prosecuted, surveilled and intimidated" child protesters for taking part, in a report calling for charges to be dropped against under-18s.

"Children with their whole lives ahead of them now face severe repercussions merely for participating in peaceful protests," Amnesty International Thailand researcher Chantip Tatiyakaroonwong said. Nearly 300 under-18s have faced criminal charges related to the protests, the human rights campaign group said, and more than 200 cases are still active.

Most were accused of violating rules around public gatherings imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic. But at least 17 minors are facing accusations of insulting the monarchy, which can carry long prison terms.

Under the kingdom's lese-majeste laws—among the harshest in the world—insulting the monarchy can carry

a jail sentence of up to 15 years per charge. The youngest child arrested during a protest was 11 years old, the report said, while in another case police reportedly used cable ties to restrain a 12-year-old in July 2021.

Minors told researchers that as well as following them, authorities had also put pressure on their teachers and parents to discourage them from participating in protests. "In addition to charges, some child protesters risk facing the added penalty of being disowned or abused by their own parents, due to the pressure put on them by authorities," Chantip said.

In some cases this led to family arguments and even physical abuse and homelessness, the report said. Amnesty urged the Thai authorities to drop charges against peaceful child protesters, saying they should be free to protest without it holding them back. — AFP



COLOMBO: Sri Lanka's President Ranil Wickremesinghe (L) and the Speaker of the parliament Mahinda Yapa Abeywardena arrive for the opening session of the parliament in Colombo on February 8, 2023.— AFP

Ousted Sri Lankan president quizzed over cash stash

COLOMBO: Sri Lankan police told AFP on Wednesday they are investigating ousted president Gotabaya Rajapaksa over a hidden cash stockpile uncovered when protesters stormed his former residence last year. Rajapaksa presided over an unprecedented economic crisis that saw the island nation's 22 million people suffer through months of food, fuel and pharmaceutical shortages. He fled the country last July after an angry mob besieged his compound—tendering his resignation from abroad days later—but has since returned and is living under armed guard.

Protesters occupied his presidential palace for several days, discovering 17.5 million rupees (\$48,000) hidden in Rajapaksa's private quarters that they later turned over to police. Police investigators on Monday "recorded a three-hour long statement from the former president Gotabaya Rajapaksa on the cash found in the president's house", police spokesman Nihal Thaldudu told AFP.

A court in the capital Colombo had ordered police

likewise point to the use of brutal methods at the Balkan nation's southeastern frontier. Border police thwarted 164,000 "irregular crossing" attempts in 2022, compared to 55,000 in 2021, interior ministry figures show. Rising numbers in Bulgaria have already contributed to Austria and the Netherlands blocking its bid to join the Schengen visa free zone and will also be high on the agenda of an EU summit in Brussels later this week.

In a bid to stem the flow, Bulgarian authorities have stepped up controls along the 234-kilometre (145-mile) barbed wire fence covering almost the entire border with Turkey. There have been accounts of abuse. A 16-year-old Syrian who AFP met in a border town said he was detained after crossing into Bulgaria and held in a "closed camp with a high fence" that he called "a prison". One night, he and other detainees were driven to the border fence with Turkey. "There, they divided us into Arabs and Afghans and started beating us up. They beat us with batons," he said on condition of anonymity, adding that he was pushed back over the border to Turkey.—AFP

Rebels take NZ pilot hostage in Papua

JAKARTA: Separatists in Indonesia's breakaway eastern region of Papua have taken a New Zealand pilot hostage after attacking a small passenger plane and setting it on fire at an airport in a remote mountainous area, officials and a rebel group said. Papuan insurgents who seek independence from Indonesia have previously threatened and attacked aircraft they believe to be carrying military or government personnel and supplies for Jakarta's forces.

The West Papua National Liberation Army (TPNPB), the military wing of Papua's main separatist group, claimed Tuesday's attack on a Susi Air plane in Nduga district—an area where rebels have launched several attacks on authorities and civilians in recent years.

"The pilot has been taken to a TPNPB headquarters, it is very far away in another district," TPNPB spokesman Sebbay Sambom told AFP Wednesday. "It takes a long time to get there, maybe a day or two. They will probably arrive today." He added that five passengers on board the plane were released after its arrival from the mining town of Timika because they were ethnic Papuans. The rebels are demanding for Indonesia to recognise Papuan independence in return for the pilot's release and a meeting with Indonesian President Joko Widodo facilitated by the international community, Sambom said.

Since the attack, a joint team of Indonesian military and police was dispatched to search for the pilot, national police chief Listyo Sigit told reporters Tuesday. New Zealand Prime Minister Chris Hipkins told Radio New Zealand Wednesday he only had preliminary information about the hostage situation but said their embassy in Jakarta was "working on the case".

Wellington "was aware of the situation involving a New Zealand pilot in Papua" and was providing consular support, a Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade spokesperson said. Rebel attacks in Papua have risen in recent years and flying is the only available option to reach remote mountainous areas there.—AFP



HARMANLI: Photograph shows men walking in front of the entrance of the Registration and Reception centre at Harmanli. Bulgaria faces mounting accusations that it is abusing people trying to cross its border with Turkey, with asylum seekers saying they have been pushed back, locked up, stripped and beaten.— AFP

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 9, 2023

Business

Inflation starting to slow but long and ‘bumpy’ road ahead: Powell

Stronger-than-expected economic data could bring more rate hikes

WASHINGTON: US inflation is starting to cool but the road ahead will likely be long and bumpy, Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell warned Tuesday, adding that stronger-than-expected economic data could bring more rate hikes. The US central bank has in recent months tempered its aggressive campaign to rein in surging inflation, opting for smaller increases to the benchmark lending rate after multiple steep hikes.

Its decisions came as a disinflationary process takes place, mainly in the goods sector, but latest government data showed Friday that the jobs market remains hotter than policymakers like, adding stress to the inflation fight. “If the data were to continue to come in stronger than we expect, and we were to conclude that we needed to raise rates more... then we would certainly do that,” said Powell at an event in Washington on Tuesday.

For now, the process of lowering inflation “has a long way to go,” he added. He noted that the services sector has not shown much disinflation yet, apart from in the housing services segment.

“This process is likely to take quite a bit of time. It’s not going to be... smooth, it’s probably going to be bumpy,” he told the event organized by The Economic Club of Washington DC. He expects 2023 to be a year of “significant declines in inflation,” but that the figure will only come down close to officials’ two percent target next year. While the unemployment rate is typically expected to rise as the Fed raises interest rates, joblessness has remained at historically low levels despite the central bank’s eight consecutive rate hikes in the past year. “The labor market’s extraordinarily strong,” Powell said, adding that it was good inflation is coming down but not at the cost of a strong jobs market.

But the stronger than expected jobs data is also an indication of why this process will take “a significant period of time.” At the end of a two-day policy meeting last week, Powell told reporters that the Fed needed “substantially more evidence” to be confident that inflation is on a sustained downward path. — AFP



WASHINGTON: Federal Reserve Board Chairman Jerome Powell speaks during an interview by David Rubenstein, Chairman of the Economic Club of Washington, DC, at the Renaissance Hotel on February 7, 2023 in Washington, DC. — AFP

India slows rate hikes but inflation remains ‘sticky’

MUMBAI: India’s central bank slowed the pace of interest rate hikes on Wednesday but warned that core inflation in the world’s fifth-biggest economy remained stubbornly high. Central banks around the world yanked up borrowing costs last year to arrest soaring prices due to the Ukraine war, but many have now slowed the pace of rate hikes as inflation cools.

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) on Wednesday raised the benchmark repurchase rate by 25 basis points to 6.5 percent, the sixth and smallest increase since May when it stood at 4.0 percent.

The move was in line with most analysts’ expectations. Most had also expected the RBI to change its policy stance from neutral to accommodative, meaning it would be the last hike in the current cycle, but bank governor Shaktikanta Das kept the door open for further tightening. “Consumer price inflation in India moved below the upper-tolerance level during November and December 2022... core inflation, however, remains sticky,” Das said in a webcast.

“Looking ahead, while inflation is expected to moderate in 2023-24, it is likely to rule above the 4.0 percent target.” Das added that the outlook was clouded by “continuing uncertainties from geopolitical tensions, global financial market volatility, rising non-oil commodity prices and volatile crude oil prices”.

The US Federal Reserve has reduced the size of its rate hikes in recent months, while the European Central Bank has remained hawkish. Fed chairman Jerome Powell said Tuesday that further tightening would be needed if data showed a strengthening jobs market, adding that inflation “has a long way to go”. Elsewhere in Asia, Malaysia’s central bank in January kept rates unchanged, while Indonesia and the Philippines signaled they were nearing the end of their rate-hike cycles. — AFP



Shaktikanta Das

KCCI, Pakistan’s Sialkot Chamber sign MoU

KUWAIT: Vice Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Kuwait Chamber of Commerce and Industry (KCCI) Fahad Yaqoub Al-Jouan on Wednesday received a Pakistani economic delegation headed by Wahob Jehangir, Vice Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Sialkot Chamber of Commerce and Industry. The delegation consisted of representatives from Pakistani companies operating in various fields including surgical medical equipment, leather industries, sports products, gloves and rice. Pakistani Ambassador to Kuwait Malik Muhammad Farooq and representatives of Kuwaiti companies that are members of the KCCI also attended the meeting.

During the meeting, the KCCI and the Sialkot Chamber of Commerce and Industry signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) aimed at strengthening bilateral cooperation between the countries and supporting joint economic activities.

Al-Jouan welcomed the Pakistani delegation, praising the good relations between Kuwait and Pakistan, stressing the direct positive impact of such visits which are considered one of the tools of joint cooperation between the two sides to strengthen the volume of trade between the two friendly countries.

Jehangir, the head of the Pakistani delegation, expressed happiness at visiting the Chamber, explaining that this initiative comes within the framework of the Pakistan’s interest in strengthening the existing trade cooperation between the two countries and their keenness to open new horizons for joint cooperation. He called on Kuwaiti companies to visit Pakistan to explore investment opportunities in the country and enter into partnerships with their Pakistani business counterparts.



KUWAIT: The meeting between Kuwait Chamber of Commerce and Industry (KCCI) and members of Sialkot Chamber of Commerce and Industry on Wednesday.

The Pakistani ambassador expressed his happiness with the existing cooperation between the KCCI and the embassy, pointing out the great interest Pakistani side attaches to joint investment with Kuwait in various fields. He explained that the main objective of this visit is to provide an opportunity for business owners from both sides to present opportunities, available investment, as well as establishing bilateral relations that would bolster trade exchanges between the two friendly countries.

The members of the Pakistani delegation made a presentation about the companies they represent and demonstrated their services and products which attracted the interest of their counterparts in Kuwait. At the end of the meeting, Al-Jouan thanked the Pakistani delegation for the visit and the attendees for their participation in such economic events.

An exhibition of Pakistani products was opened in the Exhibition Hall of the Chamber’s building which will be on display on Wednesday and Thursday. The exhibition showcases high-quality Pakistani products, including medical equipment for dentistry and surgery, leather industries such as shoes, bags and wallets, as well as hunting and equestrian equipment, sports tools, clothes, balls, tennis rackets, etc. Gloves and shoes that are used



KUWAIT: Fahad Yaqoub Al-Jouan, Ambassador Malik Muhammad Farooq and Wahob Jehangir during the inauguration of the exhibition at Exhibition Hall of the KCCI building on Wednesday.

in factories and various construction works were also on display. The exhibition also showcases food products, rice of different varieties and apriary equipment.

Burgan Bank reports net income of KD 52.1m for FY 2022

KUWAIT: Burgan Bank announced its financial results for the fiscal year ending December 31, 2022, reporting revenues of KD 232 million and operating profit of KD 125 million.

Revenue levels remained stable, backed by a growth of Net Interest Income by 15 percent year-on-year, due to improvement in its Net Interest Margins by 30 bps, reaching 2.4 percent for 2022. This improvement was driven by rate hikes in Kuwait and improved margins in Burgan Bank Turkey.

