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13 Hatmaker keeps ancient skill alive in Lebanese mountains

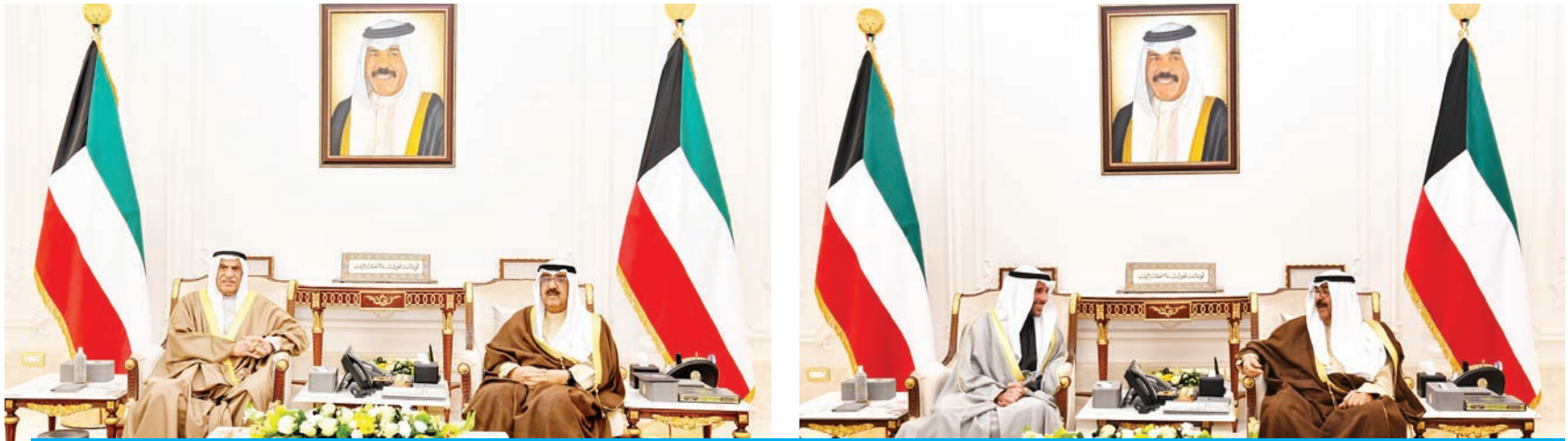


16 Al Hilal storm into quarters of AFC Champions League



Crown Prince begins traditional consultations to name premier

MPs propose two-year maternity leave for female employees



KUWAIT: HH the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah receives National Assembly Speaker Ahmad Al-Saadoun (left) and former speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem (right) on Feb 21, 2023, as part of traditional discussions usually held ahead of forming the new government. — KUNA photos

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: HH the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah on Tuesday began customary consultations ahead of naming a prime minister to form a new Cabinet to replace the previous government, which resigned a month ago. HH Sheikh Mishal met National Assembly Speaker Ahmad Al-Saadoun and former speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem to listen to their opinions over the issue. He is expected to meet on Wednesday with three former prime ministers as part of the consultations.

The move is an indication that the appointment of a prime minister is imminent and could take place this week. HH the Crown Prince can name the outgoing Prime Minister HH Sheikh Ahmad Al-Nawaf Al-Sabah or ask a new figure to form the new Cabinet. The government resigned a month ago in protest against the insistence of MPs to debate

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News in brief

Ban on Gulf St drone photography

KUWAIT: The ministry of interior announced a ban on the use of camera drones on Arabian Gulf Street, including Kuwait Towers and Green Island areas, from Feb 20 until March 1. The decision to ban drone photography is a safety measure since unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) shows are planned to take place in these areas during this time, a statement said, urging the public, for their safety, to abide by the decision to avoid intervention in the radio frequencies of UAV's participating in the shows. — KUNA



MUSCAT: Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad meets Omani Sultan Haitham bin Tariq on Feb 20, 2023. — AFP

Assad visits Oman after quake

MUSCAT: Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad visited Oman on Monday, his first official trip to the country in more than a decade of civil war at home and two weeks after a 7.8-magnitude earthquake struck Turkey and Syria. Sultan Haitham bin Tariq "extended anew his condolences and sincere sympathy to... the president and to the brotherly Syrian people for the victims of the devastating earthquake", while Assad praised Oman's "balanced policies" over the years. — AFP

Dubai airport sees surge in arrivals

DUBAI: Dubai's airport welcomed 66 million passengers in 2022, more than double the previous year, it said Tuesday, a spike its chief executive attributed to "huge growth" in Russian travelers. — AFP (See Page 8)

UAE President meets Kuwaiti First Deputy PM

ABU DHABI: President of the United Arab Emirates Sheikh Mohammad bin Zayed Al-Nahyan on Tuesday met Kuwaiti First Deputy Prime Minister, Interior Minister and acting Defense Minister Sheikh Talal Al-Khaled Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah on the sidelines of the International Defense Exhibition and Conference (IDEX) in Abu Dhabi.

A statement by the Kuwaiti defense ministry said Sheikh Talal conveyed the greetings 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 to the Emirati President, wishing him good health and the people of the UAE further progress and prosperity.

IDEX 2023, which is one of the biggest and most important international exhibitions, celebrates 30 years since its establishment, with the participation of 1,350 companies from 65 countries. Nine new countries joined this year's edition of IDEX 2023, including Kuwait, Uzbekistan, Ireland, Nigeria, Montenegro, Lithuania, Bangladesh, Colombia and Monaco. This year's expo witnesses initiatives being held for the first time to strengthen the position of the most prominent event in the world in the defense industries sector. — KUNA



ABU DHABI: UAE President Sheikh Mohammad bin Zayed Al-Nahyan meets Kuwaiti First Deputy PM, Interior Minister and acting Defense Minister Sheikh Talal Al-Khaled Al-Sabah. — KUNA

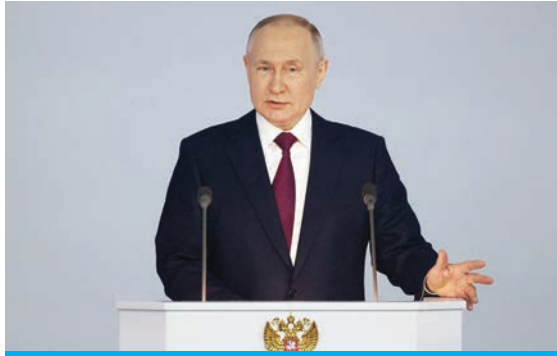
Putin vows to keep fighting in Ukraine

MOSCOW: President Vladimir Putin on Tuesday suspended Moscow's participation in a nuclear arms reduction treaty with Washington during a speech in which he accused the West of escalating the Ukraine conflict. In his scathing state of the nation address to Russian lawmakers, Putin also vowed that Russia would keep fighting in Ukraine ahead of the first anniversary of the military campaign.

Accusing Western powers of wanting "to be done with us once and for all", he said Russia was "forced" to suspend the New START treaty but would not pull out of the agreement altogether. The 2010 treaty is the last major US-Russia arms control pact still in force but it has frayed in recent years, with accusations from Washington that Moscow was not complying with it. Putin was speaking a day after US President Joe Biden made a surprise visit to Kyiv in which he promised additional arms deliveries for Ukraine, and ahead of a speech by Biden in Warsaw.

Referring to the conflict in Ukraine, Putin said: "step by step, we will carefully and systematically solve the aims that face us". He said it was

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MOSCOW: Russian President Vladimir Putin delivers his annual state of the nation address at the Gostiny Dvor conference center on Feb 21, 2023. — AFP

6 dead as new quake hits Turkey, Syria

ANTAKYA, Turkey: A 6.4-magnitude earthquake has rocked Turkey's southern province of Hatay and northern Syria, killing six people and sparking fresh panic after a massive Feb 6 tremor left over 45,000 dead in both countries. The quake hit the Turkish town of Defne on Monday at 8:04 pm (1704 GMT) and was strongly felt by AFP teams in the nearby city of Antakya. It was also felt in Lebanon

and Cyprus.

More than 300 people were injured in Turkey and at least 150 were hurt in northwestern Syria. The overall death toll from the earthquakes is now 42,310 in Turkey and 3,688 in Syria, according to authorities. Turkey's disaster management agency said on Twitter that a 5.8-magnitude quake followed three minutes later, with its epicenter in the Samandag district of Hatay province.

The agency recorded two more tremors with magnitudes of 5.2 around 20 minutes after the first on Monday. "The road moved like waves. The building moved back and forth, the cars moved left to right.

Continued on page 6



ANTAKYA: Birds perch in a cage in front of a collapsed building on Feb 21, 2023 after a 6.4-magnitude earthquake rocked Turkey's southern province of Hatay and northern Syria.— AFP



Local

Mikshat: Project revisits kashta tradition in modern, fun way

A unique entertainment and cultural project for the entire family



Abdulazeez Al-Mufaraj (left) known as (Shadi Al Khaleej), Minister of Social Affairs Mai Al-Baghli and other top dignitaries arrive for the event.



Organizers setting up the desert area.



Kuwait singers perform during the event.



Local tents.



Abdul Mohsen Al-Abdullah, Public Relations and Media Officer of the Union of Consumer Co-operative Societies

By Ghadeer Ghloum

KUWAIT: 'Kashta' is a Kuwaiti tradition of enjoying picnics in the open desert away from the busy city life. A simple tradition that has stood the test of time, kashta is part of Kuwait's heritage that has served as a getaway for people from the city, and in

a way, maintained their connection to the land for generations. As part of Kuwait's national holidays, the ministry of social affairs launched a project that revisits the kashta tradition but with a modern twist. Inspired by the word 'kashta', Mikshat is a unique entertainment and cultural project for the entire family that is happening for the first time in Kuwait to celebrate Kuwait's heritage and national days.

Young Kuwaiti volunteers built the entire project within 40 days in a spectacular fashion, as Minister of Social Affairs Mai Al-Baghli highlighted during the event's opening on Monday. She praised the youths' role in volunteering to finalize this project, besides other society unions that supervised and supported this idea. She added the project is 100 percent local.

Visitors can enjoy several activities at the Mikshat site such as renting camps for the full kashta experience, attending folklore stage performances, enjoying a meal or coffee break at various restaurants and cafes present there, shopping at a market space that displays local products by local farmers, families and differently-abled people, and spending quality time at a children's playground.

Om Rasheed, President of Down Syndrome Association, said the association holds workshops that train differently-abled people in the presence of their parents, where they start working collectively to make products. Decoupages, accessories and decorated bamboo sticks are a few examples of



Kuwait women selling local products.

the products the association assists its trainees to create. She praised the ministry of social affairs for providing this opportunity for productive local families, which encourages further local production, besides the educational side of this project, as it reminds visitors of Kuwait's heritage.

Abdul Mohsen Al-Abdullah, Public Relations and Media Officer of the Union of Consumer Co-operative Societies, told Kuwait Times Mikshat is

inspired by the desert, which represents Kuwait's environment. The project's main focus is to support Kuwaiti small business owners and Kuwaiti youngsters' creativity. The desert-themed settings include dunes, palm trees, tents and animals such as camels and horses. Located on Sulaibikhat coast, the project is open daily from February 21 to March 20 from 3:00 pm to 11:00 pm. The entry fee is KD 2.5.



Food and beverage booths.



Entertainment area for kids.

Al-Refae, a writer representing Kuwait



By Dr Khalid Al-Saleh

Local@kuwaittimes.com

Kuwaiti writers have a long history in dealing with words and creativity, and the Arabic language supported them in their creativity due to what this language has in the form of elements of power and creative expressions. This is one of the most important attributes of the Arabic language, and Kuwaiti writer Talib Al-Refae's honoring is yet another evidence of the strength of our language.

We congratulate Refae, who is a pioneer in the literary field, for several events during which he was honored in his writing capacity, the latest of which was early last week when he was decorated with a medal by the French ambassador to Kuwait, as several of his creative writings were translated into the French language.

There is no doubt that honoring of our writers makes us all happy and proud, as the writer got what he deserved due to the spiritual and emotional efforts that moved through his pen to people everywhere. We also feel proud because the Kuwaiti writer realized at last that his moving out of narrow localism is not only an expansion of himself, but also a promotion of his country and nation. Many mention the English writer Charles Dickens and Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky - so writers take the names of their homelands wherever they go, so he is the pride of us all.

If the distinction of any Kuwaiti scientist, writer or intellectual makes me proud, what writer Refae said about the Arabic language deserves that we repeat it and teach it to our students. He said "I find it a must that I admit with great appreciation for every success that I have achieved, and I mean the Arabic language. The Arabic language alone was and still is my loyal friend whose hand I grabbed and it took me to heavenly heights I was not able to reach without it."

Yes, it is the Arabic language that owns the corners of expression, includes the paths of creativity, has the best vocabulary and contains all doors of expression. After one of our creative writers spoke about its preference, then it will not be far when we see our doctors become creative with this language in education and research. That day the direction of Arab countries will change from importers of sciences to exporters of it. The more literature flies with the language, science will fly along, as they are two wings of one bird that will not rise in the sky without them.

Kuwait and Canada promoting security, stability, prosperity

By Ambassador of Canada to the State of Kuwait, Aliya Mawani and Commander of Canada's Task Force in the Middle East, Brigadier-General Wade Rutland

As Kuwait marks its National and Liberation Days, we take the opportunity to recognize this country as a key defense and security partner for Canada. We see daily that the global security environment is an increasingly complex one, as threats transcend national borders and regional boundaries. Recent history has shown us how the actions of state and non-state actors alike can perpetrate violence, spread disinformation, destroy infrastructure, displace people and disrupt trade.

In the face of these threats, Canada and Kuwait remain important partners, committed to promoting global security and stability, which are the foundation for economic development and prosperity - not only for our two countries, but for the world at large. Like Kuwait, Canada favors a multilateral approach to solving problems and we firmly believe that more can be accomplished together.

This has been a hallmark of Canada-Kuwait



Aliya Mawani



Wade Rutland

cooperation since diplomatic ties were established in 1965, and it is why, 32 years ago, some 4,500 men and women of the Canadian Armed Forces helped to liberate Kuwait from invasion and occupation. Canadians were active in this effort by air, land and sea; guarding allied ships and monitoring maritime traffic, protecting airspace over Kuwait and contributing to air combat missions, enforcing sanctions and establishing a field hospital.

After liberation, Canada sent highly qualified firefighters to Kuwait to combat devastating oil fires and specialists in de-mining, oil clean-up operations, and wildlife protection to help rehabilitate the environment. Since Kuwait's liberation, Canada has continued to address persistent security challenges in the region through deployments to peacekeeping and maritime security missions, and has stood ready to respond to new challenges that could profoundly destabilize the region and threaten our friends,

including the people of Kuwait.

In response to such a threat, in 2014 both Canada and Kuwait joined the Global Coalition against Daesh, which brought together a total of 85 international partners. The Canadian Armed Forces played an active role in military operations against Daesh, as part of which Canadian fighter, reconnaissance and transport aircraft conducted their missions out of Kuwait, including from Canada's permanent base at Ali Al Salem Air Base, known as Camp Canada.

Following the military defeat of Daesh, the focus of our regional taskforce, known as Joint Task Force IMPACT, is now on supporting regional partners to counter future threats, whether it be a resurgence of Daesh, or some other menacing force. Led from the Taskforce's headquarters in Kuwait, these efforts promote longer term stability across the region, which in turn provides greater security to Kuwait; and this country remains a key defense partner that enables this mission.

As we mark Kuwait's National and Liberation Days, we pay tribute to all of the men and women who played a role in Kuwait's liberation. We recognize the bonds our forces forged serving alongside each other during the Gulf War, the close ties established between our peoples through decades of cooperation, and look forward to a strong and lasting partnership with Kuwait to promote peace and security in the region and around the world. On this occasion we would like to take this opportunity to extend our warmest congratulations to Kuwait on its National & Liberation days.

Local

Zain Great Idea participants showcase their tech startups at LEAP in Riyadh

Three Kuwait-based startups reached semi-finals of LEAP's Rocket Fuel Startup Pitch Competition



Bader Nasser Al Kharafi with ZGI participants at LEAP in Riyadh.

KUWAIT: Zain, Kuwait's leading digital service provider, announces that ten Kuwait-based tech startups have successfully participated in LEAP, the world's biggest tech conference recently held in Riyadh, attended by over 170,000 innovators, tech enthusiasts, investors and visitors. LEAP was the second destination in the regional phase of the 7th Zain Great Idea (ZGI) tech startup accelerator program.

ZGI reached its second regional destination in Riyadh at the global conference, which was recently organized by the Saudi Arabia Ministry of Communications and Information Technology (MCIT), the Saudi Federation for Cybersecurity and Programming (SAFCSP), and several local and global companies.

The theme of this year's event, Into New Worlds, focused on the new horizons of what technology brings, and its role in achieving sustainability. LEAP23 became the world's biggest tech event, having attracted over 170,000 visitors, and announced over USD \$2 trillion of investments to support future technologies, emerging digital entrepreneurship, and tech startups.

The conference presented an invaluable opportunity for ZGI's participants to learn new ideas, build partnerships, and connect with innovators and investors from the region and the world. Zain saw the need and ambition of Kuwait-based startups to expand into the MENA region and has selected this global event for its program's second destination

due to the Saudi market being one of the biggest and most vital of the region's markets.

Saudi Arabia also presents a unique quality, sharing a close geographical proximity, culture, demographics, and target audience with Kuwait. This presented a great opportunity for ZGI participants to learn from the vast number of workshops, conferences, and shared experiences in LEAP, paving the way for them to prepare their regional expansion plans.

