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Glory and pride: Zain lights up Kuwait skies



KUWAIT: Drones form images of HH the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and HH the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah over Green Island on Feb 16, 2023. Around 2,000 drones from Zain lit up the Kuwait sky in collaboration with Touristic Enterprises Company. — Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat (See Page 2)

Kuwait Visa app soft-launched

New biometric system to begin operations in March

News in brief

US: Saif Al-Adel new Qaeda chief

WASHINGTON: Saif Al-Adel, an Iran-based Egyptian, has become the head of Al-Qaeda following the July 2022 death of Ayman Al-Zawahiri, the US State Department said Wednesday. "Our assessment aligns with that of the UN - that Al-Qaeda's new de facto leader Saif Al-Adel is based in Iran," a state department spokesperson said. Adel, 62, is a former Egyptian special forces lieutenant-colonel and figure in the old guard of Al-Qaeda. — AFP



Saif Al-Adel

Xi to make state visit to Iran

BEIJING: Chinese President Xi Jinping will make a state visit to Iran, Beijing's foreign ministry said Thursday, as a three-day trip to China by the Islamic republic's leader drew to a close. Xi "gladly accepted" an invitation by President Ebrahim Raisi to make a trip to Iran, both countries said in a joint statement issued on Thursday. No date was given for the visit, which would be Xi's first to the Middle Eastern nation since 2016. — AFP

Baby formula health claims dubious

PARIS: The vast majority of health claims used to advertise baby formula worldwide are not supported by rigorous scientific evidence, a study said Thursday, leading researchers to urge the breast milk substitutes be sold in plain packaging. The study comes a week after a group of doctors and scientists called for a regulatory crackdown on the \$55-billion formula industry for "predatory" marketing which they said exploits the fears of new parents to convince them not to breastfeed. — AFP

KUWAIT: The interior ministry announced on Thursday the soft launch of the Kuwait Visa app, which will eventually be used as the only means to verify expatriates' visa status before entering the country. The current entry procedures remain the same until the app is officially launched at a date to be announced later; after which a resident or visitor will not be allowed to enter Kuwait without verification through the app.

The soft launch allows airlines, expatriates and staff at Kuwait embassies abroad to verify the validity of a visa "in an electronic, swift and accurate way",

the ministry explained. It said the application will play a key role in preventing those with criminal records, people who are wanted by law or people who have infectious diseases from entering the country.

The ministry added efforts are being exerted to add a number of services in coordination with the state's various ministries, with the goal of educating workers about labor laws, entry requirements and numerous benefits that are intended to control demographics and expand the labor market.

Meanwhile, First Deputy Premier and Interior Minister Sheikh Talal Al-Khaled Al-Sabah inspected

the final stages of the development and establishment of an "integrated central system for biometrics" that includes finger and handprints, face and iris scans and electronic signatures of all individuals, which will enter operation in March in its first stage.

Sheikh Talal, who is also the acting defense minister, inspected the components of the second stage to upgrade systems and infrastructure at the borders, which includes a comprehensive overhaul of entry and exit procedures for individuals and vehicles.

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Girl rescued from rubble after 248 hrs

KAHRAMANMARAS, Turkey: Turkish rescuers on Thursday pulled a 17-year-girl from the rubble of last week's devastating earthquake, as hopes fade of finding more survivors. Aleyna Olmez was rescued 248 hours after the 7.8-magnitude quake flattened entire cities, killing nearly 40,000 people across southeastern Turkey and parts of Syria.

"She looked to be in good health. She opened and closed her eyes," coal

miner Ali Akdogan, who took part in the rescue effort, told AFP in Kahramanmaras, a city near the quake's epicenter. "We have been working here in this building for a week now... We came here with the hope of hearing sounds," he said. "We are happy whenever we find a living thing - even a cat."

The girl's uncle tearfully hugged the rescuers one by one, saying: "We will never forget you." But after the rescue, Turkish soldiers told the media and locals to leave the scene because teams were starting to pull corpses out of the rubble. Officials and medics said 36,187 people had died in Turkey and 3,688 in Syria from the Feb 6 earthquake and aftershocks, bringing

Continued on Page 6



KAHRAMANMARAS, Turkey: A rescuer stands in front of rubble near the site where Aleyna Olmez, 17, was rescued from a collapsed building, 248 hours after a 7.8-magnitude earthquake struck parts of Turkey and Syria on Feb 16, 2023. — AFP

Lebanese smash bank facades as crisis bites

BEIRUT: Dozens of angry demonstrators attacked several banks in Beirut on Thursday after the Lebanese pound hit a record low, AFP journalists said, amid a deepening economic crisis. Lebanon's cash-strapped banks have imposed strict restrictions on withdrawals, barring depositors from accessing their savings, especially those in US dollars. The pound is trading at about 80,000 to the greenback on the black market versus 60,000 at the start of the month, according to exchange rate

monitors.

On Thursday, around 50 protesters smashed the facades of four banks and burned car tyres in the central Beirut neighborhood of Badaro, AFP journalists at the scene reported. The attacks came after calls by the "Depositors' Outcry Association", a group that supports depositors' attempts to withdraw their money. "They stole, seized and looted our money three years ago," said protester Pascal Al-Raisi. "There are owners of millions of dollars among us without even a penny in their pockets. There is no other solution. We will escalate until we regain our rights."

Depositors have carried out similar attacks in recent months to demand access to their savings from

Continued on Page 6



BEIRUT: A protestor throws a brick at a bank after setting fire to tyres during a demonstration on Feb 16, 2023. — AFP



Zain lights up Kuwait skies



KUWAIT: Drones form images of Kuwait's icons and traditions over Green Island on Feb 16, 2023. Around 2,000 drones from Zain lit up the Kuwait sky in collaboration with Touristic Enterprises Company. — Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat



KUWAIT: (From left) Dr Ameera Al-Hassan, Walid Abou Jaoude, Mazen AboulHosn, Dr Assad Hafeez, Nour Al-Qattan, Nisreen Rubaian, Omar Al-Essa and Khaled Shahwan are pictured during the meeting on Thursday.

UN bodies detail support to quake victims

By Ghadeer Ghloom

KUWAIT: The UN House in Kuwait held a meeting on Thursday on the response and support by UN organizations to Turkey and Syria after devastating earthquakes left thousands dead and caused heavy damage. Representatives of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), World Food Program (WFP), United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), UN Human Settlements Program (UN-Habitat), International Organization for Migration (IOM), Officer for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), United Nations' Children Fund (UNICEF), World Health Organization (WHO) and International Labor Organization (ILO) were present at the event.

OCHA Kuwait Representative Nour Al-Qattan expressed her sympathies and condolences to the victims in Syria and Turkey. She said the death toll is climbing and the need for essential support is extreme, so cooperation is extremely urgent. Many countries, including Kuwait, have taken part in supporting the victims, besides international organizations. Qattan said the undersecretary general for humanitarian affairs has funded \$50 million from the United Nations' Central Emergency Response Fund to support the victims, thanking Kuwait for backing the UN's funding activity.

After expressing his sorrow on the unfortunate situation in Turkey and Syria, WHO representative and Head of Mission Dr Assad Hafeez presented the support by WHO to affected areas. He said 72 met-



WHO representative & Head of Mission Dr Assad Hafeez

logical support and continuity of routine medical support. Representative of UNHCR to Kuwait Nisreen Rubaian said UNHCR rushed to keep victims sheltered by providing tents, winter clothes, blankets, sleeping bags and other emergency supplies such as food supplies to support living conditions. Rubaian added shelter and food supplies were funded by UNHCR amounted to \$41 million.

Head of UN-Habitat Dr Ameera Al-Hassan emphasized on the importance of providing all necessities of life. She said UN-Habitat's aid activity is focusing on evaluating and supporting whatever has remained from affected buildings to avoid further damage and an increase in the number of homeless people. She also referred to this disaster as one of the most devastating accidents that has happened in the last few years.

Millions are fighting to survive, but the after-effects of earthquake are still killing people despite the great efforts exerted to save the largest possible number of survivors. Hassan insisted on reducing unfortunate results as much as possible and not allowing any hindrances to stop the victims from receiving help and support.

ric tons of first aid were sent to help 400,000 individuals and 120,000 urgent surgeries were conducted, in addition to providing \$16 million in emergency funding.

Hafeez said WHO is aiming to spend approximately \$43 million to secure residential areas that are at high risk of collapse, treating people with severe injuries, food and medicine supplies, psychological and socio-

Japan Embassy celebrates the birthday of Emperor

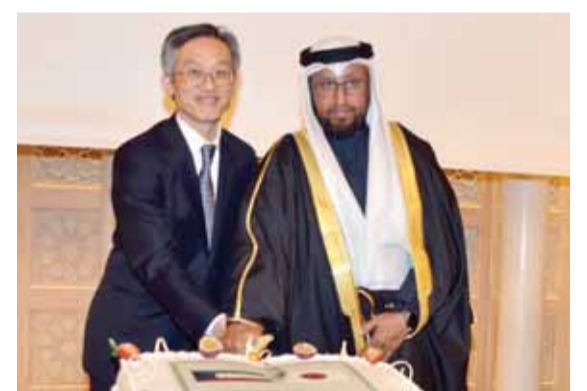
By Faten Omar

KUWAIT: The Embassy of Japan held a reception on Wednesday to celebrate the birthday of the Emperor of Japan at Regency Hotel. The event was attended by Minister of State for National Assembly Affairs and Minister of State for Housing and Urban Development Affairs Ammar Al-Ajmi. Japanese Ambassador to Kuwait Morino Yasunari expressed his deepest condolences on the tragic loss of lives by the earthquake in Turkey and Syria. "I sincerely wish the people who are suffering from this historic disaster will rise for a strong comeback," he said.

"I would like to recall the words the Emperor of Japan expressed in January to begin the year 2023. He called upon the international community, facing wars and conflicts unfolding in various parts of the world, to continue dialogues to overcome the differences among their respective positions and to cooperate mutually," Morino said.

Meanwhile, the Japanese ambassador stressed the depth of historical ties between Kuwait and Japan, citing the years of excellent and innovative diplomatic relations built on a foundation of friendship, trust and respect, highlighting the growth of bilateral ties at all levels and in a wide range of cooperation areas, noting that Japan and Kuwait both support international peace and prosperity and therefore work to enhance collaboration for a better world.

"Japan and Kuwait enjoy a strong, long-standing friendship. This year marks the 62nd anniversary of diplomatic relations. Japan sincerely appreciates the



KUWAIT: Japanese Ambassador Morino Yasunari and Minister of State for National Assembly and Minister of State for Housing and Urban Development Affairs Ammar Al-Ajmi cut the cake during the event. —Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

generous support Kuwait extended to Japan after the major earthquake in 2011. Oil trade lies at the foundation of the relationship since 1958," he added.

Morino revealed both countries need to create a new impetus to deepen relations under unique circumstances in this century. "I would like to work to renew the partnership between Japan and Kuwait in different areas beyond oil trade, including people-to-people exchanges. I will be guided by the Kuwaiti government, with the support of the Japanese community, and asking for help from those who are interested in Japanese culture, who would like to do business with Japan, who are learning the Japanese language, and not to mention, those who love sushi, tempura, etc.," he said.

At the end of the event, the Japanese Embassy offered fresh sushi made by a Japanese chef resident in Kuwait and matcha green tea brewed by a Kuwaiti tea sommelier.

Mexico Embassy congratulates Amir, Kuwaitis

KUWAIT: "I am truly privileged and honored to celebrate alongside the friendly nation of Kuwait and its people, the milestone of the 62nd Independence Day and 32nd Liberation Day celebrations. On this historic occasion, I wish to extend to His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Ahmad Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, the government and people of Kuwait our heartfelt congratulations and best wishes.

The people of Mexico and Kuwait have always enjoyed friendly relations and good cooperation. Kuwait can be rightly proud of its achievements since independence. The country has always been an example of stability and economic growth and I wish Kuwait to continue serving as an oasis of peace and welfare in the region. I am confident that the existing bonds of friendship and good cooperation will be further enhanced for the mutual benefits of our two countries. May I take this opportunity to wish His Highness the Amir good health and the friendly Kuwaiti people continued progress and prosperity."



Mexico Ambassador Miguel Angel Isidro

Local

MoH to keep up-to-date with latest medical technologies

Health Minister addresses radiology conference

KUWAIT: Kuwaiti Health Minister Dr Ahmad Al-Awadhi affirmed the ministry's keenness and commitment to keep up-to-date with the latest technologies and scientific developments in the field of diagnostic radiology, radiation oncology treatment and nuclear medicine. Al-Awadhi said in his opening speech to the annual radiology conference Thursday that the teams research the most well-known scientific journals at a time when the entire world is showing more interest in the latest technologies in those fields.

He is confident in the future vision of those in charge of the conference regarding medical care in the field of radiology and its expansion to include the role and responsibilities of care providers to meet the challenges related to the safety and rights of patients while taking advantage of the promising opportunities and harness them to serve patients while continuing working within a team to perform professional responsibilities.

The conference provides an opportunity for the medical staff in various specialties to learn about the latest scientific developments in the field of diagnostic radiology for the treatment of radiation tumors and nuclear medicine, he explained.

Meanwhile, Chairwoman of the Council of Radiology Departments at Ministry of Health (MoH) and Chair of the conference Dr Buthaina Al-Kandari said that this event constitutes cooperation between the specializations of diagnostic radiology, radiotherapy oncology and nuclear medicine.

The conference hosts a large number of experts and consultants in those fields from different countries with the aim of exchanging expertise, as most of the lectures focus on the diagnosis and treatment of tumors and diseases, Al-Kandari explained. The meeting falls within the strategies and plans of MoH to improve all health services, especially since radiology departments are an integral part of the health system equipped with the latest technologies to reach the best health care and treatment methods, she stated.

She emphasized the keenness of the Radiology and Radiotherapy Departments Council to follow-up the latest scientific developments, provide continuous practical training, and hold conferences and workshops internally and externally, noting that holding the conference embodies the principle of cooperation and exchange of experiences.



KUWAIT: Health Minister Dr Ahmad Al-Awadhi opens radiology conference. — KUNA

The lectures at the conference are related to the diagnosis and treatment of breast tumors, including mammograms, Positron Emission Tomography (PET), Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI), radiotherapy, examination of patients undergoing chemotherapy, as well as follow-up of

tumor sizes after treatment and recovery, she mentioned. She also referred to lectures on diagnosing some heart diseases by MRI, nuclear medicine and radiation therapy, in addition to lectures on tumors of kidneys and adrenal glands and PET scan of the body to diagnose cancer. — KUNA

News in brief



Drug suspects nabbed

KUWAIT: Drugs Control General Department arrested three suspects for pushing drugs and mind-altering substances in three different cases. They had 4 kg of various drugs, 600 Lyrica tablets, ammunition and five sensitive scales. The three were referred to the drugs and liquor prosecution for further legal action.

76 expats arrested

KUWAIT: Criminal detectives in cooperation with general security arrested 76 people in Salmi scrap area, including wanted persons, those in violation of the residency law or for not having an ID.

Agriculture Education Day

KUWAIT: People with diverse disabilities on Wednesday marked the Agriculture Education Day by sowing a set of seeds and saplings, based on an educational program purposed to promote the social significance of agriculture. The fact that the event coincides with Kuwait's celebration of national festivals positively reflects on the health and psychological conditions of people with disability, and helps them upscale their communication skills. — KUNA

Housemaid arrested

KUWAIT: The General Director of Hawally police directorate Brigadier Ziad Al-Khatib has ordered the detention of a Filipina maid in Hawally governorate. The maid confessed to tampering with the food she prepares for a family in Rumaitiya. "A citizen came to a police station and presented a video that shows the maid taking trash out of a garbage can and putting it in sandwiches that she had prepared. The married couple noticed that the taste of the food has changed, so they placed a camera in the kitchen and were surprised of the inhumane actions of this maid," a source revealed to Kuwait Times.

Australia 'values Kuwait relations'

KUWAIT: Australia deeply values our warm relations with Kuwait, including our strong trade partnership. We are proud of our contribution to Kuwait's food security through the export of high quality meat, grains and other agricultural products over many decades. While the Australian government has announced the intention to phase-out live animal exports by sea, the phase-out will not begin in the current term of government.

The current term of government is due to expire, and elections are expected to be held in approximately 2025 - therefore, the phase-out of live exports will not commence before 2025. In the interim, Australia will continue our close consultations with Kuwaiti partners on all aspects of the relationship, including trade and food security. We are looking forward to growing the trade relationship into the future and continuing to play a key role in meeting Kuwait's food security needs.



2009 National Operetta



2015 National operetta

Kuwait operettas: Beautiful musicals of celebration

KUWAIT: Researchers in Kuwait singing heritage said the national operetta genre is a prominent part of the country's national heritage that people of all ages remember and love. In a statement to KUNA on Thursday, researcher Saleh Al-Ghareeb said the word operetta is a smaller version of the word opera. It refers to a short musical play that includes dancing, he said.

National operettas were launched in Kuwait in 1972, when maestro Saeed Al-Banna presented two works by Ahmad Anbar and Mohammad Al-Fayez. Another operetta was presented by conductor Suleiman Al-Mulla in 1981 titled "Ehna Ashaqnaha", which translates to "we love it (Kuwait)", Al-Ghareeb noted. He added that there was another operetta conducted by Yousef Nasser titled "Qissat Baladna", which means "the story of our land".

It was sung by Abdulkareem Abdulqader, Faisal Abdullah, Khalifa Bader, Huda Hussein and Sara Al-Matouq, with the poem of Sheikh Khalifa Al-

Abdullah Al-Khalifa Al-Sabah. Other operettas were "Nasar Allah Al-Haq" or "the right had prevailed" by Abdulraouf Ismail, "Hadeeth Al-Shuhour Al-Sabaa" or "the seven-month story" conducted by Anwar Abdullah with Yaqoub Al-Subaiee poem, depicting the period of the Iraqi Invasion of Kuwait, said the researcher.

Moreover, he said that "Selahi Kalamat Al-Haq" or "honesty is my weapon" operetta was written by a group of poets including Bader Bouresly, Al-Bandar and Saher and was conducted by Suleiman Al-Mulla, Dr Bandar Obaid, Anwar Abdullah and Mohammad Al-Ruwaished. The operetta was sung by Gherreed Al-Shatea, Mohammad Al-Buloushi, Tareq Suleiman, Al-Anoud, Hussein Jassim and a number of actors.