Moreover, the bank’s provision charges saw a significant improvement of 70 percent for the fiscal year 2022 compared to the performance in fiscal year 2021. This improvement underlines Burgan’s prudent risk practices across the Group and consequently, its credit costs for the year improved to 60 bps (as compared to 190 bps in 2021). The strong growth in net interest income and significant reduction in credit costs ensured that Burgan Bank produced a growth of 15 percent to deliver net Income of KD 52.1 million.

Burgan’s asset quality continues to be stable with an NPL ratio of 1.9 percent for 2022. Capital ratios for 2022 continued to be well above minimum regulatory ratios. The bank’s capital adequacy ratio (CAR) of 16.8 percent is well above the regulatory minimum of 12.5 percent. Burgan’s Board of Directors recommended distribution of cash dividend of 8 fils per share, in addition to 5 percent bonus shares for fiscal year 2022, subject to shareholder approval at the Annual General Meeting.

The recent approval of the sale of the Group’s Bank of Baghdad will avoid an increase in the bank’s NPL ratio and further strengthen the bank’s capital



Sheikh Abdullah Nasser Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah

Masoud M J Hayat

ratios. Moreover, the group’s active measures to mitigate risks in Turkey have led to an overall improvement in the performance of Burgan Bank Turkey, including much higher Net Income and improved asset quality.

A forward-looking strategy

Burgan Bank continues to focus on delivering sustainable, long-term growth and operational resilience, according to the Bank’s Chairman, Sheikh Abdullah Nasser Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah. “This year saw us make tremendous strides towards our strategic goals, whilst successfully delivering strong financial performance and solid returns to our shareholders. We are carrying substantial momentum into 2023, with clear development paths for our three core pillars of focus: sustainability, digitalization, and human capital development.” “With an ambitious strategy in place, it is vital that we strike the right balance between mitigating risk and accelerating the pace of development,” added Sheikh Abdullah.

Commenting on the bank’s ESG commitment, Sheikh Abdullah added: “Burgan has adopted a proactive and comprehensive approach to sustainability as well as environmental, social and governance (ESG) management, since its earliest day. At

the core of our ‘driven by you’ philosophy is a commitment to deliver greater value to our people and our communities-beyond simply our role as financial providers. The goal remains simple: amplify our positive impact and minimize any negative environmental impact we may have. This year, we further expanded the scope and mandate of our ESG framework, and reaffirmed our commitment to creating better solutions for a more sustainable future.”

A year of evolution and digital success

According to Vice Chairman and Group CEO of Burgan Bank, Masoud M J Hayat, the retail evolution for the bank, with its central theme of digitalization-saw tremendous progress in 2022.

“This comes as a result of our commitment to implement our long-term digital transformation strategy, which aims to focus on providing the best, safest and most convenient banking experience for our customers. In 2022, Burgan Bank launched several features and service upgrades on its mobile application, which currently stands as the highest rated banking app in Kuwait. This included the introduction of its Electronic Know Your Customer (eKYC) form, the “Apply Now” feature for products, as well as strategic design and function upgrades, to deliver convenient and advanced virtual banking experience to our customers. Additionally, Burgan’s digital innovations were also rolled out to our corporate clients as the Bank further enhanced its innovative cash management digital platform.

On the human capital front, Burgan Bank’s investment in its people is holistic and long-term, according to Hayat, who added: “Our people are integral to our strategy, as we seek to drive our financial performance. Burgan’s service evolution and digitalization journey require high-skilled, empowered and technically trained workforce. Therefore, we have dedicated considerable resources to upskill our employees and endow them with the agility needed to be able to face that transformation.”

Mideast SWFs to get boost with Brent averaging \$94pb

KUWAIT: The firepower of the Middle Eastern sovereign wealth funds (SWF) will get a further boost as Brent crude is forecast to average \$94 per barrel over the next four years, Japan’s biggest bank, MUFG, said in its Middle East 2023 outlook report. Accordingly, the net financial wealth will reach \$5.6 trillion, or 247% of GDP, by 2026, a cumulative increase of \$1.8 trillion from the present \$3.8 trillion.

“Such an unprecedented quantum of surpluses will fortify the region’s balance sheets, support regional risk assets in the medium term and further strengthen its position as a critical creditor region in the global economy,” the report added. Saudi Arabia has already unveiled a strategy to grow the Public Investment fund, its SWF, from \$607 billion to \$1.8 trillion by 2030. Moreover, Middle East funds have shattered stereotypes of following covert strategies and only hunting trophy assets being now increasingly recognized as smart, flexible and mature investors that can move the needle locally and overseas.

“The expected decade-long energy supercycle and the bullet-proof dollar peg that serves as a credit anchor of stability positions Middle Eastern SWFs well over the long term,” MUFG said.

Middle East SWFs have doubled their investments from \$22 billion in 2021 to \$52 billion in 2022. In addition, five of the 10 most active SWFs are from the Middle East. Of last year’s 60 mega deals (ticket size of +\$1 billion), 26 were carried out by Middle Eastern SWF. The largest deal was done by Abu Dhabi Investment Authority (ADIA), which invested \$4 billion in Ardian’s ASF IX and \$2 billion for joint co-investments, the report stated.

In a recent report, Bain & Company said Middle Eastern sovereign wealth funds are using merger and acquisitions (M&A) to scale into new verticals and build local champions. The report cited Saudi Arabia’s Public Investment Fund (PIF) investing \$1.3 billion in four Egyptian companies in August 2022, including Abu Qir Fertilizers and Alexandria Container and Cargo Handling. — Zawya

Business

2022 a year full of achievements for stc

Net profit KD 33.2 million in 2022, 30 fils cash dividends

KUWAIT: Kuwait Telecommunications Company (stc), a world-class digital leader providing innovative services and platforms to customers and enabling the digital transformation in Kuwait, announced its financial results for the financial year ended 31 December, 2022, highlighting the most significant achievements, financial and operational performance in addition to the social initiatives taken by the company during 2022.

Commenting on the announcements of these results, Dr Mahmoud Ahmed Abdulrahman, stc's Chairman, stated: "stc has witnessed a number of achievements during 2022 in terms of expanding the Company's operating model, supporting the digital transformation strategy and adding value to its shareholders. The rapid development of the telecommunications sector showed stc's flexibility in driving further progress and accelerate the digital transformation process aimed at enabling the Company to capture all the available business opportunities to achieve the growth in its operating and financial results. Driven by the ever-growing and continuous reliance on digitization and global networking in various sectors, stc ensured providing the telecommunications and ICT services as one of the key pillars that the company has followed throughout the previous years, in order to achieve its corporate strategy focused on business expansion, especially in the enterprise sector. This has also supported stc to enhance its internal capabilities and increase its market share through enriching customer experience and relying on its solid infrastructure," he added.

Commenting on the company's financial position as at 31 December, 2022 Dr Mahmoud, stated: "stc's total assets reached KD 424.4 million by the end of December 2022, while total shareholders' equity increased by 2 percent reaching KD 241.4 million. Moreover, stc has a strong solvency position among its peers in the Middle East."

The Board of Directors has recommended distributing cash dividends of 30 fils per share representing 30 percent of the share nominal value for the year ended 2022, subject to the approval of the Ordinary General Assembly of the company. This decision was based on stc's confidence in the continuous advancements of its operations, the robustness of its financial position, and the strength of its cash flows."

Dr Abdulrahman also noted that stc has strengthened its role with regard to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in 2022. In line with its institutional values through a series of campaigns and initiatives, stc aims to contribute effectively and positively to support the development of the State of Kuwait and to raise awareness about important issues in society, in cooperation with both government and private sectors. The company's Corporate Social Responsibility program for this year has a strong emphasis on environmental, social and governance foundations, with stc eager to grow on those aspects in 2022. Accordingly, stc's working teams assure compliance with the latest trends towards adhering and evaluating the implementation of the ESG factors to protect company's stakeholders, manage its social capital, preserve the natural resources and encourage recycling. As a pioneer in Kuwait's telecom, information technology and digital solutions sector, stc will continue to contribute through its rich, diverse, and widespread program with the sole objective of creating a positive and sustainable impact in the local community.

Hence, as a pioneer in Kuwait's telecom and digital solutions sector, stc will continue to contribute through its rich, diverse, and widespread program with the sole objective of creating a posi-



Dr Mahmoud Ahmed Abdulrahman

Eng Maziad Al-Harbi

tive and sustainable impact in the local community. This approach falls in line with stc's vision to back and support the community by implementing initiatives and events that align with its robust social responsibility framework.

Commenting on stc's achievements in 2022, Eng Maziad Al-Harbi, stc's CEO stated: "stc's robust results during the financial year ended in December 2022 demonstrated the successful implementation of its corporate strategy with all the operational and financial KPIs adopted. This was the key factor behind reaching stc's best results aimed at exceeding the aspiration of our customers in addition to placing stc amongst the leading companies for supporting the digital transformation process and providing integrated technical solutions with a value added to the traditional telecommunications sector. This is by virtue of stc's most advanced 5G network and well-established infrastructure that the Company had heavily invested in to enable the Company to deliver the best integrated technical and database solutions that target and fulfill the needs of all of our customers."

In conjunction with stc's eagerness to maintain its leadership in the telecommunications sector, sustain its strong position and enrich its reputation

- Revenue increased by 13.5% to reach KD 336.4 million, representing the highest since inception
- stc's customer base increased by 14.4% to reach 2.3 million customers
- EBITDA increased by 3.1% to reach KD 82.0 million
- Net profit reaching KD 33.2 million

within one of the most competitive industries, we are keen to place the implementation of our productive and digital operating model as our foremost concern with an unwavering commitment to enhance profitability, maximize our employees' potential, improve their future career skills, and promote corporate sustainability. This is also accompanied by the hard work of our subsidiaries and their capabilities to execute business solutions in the ICT field.

stc's strategic expansion in April 2022 through the acquisition of E-Portal Holding Company and its subsidiaries was a key step in its relevance with enabling the company to create strong and solid grounds to achieve the sustainable growth in the future. In this regard, stc ensured establishing a holistic operating model, which significantly supports the strategic pillars of the digital transformation process.

Therefore, through our subsidiaries, solutions by stc and E-Portal, specialized in providing the latest solutions for the enterprise sector, stc is keen to keep up with all the changes and challenges that would result from the economic impact



are provided by our subsidiaries. Furthermore, the accelerated demand for the integrated enterprise solutions and the continuous increased demand on the traditional telecommunications services in the Kuwaiti market have significantly attributed to achieving these outstanding results. Additionally, this growth in revenue was achieved with the significant support from the increase in stc's customer base which has reached 2.3 million customers by the end of December 2022, representing a rise of 14.4 percent compared to December 2021.

Al-Harbi noted: "Accordingly, stc's EBITDA witnessed a growth of 3.1 percent to reach KD 82.0 million in 2022 compared to KD 79.6 million in 2021. In an analysis of stc's net profit during 2022 which reached KD 33.2 million (earnings per share 33 fils) compared to KD 44.9 million (earnings per share 45 fils) in 2021, in which the decline in net profit is due to the nonrecurring and extraordinary gains from legal claims in 2021. Whereby, without considering these nonrecurring and extraordinary gains, stc's net profit in 2022 witnessed a growth of 12.7 percent with the support of the growth in revenue and cost operational efficiencies."

Al-Harbi concluded: "The continuous update of stc's long-term financial policy, short and long-term digital transformation strategy along the previous three years was the main attribute that facilitated the ability to keep pace with the most recent developments in the telecom industry. stc succeeded in not only satisfying and exceeding the needs of its customers, but it has also demonstrated its ability to build a wise financial and operational plan based on the Company's cost optimization program. This, in turn, had a significant role in enhancing stc's solvency and strong cash position."

French unions battle to keep momentum

PARIS: Opponents of France's controversial pension reform plan sought to keep up the momentum on a third day of protests and strikes, but the numbers taking to the streets were down on the previous week. President Emmanuel Macron's bid to raise the retirement age has sparked immense opposition from unions, the left and the wider public, with previous protests on January 19 and 31 sparking mass demonstrations and walkouts.

Implementing the policy in the face of opposition on the street and in parliament is seen as a crunch test of the president's political strength at the start of his second and final mandate in power up to 2027. But turnout was trending downwards on Tuesday with the hardline CGT union saying almost two million people protested nationwide compared with its estimate of 2.8 million last week. It said 400,000 people were protesting in Paris compared with 500,000 on January 31 and 400,000 on January 19. The interior ministry said police counted 757,000 people protesting across France, also fewer than previously.