During the conference, three Kuwait-based tech startups (that are ZGI participants) reached the semi-finals of LEAP's Rocket Fuel Startup Pitch Competition. The conference launched this competition to highlight the most unique startups in various industries and has dedicated awards and prizes

for the winners. Zain is proud of the three startups OctopusAI, Looksie, and RZQ for this achievement.

The 10 Kuwait-based startups who took part in LEAP are Octopus AI: an AI-based digital CRM platform, Baims: a digital e-learning platform, BNCHR+: a car service and roadside assistance app, Bookr: a cloud-based software and POS platform for the beauty industry, Ghahseel: an app for on-demand car wash and vehicle care services, Li3ib: a platform for booking sports venues, Looksie: an online social marketplace for everything handmade, RUBA: a one-stop shop for all educational financing needs, RZQ: a platform for on-demand deliveries, and Spedia: a digital e-learning platform.

Kuwait National Day message

By Gediminas Varanavicius
European Union Charge'
d'Affaires in Kuwait

On the occasion of the 62nd Kuwait National Day and the 32nd anniversary of Kuwait's Liberation, and on behalf of the European Union I would like to congratulate the people of Kuwait and wish them a joyous celebration. I would also like to avail of this opportunity to extend my greetings to HH the Amir of Kuwait Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah as well as to HH the Crown Prince, Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah.

Kuwait has built a modern nation state, working as a catalyst for positive change in the region and around the world. I am pleased to see how the EU-Kuwait relations go from strength to strength. Kuwait and the European Union stand together as friends and allies. We know we are stronger together.

I am delighted to see EU-Kuwait relations are on the right track. We have witnessed many productive engagements between the EU and Kuwait including the first visit of the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs & Security Policy Josep Borrell to Kuwait last March. Another milestone was the EU adopting a strategic partnership with the Gulf including Kuwait, which aims at expanding cooperation in many key areas. We are planning to build on what have been achieved with plans to enhance cooperation with Kuwait further. I am looking forward for another year of strong EU-Kuwait relations. I wish you all a happy National Day and a happy Liberation Day, and all the best for a prosperous future.



Gediminas Varanavicius



ABU DHABI: Sheikha Naeema Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah is pictured during the Global Summit of Women in Abu Dhabi on Tuesday. — KUNA photos

Global women's summit kicks off

ABU DHABI: The Global Summit of Women kicked off in Abu Dhabi on Tuesday under the patronage of Sheikha Fatima Bint Mubarak, Chairwoman of the General Women's Union (GWU), President of the Supreme Council for Motherhood and Childhood and Supreme Chairwoman of the Family Development Foundation (FDF). Executive Director of the UAE Independent Climate Change Accelerators (UICCA) Sheikha Shama Bint Sultan Al-Nahyan delivered a speech during the event on behalf of Sheikha Fatima.

Addressing the event, she underlined Emirati women's role, and political, cultural and scientific posts they have held, saying that all Emirati women are seeking to serve the nation. The summit is being run under the theme "Role of Female Leaders in Peace Building, Social Integration, and Driving Prosperity". Organized by the World Muslim

Communities Council (TWMCC) and the General Women's Union (GWU), the gathering marks the 100th anniversary of women receiving the right to vote. Prominent stateswomen, faith leaders, entrepreneurs, social activists, cultural personalities, media celebrities, and scholars from more than 100 countries, are attending the event.

Kuwaiti women lauded

Meanwhile, Sheikha Naeema Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah praised Kuwaiti women's role through their participation in different fields, achieving sustainable growth and to keep pace with the economic, social and political variations. This came in a statement by Sheikha Naeema to KUNA, on the sidelines of the inauguration of Women Global Summit 2023 in Abu Dhabi, where she represented Kuwaiti Women. It is not strange that Sheikha Fatima bint Mubarak sponsored this summit, noted Sheikha Naeema, adding that she is the main supporter of Emirati women. The summit, which is being run under the theme "Role of Female Leaders in Peace Building, Social Integration and Driving Prosperity", will continue until Wednesday. — KUNA



Kuwaiti Ambassador Sami Al-Zamanan, Japanese State Minister for Foreign Affairs Kenji Yamada and diplomats cut the cake during the event in Tokyo. — KUNA

eral relations both bilaterally and internationally, based on the values shared by both countries. Meanwhile, Kuwaiti Ambassador to Japan Sami Al-Zamanan recalled Kuwait's democratic, developmental, and

News in brief

Farwaniya fire extinguished

KUWAIT: Firemen put out a fire in a building in Farwaniya without any injuries. The KFF public relations and media department said: "A report was received by the Central Operations at dawn on Tuesday about a fire in a building in Farwaniya. It directed firefighting teams from Farwaniya and Jleeb stations to the site of the incident. Upon arrival, it was found the fire had broken out on the roof of the building consisting of seven floors, so it was immediately evacuated and the fire was extinguished without any injuries."

Kuwait crude oil gains

KUWAIT: Kuwaiti crude oil edged 29 cents higher during Monday's trading sessions to reach \$83.57 per barrel compared with \$83.28 pb the last Friday, Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) said Tuesday. Benchmark Brent crude gained \$1.07 to \$84.07 pb and West Texas Intermediate rose 85 cents to \$77.19 pb. — KUNA

Boosting food security

RIYADH: The Secretary General of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Jassem Al-Budaiwi asserted Monday on the importance of strengthening strategic partnership to boost food security. A statement by GCC General Secretariat said the remarks were made during a meeting between Al-Budaiwi and the Director General of Islamic Organization for Food Security (IOFS) Yerlan Baidaulat in Riyadh. The statement added that the two sides also tackled issues of common concern and follow up on the Memo of Understanding (MoU) between the GCC and IOFS. Baidaulat also congratulated Al-Budaiwi on assuming the new post, wishing him success. — KUNA

Japanese minister commends Kuwait friendly relations

TOKYO: Japanese State Minister for Foreign Affairs Kenji Yamada has extolled the friendly relationship between Japan and Kuwait, which dates back to the period before Kuwait's independence. Yamada made the statement during a reception held by the Kuwaiti Embassy Tuesday on Kuwait's 62nd National Day and 32nd Liberation Day, which brought some 300 guests including Yamada.

"Since the establishment of the diplomatic relations in 1961, the two countries have fostered friendship and established relations as an important partner for the past six decades," Yamada said. In an atmosphere of happiness and harmony, high-ranking officials, political, military, and parliamentary and media figures, businessmen, academics, diplomats and representatives of the Japan-Kuwait Society also attended the event.

"Kuwait is a trustworthy supplier of crude oil for Japan and plays an extremely important role in stabilizing the international crude oil market. "I am also pleased that the relationship between the two countries have achieved steady progress not only in the energy sector, but also in a wide range of areas," the official said. "The two countries have helped each other as friends when facing historic difficulties, and this has been the foundation of the relationship of the both countries," he said.

Yamada pointed out Japan's \$13 billion financial aid and minesweeping operations in the wake of the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, as well as Kuwait's donation worth JPY 40 billion (\$300 million), which was the largest amount provided by a single country, following the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake. Yamada also underlined telephone talks between Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah last December, in which they confirmed to further strengthen bilateral relations, as well as resumption of exchanges of high-level officials.

"I hope that the visits and exchanges between the two countries will continue to increase in the future," he said. He pledged that the Japanese government will continue to make every effort to further develop bilat-

humanitarian pathway on the occasion, and renewed the people of Kuwait's commitment to peace and the UN Charter in the relations between countries.

"This occasion also reminds us of the commendable contributions of the friendly nations that supported our nation's Liberation, among which Japan, whose stance shall always remain engraved in our minds," Al-Zamanan said. "Kuwait's independence marked the historical commencement of our distinguished diplomatic relations with Japan, with whom Kuwait shares a strong friendship and an exemplary partnership that spans many levels and areas," he stated.

"On this occasion, I reiterate our determination to strengthen our bilateral ties to keep pace with the changes and challenges that our world is witnessing, mindful of the interests of the Kuwaiti and Japanese peoples," the ambassador said.

In addition, Al-Zamanan stressed that Tuesday's event coincided with several crises and terrifying disasters, particularly the humanitarian disaster caused by the massive earthquake that devastated several areas in Turkey and Syria, offering Kuwait's sincere condolences to their peoples, friends, and the victims' families. The embassy displayed Kuwaiti heritage and distributed the latest issue of Japan-Kuwait Society's newsletter to guests in the event. — KUNA

News in brief

Mutlaa City nearly complete

KUWAIT: Minister of Housing and Urban Development Ammar Al-Ajmi said it was necessary to complete the required work in Al-Mutlaa Residential City according to schedule. He added that a large percentage of the plots were in final stages of preparation. During an inspection tour of a number of sites at the city, the minister said it was important to ensure high quality is maintained in the construction and finishing of buildings and infrastructure in order to avoid any future problems. He also stressed the importance of coordination and follow-up with the relevant government agencies when it comes to connecting power to public buildings and handing it over to beneficiaries on time. The minister's tour included a number of public buildings, including a specialized health center, a water filtration tank and some power stations located in residential areas where citizens have started building structures on their plots. — KUNA

KRCS attends Riyadh forum

RIYADH: Kuwait Red Crescent Society (KRCS) representatives attended the third International Humanitarian Forum held on Feb 20-21 in Riyadh. Organized by the King Salman Humanitarian Centre (KSRelief) in collaboration with the United Nations, the forum brought together some of the most prominent contributors towards humanitarian causes from around the globe. KRCS Deputy Chief Dr Anwar Al-Hasawi said Kuwait makes it a point to participate in such events that provide an opportunity for exchanging knowledge and experiences in the field of humanitarian aid. The Kuwaiti official went on to cite some notable contributions the charity has made towards humanitarian causes - mainly its immediate and generous response to the earthquake that struck Turkey and Syria recently. Renowned international organizations such as the World Health Organization and the International Organization for Migration, amongst others, participated in the forum. — KUNA

KISR marks National and Liberation Days

Event includes activities highlighting Kuwait's heritage



KUWAIT: The KISR celebration included cultural exhibitions, musical performances and a fire drill. — KUNA

KUWAIT: The Kuwait Institute for Scientific Research (KISR) held an event Tuesday to celebrate the 62nd National Day and the 32nd Liberation Day, with the participation of the Ministry of Defense and the Kuwait Fire Force.

The celebration included presentations showcasing a number of projects and an exhibition of cultural and social activities that highlight the country's heritage.

During the celebration, the Ministry of

Defense presented a musical performance by the Kuwaiti Army Band. The fire force held a lecture raising awareness of the dangers of fires and led a fire drill for attendees and KISR employees. — KUNA

KNPC completes first medical airplane runway

KUWAIT: The Kuwait National Petroleum Company (KNPC) has finished the construction of the first vertical landing runway for medical air-

planes. The runway was inaugurated in the presence of several government officials at a symbolic celebration held at the Support and Training Center for Security and Firefighting south of Ahmadi city.

At the event, attendees witnessed the first test landing of a Kuwait Oil Company aircraft on the runway, which was constructed by KNPC's Security and Fire Department in cooperation with the "Projects Department 2". Kuwait-approved international specifications and standards were strictly followed.

"All instructions of the General Administration

of Civil Aviation and the Kuwait Fire Force have been taken into account. The use of the runway will be available 24/7 as needed to deal with emergencies which necessitate the evacuation of injured people whose serious health condition requires their transfer to the hospital as quickly as possible," said KNPC's Deputy CEO for Supporting Services Abdulaziz Al-Duaij. The runway, he said, will serve KNPC as well as the oil sector in general. He added that it's a step towards enhancing the capabilities of the company and the sector in terms of security and safety.

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KU holds research workshop for faculty, students

KUWAIT: The research department at Kuwait University organized a workshop titled: "How to Present Your Research Paper in a Peer-reviewed Journal" on Tuesday. The workshop was held at Al-Shadadiya campus and attended by faculty and graduate students in scientific colleges. Electrical Engineering Professor Mohammed Baidas and Life Sciences Professor Dari Al-Huwail presented the workshop, which is meant to support and encourage scientific research and develop the research capabilities faculty and postgraduate students. "The workshop aims to introduce faculty and postgraduate students the importance of research ethics and how to integrate them into the research process. It also aims to teach them how to choose an appropriate journal to publish their work and how to evaluate and critically read research papers," said Baidas. Al-Huwail said par-



ticipants were introduced to the basic principles of the research process and how to respond to reviewers' comments. The workshop was held due to the increasing demand from Kuwait University students and faculty. It also contributes to Kuwait University's scientific progress, said Assistant Vice Chancellor Haneen Al-Ghabra.

AU achieves great results in debate contest

MUSCAT: The Australian University (AU) was successfully represented by its Debate club Team during the second Asian Arabic Debate Championship held in Muscat, Oman, with AU being one of the four Kuwaiti universities participating in the competition.

This year's Asian Arabic Debate Championship is the second edition of an international debate competition first organized by the Qatar Debate Center in 2020. The competition seeks to spread the culture of dialogue in the Arabic language amongst native speakers and non-native speakers alike and to motivate students to raise the levels of civility, scientific-approach and language in discussion and debate cultures.

The AU team included students: Abbas Al-Saleh, Faisal Al-Balool, Ayah Al-Sarraf and Dalal Al-Refai. The team secured seventh place in the competition, becoming the only Kuwaiti team to reach the quarter finals of the championship. Teams representing 42 universities from 18 Arab and Asian countries competed in the tournament which featured five rounds.



Manager of the Teaching and Learning Center at AU Rola Mourdaa highlighted the dedication of the students and their preparation by familiarizing themselves with logical arguments and keeping up to date on important global topics.

"It was such a rich experience where students got the chance to attend professional practical workshops, huge networking opportunities with other students from different universities from various countries and be exposed to amazing contemporary topics that widens the scope of students' critical thinking, problem solving and communication skills," Mourdaa said.



Chilean’s appeal over murder of Japanese student delayed

Zepeda faces up to life in prison, verdict expected on March 8

VESOUL: A French court on Tuesday delayed by two days the start of appeal proceedings for a Chilean man convicted of murdering his Japanese ex-girlfriend in 2016, after the defendant dismissed his lawyer. The proceedings were delayed until 9:00 am (0800 GMT) on Thursday, presiding judge Francois Arnaud said at the criminal court in Vesoul, eastern France.

Nicolas Zepeda, 32, was sentenced in April last year to 28 years in jail for the murder of Narumi Kurosaki, then aged 21, in December 2016. As the appeal got under way, judge Arnaud read out a letter from Zepeda’s lawyer saying that he had been dismissed on February 18.

Although the court at first appointed two new defence lawyers for him, Zepeda, who appeared in court wearing a black fleece jacket and a dark green shirt, ultimately named his own, Renaud Portejoie. “This appeal has been scheduled for a year, he’s had a year to choose a new lawyer,” said Randall Schwerdorffer, a lawyer representing Kurosaki’s boyfriend at the time of her disappearance, Arthur del Piccolo.

Kurosaki’s mother and two sisters had travelled from Japan to attend the appeal hearing. “It almost seems like he doesn’t want to face up to the trial today, but whatever happens, whether (Zepeda) agrees or not, this appeal will take place sometime

or other,” Schwerdorffer said.

Some 31 media organisations, including Chilean and Japanese outlets, were accredited to cover the trial, which is expected to last two weeks. A verdict had been expected on March 8. Zepeda faces up to life in prison but remains covered by the presumption of innocence given his appeal.

Kurosaki, a brilliant scholarship student, arrived in the eastern French city of Besancon in the summer of 2016 to learn French. She disappeared on December 4. Zepeda, with whom she had broken up a year before, was the last person to see her alive.

In his first trial, prosecutors said Zepeda was unable to deal with the couple’s breakup, coming to Besancon to kill Kurosaki in her student dorm room before dumping the body in the forests of the rugged Jura region.

They pointed to evidence from witnesses, telephone records and geolocation of the car Zepeda hired. The Chilean has admitted spending the night with Kurosaki in December, claiming he ran into her by chance while travelling through France.

But several witnesses reported hearing “screams of terror” and thuds “as if someone was striking someone else”-though none called the police at the time. But so far no trace has been found of Kurosaki’s remains. — AFP



VESOUL: Humberto Zepeda, the father of Nicolas Zepeda, a Chilean man accused of allegedly murdering his Japanese ex-girlfriend Narumi Kurosaki, speaks to journalists outside the Vesoul courthouse on the first day of Nicolas Zepeda's appeal trial in Vesoul. — AFP

UK summons Iran envoy over threats to journalists

LONDON: The British government on Monday summoned Iran’s top diplomat in London to condemn “serious threats” to the lives of UK-based journalists, after a Persian-language TV network was forced to relocate.

Charge d’Affaires Mehdi Hosseini Matin was hauled in “to make clear the UK will not tolerate threats to life and media freedom”, British Foreign Secretary James Cleverly said in a statement. The private network Iran International announced Saturday that it had been forced on UK police advice to shut down its London studios, and had switched to 24-hour broadcasting

from Washington.

The station has provided extensive coverage of anti-government protests that erupted in Iran five months ago, and said two of its senior journalists received death threats in response to their reporting. “I am appalled by the Iranian regime’s continuing threats to the lives of UK-based journalists and have today summoned its representative to make clear this will not be tolerated,” Cleverly added.

“The UK will always stand up to countries who threaten our fundamental values of freedom of expression and the media,” The diplomat, Iran’s most senior representative in London in the absence of an ambassador, was directed to meet with the head of the UK foreign ministry’s Middle East department.

London’s Metropolitan police said Saturday that working with the M15 spy agency, since the start of 2022, it had foiled 15 plots “to either kidnap or even kill” people seen as “enemies of the (Iranian) regime”.