The Ministry of Information presented an operetta titled "Asrana fe Al-Dhameer" or "our POWs on our minds", the Martyrs Bureau presented "Kuwaituna Shams la Taarif Al-Ghuroub" or "Kuwait is a sun that never sets", the Ministry of Education presented "Al-Ahd Al-Jadeed" or "the new era" and "Thekra Al-Aseer" or "memory of a POW", while the Public Authority for Youth and Sport presented "Hadeeth Al-Ajal" or "the talk of generations", performed by Essam Kamal and Najat Al-Zayed, said Al-Ghareeb.

Meanwhile, he spoke of one of the most promi-

nent national operetta singers "Shadi Al-Khaleej" Abdulaziz Al-Mufrij, who sang "Muthakarar Bahar" or "memoirs of a sailor", conducted by Ghannam Al-Dekan, with Mohammad Al-Fayez's poem and participation of Sanaa Al-Kharraz. The operetta was performed in October 1988 in South Korea, during the international forum for radio presenters, when Kuwait won the golden award for the "Al-Sindebad Al-Bahri" show.

Another operetta by Shadi Al-Khaleej was "Hadeeth Al-Soor" or "the story of the wall (of Kuwait)" in February 1988, conducted by Ghannam Al-Dekan with Dr Abdullah Al-Otaibi's poem, he noted. He also sang "Mawakib Al-Wafaa" or "parades of loyalty" in 1989 by Dr. Abdullah Al-Otaibi and Ghannam Al-Dekan many others. On his part, former head of the music department in the Basic Education College Dr Fahad Al-Faras said that a successful operetta depends on the topic presented and the conductor's experience, as well as a great singer.

Operetta mostly consists of a group of men and women choir with duo or trio singers and an orchestra with no less than 50 musicians, he noted. Meanwhile, Al-Faras said operettas are mainly famous during the country's national celebrations, adding that the Ministry of Education had set a special budget for such musical events. —KUNA

Kuwait and Italy enhance cultural ties

KUWAIT: Italy signed two important agreements on Wednesday with the Acting Secretary General of the National Council for Culture, Arts and Letters to strengthen the collaboration in the archeological field. The first, extends for five more years the Italian study camp research activities in the island of Failaka; the second establishes a new five-year collaboration in the Kadhimia area with the University "Sapienza" of Rome (Sapienza is the number one for Classics and Ancient History studies in the QS World Ranking universities by Subject).

The scientific collaboration between Italy and Kuwait in the archaeological and historical fields has a long history, which began at the end of the seventies. In this period the first Italian archaeological mission to Kuwait took place, the results of which converged into a monograph, which for decades was the basis of the archaeological research carried out in the following years on Failaka Island. In 2010, Italy signed a collaboration agreement between the National Council for Culture, Arts and Letters and the University of Perugia, which had as its purpose the organization of a new Italian-Kuwaiti archaeological mission on Failaka.

Now a new important Italian University, the "Sapienza" of Rome, has joined the prestigious project, which at this point also see the participation of young archaeologists and researchers from the Roman university. The Italian mission is part of a more complex research project in which various foreign teams from many European countries participate, the purpose of which is to reconstruct the millenary history of this country. The site involved in the Italian excavations, Al-Qurainiyah, is located on the north coast of the island of Failaka and represents one of the most interesting settlement palimpsests of the island and, more generally, of the entire country.

Al-Qurainiyah represents one of the most important archaeological sites on the island and in the whole of Kuwait because the different phases of

occupation identified allow us to shed new light on the history of this Country. The Italian excavation of the late Islamic village of Al-Qurainiyah, abandoned in the first decades of the 20th century, helps restore a face to the original settlement of Kuwait City and the surrounding areas, before the transformations completely erased the traces of the oldest settlements.

Starting from this important cultural and working heritage and without wanting to abandon it in any way, Italy - through "La Sapienza" of Rome, the most quoted university in the world for Classical Archaeology studies - today signed a second agreement to give life to a new project, which will develop from an idea born thanks to the collaboration with the National Council for Culture, Arts and Letters.

In fact, the foundations have been laid for a project to study and enhance one of Kuwait's most interesting archaeological sites outside of Failaka Island, the Kadhimia area. The site represents one of the most interesting evidence of the early Islamic occupation of Kuwait, when this territory was still a land of passage crossed by the caravan route that led from Basra to Makkah. The center of Kadhimia, in the Umayyad period, represented an obligatory stop for merchants and pilgrims who from the north wanted to reach the sacred places of Islam. The project will have, as its first objective, a detailed survey of the settlement area with the aim of identifying the best intervention strategy.

The area to be investigated occupies a surface of about 1000 sq km. It covers the entire coastal littoral area extending over 50 km from the modern city of al-Jahra (in the western suburbs of Kuwait City, north of which is Kadhimia) in the south, to al-Sabiya in the north. The coastal strip is quite narrow, 3 to 4 km wide, with gently sloping terrain towards the extensive salt marshes around Kuwait Bay; it is separated from the inland desert plateau, the Jal Al-Zawr, by a low ridge running parallel from north to south.

It was decided to extend the reconnaissance towards the hinterland for about 20 km, a dimension that could possibly be reduced on the basis of what will be found in the preliminary phase, in order to obtain a more homogeneous and system-



KUWAIT: Muhammad Al-Jassar, Acting Secretary-General of the National Council for Culture, Arts and Letters and Carlo Balducci chat after two important agreements were signed on Wednesday.

atic coverage possible. The goal is to obtain an overview of the Kadhimia region and the coastal littoral as complete as possible, through the creation of an archaeological map where all the evidence will be recorded.

The ultimate aim is, therefore, the reconstruction of the settlement structure of the territory in antiquity, including the identification of the main historical-topographic peculiarities, such as - for example - the distribution of the sites around ecological facies and/or caravan routes. The diachronic setting of the research will be aimed, in particular, at understanding the transformation of the landscape and the history of human settlement in relation to the environment and its resources and the interaction between the Kadhimia site and the coastal territory between the Sasanian and Islamic periods (and consequently in the transitional period between the two).

At the same time, this work will make it possible to delimit micro-areas of significant archaeological interest, where it is possible to estimate the opening of a targeted excavation in subsequent campaigns, in order to confirm or in any case deepen what has been deduced from the reconnaissance.

Local



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Kuwait's trade surplus with Japan jumps 85.5%

TOKYO: Kuwait's trade surplus with Japan surged 85.5 percent from a year earlier to JPY 110.3 billion (\$823 million) in January - up for the 22nd straight month, fueled by robust exports, government data showed Thursday. Kuwait posted black ink with Japan for 15 years on a monthly basis, the Finance Ministry said in a preliminary report.

Overall exports from Kuwait to Japan ballooned 81.2 percent year-on-year to JPY 126.5 billion (\$944 million) for the 22nd consecutive month of expansion. Imports from Japan also soared 56.4 percent to JPY 16.1 billion (\$121 million), up for the ninth month in a row. Middle East's trade surplus with Japan widened 32.8 percent to JPY 1.0 trillion (\$7.5 billion) last month, with Japan-bound exports from the region increasing 34.6 percent from a year earlier, according to the data.

Crude oil, refined products, liquefied natural gas (LNG) and other natural resources, which accounted for 95.7 percent of the region's total exports to Japan, inflated 37.2 percent. The region's overall imports from Japan also swelled 43.4 percent on demand for automobiles, machinery and steel. The world's third-biggest economy logged a record global trade deficit of JPY 3.5 trillion in January, as higher energy bills and the yen's depreciation contributed to increase the value of its imports while export growth slowed, showed the government data.

The deficit was the biggest since comparable data became available in 1979, and the country posted red ink for the 18th consecutive month. Exports went up just 3.5 percent from the year before amid weakening demand for China during the Lunar New Year holidays. Imports grew 17.8 percent with energy prices, especially coal, LNG and crude oil rising. China remained Japan's biggest trade partner, followed by the US. The trade data are measured on a customs-cleared basis before adjustment for seasonal factors.

Kuwait oil price down

Meanwhile, the price of Kuwaiti oil dropped by \$1.62 to \$84.46 per barrel on Wednesday as opposed to \$86.08 pb the day before, said the Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) Thursday. The Brent crude in the global market went down 20 cents to \$85.38 per barrel, the same occurred with the West Texas Intermediate, which decreased by 47 cents to \$78.59 pb. —KUNA

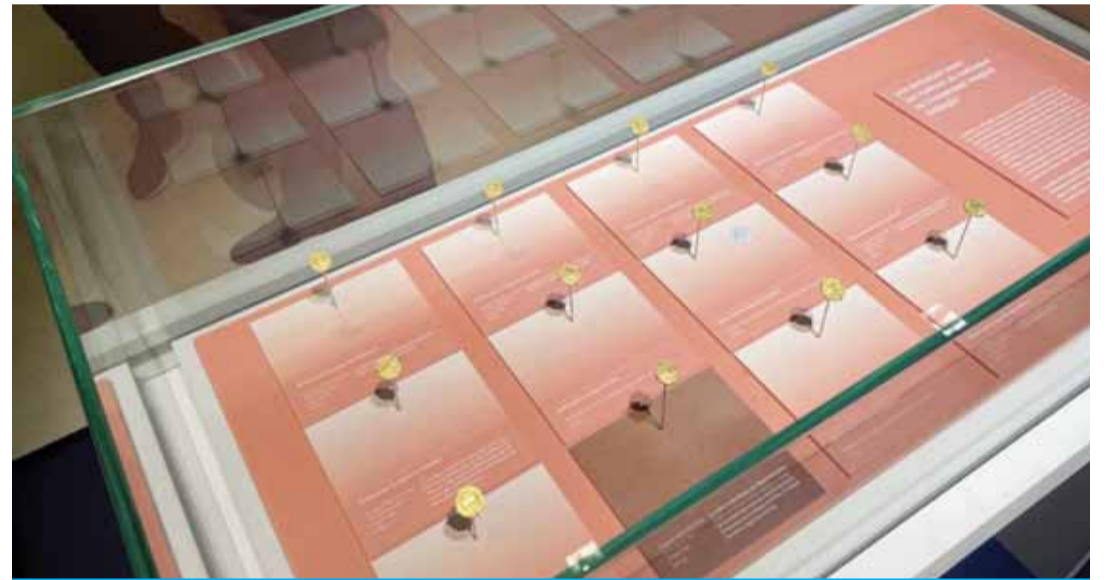
Photo of the Day



KUWAIT: Portraits of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah are seen on a shopping mall in Kuwait City as Kuwait celebrates National and Liberation Days. — Photo by Fouad Al-Shaikh



Sheikh Mubarak Abdullah Al-Sabah and the institute's chairman are pictured during the event.



Twelve zodiac signs at Arab World Institute in Paris. —KUNA photos

Arab World Institute displays Sheikh Mubarak Al-Sabah's zodiac collection

PARIS: The Arab World Institute in Paris inaugurated an exhibition of a collection called "astronomical dinar", belonging to Sheikh Mubarak Abdullah

Al-Mubarak Al-Sabah, carrying all 12 zodiac signs of Mughal Emperor Jahangir. The inauguration was attended by head of the institute and former French minister of culture Jack Lang, Kuwaiti Ambassador to France Mohammad Al-Judai and French Ambassador to Kuwait Claire Le Flecher.

In a statement to KUNA, Lang said he was pleased to showcase the rare golden collection of the zodiac signs, adding that Sheikh Mubarak succeeded in finding all pieces to present them in Paris. On his part, Sheikh Mubarak noted the importance of this set historically. These pieces show the Islamic cultural and scientific prosperity in India and also presents the connection between the Greek-Roman culture with the Arab and Muslim World.

The institute is one of the most prominent Arab bodies established in cooperation between France and 18 Arab countries in 1987. The institute aims to



connect Arab and western cultures, encourage learning Arabic language and spread Arab past and present culture. — KUNA



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Hundreds of Gazan students covered in this initiative.

Kuwait charity covers loans of 770 students in Gaza Strip

GAZA: Kuwait's Bayt Al-Zakat (Alms House) Charity had covered loans of some 770-university students in the Gaza Strip, a Palestinian charitable committee said on Thursday. Al-Daraj Zakat committee's head Abdulqader Abu-Annour told KUNA that the project — to cover the loan installments for the students — began this week and it was supervised by Kuwait's Society for Relief and representatives of several universities in the Gaza Strip.

This current support campaign was preceded by another project last month covering the expenses of 305 graduates in Gaza, overseen by Kuwait's Awqaf (Endowment) Public Foundation and also supervised by the Society for Relief, he added. University representatives expressed gratitude to the State of Kuwait for its unyielding support to the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. — KUNA



Representatives of Palestinian universities



A Palestinian student receives university fees.



Vietnam jails South Koreans for people smuggling

Tensions brew in German village of Upahl over refugee arrivals

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MASBATE: Handout photo shows officials assessing the damage at Magallanes Coliseum in Masbate, after a 6.1-magnitude earthquake rocked the central Philippines. —AFP

6.1 magnitude quake rocks Philippines

Some buildings in Masbate City had cracks in their walls, including provincial hospital

MANILA: A 6.1 magnitude earthquake rocked the central Philippines on Thursday, the US Geological Survey said, though there were no reports of casualties or significant damage. The strong and shallow quake struck just off the coast of Masbate province in the centre of the archipelago nation shortly after 2 am (1800 GMT).

The epicentre was 11 kilometres (seven miles) from the coastal village of Miaga in Masbate's Uson municipality, USGS said. The Philippine seismological agency said it had recorded more than 80 aftershocks. "It was a bit strong," Masbate provincial police chief Rolly Albana told AFP.

"I was sleeping when we were shaken and woken up." The province has a population of nearly one million people spread across three islands. Masbate provincial disaster officer Adonis Dilao told local media some buildings in the capital Masbate City had cracks in their walls, including the provincial hospital. Patients had been evacuated from the facility, he

said. A section of the ceiling inside a sports and entertainment venue in the city also collapsed. "Electricity posts were moving, even parked cars were shaken," said Dilao.

Masbate City Mayor Socrates Tuason said classes and government work would be suspended on Thursday to allow for the "monitoring and inspection of structural integrity" of buildings. Uson police chief Captain Reden Tolledo said some residents fled their homes.

"Even I went outside because of possible aftershocks," Tolledo said. Gregorio Adigue, a disaster officer in the Dimasalang municipality, said he felt a strong aftershock nearly an hour after the quake. But buildings and other structures in the area did not appear to be damaged, he said.

On Ticao island, which is part of Masbate province, residents in one house reported a wall had crumbled, but they were unharmed, said Consencino Reymundo, a disaster officer in San Fernando municipality.

"We lost electricity but it was restored two hours later," Reymundo told AFP. Quakes are frequent in the Philippines, which sits along the Pacific "Ring of Fire", an arc of intense seismic as well as volcanic activity that stretches from Japan through Southeast Asia and across the Pacific basin.

Most are too weak to be felt by humans, but strong and destructive ones come too, with no technology available to predict when and where they will hit. The nation's civil defence office regularly holds drills simulating earthquake scenarios along active fault lines.

The last major quake was in October in the northern Philippines. The 6.4 magnitude earthquake hit the mountain town of Dolores in Abra province, injuring several people, damaging buildings and cutting power to most of the region.

A 7.0 magnitude quake in mountainous Abra last July triggered landslides and ground fissures, killing 11 people and injuring several hundred. —AFP



NAPIER: Photo shows the remains of the Puketapu Bridge that washed away during Cyclone Gabrielle near Napier on February 16, 2023. —AFP

N Zealand accepts international help after cyclone

NAPIER: New Zealand redeployed gunships and helicopters to deliver water, food and fuel to cities cut off by Cyclone Gabrielle on Thursday, as overwhelmed rescue teams embraced overseas offers of help. Five people have died and 10,500 more have been displaced, according to authorities, in a disaster that has crippled the country's populous North Island.

Four days of violent winds and lashing rains caused landslides and widespread flooding that lacerated the island's road network, caused rolling power cuts and knocked out hundreds of mobile phone towers.

Police said 3,500 people had been reported as "uncontactable", as residents around the country tried desperately to reach loved ones. New Zealand Prime Minister Chris Hipkins said the police held "grave concerns" for those still missing.

"We do need to be prepared for the likelihood there will be more fatalities," he warned. Hipkins said over 100,000 households were still without power on the North Island, home to more than three-quarters of the country's five million residents.

On Thursday, the east-coast city of Napier was briefly cut off after experts detected damage to the last useable bridge linking its 65,000 residents with the rest of the country. The national Transport Agency said the bridge had since reopened, but only for emergency services and critical workers.

Isolated residents have been told not to leave their homes unless "absolutely essential" and to restrict water use. When residents do venture out, they wade through murky floodwaters to get supplies or huddle on the steps of a few buildings that still have wifi, trying to let loved ones know they are safe. Around the city, petrol stations have put up signs declaring there is "NO FUEL" for anyone other than emergency services.

Earlier Hipkins warned New Zealanders of a long, gruelling recovery ahead, with power not expected to be restored to some areas for weeks and the clean-up likely to take much longer. "This is a traumatic event," he said. "It's a very big challenge to restore infrastructure as fast as we can, but we have to acknowledge that we are in for a bumpy ride."

"There are no overnight fixes. We could have the bulldozers working 24/7 and it would still take time to re-establish road links." The New Zealand Defence Force has deployed two large naval vessels and a C-130 Hercules transport plane to deliver thousands of litres of water along with personnel and several mobile water treatment plants to hard-hit regions. —AFP

Biden, 80, completes medical checkup before 2024 campaign

WASHINGTON: Joe Biden, at 80 the oldest man ever to be US president, spent the morning Thursday completing an annual medical checkup that political allies hope will give him the all clear to run for a second term in 2024.

Biden left the White House by helicopter for Walter Reed National Military Medical Center, a complex in the Washington suburbs that has a special facility for treatment of presidents. He has not declared a reelection bid but is widely expected to do so soon, with the campaign starting to heat up. On the Republican side, so far the frontrunner is former president Donald Trump, whom Biden beat in the tumultuous 2020 election.

Results from the medical checkup—some portions of which were done in an earlier session last year—are expected Thursday. "Later today, the White House will publicly release a written summary of the president's physical," a spokesman said.

After Biden's last checkup in November 2021, presidential physician Kevin O'Connor issued a memorandum declaring Biden "healthy, vigorous," and fit to do his job, although prone to increased coughing and growing stiffness while walking.

Both those issues are noticeable daily during

Biden's public interactions, but the octogenarian leader has otherwise managed to maintain a full schedule in the grueling job, overseeing mass Covid vaccinations, the Western response to Russia's war against Ukraine, and so far steering the US economy clear of recession.