There were isolated clashes in some cities, including Nantes, Paris and Rennes, with police using tear gas against protesters, AFP correspondents said. Police said that 17 people were arrested in Paris, where bins were set alight, the fronts of McDonald's restaurants smashed as well as glass bottles and other projectiles thrown. The head of the CGT union, Philippe Martinez, indicated there would be no let-up in the fight, warning that more "numerous, massive and rolling" strikes were coming if the government did not drop the pensions plan. "If the government keeps on refusing to listen then of course things will have to be ratcheted up," he said. — AFP

Net Profit

33.2^{KD} Million

The Board of Directors of
Kuwait Telecommunications Company (stc)
is pleased to announce to its shareholders
that the company has achieved a net profit
of KD 33.2 million (earnings per share 33 fils)
for the full year ended 31 December 2022.

stc

FY - 2022

Total Revenue

▲ 13.5%
336.4
KD Million

FY - 2022

EBITDA

▲ 3.1%
82.0
KD Million

31 December 2022

Subscribers

▲ 14.4%
2.3
Million

FY - 2022

Cash Dividends

30
Kuwaiti fils per share

Business

US trade gap widens in 2022 to record on strong imports

Overall trade deficit grew \$103bn from 2021 to \$948.1bn in 2022

WASHINGTON: The US trade gap widened to a record in 2022, though expanding less than expected in December, government data said Tuesday, capping off the year on robust imports and strong spending. The overall trade gap grew \$103.0 billion from 2021 to \$948.1 billion last year, Commerce Department data showed, on a surge in goods imports ranging from crude oil to consumer items including pharmaceuticals and household products. This marks the biggest deficit dating back to 1960, according to government data.

Analysts note that trade has been a swing factor in GDP growth over the last year, bogging it down in the early months of 2022 but providing a boost later on. In December, the trade deficit expanded \$6.4 billion to \$67.4 billion, said the Commerce Department.

US imports rose \$4.2 billion from November to December, hitting \$317.6 billion on greater spending on consumer goods such as cell phones and other household goods as well as automotive vehicles.

Exports slipped \$2.2 billion to \$250.2 billion in December, dragged by a fall in exports of goods such as industrial supplies and materials. The latest figures come as households shift more spending to services instead of goods, with consumers grappling with persistently high inflation.

The goods trade deficit with China widened by \$29.4 billion to \$382.9 billion in 2022, also a record. And the past year marked the first time since 2019

that the United States imported more goods from the European Union than China. But analysts have noted that the numbers are affected by Beijing's strict virus controls and coronavirus outbreaks, which hit its economy last year, and an uptick in commercial activity elsewhere as countries bounced back from the pandemic.

Reduced demand

"Net trade has been a significant swing factor in headline GDP growth over the past year," said Ian Shepherdson, chief economist of Pantheon Macroeconomics in a recent note. "It depressed growth in the first quarter of 2022 as an inventory-rebuilding frenzy by wholesalers and retailers led to a surge in imports," he said.

Trade provided a boost in the subsequent quarters as the surge unwound, but he added that similarly large swings in 2023 "are unlikely." Matthew Martin of Oxford Economics added that the economy displayed solid growth in the fourth quarter. But "underlying data points to softening activity, particularly for the world's major trade routes which have seen reduced demand from retailers and consumers," he warned. He added that imports and exports of industrial supplies and materials slipped in December, confirming the manufacturing sector weakened towards year-end.

Rubeela Farooqi, chief US economist of High



LONG BEACH, US: In this file photo taken on November 17, 2021 gantry cranes and shipping containers are seen at the Port of Long Beach in California. — AFP

Frequency Economics, said that trade flows have "slowed recently on a shift in demand for services from goods and weaker global growth."

"But better growth prospects in the US and abroad could provide support over coming months," she said. — AFP

Al-Tukhaimas wins ABK's Alfouz draw prize of KD 10,000

KUWAIT: Al-Ahli Bank of Kuwait (ABK) announced Hebah Barrak Al-Tukhaimas the winner of KD 10,000 in the Alfouz weekly draw. The winner was announced on Feb 6, 2023. The draw was held under the supervision of the Ministry of Commerce and Industry.

The Alfouz draw account offers ABK customers the chance to win life-changing rewards. With Alfouz, ABK customers will get a chance to win KD 10,000 in the weekly draw and the ultimate grand prize of KD 5,000 monthly additional income for 10 years. Both new and existing ABK customers can benefit from this opportunity, with a minimum account balance of KD 100 only.

ABK encourages everyone to open Alfouz draw account and/or increase their balances to have more chances in winning in the upcoming draw which will happen on Monday, Feb 13, 2023. The higher the deposits are, the higher the chances to win.



Eurozone banks 'resilient' but risks remain: ECB

BRUSSELS: Eurozone banks have sufficient capital buffers to weather shocks and are benefitting from rising interest rates, but "persistent weaknesses" in governance must be addressed, the European Central Bank said Wednesday. For 2023, the ECB said it would only slightly increase the amount of capital banks need to hold, on average, to 15 percent of risk-weighted assets, compared with last year's 14.7 percent.

"Banks remain resilient," the ECB said in a regular review of the around 115 banks it supervises, adding that "the vast majority" held more capital than required. "Banks have done well in withstanding the economic impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, thanks to their strong capital and liquidity positions," said Andrea Enria, head of the ECB's supervisory board.

"Despite the outlook worsening throughout the year, rising interest rates led to improved profitability and capital generation," he added. But challenges remained, Enria said, warning that "banks need to address persistent weaknesses, particularly in their risk control and governance frameworks".

The ECB's report highlighted concern about the effectiveness and make-up of management bodies, as well as banks' expertise in assessing and managing climate-related risks and cyber threats.

If such issues are not resolved, there will be a supervisory "escalation process", Enria told a Frankfurt press conference. Some eurozone lenders have in the past accused the ECB's supervisory arm of being too intrusive, but Enria dismissed the criticism.

"The banks understand what we want from them, but sometimes they are not reacting as fast and decisively as we would expect," he said. — AFP

Canada CB chief says rate hikes taming inflation

OTTAWA: The Bank of Canada's aggressive monetary policy is taming inflation as hoped, its governor Tiff Macklem said in a speech Tuesday, adding that more rate hikes likely won't be required unless energy prices jump back up. In his first speech since the central bank on January 25 last increased its key lending rate - its eighth hike in less than a year - to 4.5 percent, Macklem said "inflation is turning the corner." "Monetary policy is working," he declared.

"After 11 months of policy rate increases, we're seeing signs that higher interest rates are beginning to rebalance the economy," Macklem noted that Canadian household spending has moderated, supply chain bottlenecks and backlogs are resolving, the tight labor market is showing signs of easing, and a red-hot real estate market has cooled, with average home prices down 13 percent from a February 2022 peak. He warned, however, of a risk that global energy prices could rise anew, putting upward pressure on costs.

The Canadian central bank started raising rates from a record low in March 2022 in what Macklem described as "unusually large steps"-increments of mostly 50 to 75 basis points. It has helped to push

Australia blocks coal mine near Great Barrier Reef

SYDNEY: Australia's government said Wednesday it has blocked a planned coal mine because it would endanger the Great Barrier Reef, a decision hailed by environmental groups as historic. Mining billionaire Clive Palmer's scheme would have created an open-cut coal mine 10 kilometers (six miles) from the reef, it said, threatening a marine wonder and UNESCO world heritage site that has suffered in recent years from heat-related coral bleaching.

"I have decided that the adverse environmental impacts are simply too great," Environment Minister Tanya Plibersek said in a video statement. "The risk of pollution and irreversible damage to the reef is very real," she said, also citing risks to breeding grounds for fish and to fragile seagrass meadows that feed dugongs, a marine mammal. The federal govern-

ment received 9,000 submissions from the public in 10 business days about the planned mine in Queensland, she said, as part of a consultation undertaken before she confirmed an initial proposal made last year to stop the mine.

Responses from the public overwhelmingly opposed the planned Central Queensland Coal Mine. "This is a great decision from Tanya Plibersek and the first time a federal environment minister has rejected a coal mine under Australia's environment law," said Australian Conservation Foundation climate and energy campaigner Jaclyn McCosker. "It would have extracted up to 18 million tonnes of coal per year for burning here and overseas, fuelling floods, droughts and the marine heatwaves that bleach coral reefs."

The Australian Marine Conservation Society described it as a "historic decision". "This is the first time the Australian government has rejected a coal mine after federal assessment and should be the first step in rejecting new fossil fuel projects," said the society's Great Barrier Reef campaigner Cherry Muddle. The company behind the project has been asked for its reaction.

meanwhile, Canada posted a smaller trade deficit in December as both exports and imports fell, but capped off the year with a surplus, the national statistical agency said Tuesday. Beating expectations, the deficit narrowed to Can\$160 million (US\$120 million) in December from Can\$219 million the previous month. Exports decreased 1.2 percent to Can\$63.0 billion mostly on lower exports of energy products, and imports-driven by lower shipments of consumer goods-fell 1.3 percent to Can\$14.3 billion.

Canada still managed to post a second consecutive annual surplus-widening from Can\$4.6 billion in 2021 to Can\$20.1 billion last year-following a string of deficits from 2015 to 2020. "The sharp rise in the annual trade surplus was primarily on account of higher exports (up 22 percent), which were mostly driven by strength in prices," Statistics



Canada said in a statement.

"Imports (up 20 percent) also rose considerably in 2022," it said. In December, energy exports were down significantly from a peak in June 2022, the agency said, as crude oil prices plummeted, coinciding with the temporary closure of a pipeline in the United States that carries Canadian crude oil.

Exports of wheat, canola and other crop products were also down, while a rise in exports of motor vehicles and parts partially offset decreases recorded in the previous two months. Imports of consumer goods, meanwhile, fell for a third consecutive month, led by pharmaceutical products.

This was due in part to lower demand for imported COVID-19 vaccines.

Canada also imported fewer passenger cars and light trucks in December. But imports of refined petroleum products hit a record high, led by diesel and biodiesel fuels from the United States. —AFP



Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's centre-left Labor government was swept to power last year promising to change the pro-fossil fuel stance of the previous decade-old conservative government.

Australia, one of the world's largest coal exporters, is now committed to cutting carbon emissions by 43 percent by 2030 from 2005 levels, on a path to reaching net-zero emissions by 2050. But the government has rejected calls from environmental groups for a ban on all new mining projects, saying each must be judged on its merits. — AFP



The cuts follow similar steps by tech giants Microsoft, Facebook owner Meta, Google parent Alphabet, Amazon and Twitter as the industry girds for economic downturn. They also come after a major hiring spree at the height of the coronavirus pandemic when companies scrambled to meet demand as people went online for work, school and entertainment. According to the specialist site Layoffs.fyi, just over 95,000 tech employees have lost their jobs since the beginning of January worldwide. — AFP

Video conferencing star Zoom cuts staff by 15%

SAN FRANCISCO: The company behind the Zoom video conferencing platform-which became a household name during the pandemic-announced Tuesday it is laying off about 15 percent of its staff. Zoom Video Communications chief executive Eric Yuan is also taking a 98 percent cut in salary this year and forgoing his executive bonus, he said in a blog post about the job cuts. He added that members of his executive leadership team are taking a 20 percent salary reduction and also forfeiting bonuses this year.

