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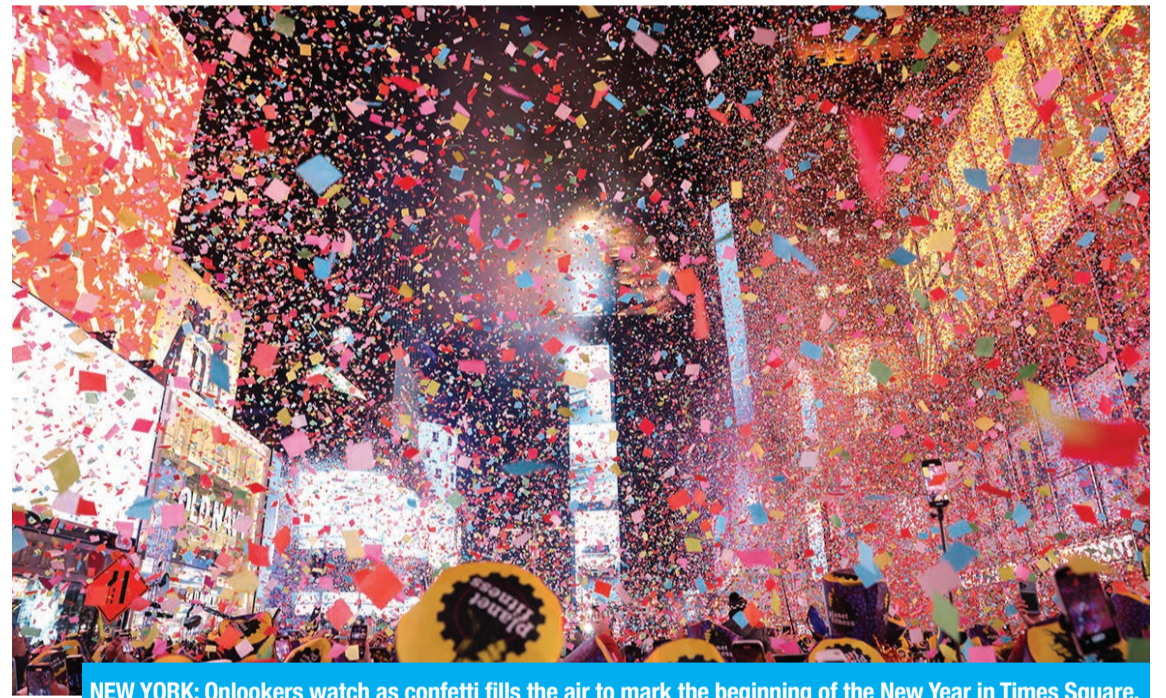


## World rings in 2023 with hope

Amir exchanges New Year congratulations with leaders



DUBAI: New Year's Eve fireworks light the landmark Burj Khalifa tower at midnight. — AFP



NEW YORK: Onlookers watch as confetti fills the air to mark the beginning of the New Year in Times Square.

NEW YORK: The world's eight billion people ushered in 2023, bidding farewell to a turbulent year marked by war in Europe, stinging price rises, Lionel Messi's World Cup glory and the deaths of Queen Elizabeth, Pele and former pope Benedict. Many set aside pinched budgets and a virus that is increasingly forgotten, but not gone, to embrace a party atmosphere on New Year's Eve after three pandemic-dampened years.

HH the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah exchanged cables of congratulations with leaders of Arab and friendly states on the New Year. HH the Amir expressed his wishes that the world may witness security, peace, stability and prosperity. The Middle East welcomed 2023 with a fireworks show from the world's tallest building, the 830-m Burj Khalifa in Dubai. Laser lights added to the spectacle at the landmark, which carried messages including "hugging again", an apparent reference to the end of COVID restrictions. Fireworks also lit up the skies in Kuwait as people welcomed the New Year.