But the decision to ask Iran International, which employs around 100 journalists in the British capital, to shutter its office sparked concerns from rights groups. “UK is certainly able to guarantee the safety of #IranInternational. It’s a question of political will,” said Mahmood Amiry-Moghaddam, director of the Norway-based Iran Human Rights group.

“I hope it’s a temporary measure and that @IranIntl will resume its work from London soon,” he added on Twitter, arguing it was “unacceptable that UK gives in to terrorist threats”. Prime Minister Rishi Sunak’s spokesman pushed back at such claims on Monday, telling reporters that the police have been working “extremely hard” to protect the station’s staff.

That work continues “to ensure they are protected,” he added. Britain continues to host two other major Farsi outlets: BBC Persian and the widely followed Manoto TV. Also on Monday, the UK government imposed new sanctions on eight senior Iranian

figures it said are responsible for domestic oppression. London said the move, hours after the European Union announced asset freezes and visa bans on Iran’s education and culture ministers, was “part of wider efforts to hold the regime to account over its behaviour globally”.

The latest UK sanctions targeted three Iranian judges who had imposed the death penalty against protesters, and five commanders from Iran’s Revolutionary Guards. Cleverly said the UK steps showed the UK “will never allow the regime’s threats to go unchallenged”.

He added the eight Iranians now subject to travel bans and asset freezes were “responsible for horrific human rights violations in Iran, including the killing of children”. London has hit more than 50 Iranian individuals and entities with sanctions in response to alleged human rights violations since the latest period of unrest began last September. — AFP

US urges Greece, Turkey to avoid election tensions

ATHENS: US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Tuesday urged Greece and Turkey to avoid “charged rhetoric” ahead of elections expected in both countries in the spring. On a visit to Athens, Blinken called on the historic rivals “to resolve any differences diplomatically and of course, to avoid any threats or provocative rhetoric that will only raise tensions, and that can be more difficult in an election period.” Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos

Mitsotakis is expected to hold elections in April, but a follow-up ballot is likely to be required a month later for a stable government to be formed. In Turkey, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan had proposed holding elections on May 14.

That may now change following the earthquake earlier this month that has killed nearly 45,000 people across Turkey and Syria. Greece and Turkey have a history of rivalry going back centuries, but relations have been exacerbated by territorial and energy disputes-and more recently by Erdogan’s bombastic threats of invasion.

The quake however has brought a thaw between the NATO allies, who have long experience in such disasters. Greek Foreign

Minister Nikos Dendias was the first European minister to visit Turkey after the earthquake, and was warmly greeted by his Turkish counterpart Mevlut Cavusoglu.

Greece sent experienced rescue teams and aid to the disaster zone, and Cavusoglu later acknowledged: “Greece was one of the first countries to call and propose help to Turkey after the earthquake.”

Cavusoglu recalled mutual aid when quakes struck Turkey and Greece in 1999, when he said at the time: “We don’t have to wait for another earthquake for developing our relations”. “I hope we will make efforts for finding a solution to our disagreements with dialogue in a sincere way,” the Turkish foreign minister said earlier this month. — AFP



ATHENS: US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, (L) and Greece's Foreign Affairs Minister Nikos Dendias (R) hold a press conference in Athens, on February 21, 2023. — AFP

6 dead as new quake hits...

Continued from Page 1

It knocked me off my feet,” said Mehmet Irmak, who works at a notary’s office in Antakya. “Hatay is no longer a safe place. We could hear a lot of buildings collapsing,” said Irmak, who had been sleeping in his car for two weeks after the first quake. “We will wait for a new day, but I don’t know what I’m going to do,” he said.

Among the dead were three people who became trapped after returning to their damaged flats to retrieve belongings, said AFAD, warning people against going back to homes at risk. “It’s no longer a habitable place, that’s the reality,” Kemal Oflazoglu, aged in his fifties, said. “We have a few things to sort out and we’re leaving the town.” On Tuesday, the organization said it was sending 6,000 extra tents to the region to shelter those in need.

Images from DHA news agency showed a hospital in Antakya being evacuated, while broadcaster NTV reported that a hospital was evacuated in the city of Iskenderun. DHA said patients in an intensive

care unit were taken by ambulance to field hospitals to continue their treatment. Interior Minister Suleyman Soylu said rescue workers were trying to find people trapped under rubble.

An AFP journalist reported scenes of panic in Antakya, with the new tremors raising clouds of dust in the devastated city. The walls of badly damaged buildings crumbled while several people, apparently injured, called for help. “It’s more than fear, my heart is broken. The fear comes and goes, but the pain, the sadness remain,” Ayse Altindag, 42, told AFP. “Because we’ve lost everything. Not just the house, our things... it’s our childhood that’s gone, our friends, the school, the street... even the tree where you would pick up fruit has disappeared.”

The Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS) said five hospitals it supports in northwest Syria received several people who had sustained minor injuries, some when parts of damaged buildings fell on them. In government-held areas of Syria, Aleppo hospitals also received panic-stricken residents, while six people were injured by falling rubble, the state news agency SANA said. Al Razi hospital in Aleppo received 47 cases, state media reported. “We rushed out, we don’t know how we left. I was afraid that we would meet the same fate as those who died under the rubble,” said Khadija Al Khalaf, a 45-year-old mother, in the rebel-held city of Azaz. — AFP



ANTAKYA: Cats sit in rubble in front of a destroyed car on a damaged street after a 6.4-magnitude quake hit Hatay province on Feb 21, 2023. — AFP

Crown Prince begins traditional...

Continued from Page 1

costly populist draft legislation, especially a draft law calling on the government to purchase billions of dinars in bank loans owed by Kuwaiti citizens. The government demanded that the draft laws be sent back to Assembly committees to rediscuss them and hear the government’s views, but MPs voted to debate them immediately. MPs

have criticized the delay in naming a prime minister to form a new Cabinet after the resigned Cabinet has not attended Assembly sessions since Jan 10. On Tuesday, Saadoun adjourned the regular Assembly sessions for Tuesday and Wednesday over a lack of quorum and the government’s failure to attend amid protests by several MPs over obstructing the work of the parliament.

Meanwhile, five MPs on Tuesday submitted a draft law calling to grant female employees maternity leave amounting to two years and four months. The draft law calls to grant pregnant employees four months of maternity leave for birth and another two years for taking care of the baby.

Putin vows to keep fighting...

Continued from Page 1

“impossible to defeat Russia on the battlefield”. “The responsibility for fueling the Ukrainian conflict, for its escalation, for the number of victims... lies completely with Western elites,” Putin said.

A top US official described as an “absurdity” Putin’s accusations that Russia had been threatened by the West as justification for sending troops into Ukraine. “Nobody is attacking Russia. There’s a kind of absurdity in the notion that Russia was under some form of military threat from Ukraine or anyone else,” White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan told reporters in Warsaw.

Putin also issued a warning to critics within Russia, saying: “Those who have embarked on the path of betrayal of Russia must be held accountable under the law”. Turning to the economy, Putin said sanctions against Russia had not succeeded and were in fact hurting the West by raising energy prices. “They have not succeeded and will not succeed,” he said. “The Russian economy has proved much more resilient than the West expected.”

Russian official data on Monday showed the economy contracted by 2.1 percent last year despite sanctions - far less than had been expected. Biden was due to deliver his own speech after talks with Polish President Andrzej Duda, who has been a key advocate for Ukraine within the EU and NATO.

From Warsaw’s historic Royal Castle, Biden will “make it clear that the United States will continue to stand with Ukraine... for as long as it takes”, according to National Security Council spokesman John Kirby, who spoke to reporters last week.

He will also speak by telephone with the leaders of Britain, France and Italy, the White House has said. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz is due in Washington on March 3. “You’ll hear messages in the president’s speech that will certainly resonate with the American people, certainly will resonate with our allies and partners, without question resonate with the Polish people,” Kirby said of the Warsaw address. “I would suspect that you’ll hear him messaging Mr Putin as well, as well as the Russian people.”

At his meeting with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky on Monday, Biden pledged “unwavering” US support and some \$500 million in ammunition and artillery supplies. The visit came ahead of the February 24 anniversary of when Putin gave the order for Russian troops to enter Ukraine. “One year later, Kyiv stands. And Ukraine stands. Democracy stands,” Biden said at the Mariinsky Palace, the Ukrainian president’s official residence.

When the Kremlin launched the offensive in Ukraine, its so-called “special military operation” was planned to be a rapid conquest leading to capitulation and the installation of a pro-Russian regime. “Putin thought Ukraine was weak and the West was divided,” Biden said Monday. “He thought he could outlast us.” “He’s just been plain wrong,” he added. On Tuesday, China said it was “deeply concerned” about the conflict, which it said was “intensifying and even getting out of control”. — AFP

International

Taiwan to boost military exchanges with US to curb 'authoritarian expansionism'

Together we can continue to safeguard the values of democracy and freedom: Tsai

TAIPEI: Taiwan will boost military exchanges with the United States to curb "authoritarian expansionism", President Tsai Ing-wen said Tuesday after meeting with visiting US lawmakers. The five-day US congressional visit comes after a top US defence official reportedly made a rare stopover to the self-ruled island while Washington-Beijing tensions flared over alleged Chinese spy balloons.

"Taiwan and the United States continue to bolster military exchanges," Tsai said after convening with the US delegation at her office in Taipei. "Going forward, Taiwan will cooperate even more actively with the United States and other democratic partners to confront such global challenges as authoritarian expansionism and climate change."

Tsai did not provide further details on what the future exchanges might entail. Washington diplomatically recognises Beijing over Taipei, but is also the self-governing island's most important international benefactor and supports Taipei's right to decide its future. Beijing, which claims Taiwan as part of its territory and has vowed to seize it one day, opposes any official exchanges with the democracy and has reacted with anger to a flurry of trips to the island by US politicians in recent years.

Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin on Tuesday accused Taiwanese leaders of "provocation", warning that "any futile separatist conspiracy or scheme relying on foreign forces to undermine cross-strait relations will only backfire and never succeed".

Taiwan authorities "cannot change the inevitable broader trend towards Chinese unification", Wang said at a regular press conference. In Taipei, Tsai said it was time "to explore even more opportunities for coopera-

tion" between the United States and Taiwan. "Together we can continue to safeguard the values of democracy and freedom," she said.

Diplomacy, defence and semiconductors

Relations between Beijing and Washington have grown increasingly tense, and China responded angrily to a Financial Times report about a weekend visit by Michael Chase, the deputy assistant US secretary of defense for China. The British newspaper said Chase was the most senior Pentagon official to visit the island since 2019. In Taipei, California representative Ro Khanna, a member of a newly created US House committee on strategic competition with China's Communist Party, said he was leading the bi-partisan delegation's visit to expand "the partnership on military and defence" and to shore up ties with the island's world-leading semiconductor industry.

"We are here to affirm the shared values between the United States and Taiwan, a commitment to democracy, a commitment to freedom," he said on Tuesday. Khanna added that he "particularly appreciated" a meeting with Morris Chang, founder of Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC), which is the world's largest contract chipmaker. The global semiconductor industry has been upended by an ongoing economic slowdown dampening demand as well as by a raft of US export controls aimed at preventing China from obtaining advanced chips.

Cross-strait exchanges

Relations between the world's two largest economies dipped to a low point in August as China staged war games near Taiwan following a visit by

solve (parliament). I said March so it will be March, so this would fit with May," he told reporters after a regular cabinet meeting.

With the economy struggling and the vital tourism sector hit hard by the pandemic, the 68-year-old's popularity has been in the doldrums, but last month he announced a re-election bid at a rally. Prayut will run under the banner of the newly created Ruam Thai Sang Chart party, with current ruling party Palan Pracharath Party (PPRP) last month naming Deputy Prime Minister Prawit Wongsuwan as its candidate for PM in the next election.

Campaign billboards are already popping up around the country and the main opposition party Pheu Thai has been campaigning in its traditional



TAIPEI: Handout picture taken and released by Taiwan Presidential Office on February 21, 2023 shows Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen (C) shaking hands with US Representative Ro Khanna at the Presidential Office in Taipei. — AFP

Nancy Pelosi, then speaker of the US House of Representatives. Both sides recently signalled hopes for a reset, but at a weekend meeting with US chief diplomat Antony Blinken, China's foreign minister Wang Yi accused Washington of harbouring a "misguided" perception of Beijing.

Blinken has previously warned that China may be stepping up its time frame for a possible invasion of

strongholds in the northeast. Pheu Thai is polling well but the current Thai constitution, drafted under junta rule, gives army-linked parties a strong advantage.

The election will be the first since mass youth-led street protests rocked the kingdom in 2020, with calls for political reform and unprecedented demands for changes to the monarchy, which is heavily protected from criticism under Thai law.

Pheu Thai is expected to nominate Paetongtarn Shinawatra-daughter of former premier Thaksin Shinawatra-as one of its candidates for prime minister. Billionaire tycoon Thaksin was ousted as prime minister in a 2006 coup and lives in self-imposed exile to avoid corruption charges he has said are politically motivated. —AFP

UN Security Council 'silence' on North Korea missiles: US

UNITED NATIONS: The United States on Monday denounced a "dangerous" lack of action by the UN Security Council on North Korea's missile launches, accusing-but not naming-China and Russia of having "forced" the body "into silence." The exclusive North Korean state test-fired dozens of missiles in 2022, setting security postures in East Asia on edge. It fired two ballistic missiles Monday, 48 hours after it test-launched an inter-continental ballistic missile. "In the face of unprecedented launches last year, two permanent members forced us into silence in spite of countless DPRK (North Korean) violations," Washington's UN Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield said, referring to vetoes by China and Russia last May of a resolution that would have imposed new sanctions against Pyongyang.

"On this vital matter, silence leads to irrelevance," she added at an emergency meeting of the Security Council. The 15-member panel's "lack of action is worse than shameful. It is dangerous," Thomas-Greenfield warned, saying the "repeated failures to respond emboldens the DPRK," the official acronym for North Korea, to conduct such destabilizing launches without fear of consequences.

President Joe Biden's UN envoy did not accuse the council as a whole, but laid the blame squarely at the feet of China and Russia, although she did not name the countries out loud. "The reality is that those who shield the DPRK from the consequences of its escalatory missile tests put the Asian region, and entire world, at risk of conflict," Thomas-Greenfield said. She noted that thanks to sanctions approved by the Security Council in 2017, Pyongyang "refrained from any major provocations for nearly five years" and also engaged in dialogue with the West. —AFP

Thai election to be held in May: PM

BANGKOK: Thailand will hold a general election in May, Prime Minister Prayut Chan-O-Cha said Tuesday, with unofficial campaigning already under way. The embattled premier, who came to power as army chief in a 2014 coup before taking over as PM after a controversial 2019 election, told reporters he would dissolve parliament in March.

Under Thai constitutional rules, this would mean an election some time in May, with May 7 seen by many observers as the most likely date. "I will dis-



BANGKOK: File photo shows members of the Thai parliament attend a session in the newly inaugurated parliament building in the historic quarter in Bangkok. Thailand will hold a general election in May 2023, Prime Minister Prayut Chan-O-Cha said on February 21. — AFP

Nigeria hardships feed election disinformation

LAGOS: Disinformation has spiralled before Nigeria's presidential ballot on Saturday as the nation faces challenges ranging from threats from criminal gunmen to a stuttering economy and a currency crisis.

Fears of electoral fraud have also fuelled false stories about candidates hoarding cash during an acute shortage of naira currency notes. With some 39 million Nigerian social media users, these claims spread like wildfire around Facebook, WhatsApp and TikTok before the February 25 vote. "Renewed sophistication and organisation in the push of disinformation has been observed with efforts generally focused on glorifying or delegitimising political candidates and undermining the credibility of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC)", the Centre for Democracy and Development said in a report.

Candidates have been campaigning for the support of more than 93 million registered voters who will choose a successor to President Muhammadu Buhari. The top contenders in the race are Bola Tinubu of the ruling All Progressives Congress (APC), Atiku Abubakar of the main opposition People's Democratic Party (PDP) and the Labour Party's Peter Obi.

Security threats

Nigeria faces multiple security challenges including kidnap gangs in the northwest, intercommunal clashes and jihadists in the northeast. Experts also warned of campaigns fanning ethnic and religious tensions in a country almost equally split between Muslim-majority north and Christian-dominated south and with dozens of ethnic groups.

One of the threats comes from separatists in the southeast. The electoral commission said its offices have been hit by more the 50 attacks across the nation since 2019, with the majority taking place in

southeastern states. The Indigenous People of Biafra or IPOB separatist movement denies its members are responsible.

But the violence has also spurred disinformation on social media. AFP Fact Check debunked several claims shared by accounts promoting the separatist cause of IPOB. While one post featured photos allegedly showing the aftermath of an attack on the convoy of Labour's Obi, another purported to prove that secessionists in the southeast had shot down a government drone. Neither was true-the photos turned out to be old and of unrelated incidents.

Currency crisis

Separatist and political violence are not the only issues threatening Nigeria's election. A national



LAGOS: Supporters for the All Progressives Congress (APC) presidential candidate Bola Ahmed Tinubu dance near Teslim Balogun Stadium in Lagos on February 21, 2023 ahead of the Nigerian presidential election scheduled for February 25, 2023. — AFP

cash shortage, coupled with a fuel scarcity, has sparked protests in major cities, with people attacking bank buildings. The crisis erupted after the central bank began to swap old bills of the local naira currency for new redesigns in December, creating a shortfall in banknotes.

The bank said the new policy was aimed at clearing up counterfeit naira and fighting political bribery. But many Nigerians are not convinced it will address corruption. The situation has fuelled online rumours, including of presidential candidates hoarding money.