While people and businesses continue to rely on Zoom "as the world transitions to life post-pandemic," the Silicon Valley-based firm is seeing customers cut back on spending, Yuan said in the post. Zoom has made the "tough but necessary" decision to lay off about 1,300 people, or roughly 15 percent

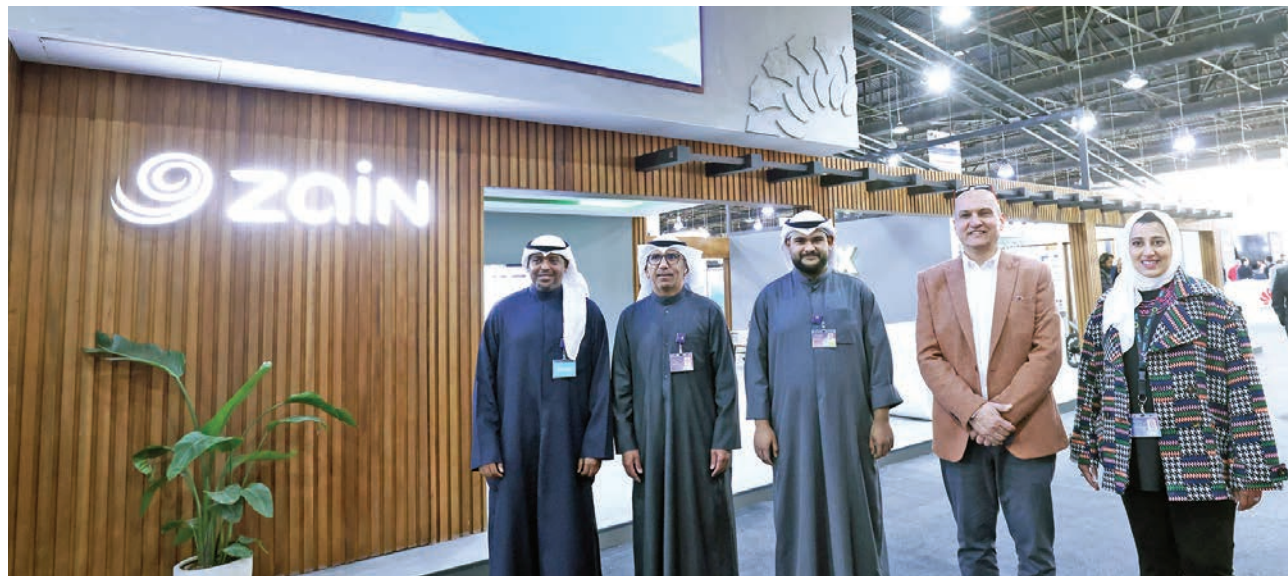
of its staff, according to Yuan.

"Our trajectory was forever changed during the pandemic when the world faced one of its toughest challenges, and I am proud of the way we mobilized as a company to keep people connected," Yuan said. Zoom tripled its ranks of employees during the pandemic, as people used the platform for remote work, court hearings, social events and more while COVID-19 risks barred them from getting together in person, according to Yuan.

"We are seeing that people and businesses continue to rely on Zoom," Yuan said. "But the uncertainty of the global economy, and its effect on our customers, means we need to take a hard look inward to reset ourselves so we can weather the economic environment, deliver for our customers and achieve Zoom's long-term vision."

Zoom will continue to invest in strategic areas, the chief executive noted. Zoom joined a growing list of US tech firms slashing jobs as years of high spending has given way to parsimony due to harsh economic conditions around the world. American computer firm Dell said Monday that it will lay off some five percent of its global workforce, or around 6,650 employees.

Business



KUWAIT: (From left) Zain's team - Masoud Al-Suroor, Ahmad Abul, Abdulaziz Al-Shammari, Hussein Saad and Taibah Al-Mutawa - pose for a group photo. — Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat



Muhammed Aslan at Volvo and BNK Automotive booth.



Mohammad Al-Garashi at Pro Touch Computers booth.



AAB Executive Manager Ahmad Abul Burghul with his team.



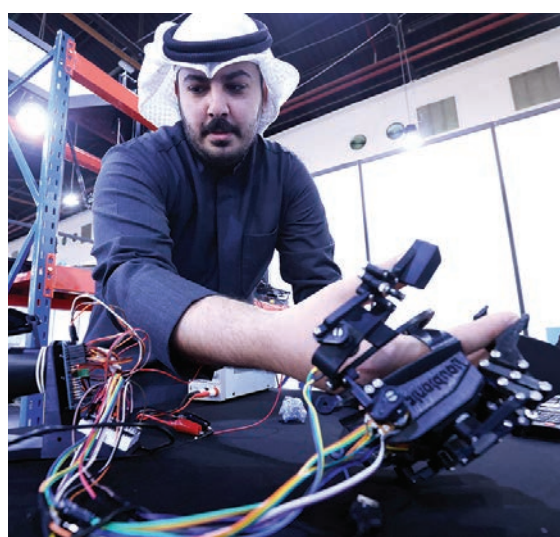
Robots are displayed at the expo.

KUWAIT TECH EXPO KICKS OFF

Zain strategic sponsor and BNK Automotive diamond sponsor of Kuwait's largest technological event



Rawan Kamel and Aseel Nabil from Ad Zone.



Yousef Al-Ali shows robotic arm at SWBAC booth.



Zain's staff explaining a product to a customer.



Fares Asfour and Rakan Alheyari at Treendat booth.

By Faten Omar

The third edition of Kuwait's largest technological event, 'Kuwait Tech Expo', kicked off on Wednesday at the International Fairgrounds in Mishref, with Zain, the leading digital service provider in Kuwait, as a strategic sponsor, and BNK Automotive as a diamond sponsor. The expo's organizer Abdel Fattah Samara, CEO of UCS Group, told Kuwait Times



UCS Group CEO Abdel Fattah Samara speaking to Kuwait Times.

the Kuwait International Technology Expo is considered the largest and only exhibition in Kuwait that brings the business and consumer sectors together.

"The exhibition brings together more than 80 local and global companies that are presenting various solutions from the virtual world, robotics and other technological solutions directed to the private and government sectors, in addition to phones, accessories and other electronic and consumer products directed to individuals," he said.

Samara noted the expo is a translation of the vision of HH the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah to transform Kuwait into a regional financial and commercial center by 2035, saying the event aims at offering effective solutions to the country's various bodies while serving customers' needs.

He said the expo is divided into two events - the first event is 'Kuwait International Technology Show', which is the largest B2B show that offers companies the opportunity to showcase their latest products and applications, including information systems, smart applications and the latest strategies. The second event is the 'Kuwait Tech Shopper', which is specialized in direct sales of telecommunication gadgets, smartphones, electronic devices and accessories.



Students touring the expo.

"The exhibition is free to attend, with seminars in the morning for school and university students and those who are interested in technology. In the evening, 25 well-known participating companies offer discounts and present the best offers," Samara mentioned. He stressed the expo is coinciding with national celebrations, calling on citizens and resi-

dents to visit the daily and free-of-charge expo, where there will be competitions and valuable gifts exceeding KD 10,000 daily at the expo's stage.

Kuwait Tech Expo 2023 is the biggest technology event of its kind in Kuwait. The expo runs from February 8-11 at Kuwait International Fairground in Mishref, Hall 4, from 10 am to 10 pm,



Zain and BNK Automotive, sponsors of Kuwait Tech Expo.

with the presence of the biggest local and international companies from the tech and telecom sectors as well as government institutions.



Concept Combined team.



Hassa Alkaouri at Falcon Store.



Hasan Algarhy tries Meta Quest at Diverse booth.

Lifestyle | Features



Snow surfing season commences in Lebanon

Lebanese people impatiently await snow every year to kick-start winter tourism nationwide, only to secure considerable earnings amid the long-lasting economic crisis experienced by the

country. Lebanon's mountains are now snow-covered as a several-day-long cold storm has hit this Arab country, sending snow 600 meters above sea level, according to forecasters. Lebanese people happily

welcomed the "white general, just as being described in Lebanon, as a heavenly gift to ease out the reflections of the strangling living crisis in the country. — KUNA



Vermeer in five masterpieces

As the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam unveils the largest ever retrospective of Dutch artist Johannes Vermeer, we look at five highlights from the show.

'The Milkmaid' (1658-59)

One of Vermeer's most famous works, this simple domestic scene shows a woman in her kitchen absorbed in her task of pouring milk into a bowl, the light pouring in through a window. Best known for his depictions of middle-class life, this is the artist's only study of a working-class woman. Vermeer "endows this domestic worker with traits typically reserved for higher-class women — virtue, diligence and a rich interior life", wrote the New York Times in 2009. For years after his death, Vermeer was largely forgotten but "The Milkmaid", owned by the Rijksmuseum, was always heralded in art circles as a masterpiece.

'View of Delft' (1660-61)

French writer Marcel Proust declared this luminous view of Vermeer's hometown, a rare exterior painting in his oeuvre, the "most beautiful painting in the world". The painting of a quay and surrounding houses, which is owned by the Mauritshuis museum in The Hague, is one of the most famous cityscapes of the 17th century. Near photographic in its precision, the artist composes a scene of balance and calm, a few people mingling, the canal without a ripple and a church rising in the distance.

'Woman Holding a Balance' (1662-64)

A quiet moment of contemplation dominates this painting of a woman standing at a table scattered with jewelry, delicately holding a set of dainty scales. At first glance, the work, loaned for the exhibition by the National Gallery of Art (NGA), Washington, looks like another of Vermeer's tranquil domestic scenes. But a picture of the Last Judgement hanging on the wall gives it distinctly religious overtones. The artist seems to be warning the woman to weigh up the eternal consequences of her actions.

'Girl with a Pearl Earring' (1664-67)

Dubbed the "Mona Lisa of the North" for the inscrutable expression of its subject, which recalls Leonardo Da Vinci's famous portrait, this painting attained global fame after inspiring a best-selling novel that was turned into a Hollywood film. The small canvas shows a young woman set on a dark background, her head turned towards the viewer and a pearl earring glinting from beneath her blue and cream turban.

'The Lacemaker' (1666-68)

Another of Vermeer's masterpieces, this painting shows a woman bending over a piece of lace, bathed in light and deeply concentrated on her meticulous work. At 24 by 21 centimeters (10 by eight inches), smaller than an A4 page, this is the most diminutive of Vermeer's paintings. It usually hangs in The Louvre in Paris. It is also among his most beloved works, inspiring a French film of the same title, starring Isabelle Huppert.

VERMEER SHINES AT 'ONCE IN HISTORY' AMSTERDAM SHOW

The Dutch master Johannes Vermeer himself never got the chance to see so many of his paintings in the same place. Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum has brought together 28 of Vermeer's luminous masterpieces from around the world, in the largest-ever exhibition of the 17th century artist's works. Curators hope the blockbuster show, featuring some three-quarters of his modest output of around 35 paintings, will also shed light on the enigmatic creator of "Girl with a Pearl Earring" and "The Milkmaid".

paintings together and build a picture for themselves of what Vermeer was," said the author. Most of Vermeer's works focus on women, often caught in the midst of acts like writing a letter or playing a musical instrument, and Chevalier said he was "just presenting women in the best possible light, literally and figuratively". Her favorite in the exhibition-apart from "Girl with a Pearl Earring", of course—was "The Lacemaker", a tiny work of exquisite beauty loaned by The Louvre in Paris, she said.



A banner advertising a Vermeer show hangs outside the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam.

"Never in history have 28 paintings by Vermeer been gathered," Rijksmuseum General Director Taco Dibbits told AFP at a preview. "He didn't even see that many together himself." Famed for their use of light and color and their tranquil yet haunting indoor scenes, Vermeer's paintings practically shine from the walls of the dimmed galleries at the Rijksmuseum.

The works have been brought from museums and collections around the world, including Washington, New York, Tokyo, London, Paris, Dublin. "It's a very happy reunion," said Dibbits. Interest is so intense that the Rijksmuseum has already sold 200,000 tickets for the exhibition, which opens on Friday until June 4, the most ever for one of its shows.

'Wonderful'

Part of the appeal is the mystery surrounding the man often called the "Sphinx of Delft". Vermeer (1632-1675) was born into a family of Calvinist traders but converted to Catholicism after marrying a wealthy woman with whom he had 11 children. But there are very few records of his life, and compared to Dutch "Golden Age" artists such as Rembrandt his work languished in obscurity, until a reappraisal in the 19th century.

Vermeer rose to megastar status with the publication of the novel "Girl with a Pearl Earring" by US author Tracy Chevalier, based on the painting that has been loaned for the exhibition by the Mauritshuis in The Hague. The book also spawned a 2003 Hollywood movie starring Scarlett Johansson and Colin Firth.