In New York, confetti rained down after the famous ball drop in Times Square, a tradition that dates back to 1907, with visitors from across the world waiting hours in the chilly rain to take part. Throngs of people also packed Rio de Janeiro's Copacabana Beach, where up to two million were expected for music and fireworks without the coronavirus safety measures of the past few years.



KUWAIT: People watch fireworks as they celebrate the New Year. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat (More pics on Page 3)

Across the Atlantic, Parisians crowded shoulder-to-shoulder for fireworks along the Champs-Elysees in numbers comparable to 2018 and 2019, officials said. Sydney became one of the first major cities to ring in 2023 after two years of lockdowns and coronavirus-muted festivities, staging a fireworks display over the Sydney Harbour Bridge. Hours later, London also welcomed crowds to its official fireworks display for the first time since before the pandemic. — AFP (See Pages 12 & 13)

### Power outage strands travelers in Philippines

MANILA: Tens of thousands of travelers were stranded at Philippine airports on Sunday after a power outage knocked out communication and radar equipment at the country's busiest hub in Manila, forcing hundreds of flights to be cancelled, delayed or diverted. Aviation authorities detected a "technical issue" on Sunday morning involving the air traffic management center at Manila's domestic and international airport.

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### KuwaitSat-1 to launch on Jan 3 from Florida

KUWAIT: KuwaitSat-1 will launch on Tuesday onboard a SpaceX rocket, carrying with it the hopes and dreams of Kuwaiti youth of further space exploration, said operational director at the National Project for the First Kuwaiti Satellite Dr Ahmad Al-Kandari on Sunday. Speaking to KUNA, Dr Kandari said that once the KuwaitSat-1 reaches its designated orbit, it will disengage from the rocket and spread its wings containing solar-powered batteries that will enable it to operate.

The satellite will be able to send its first message in four hours and two minutes after launch, with the signal received at a station at Kuwait University, he revealed. He went on to say the rocket used in the operation is able to carry up to 70 to 100 pieces of equipment. Kandari pointed out the launch of this particular project will pave the way for plans to further develop Kuwait's space capabilities.



KUWAIT: KuwaitSat-1 is carrying the hopes and dreams of Kuwaiti youth. — KUNA

The official said the project had been four years in the making, consisting of seemingly never-ending training, research and studies by the project's team members. KuwaitSat-1 has a high-definition camera which will capture important data and pictures of Kuwaiti waters to analyze the level of pollutants, he revealed. KuwaitSat-1 cost KD 316,000 (\$1.032 million), with 67 members assembling the satellite, which took around 1,000 hours of work to be completed. — KUNA

### Croatia adopts euro, enters borderless club

ZAGREB: Croatia on Sunday switched to the euro and entered Europe's passport-free zone - two major milestones for the country after joining the European Union nearly a decade ago. At midnight, the Balkan nation bid farewell to its kuna currency and became the 20th member of the eurozone. It is now the 27th nation in the passport-free Schengen zone, the world's largest, which enables more than 400 million people to move freely around its members.

"It is the season of new beginnings. And there is no place in Europe where this is more true than here in Croatia," tweeted EU chief Ursula von der Leyen, as she arrived in Croatia to mark the occasion.

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# Strong correlation between drug addiction and divorce

## Children tragic victims of narcotics addiction

### Online narcotics sales destroying people's lives

KUWAIT: For those into the social media experience and cyberspace in general, it would not be a surprise to find various accounts promoting drugs of numerous functions or miracle treatments. However, if people investigate the matter thoroughly, they will discover that such accounts are fake and run by gangs of dubious individuals eager to hook people to their products that most times turn out to be narcotics.

In cyberspace, the sky is the limit; therefore, criminals might lure people in social media via accounts displaying some lewd and attractive profile pictures promising sexual gratification or fake medicine touting treatment for ailments of all kinds. Social media applications and cyberspace provide the necessary anonymity for felons to abuse society without leaving much of a trace, criminologist at Nottingham University Dr Grace Robinson told KUNA via phone. She said messaging through applications such as Snapchat allows people to chat with the text disappearing after a while, a factor, which criminals pounce upon to use in their illegal transactions.