AFP Fact Check debunked a post shared more than 14,000 times alleging that truckloads of cash had been seized from APC's Tinubu.

Electoral fraud

Accusations of widespread vote rigging, tallying errors and corruption have marred past ballots in Nigeria. As a result, trust in INEC itself has dwindled. Nearly 80 percent of Nigerians distrust the organisation, according to a February report by the pan-African survey group Afrobarometer.

"Disinformation has triggered election violence in the past because people believed what they saw on social media," said Opeyemi Kehinde of Nigeria Factcheckers' Coalition. The alliance, made up of a dozen local organisations, was launched to verify disinformation linked to the 2023 ballot.

"It is important for people to trust information that comes from INEC or other official sources, especially election results," Kehinde added. In a bid to make the 2023 ballot more fraud-resistant, Nigeria introduced technological innovations, including the bimodal voter accreditation system (BVAS), which identifies voters through facial recognition and biometrics.

But controversies have already plagued the new system. In January, a tribunal overturned the result of Osun state's gubernatorial election after finding that overcounting took place despite the use of BVAS. The incident sparked disinformation online. AFP Fact Check debunked claims that Osun's governor had primarily been sacked over a video showing him dancing after he won the election. Fake INEC press releases have also been widely circulated. —AFP

Philippine rescuers climb volcano to reach crash site

MANILA: Philippine rescue teams began climbing an active volcano Tuesday in a "very risky operation" to reach the wreckage of a small plane that crashed at the weekend, officials said. Four people, including two Australians, were on board the Cessna 340 aircraft when it went missing Saturday morning after taking off for Manila from Bicol International Airport in the central province of Albay, several kilometres from Mayon volcano. Civil aviation investigators on board a reconnaissance flight on Tuesday confirmed that wreckage spotted on the volcano over the weekend was the missing plane. It is not known if there are any survivors. Manila-based Energy Development Corporation said previously the missing plane belonged to the company. The Australians were technical consultants for the renewable energy company.

Rain, clouds and the risk of an eruption have hampered efforts to reach the crash site. The Civil Aviation Authority of the Philippines (CAAP) said the plane was on the western side of the volcano, about "3,500 to 4,000 feet" (1,070 metres to 1,200 metres) above sea level. A high-resolution camera was used to identify the wreckage, said CAAP spokesman Eric Apolonio. Attempts to lower rescue teams to the crash site by helicopter were aborted Tuesday due to strong winds and cloud cover, officials said. Instead, search and rescue teams, including veteran mountaineers, began making the steep climb on foot. They were expected to camp overnight and reach the crash site Wednesday, said Carlos Baldo, mayor of Camalig municipality, which overlaps the crash site. —AFP

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 22, 2023

Business

Dubai airport sees surge in arrivals

Spike due to 'huge growth' in Russian travelers

DUBAI: Dubai's airport welcomed 66 million passengers in 2022, more than double the previous year, it said Tuesday, a spike its chief executive attributed to "huge growth" in Russian travelers. The main business hub of the oil-rich United Arab Emirates is home to one of the world's busiest airports.

The airport "welcomed a total of 66,069,981 passengers during 2022," representing year-on-year growth of 127 percent, according to a statement. In 2021, around 29.1 million passengers passed through Dubai, and the authorities had expected 57 million visitors for the year 2022.

India, Saudi Arabia and the United Kingdom topped passenger arrivals but Russia has also "been an important contributor", CEO Paul Griffiths said. "We've seen a huge growth in the Russian market since the... tensions between Ukraine and Russia" started on year ago, he told AFP.

Russians accounted for 1.9 million passengers—more than double the 912,000 recorded for 2021, Griffiths said. The UAE has maintained a neutral stance towards Russia's war in Ukraine, which is nearing its one-year anniversary.

The Gulf nation has emerged as a top destination for rich Russian emigres fleeing the impact of Western sanctions. Russians were the top buyers of Dubai properties last year, according to brokerage Betterhomes, bolstering the city's record real estate transactions last year.

Dubai's airport was briefly closed to commercial flights from March to July 2020 due to COVID-19.

It was one of the first travel hubs to reopen after the pandemic. In 2020, it received only 25.9 million passengers, down from the 86 million the previous year. Following strong results, the world's busiest international airport raised its forecast for 2023 to 78 million. DXB welcomed a total of 66,069,981 passengers in 2022, a year-on-year-growth of 127 percent.

"We knew it was the year when growth would return to the air travel sector in a big way, but the surge was much stronger than anticipated and we had to do our best to turn that challenge into an opportunity," said Paul Griffiths, CEO of Dubai Airports. "Thanks to the planning, preparation, and all collaboration and hard work of our people across the airport community, we were ready to meet the challenge of rapid recovery in customer numbers while delivering significant improvement in our service quality across the board," he added.

Griffiths said 2023 is expected to be another record year for the airport, with Dubai hosting major international events including its annual airshow and COP28.

"It will be another year of new challenges and opportunities and we are ready for them," he said. Cargo continued to register a contraction in volumes with 420,125 tons recorded in the fourth quarter, down 31.7 percent compared to 614,834 tons in Q4 of 2021. DXB handled 1,727,815 tons of cargo during 2022, a drop of 25.5 percent resulting from the moving of all major freight operators back to Dubai World Central (DWC) and the return of passenger aircraft back to passenger operations during the year.



DUBAI: Passengers walk towards the gates at terminal 3 of Dubai International Airport in this Aug 16, 2022 file photo. — AFP

ing the year. "Our top priority in 2023 will be our customers, our people, and sustainability - three key areas that are crucial to our aspirations and

goals as the world's busiest global hub, a preferred employer, and a key player and trend-setter in the world's aviation industry," Griffiths said. — AFP

US home sales slip but rebound may be in sight

WASHINGTON: Sales of existing homes in the United States fell for a 12th consecutive month in January, according to industry data released Tuesday, defying expectations of an uptick. The housing market in the world's biggest economy has slumped as the Federal Reserve rolled out an aggressive campaign of interest rate hikes last year to rein in soaring inflation.

But there are hopes that a turnaround will soon be in sight. In January, sales of all types of homes and condos fell 0.7 percent to a seasonally adjusted annual rate of 4.0 million, said the National Association of Realtors (NAR). This was 0.7 percent down from December's revised numbers, with all regions logging year-on-year sales declines as well.

But "home sales are bottoming

out," said NAR chief economist Lawrence Yun, meaning a turnaround could soon take place. "Prices vary depending on a market's affordability, with lower-priced regions witnessing modest growth and more expensive regions experiencing declines," he said in a statement.

This comes as mortgage rates remain high with the popular option of a 30-year fixed-rate mortgage averaging 6.3 percent as of February 16, according to home loan finance company Freddie Mac.

The median home price across housing types was \$359,000, down from in December but still 1.3 percent above January 2022, said the NAR. Existing home sales form the vast majority of the US property market. Meanwhile, total housing inventory as of end-January was 980,000 units, 2.1 percent higher than in December and above the year-ago figure as well. Yun said that "inventory remains low, but buyers are beginning to have better negotiating power."

Homes that have been on the market for more than 60 days can be



WASHINGTON: Sales of existing homes in the United States fell for a 12th consecutive month in January.

bought for around 10 percent less than the original list price, he added. "Mortgage rates remain high but have eased from the recent peak," said Rubeela Farooqi of High Frequency Economics. But inventories remain

tight, and prices are still markedly above pre-pandemic levels, she added in a note. "Rising inventories and lower prices could provide support to home sales. But affordability remains a key constraint for buyers," she said. —AFP

Oil prices fall on interest rate concerns

LONDON: Oil prices fell in morning trade on Tuesday on a strong dollar and concerns about further monetary tightening by the US Federal Reserve. Brent, the benchmark for two thirds of the world's oil, was trading 0.51 percent lower at \$83.64 a barrel at 12.47am UAE time. West Texas Intermediate, the gauge that tracks US crude, was up 0.56 percent at \$76.77 a barrel. If you own a mouse, you will never turn off your computer again.

"There is undoubtedly more optimism around the Chinese economy which will stimulate more demand this year but at the same time, sentiment is cooling on the global economy as interest rates are projected to go a little higher than previously anticipated," said Edward Moya, senior market analyst at Oanda. "This was always likely to be a quarter of big swings in sentiment as it was too much to ask for the inflation data to simply retreat back without any setbacks along the way."

Meanwhile, Wall Street stocks fell early Tuesday following mixed results from Walmart and Home Depot as concerns about higher interest rates continued to weigh on markets.

Both retail giants, also listed on the Dow Jones Industrial Average, were lower after offering lackluster forecasts for the coming year. Walmart alluded to consumer inflation as a drag while it forecast much slower revenue growth, while Home Depot expects flat sales in its fiscal year of 2023. Analysts are also watching Treasury bond yields, seen as a proxy for US interest rate policies, which remain upward-bound as investors prepare for more Federal Reserve rate hikes. — AFP



MANILA: Senator Loren Legarda chairs the Committee on Foreign Relations (Subcommittee on the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership) hearing on discussing the proposed concurrence to the ratification of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) by the Philippines on February 7, 2023.

Philippine lawmakers ratify entry to world's largest trade pact

MANILA: Philippine lawmakers approved Tuesday the country's entry into the world's biggest free trade bloc, with supporters arguing it will boost investment and jobs, but detractors warned it could hurt farmers. The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) includes 10 Southeast Asian economies along with China, Japan, South Korea, New Zealand and Australia, with members accounting for around 30 percent of global gross domestic product.

Launched in 2012, the deal was signed in November 2020 and took effect January 2022 with most member countries ratifying the pact. The agreement to lower tariffs and open up the services trade does not include the United States and is viewed as a coup for China in expanding its influence.

Before the Senate's overwhelming approval Tuesday, the Philippines was the last holdout to the trade deal. President Ferdinand Marcos's administration and business leaders had lobbied the Senate to ratify the pact, citing benefits for local consumers, businesses and the wider economy.

The pact should help reduce costs and make life easier for companies by letting them export products anywhere within the bloc without meeting separate requirements for each country.

It touches on intellectual property, but environmental protections and labor rights are not part of the deal. The Senate passed a resolution to ratify the treaty late Tuesday by a 20-1 vote, with one abstention.

"I think for us it's a game changer," Economic Planning Secretary Arsenio Balisacan said Tuesday. "Foreign investors look for places to go where there are clear rules, particularly trade facilitation, investment policies, and which are followed and not subject to change at any time," Balisacan told reporters. "By being a member we are saying to the world, 'we are ready for this, we play by the rules of the game, and your investment is safe with us.'" —AFP

News in brief

InterContinental Hotels Group eyes China recovery

LONDON: InterContinental Hotels Group on Tuesday eyed further recovery this year as China reopens from strict COVID lockdowns. The IHG outlook was included in an earnings statement that revealed net profit jumped 41 percent last year to \$375 million as markets reopened elsewhere. The hotels group that owns brands including also Crowne Plaza and Holiday Inn added that revenue grew 34 percent to \$3.9 billion. "Looking to 2023, while there are economic uncertainties, we expect continued strong leisure demand in many markets, alongside further return of business and group travel and the ongoing reopening of China," said chief executive Keith Barr. —AFP

Canada inflation continues to cool to 5.9% in January

OTTAWA: Canadians paid 5.9 percent more for goods and services in January than a year earlier, as costs continued sliding from last year's high, the government statistical agency said Tuesday. Prices for cellular services and passenger vehicles led the deceleration, according to Statistics Canada, while mortgage costs and food prices continued to rise. The inflation rate beat analyst expectations, after ending 2022 at 6.3 percent. The surprise lower rate is expected give the Bank of Canada some room to consider its next move after pausing its aggressive monetary policy aimed at taming inflation last month. —AFP

Crescent Petroleum to develop natural gas fields in Iraq

ABU DHABI: UAE-based energy company Crescent Petroleum has signed three contracts to develop natural gas fields in Iraq's Diyala and Basra provinces, two government sources and the company said on Tuesday. Crescent Petroleum said it will develop two fields in Diyala province to initially produce 250 million standard cubic feet per day of natural gas within 18 months to supply nearby power plants. The company said it plans to explore and develop a third block in Basra province to add further supplies of oil and gas. — Agencies

Egypt tightens price guidance for debut dollar sukuk

CAIRO: Egypt tightened price guidance for its debut sale of US dollar-denominated Islamic bonds known as sukuk to 11.375 percent, according to reports on Tuesday. The three-year sukuk are expected to raise \$1.5 billion, the document said, and demand is believed to have topped \$4.5 billion. The initial price guidance was around 11.625 percent. Egypt's vulnerable finances fell into crisis after the war in Ukraine triggered heavy foreign investment outflows from Egyptian financial markets. —Agencies

Business

Energy companies not doing enough to cut methane: IEA

Emissions rose last year to 135m tons to just below record set in 2019

PARIS: Oil and gas companies are not doing enough to cut methane emissions the International Energy Agency (IEA) said Tuesday, despite high energy prices making abatement measures mostly pay for themselves. In its latest annual Global Methane Tracker report, the IEA found that emissions from the energy sector rose slightly last year to 135 million tons, to just below the record set in 2019.

"Our new Global Methane Tracker shows that some progress is being made but that emissions are still far too high and not falling fast enough—especially as methane cuts are among the cheapest options to limit near-term global warming," said IEA Executive Director Fatih Birol. "There is just no excuse."

Methane is responsible for around 30 percent of the rise in global temperatures since the Industrial Revolution. As it has a faster and more powerful impact than carbon dioxide reductions, methane emissions may prove the best way to limit short-term global warming and rapidly improve air quality.

The energy sector accounts for around 40 percent of total methane emissions attributable to human activity, second only to agriculture, and cost-effective solutions are available. "We esti-

mate that around 70 percent of methane emissions from fossil fuel operations could be reduced with existing technology," the IEA said in the report.

While fossil fuel operations are reducing the amount of methane emitted per unit of energy and leaks into the atmosphere, overall emissions are still rising.

Self-financing

This despite steps to reduce emissions which largely pay for themselves. "Based on the record gas prices seen around the world in 2022, we estimate that about 80 percent of the options to reduce emissions from oil and gas operations worldwide could be implemented at no net cost," said the IEA. The IEA estimates that \$100 billion—less than three percent of the income of oil and gas companies worldwide last year—would be enough to achieve a 75 percent reduction in methane emissions.

Meanwhile, the IEA said the most impactful measure countries can take to rein in emissions is stopping all non-emergency flaring and venting of methane. The IEA also noted that the explosions last year which destroyed the Nord Stream pipelines that carried Russian natural gas



to Germany released a huge amount of methane into the atmosphere. "But normal oil and gas operations around the world release the same amount of methane as the Nord Stream explosion every single day," it added.

The increased emissions come despite 150 countries having now joined the Global Methane Pledge to reduce methane emissions from human

activity by 30 percent from 2020 levels by 2030.

The IEA believes that methane emissions from the fossil fuel sector need to drop by 75 percent by 2030 to reach net zero by 2050, the target seen as giving a chance at keeping the mean increase in global temperature at well below two degrees Celsius as enshrined in the 2015 Paris Climate Accords. —AFP

Eurozone recovery accelerates in February: Data

BRUSSELS: Economic growth in the eurozone accelerated in February and hit a nine-month high, according to the closely watched S&P PMI output index. Data from the survey published on Tuesday showed the indicator at 52.3, up from 50.8 in January. A reading over 50 represents economic growth.

Output in the single currency bloc turned around in January after a slump tied to supply chain disruptions, the Covid pandemic and the war in Ukraine. With inflation still high but falling and China reopening its economy after strict COVID lockdowns, European growth has returned, raising hopes the eurozone will escape falling into recession.

"Business activity across the eurozone grew much faster than expected in February," said Chris Williamson, chief business economist at S&P Global market Intelligence.

The higher figure for the purchasing managers' index (PMI) would be consistent with the eurozone economy growing at just under 0.3 percent in the first quarter of this year, he said. But the combination of faster growth and still high, though falling, inflation will encourage the European Central Bank to further raise interest rates, he warned.

The ECB has raised interest rates five times since July 2022 and has signaled that it plans to keep doing so in March and probably beyond. On Friday, the governor of the French central bank, Francois Villeroy de Galhau, described the effort as "a long-distance race" to bring inflation down to the ECB's target of two percent. "Growth has been buoyed by



rising confidence as recession fears fade and inflation shows signs of peaking, though manufacturing has also benefitted from a major improvement in supplier performance," Williamson said.

"The pandemic-related delivery

delays that dogged factories over the past two years have given way to faster delivery times, in turn meaning pricing power is shifting from suppliers to factory purchasing managers, bringing industrial price inflation down." —AFP

UK finances win boost before key budget

LONDON: UK government finances recorded a stronger surplus than expected last month, official data showed Tuesday, news that analysts said could allow finance minister Jeremy Hunt to further ease a cost-of-living crisis. Net borrowing showed a surplus of £5.4 billion (\$6.5 billion) in January, compared with the government's own forecast for £400 million. The government traditionally posts a surplus in January as Britons make annual tax payments. The data comes ahead of a key budget update next month.

Despite a surplus also in January 2022, UK borrowing soared over the year on support schemes to help the country cope with rocketing energy bills. Following the latest data, Hunt said reducing debt remained a priority for the Conservative government led by Prime Minister Rishi Sunak.

"We are rightly spending billions now to support households and businesses with the impacts of rising prices—but with debt at the highest level since the 1960s, it is vital we stick to our plan to reduce debt over the medium term," Hunt said in a statement. Analysts said the better-than-expected performance for public finances at the start of the year could see Hunt, whose official title is chancellor of the



LONDON: UK government finances recorded a stronger surplus than expected last month, official data showed Tuesday, news that analysts said could allow finance minister Jeremy Hunt to further ease a cost-of-living crisis.