"Wonderful, it's wonderful," Chevalier told AFP after viewing the exhibition. "I'm so glad people are going to see these

Five things to know about Vermeer

Long considered a minor figure in art history with only around 35 works to his name, Johannes Vermeer is today one of the world's most revered painters. Here are five things to know about the Dutch Baroque artist who will be the subject of a major retrospective at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam opening on Friday:

The Sphinx

Nicknamed the "Sphinx of Delft", Vermeer is one of art's great enigmas, with only a few known facts about his 43-year existence. Born into a middle-class family of Calvinist traders in 1632, his eccentric father was also an art dealer on the side. For reasons unknown the artist shortened his surname "Van der Meer" to "Vermeer". He converted to Catholicism, marrying a wealthy woman with whom he had 11 children, but on his death left a mountain of debt from his own art trading. To pay it back, his widow sold two of his paintings to a local baker for the equivalent of two to three years worth of bread supplies.

Minor figure to megastar

In his lifetime, during the "Golden Age" of Dutch art that also produced Rembrandt, Vermeer was a respected artist with a number of wealthy patrons, but apart from a few astute collectors, his work went largely forgotten after his death. It was only in the 19th century that he was plucked from obscurity, notably due to the interest shown by French journalist and art critic Theophile Thoré-Burger. Vermeer's stratospheric rise to being considered one of the great masters in art history led to a frenzy of interest in his relatively small body of work.

It's a fake!

Celebrity brought a rash of fake Vermeers onto the market as art forgers sought to cash in. The Rijksmuseum says his "remarkably small oeuvre" is believed to consist of between 35 and 37 paintings, but only around 30 have been indubitably certified as his, with debates continuing about the authorship of several others. "Girl with Flute" is a case in point. The painting is included in the Rijksmuseum show but its owner, Washington's National Gallery of Art, says it is was probably the work of one of Vermeer's students.

Vermeer's 'camera'

Vermeer's canvases are recognizable by their quasi-photographic quality, which is the more remarkable in that the artist apparently made no preparatory sketches. His perfectly rendered interiors are re-inventions of real places, with objects moving or disappearing, and specific details becoming central, such as a single piece of thread or a sparkling earring. Some biographers have raised the possibility that Vermeer, and other Dutch masters, used a pinhole camera to trace their compositions, rather than solely depending on their draughtsmanship.

Art imitating art

The Dutch master's work was part of the intrigue in the Agatha Christie mystery "After the Funeral" and an episode in the hit TV series "Sherlock". Meanwhile, "Girl with a Pearl Earring", among Vermeer's most famous works, owes its monumental fame in part to a 1999 best-selling novel by US author Tracy Chevalier. The book was adapted by Hollywood in 2003 with Colin Firth as the painter and Scarlett Johansson as his muse, triggering a wave of Vermeer-mania across the Atlantic. — AFP



General Director of the Rijksmuseum Taco Dibbits speaks to journalists as he stands in front of a painting by the Dutch master Johannes Vermeer titled, 'Girl with a pearl earring' at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam.— AFP photos

Lifestyle | Features



In this file photo a young visitor holds a magic wand during the opening of the European exhibition of Harry Potter in Vienna. — AFP photos



In this file photo visitors walk past a screen showing an excerpt of a film during the opening of the European exhibition of Harry Potter in Vienna.



In this file photo visitors explore the exhibition during the opening of the European exhibition of Harry Potter in Vienna.

HARRY POTTER VIDEO GAME GETS BUMPER SALES DESPITE LGBTQ BACKLASH

The “Harry Potter” universe welcomes its latest edition on Friday, the “Hogwarts Legacy” video game, which provides a big test of the resilience of a franchise hit by criticism from some LGBTQ activists over the views of author JK Rowling. The Scottish writer has been plagued by threats and controversy since she publicly took issue in 2020 with the trans-inclusive phrase “people who menstruate” being used instead of the word “women”.

Many accused her of transphobia for putting the emphasis on biological sex over notions of gender. She denies the charge. The video game’s release has prompted some to call for a boycott but thanks to pre-orders it is already sitting at the top of sales charts.

“It’s not that this particular title has rep-

rehensible things in it,” said Will Overgard, a Seattle-based gamer and streamer who called on his followers not to buy the game. “It’s that supporting this title says ‘A-okay’ to some very, very, very questionable personal stances from (JK Rowling).”

Some specialist news sites, like TheGamer in Canada, are refusing to cover the release, though they have stopped short of calling for a boycott. All that has done little to dampen enthusiasm among gamers for Hogwarts Legacy, which has been garnering rave reviews.

‘Dream come true’

“It’s the game that everyone has been waiting for,” said Quentin Seigneur, a 31-year-old French entrepreneur who has been a fan of the franchise since the first book was released in French in 1998. He

described the forthcoming game as a mix of Harry Potter’s universe and the “open worlds” of the “Grand Theft Auto” video game franchise. “We’ll finally be the wizard we’ve all dreamt of being,” he said.

Video games related to the franchise have not traditionally been huge hits: the last attempt, 2019’s “Wizard’s Unite”, failed to find an audience and the publisher halted sales last year. Players of “Hogwarts Legacy” get to spend time as students at the famous wizarding school, with courses in magic and multiple quests to complete.

“The books and films always invited us to imagine the ways our story might be different if we were in Harry’s shoes,” Alan Tew, director of the game, produced by Avalanche studio and US giant Warner Bros, told AFP. “And we knew it would be

a dream come true if fans could be put in the same situation.”

Warner Bros did not respond to an AFP request for comment on the controversy surrounding Rowling. Tew told AFP it would be possible to choose gender in the new game, which is set to feature a trans character. “In the character creator, you will choose whether others refer to you as a witch or wizard,” said Tew, adding that the choice would affect which dormitory you were in.

‘Holding their noses’

The backlash seems not to have affected the popularity of the books or the shows and films based around them. Book publisher Bloomsbury said sales of the wizarding tales leapt during pandemic lockdowns before falling back again,

reflecting the broader pattern of book sales. “For me, Harry Potter was an escape from the world,” said Kyle Thomas, 32, who read the first book 20 years ago.

“I still listen to the audiobook every year, it’s still my favorite book,” said the Canadian, who was visiting London to see the play “Harry Potter and the Cursed Child”. LGBTQ gamers in the United States were split on the issue, said Cody Mejeur from the University of Buffalo. While some wanted full-on boycotts, others were less militant and were thinking of buying the game second-hand to avoid giving money to Rowling. Others, said Mejeur, loved the franchise and the idea of the game and would probably buy it while “holding their noses”. — AFP



A handout picture received from Britain's Royal Mail in London shows an impression of the new King Charles III 1st class stamp.

UK's Royal Mail unveils first King Charles stamps

Britain's Royal Mail on Wednesday unveiled the first postage stamps to feature the image of King Charles III, following his ascension to the throne last September. The new so-called “definitive stamp”-intended for everyday use and consisting solely of the monarch’s head, the stamp’s value and a barcode-will go on general sale from April 4. The image, which was approved by Charles himself, is adapted from the official effigy that appears on new UK coins after he succeeded his mother, Queen Elizabeth II.

Elizabeth died on September 8 following a record-breaking 70 years on the throne. Retailers will continue to sell their existing stamps featuring the late queen, and be supplied with the new ones when current Royal Mail stocks have run out. British artist Arnold Machin created an effigy of the queen for decimal coinage in the 1960s, and then designed the definitive stamps bearing her image which became an iconic symbol of the UK

around the world.

The new design shows Charles facing left, as all British monarchs have done on stamps since the “Penny Black” was issued as the world’s first postage stamp



A handout picture received from Britain's Royal Mail in London shows the new King Charles III 1st class stamp. — AFP photos

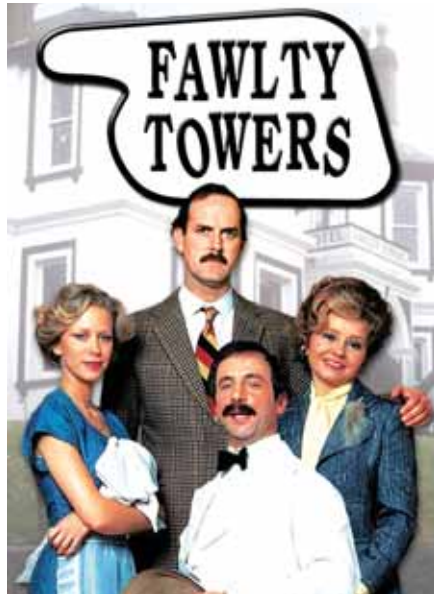
in 1840, under Queen Victoria. The image of Charles is an adapted version of a portrait by British sculptor Martin Jennings, created for The Royal Mint for new UK coins, which are already in circulation. Royal Mail chief executive Simon Thompson said British stamps are unique in not having the country of origin printed on them, “as the image of the monarch is sufficient”. — AFP

Do mention the reboot: ‘Fawlty Towers’ to return

“Fawlty Towers”, named Britain’s greatest sitcom in a 2019 poll, is set to return with John Cleese reprising his role as the world’s most irascible hotelier, US producers said Tuesday. The original show, written by the “Monty Python” star and his then-wife Connie Booth, ran on BBC television for two series in 1975 and 1979. The reboot will feature Basil Fawlty tackling the modern world after teaming up with his long-lost daughter, played by Cleese’s own daughter Camilla, to run a boutique hotel.

Its return was announced by Castle Rock Entertainment, a US production company cofounded by US actor and “This Is Spinal Tap” filmmaker Rob Reiner. “John Cleese is a comedy legend. Just the idea of working with him makes me laugh,” Reiner said.

The new show’s executive producers include Reiner, his wife and actress Michele Reiner, and director and producer Matthew George. Cleese said that George, “unlike many producers, he really ‘gets’ the creative process”. “When we first met, he offered an excellent first idea, and then Matt, my daughter Camilla, and I had one of the best creative sessions I can remember.



“By dessert we had an overall concept so good that, a few days later, it won the approval of Rob and Michele Reiner,” Cleese added. “Camilla and I look forward enormously to expanding it into a series.” No dates were given for the project to reach the screen, but the reboot will have work to do to match the original in public esteem.

In 2019, the show was named the greatest British sitcom ever by a panel of TV experts for “Radio Times” magazine. Following the misadventures of a short-fused and snobbish hotel manager, his sarcastic wife and a bumbling Spanish waiter, it popularized catchphrases such as “Don’t mention the war!”

News of the revival drew a mixed reaction on social media, with some fans noting that the show had originally ended after just a dozen episodes before its quality could be diluted. “Fawlty Towers had 12 episodes, established itself as a cultural touchstone of British comedy, and then stopped before it got tired. — AFP

Codebreakers find, decipher lost letters of Mary, Queen of Scots

An international team of codebreakers said Wednesday they have found and deciphered the long lost secret letters of 16th-century monarch Mary, Queen of Scots, one of the most argued-over figures in British history. The long-rumored missing letters, which were found mislabeled in the digital archive of a French library, were hailed by excited historians as the most significant discovery



In this file photograph taken on June 10, 2003, Britain's Queen Elizabeth II (right) walks past a figureine of Mary Queen of Scots, on display at The Britain and London Visitor Centre in central London. — AFP

about the Scottish queen in a century.

Mary Stuart, a Catholic, wrote the coded letters from 1578 to 1584 while she was imprisoned in England due to the perceived threat she posed to her Protestant cousin Queen Elizabeth I. Mary was beheaded in 1587 after being found guilty of plotting to assassinate Elizabeth I, marking the end of a dramatic life since portrayed in numerous movies and books.

But Mary was far from the minds of the three codebreakers who discovered more than 50 of her letters containing around 50,000 never-before-seen words. They are members of the DECRYPT project, an international, cross-disciplinary team scouring the world’s archives to find coded historical documents to decipher.

The trio were trawling through the digitized archive of France’s national library, known as the BnF, when they stumbled onto enciphered documents labeled as being from Italy in the first half of the 16th century. “If someone wanted to look for Mary Stuart material in the BnF, that’s the last place they would go,” said French computer scientist and cryptographer George Lasry, the lead author of a new study in the journal Cryptologia. Lasry told AFP that deciphering the code “was like peeling an onion,” for the trio, which also includes German music professor Norbert Biermann and Japanese physicist Satoshi Tomokiyo.