Robinson, also the head of British research and security consultancy institute Black Box Limited, added that in the last couple of years, criminals have been heavily targeting young people, peddling their poison and illicit materials. She mentioned a research conducted with academics from University of Nottingham that showed an increase in social media usage in schemes to spread and sell illicit drugs. To find a solution, Robinson called on governments to step up age limits for the use of social media apps or the problem might become far worse.

Drug dealers fully exploit social media networks, digging their fangs deep in the youth using applications like Instagram and Snapchat for their own sick gains, affirmed criminologist at Royal Holloway University Leah Moyle. She revealed that a study she conducted with the Royal Holloway University had shown that 80 percent of those purchasing narcotics use social media apps. The majority thought that this method would keep the authorities at bay, Moyle added, who had a grim prediction that the easy accessibility of social media network would boost drug trafficking and usage.

The United Nations warned that social media networks and encrypted messaging might worsen the problem. The World Drug Report 2022, issued by the UN, displayed an increasing purchase of illicit drugs via the dark web between Jan 2014 and January 2021 with a slowdown occurring only in January of 2022 in relation to authorities tightening the noose on dark web outfits and cartels.

The International Narcotics Control Board (INCB), a UN-backed independent organization based in Vienna, said that there was an increasing amount of evidence linking narcotics sales and use to social media platforms. The board called on governments around the world to set rules and regulations to fend off the evils of drugs trafficking and use to protect the world.

Corroborating the link between social media platforms and narcotics peddling, the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) said shady individuals use social media to contact their clients without the fear of being caught. The old scenes of selling drugs in dark and dank alleys are becoming more and more of a cliché and unless people wake up at homes, schools, and all places might be vulnerable to narcotics and its evils. — KUNA

KUWAIT: There is a strong correlation between drug addiction and divorce, which has a devastating impact on society, Director of the Family Counselling Department at the Ministry of Justice Eman Al-Saleh said. Among the main reasons leading to drug addiction are family disputes and marriage problems, she told KUNA in an interview. Family problems cause a multitude of issues including depression, which when coupled with drugs, lead a person into deep despair, she said.

The daily social and financial pressures also might spark psychological insecurity, and lack of emotional control with drugs coming into the scene masquerading as a solution touted heavily by those peddling this poison, she added. Dr Saleh noted that the husbands, sometimes, create unnecessary

pressure and force wives to share their drug addiction or vice versa. She warned that drugs, as seen by addicts, offered feeling of happiness, excitement and enjoyment, but these sensations were momentary.

Drug addiction is destructive to the family unit and results in separation and desertion of all social responsibilities related to the family structure, increasing conflicts between spouses, domestic violence, and normally ends in divorce, she affirmed. Drug addiction also leads to poor financial choices, causing work dismissals, and loss of livelihood as well as debts, she added, indicating that some kinds of drugs cause a drop in male hormones in blood, which would affect the behavior of men and their daily interactions, and especially the relationship



Dr Eman Al-Saleh

with their wives.

She said that, unfortunately, children were tragic victims of drug addiction especially when they try to cope with the irresponsible behavior of their addict parents. The drugs addiction has negative impact on children, living in unbalanced, negative and stressful circumstances, leading to the loss of confidence, self-esteem, fear, inner anger and severe anxiety. — KUNA

## Kuwait's institutes play crucial role in anti-drug drives

KUWAIT: State institutes play a crucial role in preventing narcotics from spreading within society, said CEO of Ghiras National Awareness Project for Drugs Prevention Dr Ahmad Al-Shatti on Sunday.

Speaking to KUNA, Dr Shatti indicated that providing high-quality treatment for those plagued by drugs was essential, noting that privacy on this matter was paramount to save patients from social stigma. He pointed out that national statistics related to death by drugs, alcohol and hallucinogens in the past five years have reached 327 despite intense efforts to prevent such tragedies from occurring.