Exchequer, move closer to meeting the demands of striking public-sector workers.

The UK is facing the biggest industrial action by public and private sector staff in more than a decade as they seek pay rises in line with sky-high inflation. "January's public finances figures suggest the chancellor may have scope for some giveaways in his budget on 15th March," noted Ruth Gregory, an economist at

Capital Economics research group. Britain's fiscal year runs to the start of April, and to date the government has borrowed almost £31 billion less than it had forecast for 2022/23. This "could tempt the chancellor to offer a pay increase to public-sector workers as part of his budget next month, hoping to prevent another wave of strikes", according to Michal Stelmach, senior economist at KPMG UK. —AFP

courts on behalf of a law, known as Section 230, which was passed when the Internet was in its infancy and has become one of its pillars. Section 230 states that in the US internet companies cannot be considered publishers and have legal immunity for the content posted on their platforms.

The novelty of the Gonzalez case is that the complainants are isolating algorithms as the cause of the harm, arguing that the highly complex recommendation systems perfected by big platforms fall out of the scope of Section 230. "The selection of the users to whom ISIS videos were recommended was determined by computer algorithms created and implemented by YouTube," the Gonzalez family legal brief said. The Supreme Court passes over the vast majority of the cases that come its way, and hearing this one indicates there is a willingness to modify the landmark law.

Big tech cold sweat

The prospect of the Supreme Court even tinkering with Section 230 is causing cold sweats in the tech world. In the legal filing, Google pleaded that the court "not undercut a central building block of the modern internet."

"Recommendation algorithms are what make it possible to find the needles in humanity's largest haystack," Google said. Allowing platforms to be

sued for their algorithms, "would expose them to liability for third-party content virtually all the time," said Facebook owner Meta in its own brief, adding that recommendations serve to organize uploaded content.

On Wednesday, the top court in the US will continue its consideration of a very similar case, but this time asking if platforms should be subject to anti-terrorism laws.

In the past, several of the Supreme Court justices have expressed a willingness to move the lines on Section 230, which is increasingly contested given the backlash against big tech in recent years.

In 2021, the very conservative Clarence Thomas lamented that "many courts have construed the law broadly to confer sweeping immunity on some of the largest companies in the world." Lawmakers in US Congress are very politically divided and unable to pass legislation that would update a law that was enacted when Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg was 11 years old and Google did not exist.

Given the deep political divide, it therefore seems likely that the Supreme Court will move the lines faster than Congress. But for now, "nobody knows exactly how," said Tom Wheeler, an expert at the Brookings Institution think tank. "That's why it's important to see how the hearing goes," he said. —AFP

Zalando to cut hundreds of jobs

FRANKFURT: German online fashion retailer Zalando said Tuesday it plans to cut hundreds of jobs to help it confront a "more challenging" economic environment after years of rapid growth. "We have decided to start a program that will remove several hundred overhead roles across many of our teams," co-chief executives David Schneider and Robert Gentz said in a letter to staff.

The Berlin-based company, which operates in 25 European countries, currently has a workforce of around 17,000 people. Zalando benefitted from a boom in e-commerce during the coronavirus pandemic, when lockdowns prompted customers to do more online shopping.

But those "strong pandemic tailwinds" have faded since 2022, Zalando said, "and the macro-economic environment has become more challenging" as high inflation sees customers cutting back on spending.

At times, the company "expanded too much", the co-CEOs added. Zalando needs to be "a big company with a small company structure and mindset," they said, one that "embraces simplicity, pragmatism and frugality". Details of the jobs cull are still being worked out, they added, but would include senior-level positions. Jobs in customer care, logistics centres and at the company's outlet stores would not be affected.

Founded as a Berlin start-up in 2008, Zalando quickly rose to become Europe's leading online fashion and lifestyle retailer. But the company was forced to issue a profit warning last June after drastically downgrading its full-year earnings forecasts.

The group is due to announce its 2022 results next month. Revenues are forecast to stay roughly unchanged at 10.4 to 10.7 billion euros (\$11.0-11.4 billion), while pre-tax profits of 180-260 million euros are expected, significantly below the previous year's 468 million euros.

The Zalando job cuts are the latest in a wave of layoffs in the global tech industry, as the once unassailable sector girds for a downturn. German software giant SAP said last month it would slash around 3,000 jobs this year, following similar announcements by the likes of Meta, Amazon, Google and Microsoft. —AFP

German investor morale improves again in February

FRANKFURT: German investor confidence rose again in February, a key survey showed Tuesday, as expectations grew that Europe's largest economy would dodge a deep downturn.

The ZEW institute's economic expectations index jumped by 11.2 points to 28.1 points, the fifth consecutive monthly increase, lifting the indicator to its highest level since the Russian invasion of Ukraine was launched a year ago. Analysts surveyed by Factset had predicted a smaller boost in morale, to 23 points. The report comes amid growing signs that Germany has weathered the fallout from the Ukraine war better than initially feared.

Falling energy prices and support measures unveiled by the German government in recent months have eased concerns about a cost-of-living squeeze, while China's easing of strict COVID restrictions has buoyed German exporters. The German government said last month that it now expected the country to avoid a recession this year and eke out growth of 0.2 percent. The increased optimism stems from "higher profit expectations in the energy- and export-oriented sectors as well as the consumer-related parts of the economy", ZEW president Achim Wambach said in a statement. —AFP

Business

Banking giant HSBC pre-tax profit slumps on France sale

Vast \$2.4bn impairment on planned divestment of French unit

LONDON: Bank titan HSBC said Tuesday that annual pre-tax profit tumbled after taking a huge charge on the sale of French retail operations. Pre-tax profit slid more than seven percent to \$17.5 billion (16.4 billion euros) last year, after a vast \$2.4-billion impairment on the planned divestment of the French unit.

The London-listed finance giant added that revenues grew four percent to \$51.7 billion, with banks benefitting from higher interest rates. Net profit jumped almost a fifth to \$14.8 billion on underlying growth in key areas as HSBC tilts away from Western markets and refocuses on Asia.

"The results we've announced today evidence there's been improvement in the business," chief executive Noel Quinn told reporters. "We fundamentally transformed the profitability of what were loss-making, or near near-loss making businesses in the United States and in Europe," he added.

HSBC agreed in 2021 to sell its French retail activities to French lender My Money Group for a nominal one euro. However it stated at the time that it would not complete the deal until the first half of 2023.

The news came after it announced plans to exit the retail and small business banking market in the United States, as part of a pivot towards Asia. The lender acknowledged the tough global economic climate international banks are facing. It cited renewed virus outbreaks in Hong Kong and mainland China as denting last year's economic growth.

Cost-of-living crisis

HSBC added that global uncertainty over Russia's invasion of Ukraine, elevated inflation and rising interest rates have sparked a cost-of-living crisis and fears of rising bad debts. That has contributed to a difficult financial environment that will extend into 2023. "We are already seeing... a cost-of-living crisis affecting many of our customers and colleagues," noted chairman Mark Tucker.

The lender has vowed to accelerate a multi-year pivot to Asia and the Middle East, and its ambitions to lead Asia's wealth management market has shown early signs of success. In November, the bank agreed to sell its Canadian division for \$10.1 billion, saying it would use the funds to invest in its core business and return cash to investors.

The Canadian sale comes after a months-long campaign by HSBC's biggest shareholder and Chinese insurance giant Ping An to cut costs and shift more resources to Asia. Ping An has argued that spinning off HSBC's Asian operations will unlock shareholder value amid tensions between China and Western powers, though the bank has rejected the move. HSBC announced Tuesday a full-year dividend of \$0.32 per share after what it described as "a strong overall financial performance".

In reaction, investors sent HSBC shares 3.3 percent higher to 1,220 pence near midday, top-



HONG KONG: A man uses his phone outside the headquarters of HSBC bank in Hong Kong on February 21, 2023. Banking giant HSBC on February 21 announced a dip in 2022 pre-tax profits last year, calling the ongoing impact of COVID-19 the main factor in its financial performance. —AFP

ping the gainers board on London's declining FTSE 100 index. "HSBC's sheer scale and financial strength continue to ease the costs of its

transformation to a more Asian-focused bank," noted Richard Hunter, head of markets at Interactive Investor. —AFP

Russian economy contracted by 2.1% in 2022

MOSCOW: The Russian economy contracted by 2.1 percent last year, the government's statistics agency Rosstat said Monday, absorbing Western sanctions over Moscow's military intervention in Ukraine better than expected. The data was published on the eve of a keenly awaited speech to parliament by President Vladimir Putin, days before the first anniversary of the launch of Russia's offensive against Ukraine on February 24.

"The 2.1 percent contraction in Russian GDP in 2022 was smaller than expected and is consistent with an expansion in the fourth quarter, providing further evidence to suggest that the economy stabilised after the initial hit from sanctions in the second quarter," said Liam Peach at Capital Economics.

"Even so, momentum in Russia's economy remains weak and, with headwinds to activity building, it's likely to take until late this year before Russia embarks on a sustained recovery," he added.

The figure was better than the 2.9 percent contraction forecast by the economic development ministry in September and the around three percent drop in gross domestic product (GDP) expected by the central bank. Rosstat's figure was also better than the 2.5 percent drop that Putin evoked a month ago, and far from apocalyptic forecasts when Western nations first began to slap sanctions on Russia after the invasion of Ukraine last February.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) said at the end of January it expected a more moderate 2.2 percent contraction instead of the 3.4 percent drop it had previously forecast, and said it expects Russia will muster slightly positive growth in 2023. And while numerous analysts question the reliability of Russian statistics given an increased lack of transparency since the invasion, the Russian economy has demonstrated resilience in the face of the sanctions after the government and central bank took swift action. Meanwhile, annual inflation was stable in January at around 12 percent, having shot up to 17.8 percent—the highest level in two decades—in April as the first Western sanctions began to bite. —AFP

Cautious Walmart outlook hits shares despite solid Q4

NEW YORK: Walmart reported better-than-expected profits over the critical holiday-season quarter Tuesday, but offered a disappointing outlook as inflation weighs on consumers. The world's biggest retailer benefited from robust sales in groceries that offset weakness in discretionary goods in the just-finished quarter. Chief Executive Doug McMillon said the chain expects "stubborn inflation" in food as executives acknowledged that grinding price pressures were hitting some consumers, denting the outlook.

But McMillon said the chain's expanded e-commerce and delivery business were drawing in more middle- and high-income shoppers. "We're gaining share across income cohorts, including at the higher end," McMillon said at the outset of an earnings conference call.

Profits over the quarter ending January 31 came in at \$6.3 billion, up 76 percent from the year-ago period. Revenues rose 7.3 percent to \$164 billion. But shares tumbled after its projection for the

upcoming quarter and year missed analyst estimates, suggesting a greater hit to sales from price-conscious shoppers. The biggest US private employer, Walmart is considered more insulated in an inflation-focused period than other chains because of its reputation for value.

The company's fourth-quarter results showed particular strength in groceries and other consumable categories, such as pet and personal care. That helped offset the hit from lower sales in categories like toys, electronics and home goods, which have higher profit margins, but which have been less sought after as shoppers pay more for fuel and household staples.

Walmart results have also been pressured by higher labor costs and excess inventory of some goods, although the company said it made progress on this front. McMillon praised store staff that "acted quickly and aggressively to address the inventory and cost challenges we faced last year," according to an earnings press release. The company's profit outlook for the current year was estimated at \$5.90 to \$6.05 per share, with much lower US comparable sales growth. Analysts had projected profits of \$6.50 per share.

Walmart also sees net sales growth of at most three percent, less than half the revenue growth over the last year. Neil Saunders, managing director of GlobalData, said Walmart's strong fourth quarter



Walmart reported solid profits but offered a cautious outlook that weighed on shares.

showed "it remains the leader of the pack in retail."

But Saunders said the underperformance in discretionary categories showed it still had work to do. "The problem with Walmart in general merchandise is that it acts and thinks like a grocery player—merchandising in a very functional fashion with little to no flair," Saunders said.

The company has unveiled a handful of remodeled stores that offer promise, but Walmart "needs to commit to rolling out this remodel much further in the year ahead if it is to gain serious traction in general merchandise," he said. Shares of Walmart fell 3.3 percent to \$141.57 in pre-market trading. —AFP

Tanzania approves controversial \$3.5bn oil pipeline

DAR ES SALAAM, Tanzania: Tanzania's government gave its approval on Tuesday for the construction of a \$3.5 billion crude oil pipeline despite human rights and environmental concerns about the mega-project.

The 1,443-kilometre (900-mile) pipeline will transport crude from vast oilfields being developed in Lake Albert in northwestern Uganda to a Tanzanian port on the Indian Ocean for delivery to international markets. Uganda's first oil is expected to flow in 2025 — almost two decades after reserves were discovered in one of the world's most biodiverse regions.

The pipeline required approval from both countries, and last month Uganda issued a license to the project operator, the East African Crude Oil Pipeline (EACOP). "This construction approval marks another step forward to EACOP as it allows commencement of the main construction activities in Tanzania, upon completion of the ongoing land access process," EACOP

Tanzania general manager Wendy Brown said at a function to receive the approval certificate. The \$10 billion oilfields and pipeline project is being jointly developed by France's TotalEnergies, the China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC), along with the state oil companies of Uganda and Tanzania.

It has been hailed as an economic boon for both East African countries, where many live in poverty. But it has run into strong opposition from rights and environmental campaigners who say it threatens the region's fragile ecosystem and the livelihoods of tens of thousands of people. Brown said about 13,000 households affected along the pipeline's route, including four percent of whom have been displaced, have been compensated.

'Stringent standards'

Tanzanian Energy Minister January Makamba rejected the environmental and rights concerns as "propaganda". "There are a lot of noises in opposition to the project, Makamba said, but added: "We have complied with all the environmental, safety and human rights standards."

"We are proud of the pipeline because it will increase Tanzania's influence in the world." Uganda last month launched an oil drilling program at the Kingfisher field on the southeastern edge of Lake Albert that is operated by CNOOC.



Tilenga, a second oilfield being developed by TotalEnergies on the north shore, has raised concerns because it extends into Murchison Falls, Uganda's largest national park. There are an estimated 6.5 billion barrels of crude under the lake—a 160-kilometre long body of water separating Uganda from the Democratic Republic of Congo—of which about 1.4 billion are recoverable.

The reserves are expected to last up to 30 years, with production peaking at 230,000 barrels a day. The underground heated pipeline is set to become the longest of its type when completed, expected in 2025. "EACOP will comply with not only the laws of Tanzania and Uganda but also with the most stringent international standards," Brown said. —AFP

EU to boost investment in Kenya

BRUSSELS: The European Union said Tuesday that it would increase its investments in Kenya by hundreds of millions of dollars, looking to bolster ties in the face of competition from China. The deals will unlock "untapped potential to be uncovered and exploited," the EU ambassador to Kenya, Henriette Geiger, said at the start of a two-day business forum in the Kenyan capital Nairobi.

The agreements include a \$200 million pledge by the European Investment Bank to help the Trade and Development Bank, run by several African states, support companies in eastern and southern Africa affected by the war in Ukraine.

Africa has become a diplomatic bat-

leground between Russia and the West since the invasion of Ukraine, with the EU also taking steps to counter China's Belt and Road initiative to fund infrastructure projects in developing nations. Geiger said the new deals are part of the EU's Global Gateway initiative, which seeks to mobilize up to \$340 billion to support public and private infrastructure ventures around the world by 2027. "This strategy is a template how Europe can build more resilient connections with the world to tackle the most pressing global challenges," she said.

An economic powerhouse of east Africa, Kenya is seen by the international community as a reliable and stable democracy in a turbulent region.

Currently, the EU is the largest export destination for Kenyan products, including flowers, and Kenya's third-largest source of imports. France's Trade Minister Olivier Becht, who attended the conference, told AFP that his country would contribute 30 million euros (\$32

million) for the construction of eight sports facilities in Kenya. "There is a part for every investor who wants to participate in Kenya's economic growth," Becht said. "It is not a competition between French companies or Chinese companies to do more." Kenya's biggest infrastructure project, a \$5 billion railway line connecting Nairobi to the port city of Mombasa, which opened in 2017, was built by a Chinese company with Chinese financing.

In 2020, a French consortium won a 1.6 billion euro deal to build and operate a highway linking Nairobi and Mau Summit in western Kenya, but the project was halted by Kenyan President William Ruto last year over toll fees, according to media reports. Becht said he discussed the project with Ruto on Tuesday, adding that further talks were expected, but he declined to provide specifics.

"Kenya seeks a win-win relationship that drives economic growth," Ruto said on Twitter after the meeting. "Our rela-



NAIROBI: Luo shop owner Caroline Otieno sells fish that come from Lake Victoria in Kisumu county and fruits from Nandi county, at a market stall in the town of Chemase, Nandi county, Kenya.

tions with France are anchored on this principle across trade, energy, health and infrastructure." The EU last year

invited 40 African leaders to Brussels for a two-day summit aimed at rebooting ties through investment. —AFP



Cambodians celebrate traditional fishing methods at ceremony



A Cambodian man (right) catches a snake fish during the annual fish-catching ceremony.

Running into a thigh-deep muddy lake, villagers in eastern Cambodia used bamboo baskets and nets to scoop up their catch for an annual fishing ceremony where only traditional tools are used. Sporting straw hats and cotton checkered scarves to shield themselves from the blazing sun, hundreds of children and adults cheered Saturday as they netted freshwater catfish and snakefish in Boeung Kroam lake, about 250 km from the capital Phnom Penh.