While routine, Thursday's physical is being closely watched, with Democratic leaders insisting they will stand behind Biden if he runs again, but polls showing little enthusiasm from their voters. A Reuters/Ipsos poll in February found more than half of Democrats believe Biden is too old to carry on.

Does age matter?

Nikki Haley, a 51-year-old Republican who has just entered the 2024 race, called Wednesday for mental fitness tests for any elected official over 75. That would also apply to Trump, 76, under whom she served as UN ambassador.

Biden would face no Democratic challengers if he decides to run and party leaders believe he has the best chance of beating Trump in a rematch. However, a handful of Democratic lawmakers have publicly expressed worries about Biden's age and it remains unclear how he would fare if a younger Republican, not Trump, were his opponent.

On the plus side, Biden does not smoke, does not drink, works out daily in the White House gym, and has not had any major health concerns since undergoing surgery in 1988 after suffering two brain aneurysms.

He tested positive for COVID-19 last July, but

government, and not the Edinburgh parliament, could call a second independence referendum.

Scots voted in 2014 to remain part of the UK. But the SNP says the calculus was upended with Britain's Brexit referendum two years later, when a majority in Scotland opposed leaving the European Union. Despite Brexit, the UK's Conservative government has ruled out a second plebiscite in Scotland. Sturgeon summoned the conference in a bid to chart a way out of the constitutional conundrum.

Her preferred path was to turn the next UK election, due by early 2025, into a "de facto referendum" on separation, but that has left many in the SNP nervous at the prospect of electoral blowback. "I personally think that party conference should be paused, for obvious reasons," Stephen Flynn, who leads the SNP in the Westminster parliament, told Sky News.

"I think the new leader should have the opportunity and indeed the space to set out their position, their values and their intentions going forward," he said. SNP president Mike Russell told the BBC that the leadership race was "unlikely" to be over by March 19. "Therefore there is a question to be asked about whether that should be postponed while a leader comes into place," he said.



BETHESDA: US President Joe Biden arrives at the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland on February 16, 2023. President Biden is at Walter Reed for his annual physical exam. —AFP

did not have a serious form of the disease. Biden can at times appear visibly exhausted during public events and is prone to mangling sentences, but he'll often make a show of jogging a few steps across the White House South Lawn when boarding Marine One to show his vigor.

Asked in interviews about the age factor, Biden points to his achievements in office and says simply: "Watch me." During Biden's last checkup, he had a colonoscopy under general anesthesia and transferred his powers for one hour and 25 minutes to Vice President Kamala Harris, making her the first woman in US history to serve briefly as acting president. —AFP

'Run out of road'

Sturgeon, 52, confirmed she would remain first minister until the SNP elects a new leader, and also stay on as a member of the Edinburgh parliament until at least the next Scottish election, due in 2026. Opponents and SNP members alike praised her contribution to UK politics over recent years, including during the Covid pandemic.

But she departs after facing mounting pressure over her tactics on independence as well as over transgender rights. And opinion polls point to waning support for Scotland breaking away from the UK since the Supreme Court ruling.

Possible contenders in the SNP include Constitution Secretary Angus Robertson, Finance Secretary Kate Forbes, Health Secretary Humza Yousaf and Deputy First Minister John Swinney. "I firmly believe that my successor, whoever he or she may be, will lead Scotland to independence, and I'll be there cheering him or her on every single step of the way," Sturgeon said.

But others cheered her departure. In Glasgow, Scotland's biggest city and a bastion of anti-independence sentiment, demonstrators danced a line and waved UK flags late on Wednesday, as they chanted "conga, conga, conga, Nicola's no longer!" —AFP

Soul-searching for Scotland's SNP after Sturgeon quits

EDINBURGH: The Scottish National Party (SNP) on Thursday faced calls to postpone a special conference aimed at reviving its troubled push for independence, after the surprise resignation of leader Nicola Sturgeon.

After more than eight eventful years as Scotland's first minister and SNP chief, Sturgeon said on Wednesday she lacked the "energy" to carry on and would step down. The party's executive was to meet later on Thursday to set the timetable for the leadership race. There is no frontrunner to succeed Sturgeon, who was a towering presence in Scottish and UK politics, and no clear path forward on the dream of independence for Scotland from the United Kingdom. Sturgeon announced the conference for March 19 after the Supreme Court in London agreed that only the UK

International

Tensions brew in German village of Upahl over refugee arrivals

Almost 218,000 asylum applications were filed in Germany last year

UPAHL: The main road through the northern German village of Upahl is lined with wooden placards, their bright letters standing out against the grey sky and muddy fields. "Upahl says no", reads one. "Think of our children!" says another.

The signs are in opposition to a planned centre for 400 asylum seekers in the town with a population of 500. Like many communities across Germany, the district of Northwestern Mecklenburg, where Upahl is located, has witnessed an increase in arrivals of asylum seekers and people with official refugee status.

Almost 218,000 asylum applications were filed in Germany last year — more than twice as many as in 2020 and the biggest number since the influx of 2015-16. In 2022, the largest number of people seeking asylum hailed from war-torn Syria and Afghanistan, followed by Turkey and Iraq.

In addition, more than a million people arrived from Ukraine. The latter were granted a special status that means they do not need to apply for asylum to be allowed to remain in Germany. To cope with the arrivals, sports halls have been requisitioned in Northwestern Mecklenburg as temporary housing for newcomers.

Quiet life

But with current capacity exhausted and between 20 and 30 new arrivals every week, local officials voted in January to set up a new centre in Upahl using converted transport containers. It is due to open in March. "Due to the many people who have come to us (from Ukraine) plus the asylum seekers... we have a

situation that we can no longer cope with," Tino Schomann, chief administrative officer for the district, told AFP. "I need more places, more capacity," he said.

But some locals are opposed to the centre and have staged demonstrations against the plans. "Life in Upahl is so beautiful because everything is very quiet," said Jan Achilles, 46, an environmental analyst who is also a community representative.

"When 500 people, whether refugees or Germans or whatever, are crammed together in a heap, problems arise." Retired truck driver Bernd Wien, 66, who has lived in Upahl since 1980, has been at all the demos. "We just want to live here quietly, to enjoy our retirement," he said. After months of pleading from local officials across Germany for more help to deal with new arrivals, Interior Minister Nancy Faeser is hosting a meeting on Thursday to address the issue.

Ahead of the discussions, Faeser promised they would help offer an overview of the "joint humanitarian effort" required.

Far-right fears

In 2015-16, the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party harnessed anger at Germany's influx of asylum seekers to win votes and ultimately enter parliament for the first time. Right-wing extremists have been spotted at recent protests in Upahl and elsewhere, and fears are growing that the current tensions could provide a further boost to the far-right party.

"The general situation is ultimately far more dramatic than in 2015 due to the war, inflation, economic crises and new refugees," Hajo Funke, a political scien-

ist at the Free University of Berlin, told AFP. According to a recent survey by pollster INSA, around half of Germans — 51 percent — believe the country is taking in too many refugees.

However, the AfD's support is likely to have reached a plateau because "the fear of violent fascism is widespread among more than 80 percent of the German population", Funke said. Upahl resident Anika Reisch, 38, has sympathy for people coming to

the village "who are traumatised, who are worried about the future".

But the mother of two, who runs an insurance business around the corner from the planned new centre, still doesn't want it on her doorstep. "It can't go well for the people who come here either. They have no privacy at all. They can't... come to terms with everything they have experienced. That can't go well for either side," she said. — AFP



UPAHL: Placards reading 'Afraid for Upahl' (L) and 'Upahl says no' are displayed along the main road passing through Upahl, northern Germany. The main road through the northern German village of Upahl is lined with a series of wooden placards, their bright neon letters standing out against the grey sky and muddy fields. — AFP

Belarus, Ukraine face off across border crossing

DZIVIN: Beyond piled-up tyres and barbed wire, a Ukrainian flag flutters across from Belarusian border guards patrolling an increasingly tense frontier. Next to the Ukrainian colours, another flag could be seen in a sign of defiance—the white and red used by the suppressed Belarusian opposition. Like all other checkpoints between Kremlin-aligned Belarus and its neighbour to the south, the crossing has been shut for a year after Russian forces poured over the border to attack Ukraine. Now, fears are mounting that Belarus could enter the conflict despite assurances from its president, Alexander Lukashenko, that this would only happen in the event of aggression from the Ukrainian side.

Belarusian guards in the village of Dzivin, often referred to as Divin, said they were on standby, claiming the other side had staged several "provocations." "There are attempts to bring the Belarusian side into this conflict," Belarusian border guard spokesman Anton Bychkovsky said. "We are doing everything not to be dragged into some border incidents." He said the situation was "controlled but tense".

Authorities in the reclusive country, ruled by Lukashenko since 1994, showed AFP the Dzivin border checkpoint as part of a tightly controlled press tour. Belarus has been virtually closed to foreign media since Lukashenko suppressed protests against his rule in 2020.

The checkpoint is in a rural area of southwest Belarus, far from the fighting in Ukraine. At the crossing, with a deserted no-man's-land between the two sides, the prospect of tensions easing any time soon seems remote.

All 13 crossing points by road have been closed across the Ukraine-Belarus border, stretching more than 1,000 kilometres (621 miles). There are also increased controls in border zones, with a checkpoint set up outside Dzivin where only locals can enter without permission.

For Ukrainians who want to get into Belarus, the only way is through Poland. Belarusian border guards said around 7,600 Ukrainians have entered Belarus since the start of this year, mostly in transit seeking to get to Russia.

'Start negotiating'

Ever since Belarus allowed its territory to be used as a staging point for Russia's offensive, there have been concerns in both Belarus and Ukraine that the two countries could go to war. Lukashenko is largely reliant on Russian President Vladimir Putin for political and economic support. Minsk still hosts an unspecified number of Russian troops and has set up a joint regional



DZIVIN: Belarusian border guards check drivers and vehicles entering the border zone near the frontier with Ukraine near the settlement of Divin in the Brest region on February 15, 2023. — AFP

force with Moscow. The allies also held shared air force drills that ended on February 1.

In this context, analysts say any hope of winding down tensions between Belarus and Ukraine is improbable. At the Dzivin crossing, around 500 cars once passed between southwest Belarus and northwest Ukraine. But now contact between

Belarusian and Ukrainian border forces has "completely stopped", Bychkovsky said. Asked about the day Russia attacked Ukraine in February last year, he paused and said: "Like all the international community, that day we realised that politicians need to finally sit down at the table and start negotiating." — AFP

TikTokers jailed as Iraq targets 'decadent' posts

BAGHDAD: Dancing to Iraqi pop made TikTok personality Om Fahad a hit among tens of thousands of followers, but now she is in prison, caught up in a state campaign targeting "decadent content". The young Iraqi woman using that pseudonym was sentenced early this month to half a year behind bars for the light-hearted video clips that show her in tight-fitting clothes.

A new government campaign aims to cleanse social media platforms of content that breaches Iraqi "mores and traditions", the interior ministry announced in January. A specialized committee now scours TikTok, YouTube and other popular platforms for clips deemed offensive by many in the largely conservative and patriarchal society. "This type of content is no less dangerous than organized crime," the ministry declared in a promotional video that asked the public to help by reporting such content. It is one of the causes of the destruction of the Iraqi family and society."

Days after Om Fahad's sentencing, another TikTok influencer who goes by the online name of Assal Hossam received an even harsher sentence of two years in prison. Some of her videos showed her dressed in a tight military uniform. In total, a dozen people have so far been arrested for "decadent content", said an interior ministry official who spoke to AFP on condition of anonymity.

Many Iraqis embrace the campaign, and a platform set up by the authorities has received 96,000 reports from the general public, said the official. Six verdicts have so far been handed down, according to a judge working on such cases quoted by the Iraqi news agency INA. An investigative judge in the southern city of Amarah recently dealt with the cases of four minor social media celebrities accused of "offending public morals and indecent exposure", said the judiciary's Supreme Council.

Among the four, who have since been released, was Aboud Skeebea, with over 160,000 TikTok followers and known for humorous videos in which he makes incomprehensible remarks employing a pseudo-American accent. There was also Hassan



BASRA: Iraqi TikTok celebrity Om Fahad is pictured at the Basra International Stadium during a match on Jan 19, 2023. — AFP

Al-Shamri, whose skits see him play the female character Madiha, who is of humble origins and has a strong temper, and which has earned him three million fans on the online platform.

In a video published after his release, Shamri apologized and said he had deleted some material that had been deemed "offensive", although he added that he would continue producing content. The Iraqi state bases its campaign on penal code articles "with vague and elastic terminology, such as public morals and indecent exposure", said Mustafa Saadun, of the Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights. "These, he said, are open to "interpretation" and mean that "someone who has done nothing wrong risks being arrested".

Iraq, ravaged by years of war and sectarian conflict after the 2003 US invasion that overthrew Saddam Hussein, has returned to a semblance of normality despite ongoing political instability, corruption and sporadic violence. But civil liberties - of women, sexual minorities and other groups - remain constrained in a conservative and male-dominated society strongly influenced by tribal culture.

Saadun - who said he "can't stand" popular YouTubers and TikTokers - nonetheless deplored the campaign against them. He said the authorities should instead "flex their muscles and punish those who publish fake news and hate speech". The rights activist said he fears the government is now "taking the pulse" of society "before moving on to a more dangerous stage - to hold accountable all those who criticize state institutions and politicians". — AFP

Kuwait Visa app soft-launched...

Continued from Page 1

The project includes the establishment of data centers for border security and to provide devices

Girl rescued from rubble...

Continued from Page 1

the official confirmed total to 39,875. Turkey has suspended rescue operation in some regions. The government in war-torn Syria has done the same in areas under its control.

Turkish police also detained a man trying to steal a baby from a hospital in southern Turkey, state media reported. A man walked into a hospital pretending to be a police chief in the Samandag district of the quake-affected province of Hatay, the Anadolu state news agency said Wednesday. The hospital staff realized his police ID card was fake and called the real police, it added. When officers detained the man, they found fake police and military ID cards, gold and money in Turkish lira, dollars and euros worth around \$6,500, Anadolu said. The agency did not provide information about the baby. Some parents in the region have expressed alarm to AFP over rumored child kidnappings. Turkish Family Minister Derya Yanik on Monday said at least 1,362 children had been separated from their families by the quake.

Meanwhile, the United Nations launched an appeal for \$1 billion Thursday to help the victims. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said in a statement that the funds would provide humanitarian relief for

to ease procedures by digitally reading travel documents, verifying their authenticity and checking their security features to control cases of forgery, as they will be matched with the biometrics of travelers and crosschecked with local and international travel ban lists.

The project also includes checking vehicles at land borders to verify they are not stolen locally or internationally and documenting their movement.

three months to 5.2 million people. The money would "allow aid organizations to rapidly scale up vital support," including in the areas of food security, protection, education, water and shelter, he added. "The needs are enormous, people are suffering and there's no time to lose," Guterres implored. "I urge the international community to step up and fully fund this critical effort in response to one of the biggest natural disasters of our times."

More than 9 million people in Turkey have been directly impacted by the disaster, according to Ankara. Turkey's people have experienced "unspeakable heartache," the UN's Emergency Relief Coordinator Martin Griffiths said in a separate statement announcing the flash appeal. "We must stand with them in their darkest hour and ensure they receive the support they need," added Griffiths, who heads the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

OCHA said in its statement that hundreds of thousands of people, including small children and elderly people, are without access to shelter, food, water, heaters and medical care in freezing temperatures. It added that some 47,000 buildings have been destroyed or damaged across Turkey, with thousands of people having sought refuge in temporary shelters.

The UN is delivering hot meals, food, tents, warm winter clothing, blankets, mattresses, kitchen sets and medical supplies to affected areas, OCHA said. On Tuesday, the UN launched a \$397 million appeal to help quake victims in Syria. — AFP

Lebanese smash bank facades...

Continued from Page 1

banks, which have repeatedly closed for days. This month, the Association of Banks in Lebanon declared an open-ended strike, saying the crisis was affecting the entire financial system. Lebanon's eco-

nomie crisis has left many struggling to make ends meet in a country where poverty rates have reached 80 percent of the population, according to the United Nations.

The pound's plunge has triggered a wave of price hikes including on fuel, food items and other basic goods. Lebanon is being run by a caretaker government and is also without a president, as lawmakers have repeatedly failed to elect a successor to Michel Aoun, whose mandate expired at the end of October. — AFP

International

Paraguay leader hails Taiwan as 'beacon of democracy'

Taiwan finds remains of suspected Chinese balloon, tightens security

TAIPEI: Paraguay's outgoing leader hailed Taiwan as a "beacon of democracy" Thursday, ahead of a presidential vote that could see his country cutting ties with the island. "In the face of continued threats and tense situation, the Taiwan people have not given up their resolve for peace, and continued to play the role of a beacon of democracy in the region," President Mario Abdo Benitez said on a visit to the island.

The South American nation is one of only 14 countries that officially recognise Taipei over Beijing, which claims self-ruled Taiwan as part of its territory and has vowed to seize it. But Taiwan's decades-old diplomatic ties with Paraguay are at risk with opposition candidate Efraín Alegre reportedly saying he would switch recognition to Beijing if elected in April's presidential polls.

Latin America has been a key diplomatic battleground for China and Taiwan since the two split in 1949 after a civil war.

China has spent decades successfully convincing Taiwan's diplomatic allies to switch recognition, gaining eight in recent years — most recently Nicaragua.

Taiwan accused Beijing of trying to lure Paraguay away in exchange for COVID-19 vaccines in 2021 when the country was struggling with soaring infections. At that time Taiwan's foreign minister Joseph Wu said Beijing's "vaccine diplomacy" had generated a lot of pressure on Abdo Benitez's government, while the political opposition was "very willing to link up with China".

At a separate event on Thursday, Abdo Benitez reiterated his "firmest support" for Taiwan and pledged to be its "most staunch friend", whether as a president or former head-of-state.

Meanwhile, Taiwan said it found the remains of a suspected Chinese meteorological balloon on Thursday and would increase patrols at military facilities as Beijing intensifies threats toward the self-ruled island.

The incident comes after US President Joe Biden ordered the shooting down of a Chinese balloon after it crossed US territory, including over areas with sensitive military sites. US officials said it was a surveillance balloon and part of a fleet of such craft allegedly floating around the globe.

Beijing insists it was a meteorological craft that had blown off course and has accused Washington of sending similar devices into its airspace, charges the US has denied. Taiwan's army said "unidentified objects" were spotted falling from the sky on Thursday over the Matsu islands, some 280 kilometres from capital Taipei.