Dr Ahmad Al-Shatti

Ghiras has been at the forefront in terms of spreading awareness on illegal drugs and addiction, affirmed Dr Shatti, revealing that the project was based on a modern and balanced strategy to address the situation. It has been around two decades since Ghiras launched its media campaign and it continues, noted Dr Shatti. He added that from schools to the press, television and radio, Ghiras has been very active in spreading its anti-narcotics message. He commended the state's



Ghiras' awareness ads

efforts in providing assistance and treatment for drug addicts, saying that such individuals must have a chance to rehabilitate.

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) said in an evaluation that the Arab region has a serious problem with drug abuse, recorded in children as young as nine years old. On a national

scale, most local studies pointed out that narcotics use had been reported in youth between the ages of 15-24, Dr Shatti indicated. He said that methamphetamine had been spreading globally with some 27 million users in 2018, adding that some Arab states had been recording an increase in the use of this particular substance. — KUNA



KUWAIT: Therapists of the addiction treatment center. — KUNA photos



An activity by the center in coordination with the ministry of social affairs.

## Former drug addict maintains sober lifestyle

KUWAIT: After battling drug addiction for 24 years, Nasser - a narcotics survivor - continues his success story as a person striving to avoid the pitfalls of illicit substances. Speaking to KUNA, Nasser - whose name translates to victory-maker in Arabic -

recounted his struggle with drug addiction, which began at the tender age of 17. As the proverb "curiosity killed the cat" goes, Nasser dabbled with drugs not knowing the devastating impact on his personality and relationships with friends and family.

"Addiction turned me into recluses as well as a maniac who tried to secure any sort of income to fulfill my desires," he said regretfully. "The turning point was realizing that my children were scattered, I was divorced and a mountain of debt

accumulated due to this curse called drug addiction," indicated Nasser, who decided from thereon, he would set himself on the straight path, never veering towards or surrendering to addiction ever again.

The addiction treatment center was the first right step in years for Nasser and he never looked back, marking four years of sobriety and a drug-free lifestyle. He took the right decision, said Hanadi Al-Ashkanani - head of the social services department at the center. She noted that the center offers

a protocolled system of treatment, which involves an initial stage, followed by assisting in withdrawal symptoms and finally a continuous road of recovery no matter how long it took.

In Nasser's case, he joined the "midway house" program, a stage of recovery that allowed him to not only recover, but also assist in the recovery of fellow addicts. She went on to say that Nasser's road to recovery had its ups and downs, but with an iron determination, anyone can beat addiction no matter what the odds are. — KUNA

## Thirst for money, evil intentions behind drugs trade

BAGHDAD: Drugs' trade is an illegal business to make money; however, in some cases it is driven by illicit evil intentions to inflict harm on the targeted community. The former Iraqi regime of the ousted vicious dictator, Saddam Hussein, is famed for facilitating narcotics' exports to neighboring countries to undermine their social security and harm the youth's wellbeing.

Ali Al-Otobi, a drug criminologist, said in an interview with KUNA that routes for spreading drugs from Afghanistan, a main grower of plants that produce the harmful substances, snake via Iran and Iraq. Iraq before 2003 was afflicted with the hazard and enforced penalties amounting to execution; however the regime at the time was engaged in smuggling the narcotics to Saudi Arabia and Kuwait - driven by hostile intentions, Otobi said in an interview with KUNA.

Moreover at the time, only a few institutions

existed to treat the addicted in Iraq. However, after 2003, drug addiction began to mushroom locally, largely due to slack security along the long borders with Iran, fragile security and involvement of well-funded gangs. Nowadays, these trafficking routes to the Gulf countries still exist - however the bulk of smugglers targeting the GCC countries are mainly driven by thirst for money, rather than evil intentions to jeopardize the social fabrics of other Gulf countries.