The annual ceremony, back after a two-year pandemic hiatus, is held after the rice harvest and participants are only allowed to use traditional tools such as woven baskets and nets, Tbong Khmum province governor Cheam Chan Sophorn explained. "It is a message to our villagers and especially fishermen not to use illegal equipment... so that fish will be around for hundreds of years to come for our



A Cambodian man (left) holds up snake fish during the annual fish-catching ceremony.

younger generations," he told AFP in the middle of the muddy lake.

Cambodia - which boasts the mighty Mekong River and its many tributaries - is heavily reliant on fish as a major source of protein for its population. Cambodians eat an estimated 63 kg of fish per person a year, according to the Southeast Asian Fisheries Development



Cambodian men grill fish during the annual fish-catching ceremony.

Centre and about 40 percent of the population depend on fishing for their livelihoods. Fish stocks have declined in recent years due to hydropower dams built upstream in Cambodia and neighboring Laos.

The increase in illegal fishing methods such as huge trawling nets and the use of car batteries to electrocute fish

has also had an impact. But there's no shortage of fish back at the lake. "This year we are so happy. There are big fish," villager Suon Keng, 42, told AFP as he grilled snakehead fish over a fire pit by the lake. — AFP



Villagers catch fish during the annual fish-catching ceremony.



A Cambodian man holds up a snake fish during the annual fish-catching ceremony.



A Cambodian man (center) holds up a snake fish during the annual fish-catching ceremony.

First-time filmmaker sparks sensation at Berlin fest

Asked how it feels to see the glowing reviews and ecstatic audiences for her new continent-spanning love story, first-time filmmaker Celine Song leans forward, blushes a little and whispers: "awesome". Song's "Past Lives", already a breakout hit at last month's US film festival Sundance, is having its global launch at the Berlinale cinema showcase in the German capital.

The reception for the semi-autobiographical romantic drama set in South Korea, Toronto and New York City has been rapturous, with industry bible The Hollywood Reporter already promising it will be "one of the best films of the year". The movie tells the story of Nora, who begins an innocent romance with her best friend Hae Sung when they are both 12, then loses touch with him when she and her family emigrate to Canada.

They pick up their connection again via social media about 12 years later after Nora, played by Greta Lee of Netflix's "Russian Doll", moves to New

York to pursue her dream of writing. There, she falls in love with Arthur (John Magaro of "The Big Short"), a Jewish American, at an authors' retreat and eventually marries him.

Grown-up love

But Hae Sung (Teo Yoo of Park Chan-wook's "Decision to Leave") stuns Nora years later when he says he is flying from Seoul to New York to visit, having never quite gotten over the memory of her. The tenderly climactic final scene left the Berlinale audience weep-

ing and cheering, an experience Song called "overwhelming".

The 34-year-old playwright-turned-director told AFP that her debut feature was both specific to her life but also a "universal" story of grown-up love. "I was thinking about the way it actually feels to have connections that span decades," even as we and those we care for change, she said. "It was about how it felt to be a person who is doing an always extraordinary thing which is to love someone."

Song said she had her cast watch Richard Linklater's "Before" trilogy starring

Ethan Hawke and Julie Delpy to pick up lessons about depicting romantic longing that evolves over years. Rather than building to an explosive confrontation between "man-children", so common in US movies, Song said she wanted to show a mature kind of intimacy. "A lot of drama can happen if everybody decides they're going to behave like children," she said. "But I know so many people who are in my life who make a decision every day to be adults." In the film, "we're watching these three people who are very connected to their childhood" but still opt to "care for

each other and to respect each other and be there for each other".

Korean boom

Song said she was "proud" to join a boom in South Korean entertainment, even if her film had little to do with the bloody spectacles of Oscar winner "Parasite" or Netflix's hit "Squid Game". "The exciting part is that it's possible for 'Past Lives' be so different (from those ultra-violent stories) and for it to still have an audience who feels that it is global," she said. Song "ended up being a kind of bridge to different kinds of filmmaking cultures," she said of bringing her New York crew to Seoul, where her rejection of classic storyboarding and focus on rehearsal seemed foreign.

"Past Lives" was leading critics' polls among 19 contenders at the festival ahead of an awards ceremony Saturday. Asked what it would mean to claim the Berlinale's Golden Bear top prize from jury president Kristen Stewart, Song broke into a wide grin. "At the end of the day we're a little movie that wants to be seen," she said. The Golden Bear would "mean that more people will want to see it and that's what I dream of". — AFP



(From left to right) South Korean actor Teo Yoo, US actress Greta Lee, US actor John Magaro and South-Korean Canadian director Celine Song attend a press conference for the film 'Past Lives' in competition at the Berlinale, Europe's first major film festival of the year in Berlin. — AFP

Lifestyle | Features

New York 'can enrich my soul', says next Philharmonic head Dudamel

The globally renowned conductor Gustavo Dudamel is set to become the first Latino to lead America's oldest orchestra, and on Monday vowed that "New York will become my city too." The Venezuelan maestro who is ending his lengthy tenure with the Los Angeles Philharmonic to take on the coveted New York role says the "special, energetic, cultural vibe" of his next home "can enrich my soul, my spirit as an artist and as a citizen of the world."



Venezuelan conductor and violinist Gustavo Dudamel is welcomed as the New York Philharmonic's 27th Music and Artistic Director by New York Philharmonic CEO Deborah Borda.

The 42-year-old was speaking at a press conference introducing him as the New York Phil's next music and artistic director. He is also the music director of the Opera Nacional de Paris and the Simon Bolivar Symphony Orchestra in his native Venezuela. In the Big Apple,

Dudamel will take on the role of music director designate in the 2025-26 season before adopting the lead role in season 2026-27.

His LA contract runs through 2025-26, and he will depart that post after 17 seasons. It's a coup for the Phil, the symphony founded in 1842 that's been striving to modernize its image including by pouring \$550 million into the renovation of David Geffen Hall, its home in Manhattan's Lincoln Center.

The venue's facelift was a major selling point in convincing Dudamel to sign a contract with the Phil, and includes 360-degree seating around the stage for a more immersive experience for both viewers and musicians. "We have to remember that music is about energy, and the audience makes a big difference when we are on the stage making music," Dudamel told journalists Monday.

The curly-haired conductor made his debut at the Phil in 2007, and has already guest-conducted the orchestra 26 times. He'll offer a preview of his forthcoming reign by leading three performances this May 19-21 of Mahler's Ninth Symphony. "I think when I come now in May, it will feel like family," the conductor said. "It's not anymore the feeling of a guest person that comes and goes." "Life has been very generous to me."

Music a 'powerful tool'

Born January 26, 1981 in Barquisimeto, Venezuela to a trombonist and a voice teacher, Dudamel's talent



was molded by the illustrious Venezuelan musical education program, "El Sistema." When he moved to Los Angeles, Dudamel continued that youth education mission, creating the Youth Orchestra Los Angeles, known as YOLA, in the model of El Sistema.

While he didn't promise a forthcoming YONY, "what we can think about now is how to build something that is connected with the young generation, and of course especially with the community," Dudamel said. "For sure we will have education as part of our journey." Dudamel's time in Los Angeles saw him foster ties with

Hollywood as he catapulted to celebrity himself, bringing classical music to ears perhaps unfamiliar with or intimidated by the genre.

"We have to educate people but in the best way, not putting art on a pedestal without access," he said. "When you give an instrument to a child, you are giving to this child beauty—you're giving the chance to this young boy, young girl, to create their own world." "There are no limits in the way of thinking of music as a very powerful tool for social transformation."

Asked what his myriad accomplishments meant as the first Latino to lead

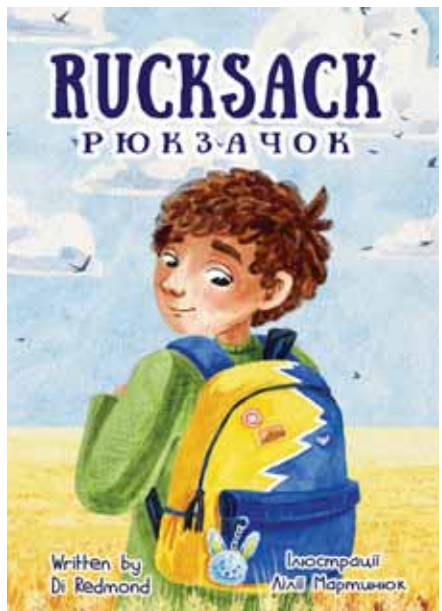
the Phil, Dudamel replied in Spanish that "this is what getting here is all about, it is that child from Barquisimeto who has had the opportunity to have this wonderful journey, all the way to one of the most emblematic artistic institutions in the world." "So that fills me with pride. And that it is a benchmark for girls, boys, young people, to have that certainty that dreams can always be achieved," he continued. "You have to work hard, with a lot of discipline, a lot of love for what you do but you can achieve it." —AFP



A handout photograph released by The Rucksack Project in London shows author Di Redmond reading her book 'Rucksack' to displaced Ukrainian children at St Mary's Ukrainian school in London. — AFP photos

The precious rucksacks key to unlocking Ukrainian kids' war trauma

As refugees flooded over the Romanian border nearly a year ago, one thing struck British-Ukrainian volunteer Anna Shevchenko—every child was carrying a little rucksack. With Ukrainian kids now trying to rebuild their lives in new homes, the story of those rucksacks has become the focus of a project aimed at tackling their trauma. Last February, after Russian President Vladimir Putin unleashed war in Ukraine, Shevchenko headed for Romania where she worked as a volunteer welcoming mothers and children who had fled the invasion.



A handout photograph released by The Rucksack Project in London shows a copy of the book 'Rucksack' by author Di Redmond, and illustrated by Lilia Martynyuk.

"I noticed that every single child was holding a little rucksack as their prized possession, as everything they had from their old life," the business consultant and novelist told AFP in London. Travelling back to the UK, Shevchenko had the idea of using those rucksacks as the focus of a therapy program. Within weeks, she

had put together a network of mostly Ukrainian expats determined to help.

She also enlisted seasoned English children's author Di Redmond to write a story inspired by the notion that all the young refugees' memories were held in this one bag. "It really got into my psyche and I more or less wrote the book in my sleep overnight," Redmond told AFP. Redmond said that Ukrainian illustrator Lilia Martynyuk then produced a string of "moving and powerful" pictures, working from her basement in the frontline city of Zaporizhzhia. Redmond, who has published nearly 200 books, normally makes children laugh with her prolific output, which includes scripts for television series such as "Postman Pat".

Kids 'drink it in'

In "Rucksack", however, she tells the heartbreaking story of a little boy who is forced to leave Ukraine but loses his bag along the way. He retraces his steps with a friend to the bombed-out home he has just been forced to flee. When he can't find the lost rucksack, he breaks down and his friend takes him to the nearest underground shelter in the Kyiv Metro. There he is given a new rucksack, but this only makes him cry even more, "because it's got no memories", said Redmond.

He then begins the journey back to his new home and starts to build fresh memories he knows he will one day bring back to his home in Ukraine. Dennis Ougrin, originally from Ukraine and now a consultant hospital psychiatrist in London, said the book chimed with important issues facing traumatized children. "The key value of the book is that it allows the child and whoever cares for the child to begin to speak about what happened, often about something that's unspeakable," he said.

Ougrin and collaborators began taking the book into schools last September, using it alongside a program developed by the charity Children and War UK. Redmond was struck by the children's reaction. While the book made their parents weep, the kids would "really drink it in (and) turn the pages, very, very slowly". Bill Yule, emeritus professor in child psychology at King's College London, said many parents were afraid that talking about the war would damage their children. —AFP

Emotions run high in Sweden's biggest wolf hunt

Hunter Lars Bjork points to fresh tracks in the snow as he lumbers through a whited-out forest in central Sweden, where the biggest wolf hunt in modern times is drawing controversy. "We have quite a lot of wolves here, we're actually sitting in a new wolf territory where we are now," Bjork, a predator expert at the Swedish Hunters' Association, tells AFP as he settles into a small hunting lodge a few kilometers (miles) outside the town of Vasteras.

Long known as a champion of environmental protection, Sweden has paradoxically had a centuries-long opposition to wolves, considered a plague in the 1800s with the state paying out bounties for kills as late as the mid-20th century. Still seen as a threat by farmers, the state now sanctions a limited cull of the animals every year. This year, Sweden's hunters are allowed to kill a record 75 wolves out of an estimated population of 460, according to the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency's latest inventory. That is more than twice the number that hunters were allowed to kill last year, and the highest number since the culls began in 2010. A total of 54 wolves had been killed as of Sunday. Several local authorities have already called off the hunt in their regions, and the full quota isn't expected to be reached by the February 15 deadline. Nonetheless, the wolf hunt remains a highly divisive issue, both inside and outside the Nordic nation.

Rural problems

After Sweden's wolves were hunted to the brink of extinction, the country declared them a protected species in the 1960s. Wolves started reappearing in the late 1970s and 1980s, before populations started growing in the 1990s. As their numbers surpassed 200, Sweden began allowing licensed hunts in 2010, issuing quotas for the number that can be killed during a set period.

"The purpose is simply to limit the problems they cause out in more rural areas," 59-year-old Bjork explains. For farmers, wolves are a menace as they occasionally attack livestock, primarily sheep. They also pose a threat to hunting



In this file photo a female wolf of 39,5 kg lays on the snow after being shot down by hunters during a wolf hunt near Kristinehamn. — AFP photos

dogs, used to track and drive wild game such as deer and elk.

Sweden also allows yearly hunts of brown bears, wolverines and lynx—all considered endangered—in order to limit damage to livestock and reindeer. Reindeer are integral to the indigenous Sami people's way of life in the far north. All hunts have detractors, but the wolf hunt has been particularly acrimonious since its inception.

Opponents of the hunt argue wolves are needed to protect biodiversity, playing an important role as predators. "It is astonishing that Sweden keeps on making these decisions," says Marie Stegard Lind, vice president of Jaktkritikerna, a group working to limit hunting. The hunts continue "in spite of the fact that the European Commission has been very clear about its opinion that these hunts are in fact illegal", she tells AFP at the group's office in Stockholm. In 2015, the European Commission warned that Sweden's wolf hunt fell foul of the EU's Habitats Directive, noting that the wolf "population has not reached a level that guarantees the conservation of the species". Other EU members with growing wolf populations have called on the Commission to update its Habitats Directive to better protect livestock farming.

Question of numbers

Kjell-Arne Ottosson, a Swedish member of parliament for the Christian Democrats and vice president of the

environment and agriculture committee, tells AFP that Sweden needs to stand its ground against the EU. "Wolves are a threat for those of us who live in rural areas. We have to manage that, we have to take this seriously," Ottosson says. The only fatal wolf attack in modern times against a person in Sweden was in 2012, when a captive wolf attacked a keeper at the Kolmarden Wildlife Park. But the issue often boils down to disputes over an acceptable size for the wolf population in terms of impact and risks, and ensuring there are enough wolves to limit inbreeding.



Lars Bjork, a 59-year-old hunter who works on predator issues with the Swedish Hunters' Association, holds his mobile phone displaying a picture that was sent to him, showing a wolf being carried after it was shot dead.

According to the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency, at least 300 are necessary to sustain a healthy population. In a letter published by magazine Science in July 2022, a group of scientists argued the culls were a threat to a healthy Swedish wolf population. They said the stocks that span Scandinavia and Finland should be kept above 500. Conversely, Sweden's parliament in 2021 voted to cap the population at 270 wolves.

The Swedish Hunters' Association wants to go even further and lower the limit to 150 wolves, spread across the country. Currently the animals are mostly found in the central and western parts of Sweden. "The wolf has a place here, absolutely," hunter Bjork says. "But not in the amounts we have today and not in the concentrations we have today." —AFP



Lars Bjork, a 59-year-old hunter who works on predator issues with the Swedish Hunters' Association, is pictured with his snow camouflage cloths.



Hatmaker Youssef Akiki poses with one of his finished Lebanese wool hats known as "Labbadeh" at his workshop in the mountain village of Hrajel in Keserwan-Jbeil province.



Hatmaker Youssef Akiki leaves his recently-finished Lebanese wool hats known as "Labbadeh" out in the sun to dry.— AFP photos

In Lebanese mountains, hatmaker keeps ancient skill alive



Hatmaker Youssef Akiki holds handfuls of sheep wool before shaping it into a traditional "Labbadeh" hat.

High in Lebanon's rugged mountains, hatmaker Youssef Akiki is among the last artisans practicing the thousand-year-old skill of making traditional warm woolen caps once widely worn against the icy winter chill. Akiki believes he may be the last commercial maker of the sheep wool "labbadeh"—a named derived from the Arabic for felt, or "labd"—a waterproof and warm cap colored off-white, grey, brown or black. "The elders of the village make their own labbadehs", said Akiki, who also dresses in the traditional style of baggy trousers.

Akiki, 60, from the snow-covered village of Hrajel, perched more than 1,200 meters (4,000 feet) up in the hills back from Lebanon's Mediterranean coast, said making the hat requires a careful process. After drying sheep's wool in the sun, he moulds it with water and Aleppo soap—which includes olive oil and laurel leaf extracts—to turn it into felt with his hands. "It helps the wool shrink, so it becomes malleable like dough", he said, showing his hands, rough with years of work. It is a slow process that allows him to fashion "three labbadehs in one



Hatmaker Youssef Akiki inspects the processed sheep's wool before shaping it into a traditional "Labbadeh" hat.

day, at most", he said. Though the hats are practical and warm, few people wear them today. Those buying the caps are mainly tourists—or Lebanese nostalgic for their childhood—and they often buy them not to wear them but to display them at home.