There they found the remains of a balloon that was one meter in diameter and a device inscribed with simplified Chinese characters commonly used in China that read "Taiyuan Radio No. 1 Factory Co., Ltd." and "meteorology instrument," the army said in a statement.

"Our initial analysis is that the remains belong to a meteorological detection device which have been



TAIPEI: Paraguay's President Mario Abdo Benitez (C) and Taiwan's President Tsai Ing-wen (L) inspect an honour guard during a welcome ceremony at the Presidential Office in Taipei on February 16, 2023. — AFP

stored by relevant units to be further analysed," the army said. "All units are required to enhance camp patrols and continue to... monitor relevant situation." Beijing has ramped up military, diplomatic and economic pressure in recent years on Taiwan, which China claims as part of its territory and has vowed to seize one day, by force if necessary.

Taiwan's defence ministry said at a press conference on Tuesday that Chinese meteorological balloons had previously been spotted without providing details on the number and frequency.

The ministry said it would shoot down devices that pose a "high level of threat" but it has not yet encountered such a craft. — AFP



DANANG: This picture taken and released on February 15, 2023 by the Vietnam News Agency shows South Korean and Vietnamese defendants at a trial for people smuggling in Danang. — AFP

Vietnam jails S Koreans for people smuggling

HANOI: Vietnam has jailed four South Korean men for smuggling people into the country during the COVID-19 pandemic, police said Thursday. Lee Kwan Yuong, 55, and Seo Yuong Jin, 50, were sentenced to 10 years in prison for "organising illegal entry into Vietnam", police in the central city of Danang said on their website.

Song Hong Sup and Kim Chang Gi were jailed for nine years and four-and-a-half years respectively by the court in Danang. Vietnam largely closed its doors to the world in early 2020 to curb the spread of the coronavirus, with a very small number of foreign experts and skilled workers from authorised companies given permission to enter. It reopened in March last year.

State media said the men had used their companies to illegally bring in nearly 200 South Koreans. Lee, former deputy chairman of the Association of South Korean People in central Vietnam, earned more than \$42,000 while Seo pocketed \$3,600 from their services between December 2020 and March 2021, when they were arrested.

Fifteen Vietnamese men and women were jailed and five others, including one South Korean were given suspended sentences for the same charge. Vietnam's authorities are examining several cases of wrongdoing during the pandemic period.

At least 100 officials and businesspeople were arrested in connection with a scandal involving the distribution of COVID-19 testing kits. Thirty-seven people—many of them senior diplomats and police—have also been arrested in an investigation into the repatriation of Vietnamese nationals during the pandemic. South Korea is the top foreign investor in Vietnam, with total registered capital of more than 81 billion dollars. — AFP

Alvaro Uribe, one in a succession of right-wing governments that led Colombia for 200 years until Petro, a former member of an urban guerrilla group, won elections in June 2022.

'Trafficker before merchant'

The president had sent a proposal to Congress to suspend arrest warrants for certain drug traffickers as he seeks ways to end ongoing fighting between guerrillas, cartels and other armed groups over drug and illegal mining resources.

Many in Colombia are opposed to the move, fearing criminals will be let off scot-free. In Cali in the country's southwest, a protester Wednesday held up a banner proclaiming that the government "puts the trafficker before the merchant, the criminal before the businessman." On Tuesday, smaller groups of people had gathered for demonstrations in response to a call by the president for marches in support of his plans. Last year, the Congress approved a law that increased taxes on the rich, another move widely opposed. — AFP



BOGOTA: Opposers of the Colombian President Gustavo Petro hold a big national flag as they take part in a demonstration against the Government's reforms in Bogota. — AFP

Thousands protest against Colombian prez reform plans

BOGOTA: Thousands of Colombians protested Wednesday against health care reforms proposed by the country's first-ever leftist president Gustavo Petro, and an amnesty proposed for members of armed groups in his quest for "total peace."

Dressed in white and waving the Colombian flag, rivers of people marched in Bogota, Medellin, Cali and other cities chanting: "No more Petro." Petro came to power last August with a raft of proposals to reform health care, pensions and the prison system.

His government has also floated the idea of giving criminals immunity in exchange for laying down arms, similar to concessions made to FARC guerrillas in negotiations that led to a peace accord in 2016 but not an end to violence.

Protesters who likened Petro to Venezuela's deceased socialist leader Hugo Chavez, are against the health sector reforms outlined in legislative proposals the president has presented to Congress. The Petro government has said it will seek to increase the role of the state in healthcare and reduce that of the private sector. But the move is opposed by the right-wing opposition and the union of private health sector business owners. The reforms are likely to pass as Petro's left-wing bloc in Congress enjoys a majority thanks to a coalition with centrist and moderate right-wing parties.

"The streets have spoken, they have spoken in a massive way and they are saying: 'It (the government) is not going to impose a health reform... it is not going to impose a total peace on us,'" former vice president Francisco Santos said at a march in the capital Bogota Wednesday. Santos served under former president

Ethiopia church says crisis over as bishops apologise

NAIROBI: Ethiopia's Orthodox Christian Church, one of the oldest in the world, says a crisis that erupted after a group of rebel archbishops created their own synod has been resolved. The three archbishops who set up the rival body in Ethiopia's largest and most populous region of Oromia have apologised, the Church leadership said in a statement posted on Facebook late Wednesday.

"The recent problems created in the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo church have been solved by face-to-face discussions," it said. The three archbishops, who were excommunicated last month after their actions, will be reinstated, it added. The announcement followed a meeting Wednesday brokered by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, who is himself from the Oromo community and had been accused of backing the rebel clergy. "This is a strong church and we have agreed to bring back the lost sheep," Abiy said at the meeting.

The tensions in the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church had spilled over into violence earlier this month when eight people died in attacks on a house of worship in the southern town of Shashamene, according to the

Ethiopia Human Rights Commission. "Security forces and their (civilian) collaborators used disproportionate force leaving at least eight dead by either gunshot wounds or beatings," the state-affiliated but independent body said in a statement last week.

"Beatings, intimidation, expulsion from churches, forced restriction of movement and unlawful detentions have been carried out in various areas on individuals." The crisis had threatened the unity of the Ethiopian Church, which accounts for about 40 percent of the country's 115 million population and has been headed by Patriarch Abune Mathias for a decade. The break-away bishops accused the Church of discrimination and linguistic and cultural hegemony, saying congregations in Oromia are not served in their native language, claims rejected by the patriarchate.

In Wednesday's statement, the Church said it would provide resources to expand services in Oromo in Oromia and other areas of southern Ethiopia. The Church had called for peaceful protests over the crisis last weekend, a move that saw the internet and social media briefly restricted, but they were later called off after talks with the government. The Church had accused Abiy's administration of interfering in its affairs and making comments that effectively recognised the "illegitimate group". Orthodox leaders have long complained of persecution, including the burning of churches several years ago, and relations with the government have been tense in the past, including over the Tigray conflict in northern Ethiopia. — AFP



MANAGUA: Supporters of Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega take part in a pro-government march in Managua. Nicaragua released and expelled to the United States 222 detained members of Nicaragua's opposition, stripping them of their citizenship. — AFP

Nicaragua yanks citizenship from 94 more dissidents

MANAGUA: A Nicaraguan court under President Daniel Ortega stripped the citizenship from 94 exiled dissidents and declared them to be "traitors to the fatherland," drawing sharp criticism from a regional UN watchdog agency.

Among the dissidents is perhaps Nicaragua's most acclaimed living author, Sergio Ramirez, who once served as vice president under Ortega, who has been widely accused of authoritarianism. Others include a Catholic bishop, Silvio Baez, and several former comrades-in-arms of Ortega in the leftist Sandinista Front that came to power in 1979, only to lose elections in 1990.

Another writer, Gioconda Belli, and a prominent human rights activist, Vilma Nunez, also were stripped of citizenship as were former Sandinista leaders Luis Carrion and Monica Baltodano and crusading journalist Carlos Fernando Chamorro.

The chief of Managua's court of appeals, Ernesto Rodriguez Mejia, read a resolution declaring the 94 exiled dissidents to be "fugitives from justice." "The accused executed and continue carrying out criminal acts to the detriment of peace, sovereignty, independ-

ence and self-determination of the Nicaraguan people," the judge said, adding that they fomented economic sabotage of the Ortega government by calling for boycotts.

"Due to these facts, the accused can no longer be considered Nicaraguan citizens," he said. The Central America office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights voiced its "alarm" over the action. "We condemn in the strongest possible terms the new wave of violations of (human rights) and call on the state to immediately cease persecution and reprisal" against dissidents and human rights defenders, the office tweeted.

Since large-scale street protests erupted against his rule in 2018, Ortega has employed heavily armed paramilitary squads to crush opposition and jailed all major opposition figures. The Ortega government freed and expelled a group of 222 jailed dissidents last week, yanking their citizenship after putting them on a charter flight to Washington.

Ortega came back to power after 2007 elections, and has steadily seized control over all branches of government. Ramirez, the writer, who is exiled in Spain, broke with the Sandinista Front in the mid-1990s, when he founded a political movement that vowed to adhere to democratic principles.

Ramirez failed in a 1996 bid for the presidency, but has had far more luck in his writing career, winning the 2017 Cervantes Prize given by the Spanish government, which is the most prestigious literary prize in the Spanish-speaking world. — AFP

Business

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 17, 2023

World Bank chief Malpass to step down

‘This is an opportunity for a smooth leadership transition’

WASHINGTON: World Bank chief David Malpass announced Wednesday he would step down nearly a year early, ending a tenure at the head of the development lender that was clouded by questions over his climate stance. The veteran of Republican administrations in the United States was appointed to the role in 2019 when Donald Trump was president and previously served as Under Secretary of the Treasury for international affairs.

His tenure at the World Bank saw the organization grapple with global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russian invasion of Ukraine and an international economic slowdown. “After a good deal of thought, I’ve decided to pursue new challenges,” the 66-year-old was quoted as saying in a statement from the bank, having informed its board of his decision.

“This is an opportunity for a smooth leadership transition as the Bank Group works to meet increasing global challenges,” Malpass added. In recent months, Malpass has come up against calls for his resignation or removal.

Climate activists had called for Malpass to be ousted for what they said was an inadequate approach to the climate crisis and the chorus grew louder after his appearance at a New York Times-organized conference last September.

Pressed on stage to respond to a claim by former US vice president Al Gore that he was a climate denier, Malpass declined several times to say if he believed man-made emissions were warming the planet-responding, “I’m not a scientist.”

He later said he had no plans to stand down and moved to clarify his position, acknowledging that climate-warming emissions were coming from man-made sources, including fossil fuels. The White

House previously rebuked Malpass, with Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre saying the expectation was for the bank to be a global leader on climate crisis response.

Quick response

The bank said in a statement on Wednesday that it has “responded quickly” in the face of recent global challenges, in particular mobilizing a record \$440 billion to tackle climate change, the pandemic and other issues.

“Under (Malpass’s) leadership, the Bank Group more than doubled its climate finance to developing countries, reaching a record \$32 billion last year,” the statement added. In a note to staff seen by AFP, Malpass said: “Developing countries around the world are facing unprecedented crises and I’m proud that the Bank Group has continued to respond with speed, scale, innovation, and impact.”

Malpass’s term would have originally ended in 2024. Environmental groups welcomed his departure. “Under David Malpass, the @WorldBank lost valuable time in fighting climate change,” tweeted Friends of the Earth.

“Not only did he fail to stop actions that fuel climate chaos and injustice, Malpass pushed for Wall Street-friendly policies that go against the public interest.” In a statement, Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said the world has benefitted from his strong support for Ukraine, his work to assist the Afghan people and his commitment to helping low-income countries achieve debt sustainability through debt reduction.

She added that the United States looks forward to a swift nomination process by the World Bank’s



WASHINGTON: Peterson Institute for International Economics President Adam Posen (R) listens while World Bank President David Malpass speaks during an event about trade at the headquarters of the World Bank, in Washington. —AFP

board for the organization’s next president. “We will put forward a candidate to lead the World Bank and build on the Bank’s longstanding work... and who will carry forward the vital work we are undertaking to evolve the multilateral development banks,” she said. The head of the World Bank is traditionally an

American, while the leader of the other major international lender in Washington, the International Monetary Fund, tends to be European. Prior to assuming his role as World Bank president, Malpass repeatedly lambasted the big development lenders as wasteful and ineffective and called for reforms. —AFP



BLAGNAC: (From L) Airbus chief executive officer Guillaume Faury, Airbus communications and corporate affairs Julie Kitcher and Airbus chief financial officer Dominik Asam attend the Airbus Annual press conference in Blagnac, southwestern France on February 16, 2023. —AFP

Airbus earns record net profit of 4.2bn euros in 2022

TOULOUSE: European aircraft manufacturer Airbus said on Thursday profits soared to a record level in 2022 despite supply chain problems limiting its ability to raise production. Net profit rose one percent to 4.2 billion euros (\$4.5 billion) last year, when Airbus delivered 661 aircraft, despite original plans to hand over 720 to clients.

Airbus had chopped production during the COVID pandemic, when airlines were forced to halt most operations due to travel restrictions.

It was hoping to quickly scale back up now that traffic is recovering and airlines are looking to step up purchases of fuel-efficient aircraft, given high fuel prices.

“We delivered solid financials despite an adverse operating environment that prevented our supply chain from recovering at the pace we expected,” Airbus chief executive Guillaume Faury said.

Airbus has over 10,000 suppliers, some of which had problems boosting production after having reduced staff numbers during the pandemic.

Obtaining raw materials hampered others and the

Russian invasion of Ukraine complicated sourcing certain parts.

Sales rose 13 percent to 58.9 billion euros. That reflected the increase in the number of aircraft delivered last year and also the strength of the US dollar, the currency in which sales are made.

“The company had to adjust its operations accordingly, which led to lower commercial aircraft deliveries than originally planned,” Faury added.

Airbus is targeting 720 deliveries for 2023. It hopes to step up production of the various models of its A320 medium-haul aircraft to 65 per month by the end of next year and to 75 per month in 2026.

It aims to increase production of its new long-haul A350 by a third to nine per month by 2024 and that of the A330 from three to four by next year.

Its order book rose by 820 aircraft in 2022 to stand at 7,239 at the end of that year. Despite the continuing supply chain problem, the general outlook for the sector looks promising. Air traffic is expected to return to pre-pandemic levels this year and double by 2050.

Airbus said it expects adjusted operating profits -- that exclude restructuring charges and changes in provisions -- should rise to 6.0 billion euros in 2023, up from 5.3 billion in 2022.

Airbus proposed a higher dividend payment of 1.80 euros per share. The company’s shares rose three percent when trading got underway. —AFP

Meanwhile, the value of exports largely stagnated, increasing just three percent in 2022 to 106.8 billion euros. The meagre figure saw China slip two places to fourth in the ranking of export destinations for German goods.

Fears have been growing in Germany about an over-reliance on China against the backdrop of tensions between the West and Beijing over its ties with Russia and human rights issues. “Germany urgently needs a strategy for more diversification” away from China to secure supply of key raw materials and goods, particularly electronics, the German economic think tank IWF Kiel said in a report published Wednesday.

The United States, Germany’s second most important trading partner overall, was the number one destination for items “made in Germany”, sucking up 156 billion euros worth of imports. Overall, Germany’s trade surplus was at its lowest level since 2000 in 2022. The important indicator for the traditional export powerhouse fell to 79.7 billion euros on a year due to the rising cost of energy imports, according to Destatis. —AFP

China remains Germany’s biggest trade partner

FRANKFURT: China was Germany’s biggest trading partner in 2022 for the seventh year in a row, figures published Thursday showed, as policymakers worry about economic over-reliance on Beijing. Goods worth 297.9 billion euros (\$318.9 billion) were exchanged between the two countries last year, up 20 percent despite the continuing impact of the coronavirus pandemic, according to the federal statistics agency Destatis.

Germany’s trade deficit with China -- the difference between the larger value of imports and smaller exports -- hit 84.3 billion euros, the largest figure since the statistics body’s records began in 1950. Imports from China rose to 191.1 billion euros in 2022, an increase of 33 percent on the previous year.

Kuwait University wins CFA annual competition

By Majd Othman

KUWAIT: Chartered Financial Analyst Society Kuwait announced the successful conclusion of its annual CFA Institute Research Challenge for the year 2022/2023, organized by the education committee of the CFA Society that provides university students with mentorship and hands-on training in financial analysis and professional ethics.

Kuwait University was awarded the first place in this year’s challenge, while American University of the Middle East came in second place. The winners have the opportunity to compete in sub-regional competitions representing Kuwait.

During the first phase of the challenge, an informational session was held, which included a presen-



Kuwait University students with the winner’s trophy.

US risks debt default as soon as July: Budget office

WASHINGTON: The United States risks defaulting on payment obligations as soon as July, if lawmakers fail to resolve a gridlock and raise the federal borrowing limit, according to Congressional Budget Office estimates Wednesday.

The forecast by the nonpartisan office serving Congress comes as Republicans threaten to block the usually rubber-stamp approval for raising the nation’s credit limit, if Democrats do not first agree to steep future budget cuts.

“If the debt limit remains unchanged, the government’s ability to borrow using extraordinary measures will be exhausted between July and September 2023,” said the CBO. The latest estimate provides another benchmark on top of the Treasury Department’s expectations.

In January, the US hit its \$31.4 trillion borrowing cap, prompting the Treasury to start measures that allow it to continue financing the government’s activities. The Treasury earlier said its cash and “extraordinary measures” would likely last until early June.

“If the debt limit is not raised or suspended before the extraordinary measures are exhausted, the government would be unable to pay its obligations fully,” the CBO warned Wednesday. “As a result, the gov-

ernment would have to delay making payments for some activities, default on its debt obligations, or both,” it added.

But the date when measures are exhausted remains uncertain as the timing and amount of revenue collections and spending could differ from projections, the CBO said. In particular, if collections fall short, the Treasury could run out of funds before July, the office added. —AFP

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LANHAM: US President Joe Biden speaks about the economy at the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 26 union, in Lanham, Maryland. —AFP

Business

Nigerian president moves to try to ease cash crisis

Scarcity of cash has triggered violent protests in major cities

LAGOS: Nigeria's President Muhammadu Buhari on Thursday defended a currency swap that sparked protests and cash shortages, but ordered old, small denomination 200 naira notes to remain in circulation in a bid to ease scarcities. Nigeria has been struggling with a shortage in physical cash since the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) began to swap old bills of the local naira currency for new, re-designed ones, leading to a shortfall in banknotes.