Saudi border personnel have recently aborted a bid to smuggle drugs aboard drones into the kingdom, Otobi said, indicating that the Saudis have beefed up border precautions deploying troop reinforcements, installing more barbed wire, anti-aircraft batteries, thermal cameras, and staging regular security patrols in a bid to combat the cross-border smuggling. As to the illegal operations targeting Kuwait, he expressed his opinion that the clandestine trade has mainly involved amphetamines and various other stimulating pills. Smugglers between Iraq and Kuwait often use yachts, dhows and fishing boats, in addition to land routes such Al-Samawa oasis close to the borderline, he said.

Furthermore, economic and security conditions in Iran and Syria have contributed to the spread of the drug trade in the region, Otobi said, adding that

Iranian authorities have opted not to be firm against the traffickers, considering the hard living conditions. Otobi added that regional and external countries should cooperate against the menace, noting that Iraq has become a route for trafficking drugs to Europe via Turkey. He also mentioned in this respect the fragile security authorities' control in Iraq, rise of influential rich gangs, some of which had been implicated in assassination of judges and security officers. He also noted that need for tighter laws and regulations against the illegal trade.

Bilal Sobhi, a state media official, said in a statement to KUNA that a bill for stiffer punishment for the addicted had been presented to the relevant authorities, however the health department in particular turned it down on grounds that the afflicted should be classified as a patient and not a criminal. Current regulations are confined to penalties against promoters and traders.

On April 30, authorities busted two smuggling networks nabbing scores of involved persons and confiscating huge caches of narcotics. As part of the operation, the personnel discovered a secret hardware store in southern Baghdad, where a ton of the banned materials were stacked. The detainees, including Arabs, confessed to being members of an international network. — KUNA





# Kuwait welcomes New Year with fireworks



KUWAIT: People watch fireworks as they celebrate the New Year in Kuwait City early on Jan 1, 2023. — Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat

## Rise in prices of camps during New Year break

### Caravans are a new trend, but rentals steep too

By Faten Omar

KUWAIT: Many Kuwaiti citizens and residents escaped the hustle and bustle of the city to spend New Year's Eve in the desert, interacting with the natural environment. But camp operators are taking advantage of the peak season, as people have noticed a hike in camp and farm rentals, where the average prices of day-use camps have more than doubled.

Hamad Al-Enezi, who owns several camps in the Subbiya, told Kuwait Times that the market attracts lots of customers, especially families, pointing out that prices are different from one camp to another depending on the size, facilities and services. "Aside from the abovementioned reasons, family camps are more expensive than the ones for men. As camp owners, we provide a better, cleaner and safer place for families away from problems caused

by reckless youth. Regular camps may cost KD 100, while family camps cost KD 300 or more," he explained.

"Family camps start from KD 250 to KD 400. While tents inside commercial farms in Wafra and Abdaly rent them for KD 50, not to mention the entry fee of KD 10 per person. As for stables, it costs KD 100 per night and KD 300 for VIP facilities," Talal Al-Fadhli, a regular customer, said. He stressed the camp has to provide all means of comfort, including furniture, traditional Arabian seating, a stove for heating, a place for sleeping, bathrooms and lighting, in addition to the luxuries that adorn the camp for New Year's Eve, in addition to fireworks and other activities.

Abdullah Al-Awda, owner of caravans in Subbiya, said caravans are the new trend in Kuwait, noting that people in Kuwait love fancy and creative spaces. "Caravans on regular days cost KD 100, but

on New Year, due to the high demand, prices reach KD 250," he said. He indicated that the prices of RVs are considered reasonable compared to services provided. "Celebrating with family in Kuwait is the best way of spending the New Year holiday. There are many activities to define it," he said.