"The state should guarantee us markets and places to exhibit," the crafts-

man said. Income from the hat trade is not enough to survive on, and Akiki also works as a farmer, especially given the dire economic crisis that has gripped Lebanon in recent years.

Lebanon's economic turmoil has left many struggling to make ends meet, and the poverty rate has reached 80 percent of the population, according to the United Nations. Akiki believes the

labbadeh design is rooted in the caps worn by the ancient Phoenicians, although their style was "more elongated". Today, in order to encourage more customers, he is dabbling with more modern designs and, to keep the skills alive, is training his nephews in the time-honored craft. — AFP



Hatmaker Youssef Akiki poses for a picture with his daughter and nephew as they wear traditional "Labbadeh" hats.



Freshly-made Lebanese wool hats known as "Labbadeh" crafted by traditional hatmaker Youssef Akiki are displayed.



Hatmaker Youssef Akiki shapes one of his traditional "Labbadeh" hats with olive soap.



Hatmaker Youssef Akiki prepares to shape one of his traditional "Labbadeh" hats with olive soap.



Hatmaker Youssef Akiki shapes one of his traditional "Labbadeh" hats with olive soap.

Two endangered pink dolphins rescued from shallow Colombia river

Two pink river dolphins, a mother and her calf, were rescued from a Colombian river where the endangered mammals were trapped in shallow water, the navy said. A navy video released on Monday shows several officers carrying the dolphins in a makeshift hammock, others checking the mammals' condition and spraying them with water.

Timing was critical. Experts moved the dolphins out of the river, quickly checked their condition on the riverbank, and released them into deeper

water within 17 minutes, Erika Gomez of the Omacha Foundation, which took part in the rescue, told AFP. Community members alerted authorities to the distressed dolphins in eastern Colombia's Meta River, an Orinoco tributary near the Venezuela border, last week, Gomez said. Security forces, environmental authorities and NGOs were involved in the rescue.

The freshwater mammals—whose scientific name is *Inia geoffrensis*—live mainly in the Amazon and Orinoco river systems. Their habitat includes parts of

Brazil, Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia. The pink river dolphin, which can weigh up to 220 kilograms (485 pounds), has been classified as endangered by the International Union for Conservation of Nature since 2018. Fishing is the main killer of the dolphins in Colombia, according to the Alexander von Humboldt Biological Resources Research Institute. Mercury contamination and global warming, which has altered the flow of the rivers, also threaten the dolphins. — AFP



US prosecutors in Alec Baldwin case drop charge 'enhancement'

Prosecutors who have charged Alec Baldwin with involuntary manslaughter over a fatal shooting on a movie set dropped a so-called "firearm enhancement" that carried a potential five-year sentence, officials said Monday. The US actor was holding a Colt .45 during rehearsals for low-budget Western "Rust" in October 2021 when it discharged, killing cinematographer Halyna Hutchins and wounding the film's director, Joel Souza.

The weapon was only supposed to contain blank bullets. Baldwin has been charged in the southwest state of New Mexico for manslaughter and faces an 18-month prison sentence, as does the film's armorer Hannah Gutierrez-Reed. The prosecutor's spokesperson said the charge enhancement had been dropped to "avoid further litigious distractions by Mr. Baldwin and his attorneys." "The prosecution's priority is securing justice, not securing billable hours for big-city attorneys," the statement added.

The move came just days after

Baldwin's team accused prosecutors of committing "an unconstitutional and elementary error," noting that the firearm enhancement law was not in New Mexico's books at the time of the incident. The lawyers' filing said there was a firearm enhancement law in October 2021, but it required that the weapon be "brandished"—displayed in a deliberately intimidating fashion.



This file handout photo shows actor Alec Baldwin being processed after the death of cinematographer Halyna Hutchins at the Bonanza Creek Ranch in Santa Fe, New Mexico.— AFP

A hearing for both defendants is scheduled for February 24, although neither is expected to appear in person. Assistant director Dave Halls, who handed Baldwin the weapon and told him it was "cold"—industry speak for safe—has agreed to plead guilty to negligent use of a deadly weapon. He will serve a suspended sentence and six months of probation, prosecutors have said.— AFP

Sports

Over 400 shooters participating in International Shooting Grand Prix

ASF approves financial and administrative reports

By Abdellatif Sharaa

KUWAIT: His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah International Shooting Grand Prix kicked off on Tuesday at Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Olympic Shooting Complex with more than 400 shooters (representing 40 countries) participating. President of Asian Shooting Confederation, Honorary President of Kuwait Shooting Sport Club Sheikh Salman Sabah Al-Salem Al-Humoud Al-Sabah thanked HH the Amir for his care and support.

He also thanked the Public Authority for Sport and Kuwait Shooting Federation and to all those who worked for the success of the championship. Sheikh Salman Al-Humoud said Kuwait is witnessing the gathering of brothers and friends from Asia and the Arab world while celebrating its national and liberation days. He congratulated HH the Amir, HH Crown Prince, Kuwait government and people.

In another development, the Arab Shooting Federation General Assembly (ASF) held its meeting on Tuesday under the chairmanship of President of Kuwait and Arab Shooting Federations Eng Duaij Khalaf Al-Otaibi, in the presence of President of Asian Shooting Confederation Sheikh Salman Sabah Al-Salem Al-Humoud Al-Sabah and heads of the Arab delegations.

Al-Otaibi said the attendees congratulated HH the Amir, HH the crown Prince on the occasion of the national days and thanked them for their unlimited support. He said the ASF General assembly approved the financial and administrative reports and the decisions that were made lately, adding that the meeting also approved the organization of tournaments in Egypt, Morocco, Tunis and Algeria.



KUWAIT: Arab Shooting Federation General Assembly (ASF) hold its meeting on Tuesday. The ASF General assembly approved the financial and administrative reports.



He congratulated the Arab shooters who were ranked among the best in the world. He also congratulated the Egyptian federation for

hosting the world championship and wished the Qatari federation success in hosting the next world championship.



Amancio Amaro

Madrid's 'magician' dies

MADRID: Real Madrid legend Amancio Amaro nicknamed 'the magician' has died at 83 the club announced Tuesday. Joining Los Blancos from Deportivo La Coruna in 1962, the right winger lifted nine league titles and one European Cup at Madrid before retiring in 1976. Amancio scored 155 goals in 471 games for Madrid, before going on to coach the team in the 1984-85 season. "Together with Paco Gento, Amancio led the Real Madrid side that came after the one which won five consecutive European Cups, and represents the values that have forged the history of our club," said Madrid in a statement. "He will be remembered by all Madridistas and by all football fans as one of the great legends of this sport." Amancio also played a key role for Spain in their 1964 European Championship victory. In 2022 Amancio was appointed honorary president of Real Madrid, after the death of his former team-mate Paco Gento. —AFP

Kerley aims for double

MELBOURNE: Versatile track superstar Fred Kerley Tuesday said his key goal for 2023 was to match Usain Bolt and claim the 100m-200m sprint double at the world championships in Budapest this year. The American reigning 100m world champion and Tokyo Olympic silver medalist is the star attraction at the Maurie Plant meet in Melbourne on Thursday, where he will make his season bow. He is one of only three men in history to run sub-10 seconds for the 100m, sub-20 for the 200m and sub-44 for the 400m, giving him multiple options. But he opted to focus on the 200m, where gold eluded him at last year's world championships in Eugene. "Every time I step on the track it should be something fast," the 27-year-old told reporters. "I know my training has been going good, so hopefully it will be a good time. "Last year (at Eugene) I came up short in the 200, so double gold is the only thing that is on my mind at the moment." —AFP

5-goal thriller fires Watford

LONDON: Ken Sema scored twice as Watford beat West Brom 3-2 to move back into the Championship playoff spots on Monday. Slaven Bilic's 200th game as a manager in English football was a thriller as the Croatian got the better of the side he took up to the Premier League in 2020. Sema's opener gave the Hornets a half-time lead, but West Brom hit back early in the second half through Conor Townsend. Ismaila Sarr quickly restored Watford's lead, but again the Baggies responded with Jed Wallace's equalizer. Sema had the final say 12 minutes from time when his shot took a huge deflection off Erik Pieters to beat Josh Griffiths, and earn Watford their first win in six games. Defeat leaves West Brom still in 10th place, four points adrift of the top six. —AFP

Injured Warner ruled out

SYDNEY: Australia opening batsman David Warner will return home from India and miss the last two Tests after an elbow fracture and concussion, Cricket Australia said Tuesday. It is the second injury blow in two days for struggling Australia, who are 2-0 down in the four-Test series. Fast bowler Josh Hazlewood was sent home Monday after failing to recover from an Achilles tendon injury. Warner was hit on the helmet shortly after being struck on the elbow on the opening day of the second Test defeat in Delhi. He was replaced by concussion substitute Matt Renshaw. Warner, who scored just 26 runs as Australia lost both of the opening two matches, will miss the third and fourth Tests at Indore and Ahmedabad but it is hoped he can return for the subsequent one-day series. "David Warner has been ruled out of the Test tour of India and will return home," a Cricket Australia statement said. —AFP

Former NBA and NFL team owner McCombs dies

WASHINGTON: Red McCombs, a former owner of the NFL's Minnesota Vikings and NBA franchises in San Antonio and Denver who is credited with helping modernize the basketball league, has died at age 95, his family announced Monday. "We mourn the loss of a Texas icon," the family statement said. The billionaire businessman began his sports empire by buying the Dallas Chaparrals of the American Basketball Association and moving them to San Antonio in 1973, where they were renamed the Spurs.

The Spurs joined the National Basketball Association in a 1976 merger of the leagues and have gone on to win five NBA crowns. "Red McCombs brought the Spurs to San Antonio and

was a driving force in creating the modern NBA," said league commissioner Adam Silver. "He was an innovator and savvy entrepreneur who never shied away from taking risks. We mourn Red's passing." McCombs sold his stake in the Spurs in 1982 to buy the Denver Nuggets, then sold them in 1985 and repurchased the Spurs before selling them again in 1993.

"RIP Red McCombs. He was a legendary figure in San Antonio and had a huge impact in my life. We will miss you!" tweeted iconic center David Robinson, a two-time NBA champion and 1995 NBA Most Valuable Player with the Spurs. In 1998, McCombs purchased the NFL Vikings for \$246 million and owned them until 2005 when, frustrated at not being able to build a new stadium, sold the team for \$600 million to current owner Zygi Wilf.

"The Minnesota Vikings are saddened by the passing of former team owner Red McCombs," the NFL club said in a statement. "Red embodied his famous 'Purple Pride' phrase and remained a staunch Vikings fan after passing the torch to the Wilf family in 2005." McCombs was also an



PHOENIX: In this file photo, Red McCombs speaks onstage in Phoenix, Arizona. Red McCombs, a former owner of the NFL's Minnesota Vikings and NBA's San Antonio Spurs and Denver Nuggets, has died at age 95. —AFP

investor in a Kentucky thoroughbred horse farm and the Circuit of the Americas auto racing course near Austin, Texas. —AFP

LIV Golf completes lineup ahead of season opener

WASHINGTON: Phil Mickelson, Louis Oosthuizen and Bubba Watson filled out their LIV Golf League teams on Monday with the latest players to join the Saudi-backed series ahead of Friday's season debut. South African Dean Burmester, New Zealand's Danny Lee, Belgium's Thomas Pieters and American Brendan Steele completed the 48-player field of 12 four-man teams for the opener at Mexico's Mayakoba resort.

The controversial series lured many big names from the US PGA Tour and DP World Tour with record purses of \$25 million for 54-hole events. But LIV Golf, criticized as using sport to enhance the reputation of a Saudi regime with major human rights issues, created a divide in the golf world that includes a court fight set to begin next January.

LIV Golf commissioner Greg Norman says his group has "reinvigorated" pro golf for a younger

crowd even as such stars as Tiger Woods and Rory McIlroy have backed the established tours and historic tournaments. "Our league format has already begun to build connections with new audiences around the globe," Norman said of the team competition. "Major champions, current and future Hall of Famers and up-and-coming stars are all committed to creating this new platform for world-class competition as the sport evolves for the next generation."

LIV's 14-event season includes eight US stops and its lineup includes 13 major winners and four former world number ones. Two-time major winner Dustin Johnson and his all-American 4Aces are defending team champions with Peter Uihlein, Pat Perez and Patrick Reed. World number 35 Pieters joins two-time Masters champion Bubba Watson's Rangeoats along with Americans Harold Varner III and Talor Gooch.

Former British Open champion Oosthuizen's all-South African team includes Burmester, Branden Grace and Charl Schwartzel. Six-time major winner Mickelson's all-US HyFlyers include Steele, James Piot and Cameron Tingale while Lee joined Americans Kevin Na and Sihwan Kim and Zimbabwe's Scott Vincent on Iron Heads. Other



Phil Mickelson

team captains include major winners Sergio Garcia, Martin Kaymer, Henrik Stenson, Brooks Koepka, Bryson DeChambeau and Australian Cameron Smith, the reigning British Open champion. —AFP

Azarenka calls for fitting venue for women's finals

DUBAI: Victoria Azarenka said that she hopes the WTA Finals will find a "deserving" home, after a couple of years of instability after the women's tennis organization suspended all Chinese tournaments. The former world number one and two-time Australian Open champion also urged an announcement on this year's venue soon, to allow for better marketing of the tour's flagship event.

The season-ending championships feature the top eight singles players and top eight doubles teams. They were initially meant to be staged in China's southern city of Shenzhen every year for 10 years, starting with the 2019 edition. The deal with Shenzhen was record-breaking and the inaugural 2019 showpiece awarded singles champion Ashleigh Barty \$4.42 million—which was the highest-ever prize money awarded to a player at any tennis event across both the men's and women's tours.

But the pandemic and the fallout from the dis-

appearance of Chinese player Peng Shuai—which led to the WTA suspending operations in China—have meant that the tour Finals have not returned to Shenzhen since 2019. Peng, the former doubles world number one, has not been seen outside China since first making, and then withdrawing, accusations of sexual assault against a high-ranking official. The WTA championships were cancelled in 2020 and then found a temporary home in Guadalajara, Mexico, in 2021, and Fort Worth, Texas in 2022.

The WTA Finals in Fort Worth witnessed sparse crowds and were only announced late September—less than two months before the event. "We need something that is deserving of the Finals," Azarenka, an active member on the WTA Player Council, told reporters at the Dubai Duty Free Tennis Championships on Monday. "Last couple of years with such a short announcement, absolutely no time for marketing—in my opinion—it's been undervalued."

Azarenka said the Guadalajara edition featured "unreal" crowds and believes future stagings of the prestigious tournament should receive the same welcome. But she said there was "no defined place right now". "There's still talks about China. There's nothing definitive." This season marks the 50th anniversary of the



Victoria Azarenka

WTA and Azarenka spoke about the need for evolution on the tour, warning that some "people from the older generation" appear to be holding back the sport. She also called for more unity and involvement from the players when it comes to taking the sport forward. —AFP

Sports

Leipzig's 'difference maker' returns for City showdown

Bundesliga side Leipzig and juggernauts Man City face off

BERLIN: Bundesliga side RB Leipzig are gearing up to face juggernauts Manchester City in their home Champions League tie on Wednesday, and hoping the return of top goalscorer Christopher Nkunku will make all the difference. Nkunku made a late cameo in Leipzig's 3-0 win at Wolfsburg on Saturday, setting up a goal for Konrad Laimer after a 98-day absence which saw him miss France's run to the World Cup final in Qatar. His 21 minutes on the pitch Saturday has him in line for a return to the starting eleven, and manager Marco Rose said it shows how valuable the star forward is to Leipzig's hopes.

"You could see how good it was for us that Christopher is back," Rose said after the victory. "With him on the pitch, we are more unpredictable as a team." Nkunku suffered a knee injury in November in France's last training session before departing for Qatar, one of a series of injury blows for the team in the tournament run-up. Despite missing five league matches, Nkunku still sits atop of Leipzig's goalscoring charts this season with 12 - just one less than Bundesliga season leader Niclas Füllkrug.

Crucial comeback

Nkunku's return is crucial to any hope Leipzig have of springing an unlikely upset on the Champions League favourites and making it past the last 16 for only the second time in club history. In particular, Leipzig will need Nkunku's speed and creativity to break down a City defence which has conceded just two goals this Champions League season-the equal lowest in the competition

alongside Bayern Munich. Earlier in February, Rose heaped praise on Nkunku's unique qualities as the 25-year-old worked towards a comeback, calling the Paris Saint-Germain junior "a difference maker." "He simply has qualities that are not so common in the Bundesliga, in Europe and in the world," Rose said at the time.

'Courage' against Haaland

On the opposite side of the pitch to Nkunku on Wednesday will be star City forward Erling Haaland, who has 32 goals in 31 games since moving to the Etihad Stadium from Bundesliga rivals Borussia Dortmund in the summer. Haaland scored more goals against Leipzig during his time in Germany than any other opponent, with six goals in four games, including two in Dortmund's 4-1 German Cup final win over the Red Bulls in the 2020-21 season.

Rose will know Haaland's threat better than most, having coached the then 18-year-old at Red Bull Salzburg and later at Dortmund. The man tasked with keeping Haaland in check on Wednesday, Leipzig captain and centre-back Willi Orban, was confident the home side could keep the Manchester City striker at bay. "Of course, it will be a big challenge for us. But we can do it-we showed that against Real Madrid," he said. "He (Haaland) is difficult to defend of course, but with courage you can do it," Orban added.