The scarcity of cash has triggered violent protests in major cities as angry and frustrated bank customers attacked and vandalised banks and blocked roads. The weeks-long cash crisis has intensified days before Nigerians go to the ballot box on February 25 to elect a successor to Buhari who steps down after two terms in office.

In a national broadcast early Thursday, Buhari described the naira policy as a "positive departure from the past" and said it represented a "bold legacy step" towards free and fair elections by helping to curb vote buying. The president said he was moved by the hardships and pain people faced over the cash crunch.

"To further ease the supply pressures, particularly to our citizens, I have given approval to the CBN that the old 200 bank notes be released back into circulation," he said. The policy has introduced redesigned 200, 500 and 1,000 naira notes. The old 200 naira bills will circulate as legal tender for 60 days until April 10 along with the new notes. Buhari said old 500 and 1,000 bills should be deposited with the central bank.

Suffering hardship

Frontrunner candidates in next week's presidential election have traded accusations over the cash shortages, with ruling All Progressives Congress party and main opposition Peoples Democratic Party blaming each other for the crisis.

The race to succeed Buhari is shaping into a three-way battle: APC's Bola Tinubu, a former Lagos governor, PDP's Atiku Abubakar, who was vice president from 1999 to 2007, and Labour Party's Peter Obi, who has emerged to challenge the traditional dominance of APC and PDP.

Buhari said his government "will continue to assess the implementation with a view to ensuring that Nigerians are not unnecessarily burdened." The president asked the central bank to make sure new notes become more available and accessible through the banks.

Tensions have flared in Nigeria since the central bank set a February deadline for depositors to change old notes, leaving many people cashless and frustrated. Many people working in Nigeria's informal economy and in transport use cash for transactions rather than banking apps.

The central bank said the policy was aimed at mopping up excess and counterfeit naira from the system as well as discouraging cash ransom payments to kidnappers and bandits. The policy was also introduced to promote cashless transactions by limiting the use of cash for businesses.

But some state governments have taken the central bank to court, seeking to suspend the pol-



KANO: Rick-shaws drive past a campaign billboard of the candidate of Labour Party Peter Obi and runningmate Datti Baba-Ahmed displayed along the road in Kano, northwest Nigeria. Africa's most populous country has been crippled by fuel shortages for weeks, and cash dispensers are running empty after a sudden currency swap two weeks ahead of Nigeria's presidential election. —AFP

icy and allow Nigerians to use both the old and new notes until the banks are able to provide

enough cash. The court is set to make a ruling on February 22. —AFP

African leaders meet to push for free trade zone

NAIROBI: Three years ago, amid a blaze of optimism, African leaders officially launched a new continent-wide free trade area after 17 years of haggling. But as the leaders travel to Addis Ababa for the annual African Union summit this weekend, transforming the block-buster pact into reality remains a tough ask.

The African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA), billed as the biggest free trade accord in the world in terms of population, gathers 54 out of 55 African countries, with Eritrea the only holdout. Two days of talks under the theme "Acceleration of AfCFTA implementation" open on Saturday.

AfCFTA's plan is to boost intra-African trade by 60 percent by 2034 by eliminating almost all tariffs, creating an economic bloc of 1.3 billion people with a combined gross domestic product of \$3.4 trillion. African countries currently trade only about 15 percent of their goods and services with each other, compared to more than 65 percent with European countries. If fully implemented, AfCFTA would lift 50 million Africans out of extreme poverty and raise incomes by nine percent by 2035, according to the World Bank. But implementation has fallen well short of that goal, running into hurdles including disagreements over tariff reductions and border closures caused by the Covid pandemic.

'Rattled economies'

This year's summit comes at a "delicate moment" for Africa, according to the International Crisis Group (ICG) think tank, citing Ethiopia's nascent peace process, conflicts in the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Sahel region, South Sudan and jihadist insurgencies in Somalia and Mozambique.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine and Western sanctions that followed "have rattled African economies and left many in deep distress", ICG adds, with food prices shooting up. While Europe's internal market is knitted together by energy pipelines, motorways, railways and flight routes, Africa is playing catch-up, with decrepit infrastructure and corruption handicapping the process.

Analysts say the obstacles, which range from ubiquitous red tape to the entrenched protectionism of some countries, must be overcome for Africa to achieve the coveted single market. "There is a declared political will, but it will take a long time to put in place," Paul-Simon Handy, regional director of the Institute for Security Studies in Addis Ababa, told AFP.

Dorine Nininahazwe, African Union director of US-headquartered non-profit ONE Campaign, agreed. "There are fears from certain African countries that with opening borders, they will have an influx of people they cannot control," Nininahazwe told AFP.

The summit, long criticised for being ineffectual, will also aim to address the raging conflict in eastern DR Congo. Rebels, many of them a legacy of regional wars that flared during the 1990s and the early 2000s, have sown chaos in the mineral-rich east and sparked a diplomatic row with neighbouring Rwanda, which is accused of backing the M23 militia.

The African Union scored some success in November last year in fostering a peace deal in Ethiopia between the federal government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front. Sudan, Mali, Guinea and Burkina Faso, four countries that have witnessed military coups, will also be seeking to rejoin the AU. —AFP

Markets rise as traders evaluate strong US economy

HONG KONG: Asian and European markets rose Thursday, extending gains in New York, as a forecast-busting US retail sales report showed American consumers remained confident despite elevated inflation and the prospect of more interest rate hikes.

Traders have been tracking US data for months, with the general consensus being that, while good for the economy, a strong reading is bad for stocks as it adds pressure on the Federal Reserve to keep tightening monetary policy.

With this in mind, a massive half-a-million jump in new jobs last month was the spark for a sell-off across the world, and a prompt for central bank officials to warn rate hikes would need to go higher than

expected and stay there longer.

News this week of a smaller-than-estimated drop in January inflation reinforced that view, further denting investor sentiment. However, analysts said Wednesday's jump in retail sales—the biggest since March 2021 — may have led some to change their minds from the "good news is bad news" mantra, and that the economy could avoid a "hard landing", or recession. Quincy Krosby, of LPL Financial, told Bloomberg Television that the gains were "telling us maybe we can keep going as long as inflation is coming down overall and growth is solid". National Australia Bank's Rodrigo Catril added: "Strength in retail sales figures have been supported by a strong labour market... and as noted by the New York Consumer survey earlier in the week, the US consumer is not worried about losing their job."

"The main takeaway is that the US consumer remains in rude health and with inflation still too high for comfort, the Fed has no alternative but to keep lifting the funds rate." All three main indexes on Wall Street initially sank on the latest figures before rebounding to end the day in the green.

Renault boosts profitability

BOULOGNE-BILLANCOURT: French automaker Renault said Thursday it boosted manufacturing profitability in 2022 but the sale of its operations in Russia pushed the company into a net loss. Renault expanded its operating profit margin to 5.6 percent of sales in 2022 and aims to increase it to at least 6.0 percent this year.

Meanwhile sales rose by 11.4 percent to 46.4 billion euros (\$49.7 billion). "2022 has more than kept its promises: with results above our initial objectives and market expectations," chief executive Luca de Meo said in a statement. "This performance reflects the energy and hard work of the Renault Group's teams even as we have faced strong headwinds related to the disposal of our operations in Russia, the semiconductor crisis and cost inflation," he added.

Last May, Renault handed over its 68 percent stake in AvtoVAZ, the largest carmaker in Russia along with top brand Lada, to the Moscow government as it joined an exodus of firms fleeing the country after the military intervention in Ukraine.

Inflation nibbles at Nestle margins

ZURICH: Swiss food giant Nestle said on Thursday sales rose last year but inflation nibbled at its margins, while net profits plunged due to asset disposals in 2021. Sales rose by 8.4 percent to 94.4 billion Swiss francs (95.5 billion euros, \$102.3 billion). However most of that was due to the company hiking prices. Nestle, which makes Nespresso capsules, Maggi soups and KitKat chocolate bars, estimated its real internal growth to be just 0.1 percent. "Last year brought many challenges and tough choices for families, communities and businesses," Nestle chief executive Mark Schneider said.

"Inflation surged to unprecedented levels, cost of living pressures intensified and the effects of geopolitical tensions were felt around the world,"

Bankrupt Sri Lanka hikes power prices again for IMF deal

COLOMBO: Sri Lanka's electricity board hiked consumer rates by up to 275 percent, officials said Thursday, the second steep increase in months as the bankrupt island nation works to secure an IMF

That created a 2.3-billion-euro hole in the balance sheet and pushed Renault into a net loss of 338 million euros for the year. Despite that setback, de Meo said, "Renault Group's fundamentals have been thoroughly cleaned up and there will be no turning back."

The increasing profitability came despite Renault's sales volumes falling by 5.9 percent excluding Russia and the overall car market continuing to shrink. The group barely kept above the two million vehicles sold last year, with a quarter of them by its budget Dacia brand.

Renault managed the trick by a combination of cutting costs, reducing rebates and raising prices, as well as clients shifting to more upscale models. The company also boosted sales of hybrid and electric vehicles, which are pricier. They now account for 39 percent of sales in Europe, the group's top market.

Renault decided to propose a dividend of 0.25 euros per share, the first time it will pay out to shareholders since 2019. Earlier this month Renault reached agreement with its alliance member Nissan that will balance their cross shareholdings and clear the way for the companies to launch a number of projects throughout the world.

Last year Renault unveiled a sweeping overhaul

he added. Nestle said its underlying trading operating profit margin dipped by three tenths of a percentage point to 17.1 percent.

Net profits fell by 45 percent to 9.3 billion francs in 2022 but the comparison with 2021 is deceptive since the disposal of shares Nestle held in L'Oreal boosted 2021 earnings. The company said underlying earnings per share rose by 8.4 percent, and by 9.4 percent when currency changes are stripped out.

Nestle's board proposed a dividend of 2.95 francs per share, an increase of 15 centimes. "Looking to 2023, we expect another year of robust organic growth, with a focus on restoring our gross margin," said Schneider.

For 2023, the company expects sales growth of between six and eight percent when excluding exceptional changes, down from the 8.3 percent registered on this basis in 2022. It hopes to hold, if not improve, its underlying trading operating profit margin, setting a target range of between 17.0 and

bailout. An unprecedented financial crisis last year saw Sri Lanka's 22 million people suffer through months of food and fuel shortages, along with lengthy power cuts.

The government defaulted on its \$46 billion foreign debt and is finalising a rescue package with the International Monetary Fund to restore its ruined finances. "We had to raise electricity charges to be in line with IMF conditions that we cannot get handouts from the treasury," energy minister Kanchana Wijesekera told reporters.

"We need to generate revenues to cover our



NEW YORK: Meal prices are displayed in a window of a Brooklyn fast food restaurant in New York City. —AFP

And after a rocky week so far, Asia picked up the baton. Hong Kong, Tokyo, Sydney, Seoul, Singapore, Mumbai, Bangkok, Wellington and Taipei were all well up, though Shanghai, Manila and Jakarta reversed earlier gains. London, Paris and Frankfurt all rose at the open. —AFP



BOULOGNE-BILLANCOURT: Renault Group's Chief Financial Officer Thierry Pieton (L) and Renault Group's Chief Executive Luca De Meo (R) present the group's 2022 annual results at Renault's headquarters in Boulogne-Billancourt, west of Paris on February 16, 2023. —AFP

to attract investors as it seeks to accelerate the shift to electric vehicles. Under the green revamp, Renault is to split operations in two, with a new electric vehicle unit and a subsidiary for petrol, diesel and hybrid cars that will pair up with China's Geely. Renault's shares jumped 1.9 percent at the open of trading. —AFP



VERS-CHEZ-LES-BLANC: A logo of the world's leading food industry group Nestle is seen on October 9, 2014 at the group's Research Center in Vers-chez-les-Blanc. —AFP

17.5 percent. Underlying earnings per share in constant currency is expected to rise between six and 10 percent. —AFP

costs." Households will now pay at least 30 rupees (eight cents) per kilowatt-hour for electricity, a figure in line with average tariffs in neighbouring India. The 275 percent increase in the lowest tariff follows a 264 percent hike that came into effect six months ago.

Larger consumers have had their rates hiked by 60 percent following an 80 percent hike in August. Wijesekera said the rate hikes would allow Sri Lanka's state electricity monopoly to end the 140-minute daily blackouts currently in force around the island. —AFP

Lifestyle |



Models present designs by Gabriela Hearst during New York Fashion Week.



KORS HONORS FEMINIST ICON AS NEW YORK FASHION WEEK WRAPS UP

American designer Michael Kors paid tribute to US feminist icon Gloria Steinem on the final day of New York Fashion Week Wednesday. His Fall-Winter 2023 parade saw several models wear round, low-hanging belts in a nod to the 88-year-old Steinem's signature look.

Steinem, considered the leader of second-wave feminism in America in the late 1960s and early '70s, sat front row at the show in Manhattan's West Village. She looked on alongside Vogue editor-in-chief and high priestess of fashion Anna Wintour, and actresses Mindy Kaling and

Kate Hudson. "The women who intrigued me then (and who) still intrigue me today are the women who break the rules, do things their own way," Kors told reporters Tuesday, ahead of the show.

"Even though they're strong or they're powerful, and they're smart, they're happy to admit that they love fashion, and they enjoy fashion," he added. Steinem said in a 2015 interview that she often wore a "concho" belt. A concho is a metal ornament, often silver and round, that has its origins in the culture of the Navajo Native American nation.

Uruguayan-American Gabriela Hearst

is another designer who drew inspiration from non-conformist, pioneering women for the New York parade. On Tuesday, she honored Irish architect Eileen Gray, who paved the way for the modernist architecture movement in the 1920s. Her homage was evident in Hearst's straight, functional cuts of recycled cashmere jackets, trousers and long coats.

Gray's "Dragons" armchair sold at auction in Paris for almost 22 million euros (\$28 million) in 2009, more than 30 years after her death aged 98. It set a record for 20th Century decorative art. "She never got to see this reality and,

like many women, she undervalued herself and her excellence," Hearst said in her designer's notes.

Meanwhile Philippe and David Blond, the duo at the helm of The Blonds, tinged their collection with references to old Hollywood. Glittering dresses and fake furs were combined with Louboutin stilettos and a James Bond soundtrack. Their inspiration was, of course, Elizabeth Taylor, David Blond revealed backstage. — AFP



Models walk the runway during the Michael Kors Collection Fall/Winter 2023 Runway Show during New York Fashion Week in New York City. — AFP photos

UK council returns Banksy freezer

A chest freezer forming part of a work by British street artist Banksy was returned on Wednesday a day after its removal by the local council for "health and safety" reasons. The mural appeared in Margate in southeast England on Tuesday, depicting a 1950s-style housewife with a swollen eye and a missing tooth seemingly shoving her male partner into a real chest freezer.

Despite protests from locals taking pictures of the mural, at the end of a terrace of houses in a rundown part of the seaside town, council workers turned up to throw the freezer into a van. The local council announced on Wednesday however that it had returned the old appliance.

"The freezer which council operatives removed from the Banksy installation in Margate has now been made safe," said a statement from Thanet District Council, which administers Margate. "It has been returned to its original position at the site of the artwork today."

The council said it had had to remove the freezer to carry out works to it "for health and safety reasons". The council acknowledged that Banksy had

raised an important issue in dealing with domestic abuse in his latest work. It was in touch with the owner of the property to find out what they intended to do to preserve it, it added.

Coveted street art

The elusive Banksy, whose true identity remains unconfirmed, posted three images of the work—which he entitled "Valentine's Day Mascara"—on his Instagram account. Two of the images were close-ups showing the woman, wearing a blue pinafore and yellow washing-up gloves, smiling but seemingly with a battered face. The removal of the freezer prompted bemusement among bystanders.

"People were sort of like, 'Stop, stop, you know, this is a Banksy, right?'" local resident Laura Holden, 35, told AFP. "And they (the workers) were like, 'Yeah, no, we've got permission to take everything away'. 'It felt like it was part of the piece, and perhaps Banksy intended that all along—because we all know how hard it is to get Thanet District Council to come and collect our rubbish,'" she quipped.

Banksy's art has come a long way from its origins on the streets of Bristol in the 1990s. A version of his iconic "Girl with Balloon" sold at auction for just over £1 million in 2018 — only to start self-destructing due to a shredder hidden by Banksy in the frame. The renamed "Love is in the Bin" then sold for a staggering £18.6 million in 2021 — a record for a Banksy. — AFP

Greece's largest museum to undergo four-year upgrade

The National Archaeological Museum in Athens, Greece's largest and one of the most important of its kind in the world, will undergo a massive upgrade expected to last four years, officials said Wednesday. Inaugurated in 1889, the museum houses some of Greece's most valuable antiquities, including the prehistoric frescoes of Thera, the Bronze Age gold treasures of Mycenae and the 2nd-century BC Antikythera Mechanism, a device

believed to be the world's oldest computer. An international architectural competition was concluded in December to boost the capacity of the 150-year-old museum which draws over 500,000 visitors annually. The plan by David Chipperfield Architects and Greek partners Tombazis includes two new levels of subterranean galleries and a raised roof garden, designed to create 20,000 square meters of additional space.

Though no specific timeframe was announced, Culture Minister Lina Mendoni said the museum will be "completely" transformed in four years. "This museum has one of the most extraordinary collections in the world," Chipperfield told the museum presentation. "We will try to close this building as (little) as we can" for the works, he added.

Less than a tenth of the many thousands of items in the museum's collection are currently on display, Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis said. He said the project will be funded with national and EU resources.

Chipperfield's works include the Neues Museum in Berlin, the Saint Louis Art Museum in Missouri and the Museo Jumex in Mexico City. The last project of this kind in Greece was the sprawling Acropolis Museum by French-Swiss architect Bernard Tschumi, which was completed in 2009. It cost 130 million euros to build and drew over 1.7 million visitors annually before the COVID pandemic. — AFP



This picture shows the National Archaeological Museum in Athens. — AFP

Lifestyle | Features



(From left to right) Romanian film director and jury member Radu Jude, German film director and jury member Valeska Grisebach, Spanish film director and jury member Carla Simon, US actress and Berlinale Jury President Kristen Stewart, Iranian-French actress and jury member Golshifteh Farahani, Hong Kong film director Johnnie To and US casting director and jury member Francine Maisler pose during a photocall on the opening day of the Berlinale, Europe's first major film festival of the year, on February 16, 2023 in Berlin. — AFP photos



(From left) US actress Marisa Tomei, actor Evan Ellison, US actress Anne Hathaway, US actor Peter Dinklage, Polish actress Joanna Kulig and US filmmaker and novelist Rebecca Miller pose during a photocall for the film "She Came To Me" presented in the Berlinale Special Gala section on the opening day of the Berlinale, Europe's first major film festival of the year in Berlin.