The telltale ‘spymaster’

First, the codebreakers realized the text was not in Italian, but French. It also used feminine forms, indicating a woman. Phrases like “my liberty” and “my son” suggested it was an imprisoned mother. Then came the breakthrough word: “Walsingham”. Francis Walsingham was Elizabeth I’s principal secretary and “spymaster”. Some historians believe it was Walsingham who later “entrapped” Mary in 1586 into supporting the foiled Babington Plot to assassinate Queen Elizabeth I, Lasry said.

Eight of the 57 letters found by the



This undated handout image shows part of a cipher used by Mary, Queen of Scots, at an undisclosed location in France.

codebreakers were already in Britain’s archives because Walsingham had a spy in the French embassy from mid-1583, Lasry said. Most of Mary’s letters are addressed to Michel de Castelnau Mauvissiere, the French ambassador to England and a supporter of Mary.

Mary was “too smart” to mention any assassination plot in the newly unearthed letters, Lasry said. Instead the letters



This undated handout image shows words in a message decoded using a cipher used by Mary, Queen of Scots, at an undisclosed location in France. — AFP photos

Sports

Juve stroll past Salernitana as Dusan Vlahovic scores

Juventus overpower Salernitana 3-0

News in brief

Jabeur to miss tournaments

TUNIS: World number three Ons Jabeur said on Wednesday she was “heart broken” after announcing she will miss tournaments in Doha and Dubai later this month to undergo minor surgery. Tunisia’s Jabeur, 28, was runner up at last year’s Wimbledon and US Open but dropped down from second in the world rankings in February. “To take care of my health situation. My medical team have decided that I need to get a minor surgery in order to be able to be back on the courts and perform well,” Jabeur said on social media. “I will have to retire from Doha and Dubai and this is breaking my heart. “I would like to say sorry to all the fans out there in the middle east that waited for this reunion. I promise I will come back to you stronger and healthy,” she added. The WTA event in Qatar starts on February 13 with the Dubai tournament six days later. — AFP

Corberan signs new deal

LONDON: West Bromwich Albion boss Carlos Corberan signed a contract extension on Tuesday to end speculation linking him with Premier League strugglers Leeds. Corberan, a former assistant to Marcelo Bielsa at Leeds, had been mentioned as a leading candidate to replace Jesse Marsch at Elland Road after the American was sacked on Monday. But instead the 39-year-old has committed himself to Championship promotion chasers Albion until 2027. “I believe that success can only be achieved when everyone works together and the way I have been made to feel welcome at this great club has made me confident that this is the right place for me,” Corberan said. “It is important to me that we do not let this moment distract us from our target, which is to ensure we improve every day, making the team more and more competitive for the challenges ahead.” — AFP

La Liga files complaint

MADRID: La Liga on Tuesday said it had filed a complaint with a local court in Mallorca over racist abuse targeted at Real Madrid forward Vinicius Junior. At least one fan could be heard shouting racist abuse at Vinicius in footage, published by DAZN, from Mallorca’s 1-0 win over Real Madrid on Sunday. La Liga said it was the sixth complaint it had filed for “racist insults or chants” against Vinicius. Three have been shelved by prosecutors but two others are still being processed in Valladolid and Madrid. In December after being abused during a win at Real Valladolid, Vinicius hit out at La Liga for continuing “to do nothing” about racists at Spanish matches. “Racists keep going to games and watching the greatest club in the world up close and La Liga continues to do nothing,” Vinicius said. The Spanish top-flight said on Tuesday: “La Liga has been fighting against this kind of behaviour for years, as well as promoting the positive values of sport, not only on the field of play, but also off it.” — AFP

Montpellier sack coach

PARIS: Montpellier have sacked coach Romain Pitau after less than four months in charge, the Ligue 1 strugglers announced on Tuesday. The club said in a statement that Pitau and his assistants Pascal Bailis and Frederic Mendy had been “provisionally suspended”, a turn of phrase in French that in this context always means the coach will not be returning to the post. The 45-year-old Pitau, who played in the Montpellier team that won the Ligue 1 title in 2012, had only taken over at the end of October following the sacking of predecessor Olivier Dall’Oglio. He leaves the southern side just two points above the relegation zone in France’s top flight following a 2-0 weekend loss at Strasbourg. Pitau won just two and lost seven of his 11 league games at the helm and also oversaw an exit from the French Cup at the first hurdle to second-tier side Pau. The club are expected to announce his successor at a press conference on Wednesday afternoon. — AFP

Ex-Olympics official held

TOKYO: Japanese prosecutors on Wednesday arrested a former senior Tokyo Olympics official and three businessmen over alleged bid-rigging linked to the Games, the latest twist in a growing corruption scandal. In a statement, Tokyo prosecutors said they arrested Yasuo Mori, 55, a senior Tokyo 2020 organizing committee official, for allegedly violating the anti-monopoly law. Prosecutors also detained Koji Henmi, an official at advertising giant Dentsu. Masahiko Fujino of television production and sales company Fuji Creative Corp and Yoshiji Kamata of events operator Cerespo. Local media published photos of police raiding the home of Mori, who ran test events for the pandemic-postponed Summer Games held in 2021. Prosecutors accuse the four men of rigging a string of supposedly open competitive bids and limited tender contracts for Olympic events, reportedly worth a total of 40 billion yen (\$305 million), local media said. — AFP

SALERNO: Dusan Vlahovic scored his first Juventus goals in nearly four months on Tuesday with a brace in his team’s easy 3-0 win at Salernitana. Serbia forward Vlahovic set Juve on their way to victory in Salerno when he rifled in a penalty off the post in the 26th minute and then swept in Juve’s third just after half-time.

Filip Kostic tapped in Juve’s second shortly before the break after Vlahovic’s mishit shot fell to his international teammate, helping Juve up to 10th and 12 points off the European positions. A further point away are Lazio and the Champions League spots, an unlikely target for Juve after last month’s 15-point penalty for illicit transfer activity. Coach Massimiliano Allegri insisted pre-match that Tuesday’s clash was a relegation six-pointer and he continued in that vein after a simple win.

“We need to get another 14 points in order to reach 40 for safety, after that we’ll see ... I hope we can be in the top half of the table,” he told DAZN. Vlahovic’s double broke a club goal duck which stretched back to mid-October, when he struck a last-minute derby winner against Torino. Since then the 23-year-old has struggled with injuries, only coming back to action in Juve’s home defeat to Monza last time out after playing twice more in October and then underwhelming at the World Cup.

His return was a boost to Allegri who lost Leandro Paredes and Arkadiusz Milik to injury and may not have Paul Pogba back until next week’s Europa League clash with Nantes. Vlahovic will face his old club Fiorentina on Sunday in one of the fieriest fixtures in the Serie A calendar. “The most important thing was that we won the match after not winning for three matches (in the league),” said Vlahovic to DAZN. “You don’t get back into form without the help of your teammates and manager.”

Salernitana meanwhile have won just once in their last nine matches, losing six, and are seven points above the relegation zone in 16th. Davide Nicola’s side could easily have lost more heavily as Angel Di Maria and Moise Kean both struck the woodwork after Vlahovic put Juve three ahead, and they could yet be sucked deeper towards trouble. On Monday Salernitana travel to Verona, who sit just inside the drop zone and have only lost once since Marco Zaffaroni took charge during the winter break. — AFP

Bayern Munich sign goalkeeping coach

BERLIN: Bayern Munich announced on Wednesday they had signed goalkeeping coach Michael Rechner to replace sacked Toni Tapalovic, whose firing kicked off a war of words at the club. Bayern will pay a “six figure transfer fee” to Hoffenheim for the 42-year-old goalkeeping coach, according to German news outlet Kicker. Tapalovic, a close friend of Bayern captain and injured goalkeeper Manuel Neuer, was fired in January, having arrived at the club with Neuer from Schalke in 2011.

In response to the sacking, Neuer, who is out with a broken leg from a skiing accident in December, gave an interview saying he felt “his

Al Hilal cruise into Club WCup final

TANGIERS: Salem Al-Dawsari scored two penalties as Al Hilal beat Flamengo 3-2 on Tuesday to reach this weekend’s Club World Cup final in Morocco. The Saudis on Saturday will play the winner of Wednesday’s other semi-final between European champions Real Madrid and Egypt’s Al Ahly.

Al-Dawsari’s first spot-kick came in the fourth minute after Luciano Vietto was felled by Flamengo right-back Matheuszinho. The Saudi Arabia forward became the first player to score against the same opponents in two editions of the Club World Cup after also netting against the Brazilians in 2019. The teams were level a quarter of an hour later as striker Pedro side-footed his effort first time past 36-year-old Abdullah Al Muaiouf.

Al-Dawsari’s second penalty came nine minutes into first-half injury time after Vietto was tripped by former Marseille midfielder Gerson. Gerson was sent off for a second yellow card, having received his first on 15 minutes for diving in the Al Hilal box.

Muani guides Frankfurt to German Cup quarters

BERLIN: France striker Randal Kolo Muani warned he was “getting better” after scoring two and assisting another in Eintracht Frankfurt’s 4-2 derby defeat of visiting Darmstadt in the German Cup on Tuesday. The five-time Cup winners needed to come from behind for the victory and once again it was in-form Kolo Muani who proved crucial for the home side in the last 16. “We played well and we fortunately equalized quickly, then we were able to put a lid on it,” he told Sky. “I’m getting better at playing to my qualities.”

Despite Darmstadt sitting a division below Frankfurt, the visitors sit atop the Bundesliga 2 table and have lost only one game in all competitions this season. Frankfurt, who have only lost once since mid-October, hit the lead after just six minutes through



SALERNO: Juventus’ Brazilian defender Danilo (left) saves a ball on his goalkeeper’s line during the Italian Serie A football match between Salernitana and Juventus on February 7, 2023. — AFP

ITALIAN SERIE A TABLE

Italian Serie A table after Tuesday’s match (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):

Napoli	21	18	2	1	51	15	56
Inter Milan	21	14	1	6	41	26	43
Roma	21	12	4	5	28	18	40
Lazio	21	11	6	4	37	17	39
Atalanta	21	11	5	5	39	24	38
AC Milan	21	11	5	5	37	30	38
Torino	21	8	6	7	22	22	30
Udinese	21	7	8	6	28	23	29
Bologna	21	8	5	8	28	31	29
Juventus	21	12	5	4	33	17	26*
Monza	21	7	5	9	27	30	26
Empoli	21	6	8	67	19	26	26
Fiorentina	21	6	6	9	23	28	24
Lecce	21	5	8	8	21	24	23
Sassuolo	21	6	5	10	24	31	23
Salernitana	21	5	6	10	25	41	21
Spezia	21	4	6	11	17	35	18
Hellas Verona	21	3	5	13	19	33	13
Sampdoria	21	2	4	15	10	36	10
Cremonese	21	0	8	13	15	37	8

* Juventus docked 15 points by the Italian Football Federation

heart was being ripped out” and said the sacking was “the worst thing he had endured in his career”. Neuer’s interview resulted in waves of criticism from Bayern’s hierarchy, including sporting director Hasan Salihamidzic who said on Sunday that Neuer was “putting his personal interests above the interests of the club”, and said “as captain I would have expected a different attitude from him”.

Bayern manager Julian Nagelsmann, who is widely believed to have been behind the sacking, was also critical of Neuer, telling German media on Sunday “I wouldn’t have done the interview”. Nagelsmann previously worked with Rechner during his decade-long stint at Hoffenheim first as under-17s manager and then head coach. Hoffenheim released a statement on Wednesday saying Rechner’s departure was “the end of an era”, thanking the coach for his 15 years of service at the club. — AFP



TANGIER: Hilal’s midfielder Gustavo Cuellar (right) tackles Flamengo’s Brazilian forward Pedro during the FIFA Club World Cup semi-final football match between Brazil’s Flamengo and Saudi Arabia’s Al-Hilal on February 7, 2023. — AFP

With 20 minutes remaining, Al Hilal moved closer to the final when Argentinean Vietto fired in off the crossbar after Al-Dawsari’s clipped pass. After 20 seconds of the six minutes of additional time, Pedro cut the deficit with an easy tap-in but it was not enough to spark a late comeback from the Copa Libertadores champions. — AFP

Kolo Muani, whose perfectly weighted header evaded the outstretched fingertips of Darmstadt keeper Marcel Schuhen.