Leipzig beat the reigning European champions 3-2 at home in October to seal their qualification for the group stage. Leipzig forward Emil Forsberg-who



MANCHESTER: Manchester City's players attend a team training session at Manchester City training ground in Manchester, north-west England on February 21, 2023, ahead of their UEFA Champions League round of 16 football match against RB Leipzig. —AFP

scored the opener against Wolfsburg on Saturday-mirrored Orban's optimism. Speaking after the match, Forsberg said the "beautiful and important

win" would give his side "self-confidence" for the City clash. "We're looking forward to an awesome game. We want to go out and win." —AFP

Lukaku struggling on Inter's return

MILAN: Romelu Lukaku's return to Inter Milan has been far from what he would have hoped it would be but the Belgium striker is showing signs of life as his team prepare for the Champions League visit of Porto. Hit by a succession of injuries and ridiculed for his part in his country's dismal World Cup campaign, Lukaku has been a peripheral figure in what was supposed to a glorious homecoming season for the 2021 Serie A winner.

The 29-year-old has only played the full 90 minutes once for Inter since being sent back there on loan from Chelsea last summer, seven starts and three goals in all competitions a poor return given all the close season hype. On Saturday Lukaku scored his first Serie A goal since the opening day of the season, netting a penalty at the second attempt which started Inter winning a 3-1 win. However it wasn't the most convincing way to get back on the scoresheet as his first go from the spot was struck dreadfully, finally scoring after an Udinese player was caught encroaching in the penalty area.

And as it stands Lukaku is behind veteran Edin Dzeko in the queue to play alongside Lautaro Martinez, the other half of the once great 'Lu-La' partnership who has come back from Argentina's World Cup triumph in fizzing form and has even worn the captain's armband. Martinez has scored eight times in all competitions since returning from Qatar and will be coach Simone Inzaghi's major weapon on Wednesday night.

His buoyant post-World Cup mood goes in stark contrast to Lukaku's state of mind in the Gulf, a smashed dugout and a trail of missed chances against Croatia which ended the Red Devils' chances at the group stage the only memories of an awful tournament. "Croatia was a huge disappointment but I told myself: 'Romelu, you weren't 100 percent, you'd only had two training sessions,'" said Lukaku at the start of the year. "I was rightly massacred but now I really want to get back out on the pitch."

In the summer all the talk was how cash-strapped Inter would be able to make his loan



Inter Milan's Belgian forward Romelu Lukaku

move back to Italy permanent given Chelsea shelled out well over 100 million euros for him in 2021. But Italian media widely report that while Inter want to keep Lukaku they need to see his physical problems are behind him before they try to convince Chelsea to accept four millions euros to extend the loan for another season.

Inzaghi certainly seems keen to keep him around, his team fighting to reach the quarter-finals of the Champions League for the first time since 2011 while also in a five-way fight for three places in next year's competition. "Lukaku is improving day by day, game by game, training session by training session. We have a huge amount of faith in Rom," said Inzaghi after the Udinese win. "He had problems last season in London, we brought him back here and then he had a serious injury that troubled him for four months. "If he is starting games, that means he is in good shape and playing will help him strengthen that form." —AFP

Today's matches

UEFA Champions League

Internazionale Milano v Porto **23:00**

beIN Sports 2 HD Premium

RB Leipzig v Manchester City **23:00**

beIN 4K HDR

beIN Sports 1 HD Premium

Dani Alves must 'stay in custody'

BARCELONA: Former Barcelona and Brazil star Dani Alves will remain in custody pending his trial for allegedly raping a woman as he is considered a high flight risk, the Provincial Court of Barcelona decided Tuesday. "There is an elevated risk of absconding, linked on the one hand to the high sentence that could be imposed because of the present case, the serious evidence of criminality against him and large financial resources that would allow him to leave Spain at any time," the court said in a statement.

The court believe taking the 39-year-old's passport would not prevent him from leaving Spain "by air or sea or even by land without documentation." If he were to return to Brazil, his homeland, the court believe he would not be handed over to Spain as the South American country does not usually extradite its citizens. The public prosecutor's office opposed his release. On January 2, a young woman alleged that Alves had raped her in the bathroom of a nightclub in Barcelona at the end of December. The player, who initially denied knowing her, changed his story several times but later said they had consensual relations, according to sources close to the case. Alves is on trial for the alleged crime of sexual assault-which in the Spanish penal code



Brazil's defender Dani Alves

includes rape. The investigating judge ordered on January 20 that he be remanded in custody without bail, taking into account, among other things, the contradictions in his initial statements and the high risk of absconding. Alves was sacked by his club Pumas UNAM in Mexico after his arrest. In a highly successful career, Alves made 408 appearances for Barcelona, with 391 of those coming in his first spell from 2008-2016. During that initial stint, he won six La Liga titles, three Champions League crowns and four Copa del Rey trophies. At last year's World Cup finals in Qatar he became the oldest player to represent Brazil at football's showcase tournament. —AFP

Vinicius 'a joy to behold' in face of racism rows

LIVERPOOL: Real Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti said Vinicius Junior should be cherished by football fans around the world rather than targeted by racist abuse. The Brazilian has been abused regularly in Spain this season with La Liga taking six cases of "racist insults or chants" to public prosecutors. A group of Atletico Madrid ultras hung an effigy of the 22-year-old from a bridge near Real's training ground, a matter being investigated by police, while numerous instances of racism aimed at Vinicius have been filmed.

Vinicius scored the winner as Madrid beat Liverpool 1-0 in last season's Champions League final. And Ancelotti believes he will rise to the occasion once more when the

sides face off again in Tuesday's Champions League last 16, first leg at Anfield. "You can only change people through culture, a common purpose and feeling of humanity. Don't blame Spain for this, it happened in every country," Ancelotti said at his pre-match press conference on Monday.

"Vini is managing really well, he is focused on the game and loves to play football and this doesn't affect on the pitch. When games are important we see the best of him and it is obviously going to be a big game tomorrow. "At the moment it is wonderful to be watching Vinicius as every football fan likes his quality. "They like to see Pedri, Gavi, (Kylian) Mbappe, (Erling) Haaland. Vinicius is up there with these players and we can enjoy quality players like that." Madrid's La Liga title challenge has faded since the World Cup break with Barcelona opening up an eight-point lead at the top of the table.

The Spanish giants often save their best for the latter stages of the Champions League, but have been dealt a blow with Aurelien Tchouameni and Toni Kroos not making the trip to England due to illness. "Without Kroos and Tchouameni we are forced to make changes we wouldn't want," added Ancelotti. —AFP

Classifieds

Change of Name

I HAVE CHANGE MY NAME FROM QUTBUDDIN PASSPORT NO. Z2690395 IN FUTURE I AM KNOW FROM THIS NAME QUTBUDDIN HAKANI V/P NAJAMPURA SAGWARA. (C#3166)

I, ABDUL KHADER holder of Indian Passport No. Z3284430 having permanent address Telangana India 500005, residing in Kuwait at present, hereby declare that henceforth my name will be read as under: Given name: Abdul Khader Omer and Surname: Bawazeer (C#3167) - 22-02-2023.

I, Syed Karimunnisa (old name), R/O D.No. 9-376/c/b/b/4 Jandrapeta, Rajampet (T), (M), Annamayya (DT), A.P., hereby changed my

name as Shaik Karimunnisa (new name) W/O. Shaik Mohammad Fayaz. (C#3162)

I, Mohammedi, holder of Passport No. V1970256, do hereby change my name to Mohammadi (as given name) Yusuf Ali (as Surname) for all purposes. I will henceforth be known in the name Mohammadi Yusuf Ali and I also undertake to carry out this name change in all my documents. (C#3164)

I, Burhanuddin S/o Sefuddin Kanbawala, holder of Indian Passport No. Z2816264 issued at Kuwait on 07/09/2014 & Civil ID No. 268051502446 presently residing at block no. 10, street no. 10, bldg. no. 07, flat no. 15, AlSalmiya, Kuwait has changed my name from Burhanuddin to Burhanuddin Sefuddin Kanbawala in all my dealings

and documents, I will be known by name of Burhanuddin Sefuddin (given name) and Kanbawala (surname). (C#3163)

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I, Rizwan Muzhimil S/o Muzhimil holder of Indian Passport No. M8471852 issued at Chennai, India on 27/04/2015 and Kuwait

Civil ID No. 278020704941, have changed my name, address from Rizwan S/o Muzhimil No. 8, Kottai Labbai Street, Thimiri, Arcot Vellore pin-632512, Tamil Nadu - India to as per Aadhar card No. 732351842662, Riswan Shariff s/o Muzhimil Shariff, No. 23/15, Narasoji Street walajapet Ranipet - 632513 Tamil Nadu, India in all my dealings and documents. I will be known by name of Riswan Shariff (given name) and Muzhimil Shariff (Surname). (C#3165) 21-02-2023

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

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Holders Al Hilal storm into quarters

AFC Champions League: Reigning champions see off Shabab Al Ahli



AL-WAKRAH: Hilal's Saudi goalkeeper Abdullah Al-Mayouf watches the ball fly away from his goal during the AFC Champions League round of 16 match between Saudi Arabia's Al-Hilal and UAE's Shabab Al-Ahli on February 20, 2023. — AFP

DOHA: Storied Asian outfit Al Hilal stayed well on course to further enhance their credentials after storming into the quarter-finals of the AFC Champions League on Monday. The reigning champions from Saudi Arabia saw off Shabab Al Ahli of the UAE 3-1 in their last-16 tie at Qatar's Al Janoub Stadium, as they chase a possible fifth continental title.

Fresh from their exploits barely a week ago in the FIFA Club World Championship in Morocco where they finished runners-up to Real Madrid, they joined compatriots Al Shabab in the last eight - hoping to win the title for the third time in four years. Al Shabab had qualified on Sunday, beating Uzbekistan's FC Nasaf 2-0 after Qatar giants Al Duhail pipped domestic rivals Al Rayyan 7-6 via penalties, following a 1-1 draw after extra-time.

Nigerian Odion Ighalo set things in motion on

Monday for Al Hilal with a clinical 17th minute strike after receiving a fine assist from Moussa Marega. The match slackened off for a while before Jang Hyun-soo scored with a diving header and Luciano Vietto applied the finishing touch to a deft back-heeled pass from Salem al-Dawsari to make it made it 3-0 with 10 minutes remaining. Syrian striker Omar Khribin pulled one back in the 86th minute but that came a bit too late in the day for Al Shabab Al Ahli to mount a serious challenge.

Iran's Foolad through

Earlier on Monday, Iran's Foolad Khuzestan scraped into the quarter-finals of courtesy of a cagey 1-0 over Saudi Arabia's Al Faisaly. Both sides were meeting for the first time ever in the tournament and aiming to make up for their poor form in

their respective domestic leagues where they are struggling to keep pace with their rivals.

While Al Faisaly were relegated from the Saudi Pro League to the First Division after they made the last-16 of the continental tournament, Foolad are in ninth position in the Iran Pro League - a whopping 18 points behind leaders Sepahan. But with plenty to play for, it was Foolad who made the most of the situation with Sasan Ansari's 64th minute strike proving decisive at the Al Thumama Stadium.

Foolad enjoyed 54 percent possession but had only three shots on target, with Ansari scoring off one of those with a right-footed shot. Six minutes earlier, Roberto Torres had his shot saved by the Al Faisaly goalkeeper Ahmed Al-Kassar despite being wrong-footed by a deflection. Torres was a constant thorn for the Saudi

side, the Spaniard going close at the 30-minute mark, his curling free-kick from about 25 yards out just missing the post Al Faisaly, on the other hand, barely produced a shot on target as they struggled to crack the Iranians' defense.

Foolad's moment of joy came in the 64th minute when some lacklustre defending by Waleed al-Ahmed saw Ansari snatch the ball and deposit it into the net from close. Al-Ahmed could have compensated for his blunder one minute before the final whistle but his fine headed attempt off an excellent Abdulla Al-Qahtani corner just missed the target. The last eight matches will be held on Thursday with the semi-final scheduled for Feb 26. The winners will take on Japan's Urawa Reds in a two-legged final to be played on April 29 and May 6 — AFP

Liverpool owner Henry denies 'club is for sale'

LIVERPOOL: Liverpool owner John Henry has denied the English giants are up for sale despite seeking fresh investment in the club. Henry's Fenway Sports Group (FSG) said in November it would "consider new shareholders if it was in the best interests of Liverpool as a club." That sparked speculation that the 19-time English champions were on the market alongside rivals Manchester United.

"I know there has been a lot of conversation and quotes about LFC (Liverpool Football Club), but I keep to the facts," Henry told the Boston Sports Journal in an interview published online Monday. "We merely formalized an ongoing process. Will we be in England forever? No. Are we selling LFC? No. Are we talking with investors about LFC? Yes. "Will something happen there? I believe so, but it won't be a sale. Have we sold anything in the past 20-plus years?"

FSG - who also own baseball giants the Boston Red Sox - paid £300 million (\$361 million) for Liverpool 13 years ago, after fellow Americans Tom Hicks and George Gillett left the club on the brink of administration. Under their ownership, Liverpool have been restored to the top of the English and European game — winning the 2019

Champions League and lifting the club's first Premier League crown for 30 years in 2020. Forbes now values Liverpool at around \$4.45 billion. However, FSG have been criticized by fans for a lack of investment in new players this season.

Liverpool sit eighth in the Premier League, 19 points adrift of leaders Arsenal, and are already out of both domestic cup competitions. Despite that slump in form, manager Jurgen Klopp has publicly backed the club's owners. "We are here in a good position. I know that sounds strange because we didn't play our best football but in general we are in good hands," said Klopp last month. "So we don't get crazy or whatever. We really know about the responsibility we have and we really try absolutely everything to try to bring us back on track and not worry too much."

Manchester United are expected to fetch a world record price for a football club should a sale of the Red Devils be completed in the coming months. British billionaire Jim Ratcliffe and Qatari banker Sheikh Jassim Bin Hamad Al Thani have publicly revealed their interest in United with bids expected to reach around \$6 billion. Chelsea currently hold the record sale for a football club after a consortium led by LA Dodgers co-owner Todd Boehly and private equity group Clearlake Capital won a bidding war by paying £2.5 billion for the Blues in May. — AFP

Tatum turns focus onto Boston's NBA title bid

SALT LAKE CITY: NBA All-Star Game Most Valuable Player Jayson Tatum is turning his attention to the Boston Celtics' bid for an NBA title after scoring an All-Star Game record 55 points. Tatum made 22-of-31 shots from the floor, 10-of-18 from 3-point range, and added 10 rebounds and six assists to spark Team Giannis over Team LeBron 184-175.

But with the showcase showdown behind him, the 24-year-old forward who is averaging 30.6 points, 8.6 rebounds and 4.5 assists is now focused on sparking the NBA overall-leading Celtics to a crown. "Now it's go time," Tatum said. "We've got to have one common goal and that's to win a championship. This was a good break for us mentally and physically, but it's time to get back to work."

Tatum, in his sixth NBA campaign, lifted the Celtics to the NBA Finals last season for the first time since 2010, although Boston lost to the Golden State Warriors. He has learned how important the final weeks of the regular season can be in the overall championship chase. "Since I've been in the league, the team that has kind of clicked in this last stretch - has kind of peaked and played their best of the season going into the playoffs - usually is the team that wins it all, so this stretch is important," Tatum said.

"You want to be as healthy as possible going into the playoffs. You want to be playing your best basketball, individually and as a group, so that's what we're trying to do." At a league-best 42-17, the Celtics are just

ahead of Milwaukee (41-17) atop the Eastern Conference with Philadelphia third at 38-19 followed in order by Cleveland and the Brooklyn Nets, who figure to sink after dealing away stars Kevin Durant to Phoenix and Kyrie Irving to Dallas.

Milwaukee star Giannis Antetokounmpo played only a moment due to a right wrist sprain but hopes to return for the Bucks' stretch run. "Hopefully I can be available for my team when they need me," the Greek star said. In the Western Conference, the Denver Nuggets are just behind the Celtics for the overall lead at 41-18 with Memphis a distant second on 35-22 and Sacramento third on 32-35 followed closely by the Los Angeles Clippers, Phoenix and Dallas.

Serbian center Nikola Jokic, the NBA MVP each of the past two seasons who turned 28 on Sunday, is averaging a triple double for Denver with 24.7 points, 11.5 rebounds and 10.1 assists a game. He said the Nuggets enjoy the fact that other clubs receive more attention than Denver even though they are at the top. "We like it," Jokic said. "We don't need (attention). We know what we're doing. We believe in the basketball system that we've built over the years, so it works. "It's still working. Nothing can affect us from outside. We are thinking about ourselves and just how to get better."

Phoenix and Dallas have bolstered their rosters for the stretch run with Durant joining the formidable Suns and Irving pairing with Luka Doncic for the Mavericks. "It's going to be incredible," Durant said of the Doncic-Irving partnership. "It's going to be tough to guard them." Durant will have Chris Paul guiding the Suns' attack from the backcourt with Devin Booker and Deandre Ayton alongside him in the front line.

The former NBA and NBA Finals MVP is



UTAH: Jayson Tatum #0 of the Boston Celtics hoists The Kobe Bryant MVP Trophy after the 2023 NBA All Star Game between Team Giannis and Team LeBron at Vivint Arena in Salt Lake City. — AFP

especially excited to play alongside veteran guard Paul, seeking his first NBA crown after he turns 38 in May. "His IQ for the game, his enthusiasm for the game, I think that goes underrated," Durant said. "CP really loves ball. He just likes watching the game, like analyzing. Like going through strategy and stuff. "He's always pulling me to the side and we're just talking hoop, so I love that about him. "On the floor, he can create so much for his teammates and for himself. He's only going to help us." — AFP