Ali Anjbar, owner of several fancy restaurants, said New Year's Day is one of the "high seasons" for restaurants and hotels around the world, which contributes to an increase in reservation prices. He said rates are not considered "high" given the additional services provided to customers and guests who want to spend an unconventional night to celebrate the New Year. He pointed out reservations rise to 90 percent in restaurants and hotels, so the previous year ends with a great achievement for both business owners and customers, noting that his guests are usually Kuwaitis and visitors from the Gulf Cooperation Council countries.

### EU and GCC witness intense, productive engagement in 2022

BRUSSELS: The year 2022 will go down in history as the year of most intense engagement and highly positive developments in the relationship between the 27-member European bloc and the 6-member Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). The year witnessed a record number of visits by top EU leaders to the Gulf region in addition to several meetings and conferences. The GCC includes Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and UAE.

For the first time ever, the EU in May adopted a working paper on a "strategic partnership with the Gulf", which aims to expand and deepen cooperation between the two regional blocs. "At a time of insecurity and significant challenges to the rules-based international order, exacerbated by the Russian war on Ukraine, the EU and the Gulf states would benefit from a stronger and more strategic partnership that spans a number of key areas," commented EU High Representative Josep Borrell, presenting the strategic partnership paper.

The document identifies six areas for enhanced cooperation: Prosperity, energy transition, global security, humanitarian aid, people-to-people contacts, and institutional relations. It includes EU pledges to play a greater political and security role in the Gulf and to appoint an EU special representative for Gulf and to hold annual EU-GCC political dialogue, consultations on multilateral issues and sectoral ministerial meetings.

The beginning of the year saw the visit of the Secretary General of the Gulf Cooperation Council Nayef Falah Al-Hajraf to Brussels in January, when he met Borrell and other EU officials and exchanged views on regional files of mutual concern and explored ways to step up EU-GCC cooperation. A few days later in January, Kuwait's ex-Foreign Minister Sheikh Dr Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah met European Union foreign ministers over breakfast in Brussels.

The first event of its kind highlighted the growing importance of Kuwait's constructive and positive role in the region in the eyes of the 27-member European bloc. Kuwait was praised for its mediating role in the region as well as being described as a "close and reliable partner of the Union," by Borrell.

The Third Senior EU-GCC Officials' Meeting was held in February followed by the 26th EU-GCC Ministerial Meeting, which stressed the importance of continuing to strengthen relations between both

sides in light of regional challenges, in order to be a strong and effective basis for regional and international security and stability.

In April, the European Commission proposed to lift Schengen visa requirements for nationals of Kuwait and Qatar. In May, Kuwait's former ambassador to the EU Jassem Al-Budaiwi told in a seminar that trade and investment have steadily grown between the EU and the GCC since the 1988 Cooperation Agreement between the two sides. "Despite the dual challenges of Brexit and the coronavirus pandemic the recovery is now blazing ahead and set to only increase to even greater levels" he told an event organized by the Arab-Belgium-Luxembourg Chamber of Commerce.

In September, European Council President Charles Michel paid his first visit to the Gulf regions visiting Qatar and Saudi Arabia. While in Doha, he participated at the inauguration of the EU delegation. Later the same month, he paid a one-day visit to Saudi Arabia and met with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in the port city of Jeddah. "Saudi Arabia is profoundly transforming. We need to work together," Michel said in a social media post after the meeting, adding that the EU "remains committed to continue our cooperation notably on energy security, renewables, trade, human rights and global stability".

The year also saw a change of guard at the Kuwait embassy in Brussels. After six years in his post in Brussels, Budaiwi was appointed as Kuwait's ambassador to Washington in June, while Kuwait's DCM in Washington Nawaf Al-Enezi moved to Brussels to head the mission to Belgium, the EU, NATO and Luxembourg. In October, Enezi presented to Belgium King Philippe his credentials, and in December to the European Union to Charles Michel, President of the European Council.