The home side almost doubled their lead 15 minutes later through midfielder Mario Goetze, but the 2014 World Cup winner’s shot was well blocked by Schuhen at point blank range. Darmstadt then turned the game on its head, scoring twice in two minutes through Mathias Honsak to take the lead. The first came when Darmstadt’s pressing forced Frankfurt captain Sebastian Rode into an error, while the second was a length of the field effort kick-started by a long pass from Schuhen and finished by cool shot from Honsak.

With one minute before the break, Goetze found forward Rafael Borre in the box and the Columbian hammered home an equalizer. Kolo Muani helped the home side reclaim the lead after 62 minutes, heading a cross into the path of Japan’s Daichi Kamada who hammered home. Kolo Muani added another in the last minute of regular time, Goetze catching Darmstadt on the break to find the France striker in space, who side-footed home. — AFP



Goalkeeper coach Michael Rechner

City face uncertain future after charges

LONDON: Manchester City were the ultra-rich “noisy neighbors” who became the Premier League’s dominant force. But they now face an uncertain future that includes the ultimate threat of relegation. Abu Dhabi-backed City were charged by the English top flight on Monday with more than 100 alleged breaches of financial rules between 2009/10 and 2017/18, and referred to an independent commission. The reigning champions have also been accused of failing to cooperate with investigations by the Premier League. The club faces a range of possible punishments, including a reprimand, points deduction or even expulsion from the Premier League.

City, who last month topped the Deloitte money league of the world’s richest clubs, appear to be confident they can ride out the storm, insisting there is “irrefutable” evidence that supports their case. It is not the first time the club, transformed on and off the pitch after their takeover by the Abu Dhabi United Group in 2008, have been in the spotlight over issues of finance. City were fined 60 million euros (\$64 million) in 2014 for breaching UEFA’s Financial Fair Play regulations.

The club were banned for two years from UEFA competitions in February 2020 by European football’s governing body for “serious financial fair play breaches”, but the sanction was overturned by the Court of Arbitration for Sport later that year. Last year City manager Pep Guardiola made it clear that he would walk away from the club if he discovered he had been lied to by the club’s owners—a worst-case scenario for City, who have won four of the past five Premier League titles under his leadership.

The Times’ chief football writer Henry Winter said City faced “allegations of wrongdoing on an industrial scale...If proved, the ensuing punishment should be designed to deter others who believe they can copy the City playbook.” But Simon Chadwick, professor of sport and geopolitical economy at the SKEMA Business school in Paris, said wider issues were at play. — AFP

Sports

Paris mayor against Russian athletes at 2024 Olympics ‘while war goes on’

Nordic nations join call for Russian Olympic ban

PARIS: Paris Mayor Anne Hidalgo changed her stance on Russian competitors at the 2024 Olympics on Tuesday saying they should be banned “while the war continues” in Ukraine, her office said. Last month Hidalgo said she believed Russians could take part “under a neutral flag” to avoid “depriving athletes of competition”. On Tuesday she told French media her earlier position was “indecent” because a neutral flag, “does not really exist” although she said there should be a place for “dissident Russians who want to parade under the refugee flag”.

Her office said this was a “clarification” of her position. They would, she said, be athletes who do not “support Vladimir Putin in his aggression”. The Refugee Olympic Team competed for the first time in the Rio Games in 2016, where it was made up of 10 athletes originally from Syria, Ethiopia, South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Hidalgo did not address the issue of the participation of Belarusian athletes.

While French President Emmanuel Macron and the International Olympic Committee (IOC) did not immediately respond to Hidalgo’s remarks, the French ministry of sports and the Olympics told AFP the question of a “possible participation” under a neutral flag in Paris is being “discussed” by the IOC but “has not been the subject of any decision”. The ministry reaffirmed French “support” for “maintaining all economic, political, diplomatic, sports and cultural sanctions” against Russia.

Since the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in late February 2022, Russians and Belarusians have been banned from most world sporting events. The IOC said last month it was exploring a “pathway” to allow competitors from both countries to take part in the Paris Olympics. Ukraine responded by saying it would consider boycotting the Games.

Neutral flag

The United States said Russian and Belarusian

athletes should compete in Paris under a neutral flag, but many countries, particularly in Eastern Europe, have opposed the idea. Poland’s sports minister, Kamil Bortniczuk, said last week that as many as 40 countries could refuse to take part in Paris if Russia and its ally Belarus were allowed to compete. Estonia has said it would boycott while the Czech Olympic Committee said on Monday it was opposed to Russian participation but would not boycott.

On Tuesday, the Olympic committees of five Nordic nations said they were opposed to allowing Russian and Belarusian athletes to take part in Paris. “We stand firm in our position, not to open for Russian and Belarusian athletes and officials in international sports participation,” wrote the Swedish, Norwegian, Danish, Finnish and Icelandic committees in a joint statement. The IOC, rather than the organizers and the French authorities, will ultimately decide who competes in the Olympics.

Russians have taken part under a neutral flag following a doping scandal at the 2014 Sochi Winter Games. The International Association of Athletics Federations, now known as World Athletics, sought to have the country’s athletes compete as “neutral athletes” in the 2016 Rio Games, although long jumper Darya Klishina went to the Court of Arbitration in Sport and won the right to compete as a Russian. Following a ban from the World Anti-Doping Agency, Russians represented their national Olympic committee, rather than Russia itself, in the Tokyo Olympics in 2021 and the Beijing Winter Games in 2022. “I am not in favor of this option, I would find it totally indecent,” said Hidalgo. “We will not parade a country that is attacking another and pretend it does not exist.”

Nordic nations join call

In another development, the Olympic committees of five Nordic nations on Tuesday said they were opposed to allowing Russian and Belarusian



PARIS: Olympics rings are installed in front of the Paris City Hall during the ‘Olympics Day’ organized by the ‘Comité National Olympique et Sportif Français’ (CNOSF) to celebrate the upcoming of the 2024 Paris Olympics Games. — AFP

athletes to take part in the 2024 Paris Olympics. “We stand firm in our position, not to open for Russian and Belarusian athletes and officials in international sports participation,” wrote the Swedish, Norwegian, Danish, Finnish and Icelandic committees in a joint statement. “The situation with the war in Ukraine has not changed,” the statement said. “Now is not the right time to consider their return; that is our position.” They said they wanted to “reaffirm our steadfast support once again with the Ukrainian people and the demand for peace.”

The International Olympic Committee said last month it was exploring a “pathway” to allow competitors from both countries to take part in the Paris Olympics, sparking an angry reaction. Ukraine responded by saying it would consider boycotting the Games. So did Estonia. Poland’s sports minister, Kamil Bortniczuk, said that as many as 40 countries could refuse to take part in Paris if Russia and its ally Belarus were allowed to compete. Earlier on Tuesday, Paris Mayor Anne Hidalgo said she was opposed to Russians competing at the Games next year, if the war in Ukraine was still going on. — AFP



SHEFFIELD: Wrexham’s Spanish defender Jacob Mendy (left) and teammate Wrexham’s English defender Harry Lennon (top right) vie against Sheffield United’s French midfielder Iliman Ndiaye (bottom right) to header the ball during the English FA Cup fourth round-replay football match between Sheffield United and Wrexham on February 7, 2023. — AFP

Wrexham suffer a cruel twist; Blades win FA Cup thriller

LONDON: Wrexham suffered a cruel FA Cup plot twist as the non-league club run by movie stars conceded two stoppage-time goals in a 3-1 defeat at Sheffield United on Tuesday. Owned by Hollywood actors Ryan Reynolds and Rob McElhenney since 2020, Wrexham had become the headline act in this year’s FA Cup. They defeated second-tier Coventry in the third round and took Championship promotion chasers United down to the wire before finally bowing out in a fourth-round replay at Bramall Lane.

Anel Ahmedhodzic put United ahead but Wrexham equalised through Paul Mullin’s penalty to spark dreams of another against-the-odds result straight from the pages of a blockbuster movie script. Mullin then missed a penalty that would have given Wrexham the lead and Billy Sharp and Sander Berge played the villains with goals deep into stop-

page time to earn United a fifth-round tie against Tottenham.

Despite the lack of a Hollywood ending, Reynolds, unable to attend the match, saluted his fifth-tier team in a tweet immediately after the final whistle. “So proud of these boys. And the 4,000 plus away supporters who gave it all,” he wrote. Second in the National League, three points behind Notts County with two games in hand, Wrexham’s main ambition this campaign is securing a return to fourth tier for the first time since 2008. But the FA Cup has always been an enjoyable diversion for the north Wales club, who famously knocked out Arsenal and West Ham in previous years.

Only a stoppage-time United equalizer had denied Wrexham when they drew 3-3 in January and Phil Parkinson’s side acquitted themselves well again. “Obviously we are disappointed we haven’t gone through but seeing how the Sheffield United players and staff celebrated at full time is a mark of how we pushed them,” Parkinson said. “There are so many positives for us to take into the second half of the season.” United took the lead in the 50th minute as Ahmedhodzic exchanged passes with James McAtee before sweeping into the roof of the net from a tight angle inside the six-yard box. — AFP

Ballance 2nd player to score Test centuries for two countries

BULAWAYO: Gary Ballance became only the second Test batsman after Kepler Wessels to score a century for two countries, hitting an unbeaten 137 for Zimbabwe against the West Indies in Bulawayo on Tuesday. Needing at least 248 runs in reply to a West Indies’ declaration of 447-6 to avoid a possible follow-on, Zimbabwe declared on 379-9 after the second session on day four of the first Test.

That left the hosts trailing by 68 runs after the first innings in their first Test since losing to Bangladesh two years ago. Batting again, the tourists were 21-0 at the close, giving them a lead of 89 runs going into the final day at the Queens Sports Club. Harare-born Ballance scored four centuries for England but last played for them in 2017.

He switched allegiance to Zimbabwe after being released by Yorkshire having admitted he used racist language to former teammate Azeem Rafiq. “I cannot even describe how proud I am, firstly to represent Zimbabwe, and secondly to get the hundred,” Ballance told reporters. “There is no feeling better than that. It has been amazing (to play for



Zimbabwe’s Gary Ballance

Zimbabwe). Every single coach, every single player, has been welcoming.

“I have played with some of the players before, but it makes a difference to come into a new team and be welcome. It makes it easier to perform. “The declaration was a positive move. We are trying to put ourselves on the front foot to win. That is how the coach (Dave Houghton) wants us to play, to play positive cricket.” South Africa-born Wessels scored four centuries for Australia and made two more for his homeland when they were readmitted to Test cricket in the 1990s. — AFP

Five Argentine rugby players jailed for life for shocking murder

DOLORES: A court in Argentina has sentenced five amateur rugby players from the same team to life imprisonment for beating a teenager to death in a crime with alleged racist undertones. Three more defendants were sentenced to 15 years in prison for “secondary participation” in the murder of Fernando Baez Sosa, a law student from a Paraguayan immigrant family, outside a disco three years ago.

The high-profile four-week trial at the court in Dolores, 220 kilometers south of Buenos Aires, turned the spotlight on classism and racism in the country and even sparked protests in several cities. The eight defendants, now aged between 21 and 23, had been charged with “doubly aggravated mur-

der” after pummeling 18-year-old Baez to death in the popular seaside resort of Villa Gesell on January 18, 2020.

After a fight broke out in a nightclub, those involved were evicted but their quarrel continued in the street. Baez became isolated from his friends and was surrounded by eight attackers, all teammates at a small, provincial rugby club, who beat him so severely that he died of his injuries. According to witnesses, his attackers called Baez-whose parents, a bricklayer and a caregiver, are Paraguayan immigrants-a “shitty black.”