BERLIN FILM FEST TO BEAM IN ZELENSKY FOR OPENER WITH SEAN PENN

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky will join Hollywood actor Sean Penn by video link on Thursday at the opening of the Berlinale, Europe's first major film festival of the year, as it spotlights the fight for freedom in Ukraine and Iran. The 73rd annual event, traditionally the most politically minded of the three big European cinema showcases, will mark the Russian invasion's first anniversary as well as anti-regime protests in Iran with new feature films and documentaries.

"It's the job of an artist to take a disgusting and ugly thing and sort of transmute it and put it through your body and pump out something more beautiful...in response to the world that's falling apart around us," she said.

Artistic director Carlo Chatrjian said the festival stood with "the suffering population, the millions who left Ukraine and the artists (who) have remained defending the country and continue filming the war," adding that it was a "special honor" to welcome Zelensky digitally. Penn will

onslaught, will on Friday premiere "Superpower", tracking Zelensky's transformation from comedian to president to war hero. "Zelensky was two completely different creatures from one day to the next," Penn told entertainment industry magazine Variety this week about the impact of the invasion. "He was a spirit in waiting." Beyond movie screenings, the Berlinale plans panel discussions with embattled directors and red-carpet protests in a show of "solidarity" with the people of Iran and Ukraine.

Animation back in force

The Berlinale has barred filmmakers, companies and reporters with direct ties to the Russian or Iranian governments from taking part in the event, including its sprawling European Film Market, a key movie rights exchange for the industry. Hollywood actors Peter Dinklage, Anne Hathaway and Marisa Tomei will later Thursday present romantic comedy "She Came to Me", the first of nearly 300 new movies from around the world to screen during the 11-day event.

Nineteen films will vie for the main awards, including British-US co-production "Manodrome" featuring Jesse Eisenberg and Adrien Brody in a thriller about an Uber driver who is lured into a cult while he is expecting his first child. Two Asian animated pictures will also join the running, "Art College 1994" by China's Liu Jian and Makoto Shinkai's "Suzume", the first Japanese anime to compete at the Berlinale since Hayao Miyazaki's "Spirited Away" clinched the Golden Bear in 2002.



US actress and Berlinale Jury President Kristen Stewart poses during a photocall.



US actor Peter Dinklage poses during a photocall for the film "She Came To Me".



This file photo shows Berlinale Executive Director Mariette Rissenbeek (left) and Berlinale Artistic Director Carlo Chatrjian posing prior to the Program Press Conference for the 73rd Berlinale Berlin Film Festival in Berlin.

US actor Kristen Stewart ("Spencer"), head of the jury for the Golden and Silver Bear top prizes, told reporters it was "an enormous opportunity to have a hand in highlighting beautiful things" in the face of global turmoil.

appear on stage at the opening gala in the German capital and introduce Zelensky who will speak via video stream, organizers said.

The two-time Oscar winner, who was filming in Kyiv at the start of the Russian

Gold for Spielberg

Three-time Academy Award winner Steven Spielberg Shinkai is to collect an honorary Golden Bear for his life's work, spotlighted in a retrospective. British actor Helen Mirren will unveil the keenly awaited "Golda" in which she stars as Israel's only female prime minister, Golda Meir. And Vicky Krieps, the acclaimed Luxembourg-born actor from "Phantom Thread" and "Corsage", will present her turn as renowned Austrian writer Ingeborg Bachmann in a biopic by veteran German director Margarethe von Trotta.

One-third of the films in competition are by women, who make up 40 percent of all directors represented at the festival. "Love to Love You", a documentary about disco queen Donna Summer, who defined an era on the dance floor and helped inspire Beyonce's latest album "Renaissance", will have its world premiere. The film was co-directed by Summer's daughter, Brooklyn Sudano, and features never-before-seen home

videos. The Berlinale ranks with Cannes and Venice among Europe's top film festivals. It will hand out the top prizes on February 25 before wrapping up the next day with screenings of popular movies from this year's selection. — AFP

Donated clothing worsening Kenya's plastic pollution

One third of all second-hand clothing shipped to Kenya in 2021 was "plastic waste in disguise", creating a slew of environmental and health problems for local communities, a new report said Thursday. Every year, tons of donated clothing is sent to developing countries, but an estimated 30 percent of it ends up in landfills-or flooding local markets where it can crowd out local production. A new report shows that the problem is having grave consequences in Kenya, where some 900 million pieces of used clothing are sent every year, according to the Netherlands-based Changing Markets Foundation.

Much of the clothing shipped to the country is made from petroleum-based materials such as polyester, or are in such bad shape they cannot be donated. They may end up burning in landfills near Nairobi, exposing informal waste pickers to toxic fumes. Tons of textiles are also swept into waterways, eventually breaking down into microfibres ingested by aquatic animals. "More than one in three pieces of used clothing shipped to Kenya is a form of plastic waste in disguise and a substantial element of toxic plastic pollution in the country," the report said. The research was based on customs data as well as fieldwork by non-profit organization Wildlight and the activist group Clean Up Kenya, which conducted dozens of interviews.

Some of the clothing items were stained with vomit or badly damaged, the report found, while others had no use in Kenya's warmer climate. "I have seen people open bales with skiing gear and winter clothes, which are of no use to most Kenyans," Betterman Simidi Musasia, Clean Up Kenya founder, told AFP. Between 20 and 50 percent of all donated clothing was not of a sufficient quality to be sold on the local second-hand market, the report found. — AFP



US actress Raquel Welch. — AFP photos

'One Million Years BC' actress Raquel Welch dies at 82

Raquel Welch, the US actress who became an international sex symbol after appearing in a deerskin bikini in "One Million Years BC," died Wednesday, her manager said. She was 82. Welch "passed away peacefully" after "a brief illness," her manager said in an emailed statement to AFP, without providing further details. The Golden Globe winner starred in more than 30 films-including "Fantastic Voyage" and "The Three Musketeers"-as well as some 50 television series in a career spanning five decades. But she would be forever associated with "One Million Years BC." The fantasy movie's poster of Welch's bikini-clad cave-woman became part of cinema history.

In her 2010 autobiography "Beyond the Cleavage," Welch admitted she had struggled to avoid being typecast, writing that her acting career became "eclipsed by this bigger-than-life sex symbol." But in a rare 2018 interview, Welch said she was at peace with being forever associated with her prehistoric bombshell heroine. "I'm often asked if I get sick of talking about that bikini but the truth is, I don't," she told The Sunday Post. "It was a major event in my life so why not talk about it?" Welch, born Jo Raquel Tejada in 1940, grew up in California, and won several beauty titles in her teens.

She launched her acting career with a string of walk-on parts in minor films, including the 1964 musical feature "Roustabout" starring Elvis Presley. Her break came when she was picked by the 20th Century Fox



Raquel Welch at the 16th Annual Latino Media Image Awards in Beverly Hills, California.

studio to star in the 1966 science fiction film "Fantastic Voyage". Her leading role in "One Million Years BC" came later that same year, cementing her global sex symbol status, despite the film itself receiving mediocre reviews. She went on to star in Hollywood's first interracial sex scene with Jim Brown in "100 Rifles," and as a transgender heroine in the explicit "Myra Breckinridge" (1970).

Welch won the Golden Globe for best actress in a comedy or musical for "The Three Musketeers" (1973), in which she plays the queen's dressmaker. While filming "Canney Row" in 1982, Welch was fired for insisting on doing her hair and make-up at home. She sued MGM studios for breach of contract, ultimately winning a \$15 million settlement.

'Glamorous beyond belief'

A lover of yoga, Welch later launched herself into the business of wellbeing, publishing her "Total Beauty and Fitness" program in 1984. Having long hidden her Latino origins, she took on Hispanic roles in the "American Family" series on PBS in 2002 and "Tortilla Soup" in 2001. She also appeared opposite Reese Witherspoon in hit 2001 romantic comedy "Legally Blonde." "So sad to hear about Raquel Welch's passing. I loved working with her on 'Legally Blonde,'" tweeted Witherspoon on Wednesday.

"She was elegant, professional and glamorous beyond belief. Simply stunning." "May all her angels carry her home. Sending love to her family and her many fans." In later years, Welch continued to act in occasional films, such as 2017's ensemble comedy "How to be a Latin Lover" with Rob Lowe and Salma Hayek. She also developed her own line of wigs, hair pieces and hair extensions. Welch married four times. — AFP

Tanzania bans 'Diary of a Wimpy Kid' for violating 'cultural norms'

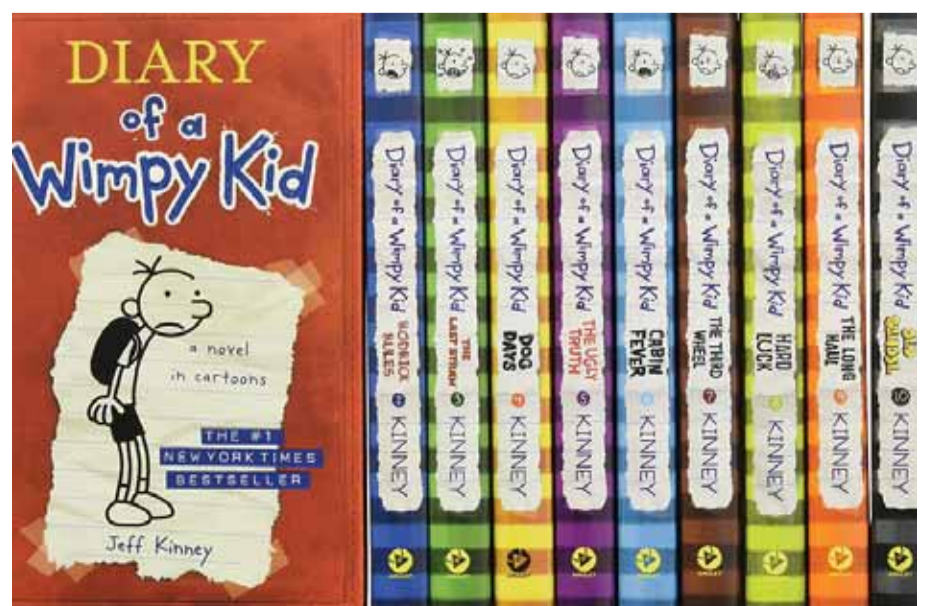
The Tanzanian government has banned a popular series of children's books from schools in the conservative East African country, claiming they violate local cultural norms. Education Minister Adolf Mkenda announced Monday an immediate ban on "The Diary of a Wimpy Kid" books, and said the government was monitoring libraries in both public and private schools to make sure they were not on their shelves.

It was not immediately clear what content in the series of illustrated books by US author Jeff Kinney that follow the life of a schoolboy had offended the authorities. The minister also listed other banned books, including "Sex Education: A Guide to Life". However, the names he gave for two books actually appeared to be pages from "An ABC of Equality" which included the terms transgender and LGBTQIA.

"We are banning these books from schools and other education institutions because they contradict Tanzanian cultural norms and morals," Mkenda told reporters in the political capital Dodoma. "The books also violate the good practices of bringing up our children," he said, calling on parents to inspect their children's bags to make sure they did not have the books. Mkenda said they were on a first list of "unacceptable books" and urged the public to report other similar books as part of an ongoing investigation.

The first book in the "Wimpy Kid" series was published in 2007 and since then 275 million copies have been sold worldwide in 69 languages, according to the wimpykid.com website. There have also been several film adaptations. Last week, President Samia Suluhu Hassan met university student leaders and asked them to be careful with some "imported cultures", without elaborating.

"If you are a Tanzanian, live in accordance with our cultures," Hassan said. Her comments followed remarks by a senior member of the ruling CCM party, Frank Haule, who claimed that same sex activity was rampant in universities. "That practice is contrary to our cultures and is prohibited by religious books," Haule said. — AFP



World's oldest near-complete Hebrew Bible heads to auction



The 'Codex Sassoon' bible is displayed at Sotheby's in New York.

A Hebrew Bible more than 1,000 years old is set to be sold at auction in New York for up to an estimated \$50 million, Sotheby's announced Wednesday. The Codex Sassoon - which dates to the late ninth to early tenth century - is the earliest, most complete Hebrew Bible ever discovered. It will become the most expensive historical document or manuscript to ever go under the hammer when Sotheby's puts it up for auction in May.

"(It) is undeniably one of the most important and singular texts in human history," said Richard Austin, Sotheby's global head of books and manuscripts. The Codex Sassoon is one of only two codices, or manuscripts, containing all 24 books of the Hebrew Bible to have survived into the modern era. It is substantially more complete than

the Aleppo Codex and older than the Leningrad Codex, two other famous early Hebrew Bibles, Sotheby's said. The manuscript bridges the Dead Sea Scrolls - which date back as early as the third century BC - and today's modernly accepted form of the Hebrew Bible.

It is named for previous owner David Solomon Sassoon (1880-1942) who assembled the most significant private collection of ancient Jewish texts in the world. The document is being auctioned for the first time in more than 30 years, with a pre-sale estimate of between \$30 million and \$50 million. In November 2021, Sotheby's sold one of the first prints of the US Constitution for \$43 million, a record price for a historical manuscript. — AFP



The 'Codex Sassoon' bible is displayed at Sotheby's in New York. — AFP photos



Military veteran and amputee Dmitry Matviyenko, 25, and his wife patriotic writer Alexandra Makarova, 34, pose during an interview with AFP in Nizhny Novgorod. — AFP photos

From Russia, with 'Z' love

Russian conservative writer Alexandra Makarova fell in love with soldier Dmitry Matviyenko after he lost a leg fighting in Ukraine. In the militarized and patriotic Russia promoted by the Kremlin, their romance is the pitch-perfect love story. "Many people left since the beginning of the military operation," Makarova told AFP. "Cowards, unworthy people." "But as soon as I saw Dmitry... He was a hero, my hero," said the 34-year-old.



Patriotic writer Alexandra Makarova, 34, the wife of military veteran and amputee Dmitry Matviyenko, 25, shows their wedding photo on a smartphone during an interview with AFP in Nizhny Novgorod.

Her hand resting on Matviyenko's arm, Makarova gazed tenderly at her husband while he told his story, going back to his early involvement with separatist military units in his native Donbas in eastern Ukraine. Matviyenko was 16 when the Maidan movement - which he called "illegal" and "Russophobic" - overthrew the pro-Moscow government in Kyiv in 2014. During the war that ensued between pro-Russians and Ukraine's forces, he said his home near Donetsk airport was shelled four times "from Ukrainian positions". As soon as he was old enough, Matviyenko joined separatist military forces.

'Patriotic writer'

He was discharged in 2021 but signed up again in January 2022 as tensions ramped up. On March 15, Matviyenko was clearing trenches in the town of Maryinka, west of Donetsk, when he was gravely wounded. He was about to throw a grenade into a shelter when he was shot at and hastily retreated. "So, I started crawling, on my hands and knees, however I could, and that's when the mine exploded. Boom!" the 25-year-old recalled. "They took quite some time to evacuate me, I don't know how I survived."

When he came back to his senses in hospital, he asked doctors if he still had his left leg. "They answered, 'No, no more leg, but be glad you're alive!' And I am happy to be alive," Matviyenko said. After two months in hospital, a war correspondent invited him to share his experience at a literary seminar near Moscow in July. There he met Makarova, who describes herself as a "Z writer". The letter-seen on Russian tanks in Ukraine - soon became a symbol for pro-army sentiment. It was love at first sight.

'Traditional values'

"I was expecting old drunk veterans, and there was a beautiful young man," Alexandra smiled. The daughter of a military officer, Makarova said she had long looked for a man "as strong" as her father.

The young couple settled in Nizhny Novgorod, a city about 400 kilometers (250 miles) east of Moscow and got married in November. Matviyenko, who received compensation of three million rubles (about \$41,000) for his injury, is waiting to receive a veteran's certificate to take out a low interest rate loan to start a new life.

Apart from a few nightmares and "phantom pains", Dmitry said the amputation left no psychological scars. In any case, he has declined the help of a psychologist and said his love for Alexandra is enough to heal. In their wedding photo, Makarova, in a long white dress and tiara, holds a bouquet. The newly-weds stand arm in arm, Matviyenko holding crutches in his free hand.

Makarova, a firm believer in "traditional values" and who is against LGBTQ rights, first worked as a journalist, then at the interior ministry press service before turning to literature. The couple now attend literary events together. Back in the room of her eight-year-old daughter - from a previous relationship - Makarova shows AFP a review that published one of her short stories.

'Soft' propaganda

"We 'Z writers' are finally getting recognition for our work!" Makarova said. She found her calling - fighting "on the cultural front" - using "soft propaganda". She plans to apply for grants recently announced by President Vladimir Putin to finance artistic projects supporting the offensive in Ukraine.

Makarova also gives literature and "patriotic education" classes to a dozen teenagers at the local school. She said that students' perspective on the conflict has changed since she started working with them. "They now understand that we are a united people and that we must be on the side of our state in case of military operations."

But, she said, many "enemies of the people" still operate in Russia, namely anti-Kremlin "liberals". "If you're a traitor, if you're not happy with this," Matviyenko begins. "Well then, the country's borders are wide open!" said Makarova, finishing his sentence. — AFP

Eco-friendly mud houses make comeback in Hungary

They were long derided as old-fashioned symbols of grinding poverty, but mud and straw houses are making a comeback in Hungary as a low-cost, eco-friendly alternative to concrete. Master builder Janos Gaspar, who renovates earth houses, is worked off his feet. "I'm booked up for three years. Interest is sky-high," the 48-year-old - who has built more than 200 clay houses — told AFP. Known as rammed earth construction, the practice dates to Neolithic times.

And it is seeing a revival thanks to its tiny ecological footprint and energy efficiency. Locally accessible materials is the basis of what Gaspar's architect colleague Adam Bihari calls "natural architecture". "Hungarians knew how to build houses from what they had to hand or under their feet," said the bespectacled Bihari as a clay brick wall was plastered with mud in the town of Acs in northwest Hungary. "This wall was made 100 years ago, and should be around for another 100," said Bihari.

'Material of future'

In contrast to concrete, which accounts for about eight percent of global CO2 emissions, "it eventually disintegrates naturally, leaving no artificial waste behind," he said. With Gaspar, Bihari teaches his methods to scores of trainees every year. In the yard beside piles of sandy earth and straw, a dozen watched Gaspar demonstrate how to make mud bricks. "This type of soil is perfect, and it's found everywhere around Hungary," said Gaspar as a cement mixer churned the ingredients into a mulch.