In a country where the majority of the population is descended from white Europeans, mostly from Spain, Italy or Germany, the term “black” is used disparagingly by some to describe Indigenous people or migrants from neighboring countries. “We are strong,” said Baez’s mother Graciela Sosa as she arrived at court with her husband Silvino Baez. “Justice means life.” Rugby is a minority sport in Argentina, traditionally played and watched by a wealthy elite. The trial of the eight accused opened in Dolores last month for aggravated, premeditated murder. — AFP

Classifieds

Hospitals & Clinics

Hospitals

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

Change of Name

I, Gulam Farooque holder of Indian Passport No. L-1165525 issued at Kuwait on 30-06-2013. Permanent resident of room No. F N H B 80, Mehfil E Jahangirya, S.M.Road, Antop Hill,

Mumbai-400037 presently resident of Salmiya, Zone-11, Street-Moosa Abdur Razzaq-4, Building-7, Flat-101, Kuwait will henceforth be known as Gulam Farooque (Given Name) Shaikh (Surname) as per documents. Objection(s), if any, may be forwarded to Embassy of India, State of Kuwait. (C #2850) 8-2-2023

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‘King’ James breaks record

LeBron eclipses Abdul-Jabbar as most prolific scorer in NBA history

LOS ANGELES: LeBron James finally eclipsed Kareem Abdul-Jabbar as the most prolific scorer in NBA history on Tuesday, breaking a 39-year record that many throughout basketball believed would never be beaten. The Los Angeles Lakers star, playing in his 20th season in the NBA, passed Abdul-Jabbar's longstanding total of 38,387 points after nailing a 21-foot shot late in the third quarter against the Oklahoma City Thunder. James flung his arms aloft in relief as the Crypto.com Arena erupted in wild celebration at his new record of 38,388 points.

Abdul-Jabbar, sitting courtside, was among the first to congratulate James as play was interrupted to salute an iconic moment in NBA history. "To be able to be in the presence of a legend and great as Kareem it means so much to me," James told the crowd before thanking family, friends and fans. "Everybody that's ever been part of this run with me these last 20 years, I just want to say I thank you so much because I wouldn't be me without all your help, all your passion and all your sacrifices to help me get to this point."

James signed off his on-court address with an F-bomb, seemingly lost for words after one of the signature moments of his glittering career. James, who eventually finished the game with 38 points on the night for a career haul of 38,390, said afterwards he expected to continue playing for at least two more seasons. "I know I can play a couple more years - it's all about my mind," James said. "If my mind is still into it, if I'm still motivated to go out and try to compete for championships, I feel like I can still do that."

Chasing history

After a dazzling season that has seen him average 30 points per game in a struggling Lakers outfit, James went into Tuesday's clash with Oklahoma

City needing 36 points to surpass Abdul-Jabbar. The 38-year-old took his time before surging towards his magic number, missing his first two attempts before finally nailing a three-pointer mid-way through the first quarter to get off the mark.

The four-time NBA champion would go on to score eight points in the opening quarter, leaving him 28 short as the second quarter got under way. James upped the pace in the second quarter with 12 quick points before being subbed off with 5:34 left in the half, 16 points away from the record by half-time. A pair of back-to-back three-pointers midway through the third quarter left him just eight points away from the record, with 28 on the night, before a driving layup put him within six.

Two more layups left him two points away before he duly converted his long-range effort to seal the record. James had been at pains to dampen anticipation surrounding his record chase this season, insisting that his priority remained helping the Lakers become a competitive outfit once more. However, in the build up to Tuesday he was more expansive when discussing the record, saying beating Abdul-Jabbar's mark was comparable to breaking baseball's all-time home run record.

'Untouchable' record

"I think it's one of the greatest records in sports in general," James said. "I think it's up there with the home run record in baseball. It's one of those records that you just don't ever see or think that would be broken." Many in the NBA agreed, believing that Abdul-Jabbar's record was untouchable. "I think most of us back then thought that record would never be broken," Golden State coach Steve Kerr said of Abdul-Jabbar's record last weekend.

"So to see LeBron do it over 20 years is pretty

thanks to his father and gave a divided answer to the Jordan-James debate. "If I had one game, I would take Michael Jordan or one series," Mahomes told Fox Sports. "But I would say for a full entire season, I've got to go with LeBron because he can do a little bit of everything."

San Antonio Spurs coach Gregg Popovich says high regard for fitness has enabled James to have the longevity to make history. "LeBron has taken care of himself so well and he has been able to play a bundle of games for a lot of years," Popovich said. "His commitment to the game and to what he has to do has allowed him to be in this position."

Golden State Warriors coach Steve Kerr, a former championship teammate of Jordan, says James gets better with age. "It's pretty remarkable when you've got a guy who is already considered one of the top few players ever to play the game can make that much improvement late in his career," Kerr said. James is the only player to average a triple-double in an NBA Finals and to lead both teams in points, assists, rebounds, steals and blocks. "You've got to give him a lot of respect," Warriors star Klay Thompson said of James. "It's an honor to face LeBron. He's a once-in-a-generation type player." — AFP

Evolution of NBA all-time scoring record

LOS ANGELES: A look at the seven players who have held the NBA's scoring record after Los Angeles Lakers superstar LeBron James moved to the top of the all-time list:

LeBron James, 38,388 points
Dubbed "The Chosen One" while still in high school, James has methodically improved every aspect of his game over his 20 seasons in the NBA working to make himself "unguardable." "I've evolved into where I do what I want to do on the floor," he said in January after joining Kareem Abdul-Jabbar as the only players to score more than 38,000 points. "I take the shot that I want to take." A four-time NBA champion, four-time MVP and four-time Finals MVP, James, at 38, continues to be a dominant force in the league.

As his pursuit of the all-time scoring record heated up, James poured in 48 points in a 140-132 Lakers victory over the Houston Rockets on January 16, and became the oldest player in NBA history to post a 20-point triple-double when he delivered 28 points, 10 rebounds and 11 assists in a Lakers overtime victory over the New York Knicks on January 31. He's the only active player in the top 10 on the NBA's all-time scoring list, with Brooklyn's Kevin Durant the closest to him among current players with 26,684 career points.

Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, 38,387 points
Abdul-Jabbar soared over opponents for 20



remarkable and a testament to not only his ability but his durability. "He's just a machine. He's healthy and a physical force night after night." Tyrone Lue, James's former coach at the Cleveland Cavaliers, believes the scoring record is the crowning achievement of his glittering career. "This has to be No. 1, seeing how long Kareem has held this record (since 1984). I know LeBron has his championships and MVPs. But to be the all-time leading scorer in NBA history, considering all the great players that have come through this game? That's a big-time accomplishment," Lue told NBA.com. James, meanwhile, declined to be drawn on whether his scoring record meant he should now be considered the greatest basketball player in history. "I'll let everybody else decide who that is," he told Lakers great Shaquille O'Neal on TNT television. "But it's great barber shop talk." — AFP

Jordan-LeBron debate revived

LOS ANGELES: As LeBron James adds to his amazing legacy by becoming the NBA's career scoring leader, the debate resumes over whether he or Michael Jordan is the NBA's all-time greatest player. Los Angeles Lakers forward James, in his 20th NBA campaign at age 38, overtook fellow legend Kareem Abdul-Jabbar for the all-time league scoring crown on Tuesday. "To be in the company with such a prominent dominant force as Kareem was, it's an honor," James told ESPN before breaking the record. Retired icon Jordan ranks fifth on the all-time NBA points list with 32,292 in 1,072 games for a record average of 30.1 points a game. James was at about 27.2 with superior assist and rebound averages.

"Air" Jordan also was a winner and Most Valuable Player in all six of his NBA Finals appearances with the Chicago Bulls in the 1990s. He was a five-time season MVP and 10-time scoring champion. James has won four titles in 10 NBA Finals appearances, eight in a row from 2011-2018. He was a four-time finals MVP and four-time season MVP and won his only season scoring crown in 2008. Both captured two Olympic gold medals and each starred in "Space Jam" movies, becoming cultural icons with epic endorsement deals.

Like Jordan, James was a high-leaping, acrobatic, amazing playmaker in his younger days who adjusted his game to remain dangerous and raise the level of his teammates. "We can enjoy one without tearing down one," the late Kobe Bryant tweeted about the Jordan-James debate in 2018. "Don't debate what can't be definitively won by anyone." Only two players have more trips to the finals than James - Boston legend Bill Russell with a record 12 and his 1960s dynasty teammate Sam Jones at 11. James and six-time NBA champion Abdul-Jabbar each reached 10 finals.

"When you talk about just a basketball player, a complete basketball player, LeBron James is a much better basketball player than Michael Jordan," former Detroit guard Isiah Thomas told ESPN in 2018. "What I'm witnessing is LeBron James... dominating this period of time. I haven't seen anyone else do that in our league, with the exception of two people and that's Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and Bill Russell." While Russell and Abdul-Jabbar were giants who dominated inside the paint, Jordan and James were playmakers who could threaten to dominate from anywhere on the court.

Former NBA All-Star guard Gary Payton resisted picking among superstars from different times. "I don't compare them," he said. "You've got two players who dominated their eras. Michael won six. So what? Eight straight finals is really good." NBA legend Dominique Wilkins said James has a mental edge similar to Jordan's ability to turn any perceived slight into motivation. "LeBron always had a size and agility advantage over players but also the mentality," Wilkins said. "He basically said, 'I can do whatever I want and whenever I want to do it' throughout his career."

Patrick Mahomes, the Kansas City Chiefs quarterback chasing his second Super Bowl crown on Sunday, was raised on classic Jordan games



Photo shows LeBron James and Michael Jordan. As LeBron James adds to his amazing legacy by becoming the NBA's career scoring leader, the debate resumes over whether he or Michael Jordan is the NBA's all-time greatest player.

seasons, his signature sky hook just one of the weapons that propelled him to six NBA titles, six MVP awards and 19 All-Star selections. A stand-out at the University of California, Los Angeles, Abdul-Jabbar quickly made his mark in the NBA, averaging 28.8 points per game his rookie season, 31.7 the next and 34.87 in his third. He moved atop the all-time scoring list on April 5, 1984 and would add almost 7,000 more points to his tally before retiring—building a career total that remained out of the reach of later greats including Michael Jordan and Kobe Bryant.

Wilt Chamberlain, 31,419 points
Chamberlain entered the NBA in 1959 and quickly established himself an offensive juggernaut. His individual scoring feats include his fabled 100-point game and his 50.4 points per game average for the Philadelphia Warriors in the 1961-62 season. In fact, Chamberlain delivered 113 games of 50 points or more, leading the league in scoring seven times and amassing two championships and four MVP awards. He moved to the top of the all-time scoring list on February 14, 1966 — during a 41-point performance for the Philadelphia 76ers against the Detroit Pistons. He would own the record for 18 years.

Bob Pettit, 20,880 points
Pettit, the second pick in the 1954 draft, led the St. Louis Hawks to the NBA title against Boston in 1958, scoring 50 points in a championship clinching 110-109 victory in game six. A two-time NBA MVP and two-time scoring champion, Pettit averaged more than 20 points per game in each of his 11 seasons. That included 31.1 points per game in 1961-62.

Dolph Schayes, 18,438 points
Schayes won the NBA title with the Syracuse Nationals in 1955, launching a string of six

straight seasons in which he averaged more than 20 points per game. In addition to his scoring touch-and 84.9% free-throw shooting over the course of his 15-year career—Schayes led the NBA in games played four times and minutes played twice. He became the league's all-time leading scorer in 1958, moving past Mikan during a blowout victory over the Detroit Pistons.

George Mikan, 10,156 points
Mikan, who won five BAA/NBA titles from 1949-54, was a prolific scorer from the time he jumped from the National Basketball League for the 1948-49 campaign. He averaged 23.1 points per game over six plus seasons, winning the NBA scoring title in 1949, 1950 and 1951. He and Joe Fulks traded places atop the all-time scoring list in 1952 before Mikan supplanted Fulks for good on November 8 of that year. Mikan, who was inducted into the Basketball Hall of Fame in 1959, became the first commissioner of the American Basketball Association in 1967, a rival league that would merge with the NBA in 1976.

Joe Fulks, 8,003 points
Fulks won the scoring title with an average of 23.2 points per game in the Basketball Association of America's inaugural season, helping the Philadelphia Warriors to the 1947 championship. The BAA would merge with the National Basketball League in 1949 to form the NBA, and Fulks, a power forward and pioneer of the modern jump shot, would finish his eight-year career having set the single-game scoring record on four different occasions. The first was a 37-point performance on December 3, 1946 and for fourth was a 63-point outburst against the Indianapolis Jets in February 1949 that would stand as the most points scored in an NBA game until Elgin Baylor scored 64 points in a 1959 contest. — AFP