"You can make one brick a minute, and around 20,000 will make a house," he told the group while kneading handfuls of the

mixture into a wooden mould. The centuries-old practice fell out of fashion during the country's four-decade-long communist era. "Folk traditions were officially frowned upon and modern materials took over," said Bihari, 33. Clay brick walls were often cemented over which caused rot as dampness got trapped, he added.

ing is naturally warm in winter and cool in summer. "Amazed visitors ask us where the air conditioning is, but there is none," said the 42-year-old.

Earth homes also regulate their own humidity, said Bihari, which can help people with asthmatic problems. They are also fireproof and non-toxic. "You hear



A volunteer makes bricks of a mud-brick house in Acs.



A worker preparing material for the reconstruction of a mud-brick house in Acs.

More than one in seven Hungarians still live in earth-built homes, mostly in villages in poorer regions. Bihari said it is hard to counter long-held associations with damp and poverty. But interest in natural materials is increasing among developers and investors, according to the architect. "It is the building material of the future," he said.

'Naturally smart'

Bihari said clay's thermal properties make it ideal for Hungary's fluctuating climate of hot summers and cold winters. One of the camp participants, Timea Kiss, who already owns a clay house but wants to learn how to renovate it, said her build-

about 'smart' houses and even smart bricks," said Bihari. "But for me that is nonsense... clay is naturally smart." Rising energy costs is another push factor behind the growing popularity of earth houses. Several of the trainees in Acs told AFP they can no longer afford to build or buy conventional houses. "My wife and I are interested in cheaper solutions like this, it's a bonus that it's good for the environment," said truck driver Zsolt Cserepkei, 31. — AFP



Master builder Janos Gaspar (left) gives instructions to his colleague for mud plaster inside a mud-brick house in Acs.



A volunteer presents a wall decoration inside a mud-brick house in Acs.



A worker is seen inside a mud-brick house in Acs, northwestern Hungary. — AFP photos

Sports

Nuggets thump Mavericks as LeBron return sparks Lakers

Jokic bags his 21st triple-double of the season

LOS ANGELES: Nikola Jokic bagged his 21st triple-double of the season Wednesday as the Denver Nuggets maintained their grip on the top spot in the NBA's Western Conference with a 118-109 victory over the Dallas Mavericks. The two-time NBA Most Valuable Player finished with 14 points, 13 rebounds and 10 assists to set up a third straight win for Denver, who now lead the standings by five games with 41 wins and 18 defeats.

The Mavericks were without new signing Kyrie Irving, who watched from the sidelines as Luka Doncic finished with 37 points in vain at Denver's Ball Arena. Irving was ruled out of what would have been only his fifth game for Dallas after complaining of lower back tightness. Without Irving's offensive firepower, Dallas struggled to get in the game. Doncic was the only Mavs starter to finish in double digits—a stark contrast to Denver, which saw all of their starters make double figures. Michael Porter Jr backed Jokic with 22 points, while Kentavious Caldwell-Pope added 14. Jeff Green scored 24 off the bench.

LeBron back

Elsewhere Wednesday, LeBron James returned from an injury absence to help the new-look Los Angeles Lakers rout the New Orleans Pelicans 120-102. James had not played since breaking Kareem Abdul-Jabbar's NBA all-time scoring record last week due to a niggling ankle problem. But the 38-

year-old star showed no sign of lingering fitness issues, scoring 21 points in the Lakers victory. Anthony Davis led the Lakers with 28 points while newly acquired point guard D'Angelo Russell impressed with a 21-point haul.

In Boston, Jayson Tatum returned in style with 38 points as the Celtics trounced Detroit 127-109. Tatum, who missed Tuesday's loss to Milwaukee, shot 15-of-24 from the field including six from three-point range. The Eastern Conference leaders improved to 42-17 with the victory and once more demonstrated their depth, with Malcolm Brogdon adding 25 off the bench. Bojan Bogdanovic (28 points) led the Pistons scoring.

The win means Boston will remain the Eastern Conference's No 1 seed heading into the All-Star break later this week. "All things considered, with everything we went through this season as a team-coaching changes, guys getting injured and missing games—overall it's been a hell of a start," said Tatum. In Philadelphia, Joel Embiid's 29-point haul helped the 76ers claim a 118-112 victory over the Cleveland Cavaliers in a game that had threatened to go badly wrong for the Sixers during a lopsided second half.

The Sixers seemed to be cruising to a comfortable win after dominating the first half to lead 63-38 at half-time. But Donovan Mitchell caught fire for Cleveland after the break with 25 second-half points, and a game that looked set for a Sixers

blowout suddenly became a contest. The Sixers led by 28 points in the third quarter but Cleveland's comeback saw that lead shrink to just four points with under two minutes remaining.

Bridges shines in Brooklyn

Philadelphia, however, did just enough to hold on for the win, despite being outscored 42-31 in the final quarter. "We played great in the first half, probably couldn't have played any better," said Sixers coach Doc Rivers, adding that the looming mid-season All-Star break might have explained his team's limp second-half display. "Second half, I think the All-Star break started," Rivers said. "I loved how we came out with the intensity, but we just couldn't sustain it... Tonight was almost a case of finding a way not to win right at the end.

"But we'll take the win." In Brooklyn, Mikal Bridges erupted for a career-high 45 points to help the Nets sink the Miami Heat 116-105. Bridges, who joined Brooklyn from Phoenix as part of the blockbuster trade that sent Kevin Durant to the Suns, went 17-for-24 from the field. "My teammates just kept finding me," Bridges said. "They felt like I had it going and just kept giving me the ball. They gave me the confidence to go out there and be aggressive. "But I go out there to win, so it's an empty stat for me if I lose. I'm just happy we got the dub." —AFP



Nikola Jokic #15 of Denver Nuggets

News in brief

Rublev and Zverev crash

ROTTERDAM: Fifth-ranked Andrey Rublev and former world number two Alexander Zverev both crashed out of the Rotterdam ATP event on Wednesday. Second seed Rublev went down 6-4, 6-4 to Australia's Alex De Minaur who goes on to face American serve-and-volleyer Maxime Cressy for a quarter-final place. Rublev was the second seeded player to exit on Wednesday after Polish world number 10 and fifth seed Hubert Hurkacz lost to Bulgaria's Grigor Dimitrov 7-6 (7/4), 7-6 (7/5) in the last 16. Zverev, now ranked 17 in the world and attempting to rebuild his career after suffering ankle ligament damage at the French Open last year, slipped to a second round 4-6, 6-3, 6-4 defeat to Dutch player Tallon Griekspoor. Jannik Sinner, fresh from lifting the MontPELLIER title last weekend, set-up an intriguing last-16 showdown with top seed Stefanos Tsitsipas by seeing off France's Benjamin Bonzi 6-2, 3-6, 6-1. Fourth seed Holger Rune knocked out French qualifier Constant Lestienne 6-4, 6-4. —AFP

Thohir named Indonesia FA boss

JAKARTA: Former Inter Milan owner Erick Thohir was named Indonesia's football association chief on Thursday, several months after one of the worst stadium disasters in the sport's history. The 52-year-old is Indonesia's minister of state-owned enterprises and one of the most influential figures in Southeast Asia's biggest economy. He ran President Joko Widodo's 2019 re-election campaign, serves as Indonesian Olympic Committee chief and once owned Inter Milan and DC United. His brother Garibaldi is one of Indonesia's youngest billionaires. He secured the majority of votes at a football association meeting and will hold a press conference with FIFA representatives in the coming days to address match-fixing in Indonesia. "Clean football should be our main goal, we can't even talk about achievement if we don't have clean football and this is not an easy thing to achieve," Thohir told reporters on Thursday. —AFP

Middlesbrough beat Sheffield

LONDON: Middlesbrough cut the gap on Sheffield United in the race for a Championship promotion place to seven points by coming from behind to win 3-1 at Bramall Lane. The Blades had been unbeaten in all competitions since November and got off to the perfect start when Oli McBurnie headed in a long throw from Jack Robinson. But Boro have been transformed since former Manchester United midfielder Michael Carrick took charge in October and secured a fourth consecutive win as Chuba Akpom equalized before Cameron Archer scored twice in the second half. Defeat leaves Sheffield United still eight points adrift of league leaders Burnley. West Brom missed the chance to climb into the playoff places after conceding a last minute equalizer to draw 1-1 at home to Blackburn. Ben Brereton Diaz struck at the death for Rovers, who move up to eighth. —AFP

Girma breaks indoor record

LIEVIN: Ethiopia's Lamecha Girma shattered the 25-year-old world indoor 3,000m record on Wednesday by more than one second at the Lievin meeting as Armand 'Mondo' Duplantis won his third successive pole vault event. Girma clocked 7min 23.81sec to better the old mark of 7:24.90 set by Kenya's Daniel Komen in Budapest in February 1998. The Ethiopian raced alone over the closing four laps and was followed home by Spaniard Mohamed Katir, who broke the European record in 7:24.68, a time also under the old world record. Girma is a specialist outdoors in the 3000m outdoor steeplechase, an event in which he was the 2021 Olympic silver medalist. He was also runner-up in the world championships in Doha in 2019 and last year at Eugene. Indoors, he won silver in the 3000m at the 2022 worlds. World and Olympic champion Duplantis easily won the pole vault with a clearance of 6.01m but the charismatic Swede opted not to try to beat his own world record of 6.21m. —AFP

Attack-minded England take control of first Test

MOUNT MAUNGANUI: High-octane batting and a precocious day-one declaration put England in control of the first Test against New Zealand in Mount Maunganui on Thursday. The Black Caps limped to 37-3 at stumps in the day-night Test at the Bay Oval, having been thrust on to the back foot by England's swashbuckling 325-9 declared. The tourists raced to their total in just 58.2 overs—boosted by blistering half-centuries to Ben Duckett and Harry Brook—as England opened the two-Test series with the sort of attacking approach, dubbed "Bazball", that has carried them to nine wins from their past 10 Tests under coach Brendon McCullum.

England captain Ben Stokes instructed his lower-order batsmen to throw the bat before calling them in, leaving 18 overs to bowl at the Black Caps under lights with a new pink ball. The ploy worked as Tom Latham, Kane Williamson and Henry Nicholls departed before reaching double figures. Evergreen seamer James Anderson took 2-11, including the key wicket of Williamson following an lbw review. Opener Devon Conway will resume on 18 and nightwatchman Neil Wagner on four, with a deficit

of 288 runs staring at them on Friday.

It was a grim response to an England innings that featured 48 fours and one towering six from Brook off the bowling of New Zealand captain Tim Southee, who was lashed for 2-71 from 13 overs. New Zealand's depleted attack fought back midway through the second session when Ollie Pope, Joe Root and Stokes fell in quick succession, allowing debut pace bowlers Blair Tackner (1-72) and Scott Kuggeleijn (2-80) to claim their maiden Test wickets.

However, momentum was snatched back by the in-form Brook, who accelerated to 89 off 81 balls, supported by 38 from Ben Foakes. The 23-year-old Yorkshireman Brook was poised to become only the second England batsman after Ken Barrington in the 1960s to hit centuries in four consecutive Tests but he fell short when playing on to veteran seamer Wagner (4-82). Brook said he was aware of the record but his greater motivation was to put England into a strong position.

"I played the way I'm always going to play and try to put pressure on the bowlers," he said. "I dug in for a little bit but then I decided it was time to go." He said the declaration was deliberately timed to give world-class new-ball pair Anderson and Stuart Broad a chance to attack the top order. "It's the best time to bowl, under these lights you can extract the most swing and seam," he said. "We've got two of the best bowlers to ever play the game, so to get three of their top order out was really good."

NBA icon Jordan donating \$10m to Make-A-Wish

LOS ANGELES: Basketball great Michael Jordan will make a record-breaking \$10 million donation to the Make-A-Wish foundation to mark his 60th birthday later this week, a statement said on Wednesday. Jordan's donation to Make-A-Wish - which aims to fulfill the wishes of children aged between 2-18 battling critical illness - is the largest in the Arizona-based nonprofit's 43-year history.

The six-time NBA championship winner has had a long association with the nonprofit, first working with the organization in 1989. A statement from Make-a-Wish said the 59-year-old billionaire hoped his gesture would inspire others to donate to the foundation. "For the past 34

years, it's been an honor to partner with Make-A-Wish and help bring a smile and happiness to so many kids," Jordan said in a news release.

"Witnessing their strength and resilience during such a tough time in their lives has truly been an inspiration. "I can't think of a better birthday gift than seeing others join me in supporting Make-A-Wish so that every child can experience the magic of having their wish come true." Make-A-Wish said Jordan had granted "hundreds" of wishes to children all over the world since 1989. His multimillion-dollar donation will be used to create an endowment to help grant wishes in the future for children and young people with serious illnesses.

"Everyone knows about Michael's legacy on the basketball court, but it's what he has consistently done off the court when no one's watching that makes him a true legend for wish families and the wider Make-A-Wish community," said Make-A-Wish America chief executive Leslie Motter. Jordan is regarded by many as the

'Exciting' approach

Like Brook, Duckett was a revelation during the 3-0 series win in Pakistan in December and he maintained his hot streak with a rapid-fire 84 off 68 balls. The hard-hitting opener had a chance of scoring England's fastest Test century—surpassing Gilbert Jessop's 76-ball knock against Australia in 1902 - before he fell to Tickner late in the first session. Southee, leading his country at home for the first time, asked England to bat with the hope of exploiting the pink ball's swing on a green-tinged pitch that had been covered for days because of Cyclone Gabrielle.

Most of England's wickets fell to aggressive shotmaking, including Root, on 14, whose attempt at a reverse lap off Wagner was steered straight into the slip cordon. Wagner said the free-wheeling England approach was anticipated but wasn't necessarily easy to combat. "It's quite exciting for Test cricket. Hey, it's a positive brand, that's all you can sort of say," Wagner said.

"As a bowler, you want to try to combat that by taking wickets and I thought we did. "Obviously they kept scoring at a high rate but that created chances, and we took them." Preparations for both sides had been disrupted by the storms that hit New Zealand and triggered a national state of emergency on Tuesday, but Mount Maunganui avoided significant damage and play started on time. —AFP



Michael Jordan

greatest basketball player in history, with six NBA Finals MVP awards in addition to his championship rings. He also won five season MVP awards and was a 14-time All-Star during a career that spanned 1984 to 2003. —AFP

India's Pujara 'shuts out noise' to reach Test milestone

NEW DELHI: Indian batsman Cheteshwar Pujara said Thursday that "shutting out the noise" through yoga and meditation was his secret to having made it to his milestone 100th Test. The 35-year-old will be the 13th Indian cricketer to play a century of Tests when he takes to the field against Australia in New Delhi. "When I made my debut I never thought about playing 100 Test matches and it's always about the present," Pujara told reporters on the eve of the Test. "Hundred Tests is something that happens in a journey and something you can't predict, but once you continue playing good cricket, it happens."

Pujara is a rare five-day specialist in the age of Twenty20 and white-ball performers, opting out of the lucrative Indian Premier League auctions last year to play the English County Championship. India hammered Australia in the series opener at Nagpur by an innings inside three days, although Pujara made only seven runs before falling to off-spin debutant Todd Murphy. But the batsman has enjoyed remarkable longevity since his 2010 debut against Australia at home, averaging over 44 and mak-

ing 19 centuries.

Pujara attributed his staying power to discipline, especially because his single-format strengths leave long interludes between matches. "I have certain routines, fitness, little bit of meditation, yoga and pranayama (a breathing technique) because it is necessary to shut the outside noise, even if it is positive. "We play nine Tests on an average and when you go back home, unless you have domestic cricket, you are not in touch with the game. Keep challenging yourself, keep training, looking forward."

'Not someone who talks back'

Despite only five ODI appearances and a stop-start Test career Pujara said he had been able to finesse his style over the years. "I can't change my game but obviously you can fine-tune and add things," he said. "I have added a few shots to my game in the last couple of years and continuing to grow as a cricketer."

Pujara picked out England's Jimmy Anderson and Australia skipper Pat Cummins as among the best bowlers he has faced. He rated Australia, England and New Zealand as "tough oppositions" and praised the Australians for their "good fighting spirit". "They would always challenge you as opponents, I had never had easy runs versus Australia," Pujara said. "Always had to work hard for those runs and always banter and chat going on, sometimes it motivates me as I am not someone who talks back. "I let the bat do the talking." —AFP



NEW DELHI: India's Cheteshwar Pujara (left) and Mohammed Shami take part in a practice session at the Arun Jaitley Stadium in New Delhi ahead of their second Test cricket match against Australia. —AFP

Sports

Shiffrin sets fastest time in opening giant slalom run

US star clocks 1min 02.54sec down the Roc de Fer piste

MERIBEL: Mikaela Shiffrin put the split with her long-time coach behind her as she set the fastest time in the opening run of the women's giant slalom at the World Ski Championships in Meribel on Thursday. The US star, who split with Mike Day on Wednesday after seven incredibly successful years, clocked 1min 02.54sec down the Roc de Fer piste in bright, sunny conditions. "I actually thought I was a bit slower than everybody on the last bit because on these pitches this season I've always been a bit off," said Shiffrin, who bagged a super-G silver last week on the same slope.

"So when I was skiing I kept thinking 'No, you have to push harder, push harder, push harder', so I guess that was the right tactic in the end. "My skiing felt really good and I think the most important thing was that I didn't make any big mistakes so I have to take a good balance of these tactics in the second run, smart skiing, but also full pushing.

"Everybody's had a run on the hill so everybody can step it up a notch," Shiffrin, 2018 Olympic gold medalist in the GS, is perfectly poised to add to her 12 career medals at the world champs, including six titles (six gold, three silver, three bronze). Only Germany's Christl Cranz (15), skiing pre-WWII, and Sweden's Anja Paerson (13) have claimed more world medals than the American.

A seventh world title would also see Shiffrin draw level with Paerson, Marielle Goitschel, Marcel Hirscher and Toni Sailer while Cranz has 12 to her name. Second fastest down the opening leg, with the second scheduled for 1230 GMT, was France's two-time former champion Tessa Worley, at 0.12sec. "A good first leg, the goal is achieved; to be in the mix and be able to give everything in the second leg to go looking for the title, the medal," said the 33-year-



Mikaela Shiffrin

old French racer.

She was followed by a host of skiers capable of capitalizing on anyone's mistake on the unforgiving course. Italy's Federica Brignone, the Olympic silver medalist in the discipline and world alpine combined winner here last week, was third (+0.31), with Switzerland's defending world cham-

pion Lara Gut-Behrami fourth (+0.64). Norway's Ragnhild Mowinckel was at 0.71sec, with Sweden's Olympic champion Sara Hector a further 0.25sec adrift. Shiffrin's Slovak rival Petra Vlhova was exactly 1sec behind, in ninth spot, and has it all to do in the second run in her bid to push for a podium finish. —AFP

Mahomes vows to win more as Chiefs and fans celebrate

KANSAS CITY: Kansas City Chiefs quarterback Patrick Mahomes on Wednesday vowed to win more NFL championships as the team celebrated with thousands of fans on a victory parade to mark their latest Super Bowl triumph. A sea of thousands of red-shirted Chiefs fans braved chilly temperatures to throng the parade route as open-top buses carrying Mahomes and his teammates made their way through the city.

Mahomes, who engineered a second-half comeback to seal the Chiefs' 38-35 win over the Philadelphia Eagles on Sunday and claim the second Super Bowl crown of his career, told fans he planned to be celebrating with them again next year. "This is just the beginning - we ain't done yet," Mahomes told the crowd. "I'll make sure to hit y'all back next year, and I hope the crowd's the same."

Both Mahomes and tight end Travis Kelce could-

n't resist taking a dig at pundits who had expressed doubts that the Chiefs could prevail again this season. The departure of key players such as receiver Tyreek Hill and safety Tyrann Mathieu left many wondering if the campaign would be a "rebuilding year." "We're back again," Mahomes said. "Before we started this season, the AFC West said we were rebuilding. "I'll be honest with you - I don't know what rebuilding means. In our rebuilding year, we're world champs."

Kelce also weighed in, taking aim at "haters" who doubted the Chiefs' chances of even reaching the postseason. "The haters were saying that the Chiefs would never make the playoffs," Kelce said. "The haters were saying the Chiefs were done." Kansas City's Super Bowl win on Sunday was the team's second NFL championship in four seasons. The franchise also reached the NFL showpiece in 2021, where they lost to Tom Brady's Tampa Bay Buccaneers.

Prior to their Super Bowl appearance in 2020, they had not graced an NFL championship game since 1970. "It is great to be back here celebrating with you," Chiefs owner Clark Hunt told the crowd. "I'm glad it didn't take another 50 years to be here." Chiefs head coach Andy Reid meanwhile saluted his



GLENDAL: Kansas City Chiefs' quarterback Patrick Mahomes holds the trophy as he celebrates his team's winning Super Bowl LVII against the Philadelphia Eagles at State Farm Stadium in Glendale, Arizona. —AFP

team and the franchise as the "greatest" in the world. "I'm very proud of these guys on the stage, very proud of our organization," Reid said. "It's not very often you're able to say you're the greatest team in the world and have the greatest players in the world, and most of all have the greatest fans in the world. We love you." —AFP

Monza riding crest of a wave ahead of 'Berlusconi' derby

MILAN: Silvio Berlusconi's current and former loves go head-to-head on Saturday when Monza host AC Milan looking to continue their thrilling debut Serie A campaign by taking another big scalp. The only Italian top flight team yet to lose in 2023, Monza welcome the reigning champions with an eight-match unbeaten record to protect and the potential to further damage the team with whom Berlusconi won every honor in the game.

Raffaale Palladino's side are just inside the top half of the table, level on 29 points with a Juventus team they beat home and away, and playing the kind of football that suggests their stay in Serie A is set to be a long one. Since Palladino took charge in mid-September Monza have won half of their 16 league matches and had the season started at that point they would be fifth, only outside the Champions League places on goal difference.

Earlier this month former Italian prime minister Berlusconi said that he wanted Monza to aim for the league title next season "and the one after that". It may not be wise to put too much stock in what the ageing media magnate has to say given his promise of a "busload of hookers" if Monza beat one of Italy's stripey big three.

But his ambition for the club is clear and he has put his money where his mouth is, respected football finance website Calcio E Finanza estimating his outlay via family holding company Fininvest at 116 million euros in a club which was in the third tier when purchased in 2018. He has entrusted team matters to his right-hand man and Monza native Adriano Galliani, who has built a team which as well as twice beating Juve also held Inter Milan to a 2-2 draw at home last month.

Making use of smart loan deals Galliani has recruited Italy internationals Matteo Pessina - another Monza man and club captain - and Gianluca Caprari, who is rediscovering the form which led to him scoring 12 goals for Verona last season. However their task will be harder that it would have been a week ago as Milan are on a high after beating Tottenham Hotspur and giving themselves a chance of reaching the Champions League quarter-finals for the first time in over a decade. —AFP

Wales' strike may scupper England Six Nations clash

LONDON: Former Wales captain Sam Warburton has thrown his weight behind a possible players' strike that could threaten next week's Six Nations rugby clash against England in Cardiff. The Welsh Rugby Union (WRU) and the regions have yet to agree in writing a new long-term financial agreement, sparking fears that players whose current deals expire at the end of the season will leave the Welsh game. Recruitment is on hold, with next season's playing budgets not yet finalized at Wales' four professional teams - Cardiff, Dragons, Ospreys and Scarlets.

A Daily Mail report on Tuesday said players were considering industrial action amid the contract crisis. Warburton said Wednesday it was no surprise that Wales - scheduled to face England a week on Saturday in Cardiff - were bottom of the Six Nations table after defeats by Ireland and Scotland in their opening two

games. "The players clearly do not feel valued by the WRU and that has affected their performances on the field, and I can see why," Warburton wrote in an online column for The Times.

The 34-year-old, also a two-time British and Irish Lions captain, who retired through injury in 2022, added: "I know from speaking to some of them this week that this issue has been really bugging the Wales players, and the feeling is so strong that the threat to strike is very real. "They feel like they are, for want of a better expression, being shafted. So, I totally support the players and their threat to strike should some sensible agreement not be reached. If I was still playing, I would not sign these new contracts."

WRU interim chief executive Nigel Walker said earlier Wednesday he had met with senior Wales players to "further clarify the position". While a verbal agreement exists, the lack of a formal written deal has long been a source of anxiety, with former Wales international Walker insisting the WRU had "absolute empathy" with the players. The 59-year-old, while promising to act as "swiftly as possible", added: "We know we are not in an ideal situation, but it is incredibly important for the whole game in Wales for us to get this next step right." —AFP

Classifieds

Change of Name

I, **MOHAMMAD**, holder of Passport No. P1098382 do hereby change my name to **MOHAMMAD ZAKARIA** (as given name) for all purposes. I will henceforth be known in the name **MOHAMMAD ZAKARIA** and I also undertake to carry out this name change in all my documents. (C#3161) - 17-02-2023

I, **SHIVA**, holder of Indian Passport No.

T9188939 having permanent address Punjab, India, 143521 residing in Kuwait at present, hereby declare that henceforth my name will read as under Given Name: SHIVA and Surname: MADAN LAL.

I, **LOVE PREET SINGH**, holder of Indian Passport No. P5084914 having permanent address Punjab, India, 143602 residing in Kuwait at present, hereby declare that henceforth my name will be read as under Given Name: LOVE PREET and Surname: BALKAR SINGH

(C#3160) — 16-02-2023

I, **Vivek Kumar**, and Kumari Ekta have changed our daughter's name from Lavanya (current name in passport number: T2811082) to Lavanya Esha having permanent address as, Vidyanagar, near Sanjay Gandhi Memorial College, Pandra, Ranchi - 835222, Jharkhand, India residing in Kuwait at present hereby declare that henceforth Lavanya name will be read as given name Lavanya Esha. (C#3159) - 15-02-2023

Hospitals & Clinics

Sabah Hospital	24812000	Khalidiya	24848075
Amiri Hospital	22450005	Kaifan	24849807
Maternity Hospital	24843100	Shamiya	24848913
Mubarak Al-Kabir Hospital	25312700	Shuwaikh	24814507
Chest Hospital	24849400	Abdullah Salem	22549134
Farwaniya Hospital	24892010	Nuzha	22526804
Adan Hospital	23940620	Industrial Shuwaikh	24814764
Ibn Sina Hospital	24840300	Qadsiya	22515088
Al-Razi Hospital	24846000	Dasmah	22532265
Physiotherapy Hospital	24874330/9	Bneid Al-Gar	22531908
		Shaab	22518752
		Qibla	22459381
		Ayoun Al-Qibla	22451082
		Mirqab	22456536
		Sharq	22465401
		Salmiya	25746401

Clinics

Kaizen center	25716707
Rawda	22517733
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Man City seize top spot

Resurgent Manchester City down Arsenal 3-1



LONDON: Manchester City's Spanish midfielder Rodri (3rd right) during the English Premier League football match between Arsenal and Manchester City at the Emirates Stadium on February 15, 2023. — AFP

LONDON: Written off at times during an unusually erratic season, resurgent Manchester City delivered a resounding statement as they moved to the top of the Premier League with a 3-1 victory at title rivals Arsenal on Wednesday. As City's players celebrated in front of their travelling fans in one corner of the Emirates Stadium at the final whistle, Pep Guardiola's face was wreathed in smiles, and perhaps tinged with a little relief.

Just a few minutes earlier, Guardiola had been punching the air in delight as second half goals from Jack Grealish and Erling Haaland lifted City back to the top of the table. Kevin De Bruyne had given City the lead and even Bukayo Saka's controversial penalty equaliser wasn't enough to shake the champions' equilibrium once they rode Arsenal's first half storm on a rainy night in north London. Having trailed Arsenal by eight points just a month ago, City are now firmly in contention to retain the title.

Arsenal might have a game in hand but it was City who finished a frenetic encounter with all the momentum in the title race. Guardiola has been waiting for this moment as he searched for concrete proof his City stars still had the hunger required to be crowned champions. While there has never been any doubt about the hyper-competitive Guardiola's desire to lift the Premier League trophy for the fifth time in six seasons, it has not always been so clear that his team held the same appetite for success.

Defeats at Liverpool, Manchester United and Tottenham, as well as a home loss to Brentford and a surprise League Cup exit at Southampton, had given the impression that all was not well in the City camp. Guardiola's curious tactics and his unexpected decision to allow Joao Cancelo to join Bayern Munich on loan in January further added to the sense of a team drifting at a time when Arsenal were revitalised under his former assistant Mikel Arteta.

Even Erling Haaland's barrage of goals came with the caveat that the Norway striker's style of play might not be best suited to Guardiola's philosophy.

But as the critics sharpened their knives, Guardiola saw signs in training ahead of their seismic showdown at Arsenal that his squad were about to make their point to the doubters. "When we were second in the table, we were always there. But we had the feeling we needed a little more. This week the mood in training, the concentration, the focus were there," Guardiola said. Guardiola admitted his tactics against Arsenal—which included starting midfielder Bernardo Silva at left-back—had to be altered at half-time but it was an attitude change among his players that was just as important. "In the first half Arsenal were better. We were soft. My plan wasn't good," Guardiola said.

"It was not easy to play against them. But we were still in the game, we were focused, and in the end the

quality of the players made the difference." Grealish confirmed City had been fully tuned into the task at hand. "We were saying today, honestly. You know you get those games where you speak amongst yourselves, and everyone just seems so concentrated on the game today," Grealish said. "If I'm being honest I thought Arsenal were the better team, but to win titles you've got to come to places like this and win even when you are not at your best."

Even though they are sitting pretty at the top, Guardiola refused to label City as title favorites. "We won against Arsenal at the Emirates. They have one game in hand so I consider they are still top of the league. There are still so many games to play, the Champions League is coming as well," he said. "If we had come here eight or nine points behind and lost it would have been almost over. But we had a chance to be close and we took it. "If you want the crown, fight for it. We still want it." — AFP

Madrid humiliate Elche as Benzema bags 2 penalties

MADRID: Karim Benzema netted two penalties as Real Madrid breezed to a 4-0 win over rock-bottom Elche on Wednesday to cut the gap on La Liga leaders Barcelona back to eight points. Carlo Ancelotti's team did not play at the weekend because of their involvement in the Club World Cup in Morocco, which they presented to supporters at the Santiago Bernabeu.

It was Madrid's second trophy of the season, after the European Super Cup, but if they are to add La Liga to their haul they have a big job on their hands. Marco Asensio opened the scoring and veteran midfielder Luka Modric rounded off the rout on an easy night for Los Blancos. "Here nothing is impossible," Eduardo Camavinga told DAZN, pledging to fight for the title until the end of the season. "We saw it last season in the Champions League and we will play until the end."

The French midfielder said he was happy to return to his usual position in midfield after a spell on the left of the defense. "I like playing as pivot more, I'm not a full-back, I played there to help the team," he added. "Today I was a pivot and I am happy." Madrid were without winger Vinicius Junior, suspended, while Eder Militao returned after injury, forcing Antonio Rudiger to drop to the bench. Bottom of the table visitors Elche, with only one win all season, were ideal opponents for Madrid to face to resume their league campaign against.

Pablo Machin's side offered the hosts a guard of honor before the game and it only got more comfortable for Los Blancos from there. Marco Asensio put the Spanish champions ahead after eight minutes with a fine individual goal, driving into the area and stroking into the bottom corner. Benzema had an effort saved by Edgar Badia and then nodded a good chance off target, but he didn't have to wait long. The French forward's header was handled by Enzo Roco in the area after half an hour and Benzema sent Badia the wrong way from the spot.

Spanish La Liga table						
MADRID: Spanish La Liga table after Wednesday's match (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):						
Barcelona	21	18	2	1	43	56
Real Madrid	21	15	3	3	44	48
Real Sociedad	21	13	3	5	31	42
Atletico Madrid	21	11	5	5	30	38
Real Betis	21	10	4	7	27	34
Rayo Vallecano	21	9	6	6	28	33
Athletic Bilbao	21	9	5	7	31	32
Villarreal	21	9	4	8	22	31
Osasuna	21	8	6	7	19	30
Real Mallorca	21	8	4	9	16	28
Girona	21	6	6	9	27	24
Sevilla	21	6	6	9	23	24
Real Valladolid	21	7	3	11	15	24
Celta Vigo	21	6	5	10	22	23
Almeria	21	6	4	11	25	22
Cadiz	21	5	7	9	17	22
Espanyol	21	4	9	8	26	21
Valencia	21	5	5	11	26	20
Getafe	21	4	7	10	18	19
Elche	21	1	6	14	15	9

Rodrygo earned Madrid a second penalty before half-time when he beat Diego Gonzalez and was clumsily felled. Having fired his first into the top right corner, this time Benzema chose the top left and although Badia went that way he could not claw it out. Benzema's brace took him to 11 league goals for the season, three short of leader Robert Lewandowski at Barcelona. Madrid strolled through the second half, saving their stamina for what on paper will be a far more testing game on Saturday at Osasuna.

Ballon d'Or holder Benzema sent another good chance wide after the break and was unable to complete his hat-trick as Ancelotti brought him off in the 77th minute. Benzema has only recently returned from injury the Madrid coach was taking no chances. Modric smashed home Madrid's fourth goal shortly afterwards, driving into the top left corner from just inside the box to round off the rout. "We had a good game, with a lot of control and opened the scoring early through Asensio," Ancelotti told DAZN. "It was a good game at an important moment in the season." — AFP

Adeyemi sinks Chelsea, lifts Borussia Dortmund

DORTMUND: A superb length-of-the-field goal from Borussia Dortmund forward Karim Adeyemi helped his side to a 1-0 win over Chelsea on Wednesday, putting them in the box seat to qualify for the Champions League quarter-finals. Adeyemi's goal came during a period of sustained dominance from the visitors early in the second half, with the Germany forward pouncing on a clearance from a Chelsea corner.

Adeyemi sensed the opportunity and ran the length of the field, rounding both Enzo Fernandez and goalkeeper Kepa Arrizabalaga to give Dortmund the lead in the first leg tie. Dortmund captain Jude Bellingham told German TV when Adeyemi finds himself in space "not many players can really stop him." "He had a tough time coming here at the start - finding his feet - but now he's flying." After the match, Adeyemi praised his side's desire to fight for giving them an advantage ahead of March's return leg in London.

"I had a little bit of luck, but I'm really happy about the goal," he said. "Everyone fought for everyone else - (the win) was really important for the return leg." Chelsea manager Graham Potter hailed his team's performance but lamented their failure to score. "We were close to scoring ourselves. They broke on us. It's disappointing, we need to do better. "We have a team in progress, we know there are a lot of positive things there." The win means Dortmund only need a draw in London to progress to the quarter-finals for the second time in the past four years.

While Potter may still be working on how to get his squad of expensive newcomers to work as a team, the visitors' individual quality and speed on the counter was obvious throughout. Mykhailo Mudryk's pace troubled the home side frequently early and forced Dortmund central defender Niklas Suele into a looping backheel clearance after 15 minutes. Chelsea were soon on the attack again through Mudryk, who won a free kick to the left of the penalty area. Chelsea had the ball in the back of the net through Thiago Silva from the free kick but the home side swarmed referee Jesus Gil Manzano in protest.

A VAR review showed the Chelsea captain had



DORTMUND: Dortmund's German forward Karim Adeyemi (right) goes past Chelsea's Spanish goalkeeper Kepa Arrizabalaga to score the opening goal during the UEFA Champions League. — AFP

intentionally handled the cross and Silva was promptly booked. Dortmund's Julian Brandt and Bellingham continued to orchestrate attacks as the home side dominated possession, which left them vulnerable to Chelsea's counter-attacking raids. The best chance of the opening half fell to Chelsea's Joao Felix, who muscled past Dortmund fullback Marius Wolf inside the box to give himself space to shoot, but his attempt hit the crossbar.

Wolf almost had Dortmund in front close to halftime when Brandt shrugged a defender to put him in space just inside the penalty area, but his curling shot drifted wide. Chelsea dominated the early stages of the second half, forcing Dortmund midfielder Emre Can into a yellow when he took down an advancing Reece James. Goalkeeper Gregor Kobel saved the free kick to ease the pressure. James went one-on-one with Kobel again after 60 minutes, this time in open play, but the Swiss keeper tipped his shot over the bar.

Chelsea's corner pinballed around in the box and despite an offside flag, the referee played the advantage as the ball was cleared into the path of Adeyemi. The Germany forward, who was officially clocked as the fastest player in Bundesliga history in February, kicked the ball past an advancing Fernandez and then Kepa, threading the ball into the goal from an acute angle. Chelsea looked certain to score in the 78th minute when Kalidou Koulibaly's shot dribbled goalwards, but Can intervened to clear the danger, booting the ball to safety before it crossed the line. — AFP