In November, President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen visited Bahrain to address the Manama Dialogue at the International Institute for Strategic Studies. "The world needs a stronger security architecture, against the spread of chaos. We know this in Europe and it matters also here in the Gulf. Europe is willing to do its part. We want to strengthen our engagement with the region - both economically but also in terms of security," she told the meeting.

Also in November, Borrell paid a visit to the United Arab Emirates to hold bilateral meetings there and attend the Sir Bani Yas Forum. The visit was an opportunity to further reinvigorate the EU-UAE bilateral relationship and to exchange with policy and opinion makers on regional matters and global affairs, he said in press statements. The 12th GCC-EU macroeconomic dialogue was held in Brussels on Nov 23, and on Nov 24 the 6th EU-GCC economic forum was held also in the

Belgian capital.

"This meeting is both welcome and timely, given the very challenging global developments we have faced, and continue to face, in 2022," said Executive Vice-President of the European Commission Valdis Dombrovskis in his keynote speech at the EU-GCC Economic Forum. "In this challenging environment, the EU is fully committed to strengthening economic ties between our two regional blocs. By developing our areas of mutual interest, by working in a more collaborative way, we can achieve real benefits," he said.

However, EU-GCC relations also faced hiccups in 2022. On Nov 17, the European Parliament's Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Interior Affairs announced that the vote on visa-free short stays (Schengen visa) for citizens of Kuwait and Qatar has been postponed. The postponement came after seven executions took place in Kuwait as European Commission Vice President Margaritis Schinas, was on a visit to the country.

On Dec 1, the European Parliament's Committee for civil rights and interior which oversees the visa issue voted in favor of lifting the Schengen visa requirement for Kuwait and Qatar, but made the suspension of the death penalty a condition for Kuwait for granting visa-free travel to the EU. The Chair of the European Parliament's Committee on civil liberty, justice and interior affairs, Juan Fernando Lopez Aguilar, said that Schengen visa-waiver for Kuwait is a good step which will contribute to mutual cooperation and understanding.

"It will help to mutual cooperation and understanding in many ways not only tourism, but business and academic exchange, scholars," he told the Kuwait news agency, KUNA, in an interview after the vote in the Committee on visa-free travel for Kuwait and Qatar. The European Union and Saudi Arabia held their second Human Rights Dialogue in Riyadh on Nov 6. The dialogue took place in a constructive and sincere atmosphere, noted an EU statement. Saudi Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Adel Al Jubeir met EU officials and Members of the European Parliament during his visit to Brussels end November.

The Committee will now discuss the Schengen visa file for Kuwait and Qatar most probably in January. Some would argue that the war in Ukraine is behind the EU's rush to strengthen ties with the Gulf region to secure its energy needs and to reduce its energy dependence on Russia. This may be partially true but not wholly. Borrell visited Qatar, the UAE and Saudi Arabia in Sept in 2021 on his first official visit to the Gulf region as High Representative. During his visit, long before the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February of this year, he had stressed the EU's desire to deepen ties with the Gulf region. — KUNA



Nepal's Aarus Lifestyle Hospital honors Kuwait Red Crescent Society. —KUNA

### Kuwait supports humanitarian action: KRCS

KUWAIT: Kuwait attaches paramount care and backing for humanitarian and relief activities, earning it a prestigious place on the global humanitarian map, according to Kuwait Red Crescent Society (KRCS). Kuwait sets a distinguished model for humanitarian action and has always been at the forefront of countries extending relief aid to the needy regardless of religion, race or color, KRCS' Media Chief Khaled Al-Zaid told a news conference held after the KRCS was honored by Nepal's Aarus Lifestyle Hospital for funding surgeries for people in need in Nepal.

"The KRCS has reached out to various regions across the world, set a model for unlimited humanitarian giving and established a unique approach for providing aid, relief, learning and health to the needy without any discrimination," Zaid said. However, he maintained, the charity would keep putting its humanitarian marks and features and developing its relief, medical and educational projects and programs year after year with a view to serving humanity and providing life requirements and decent life to people in need across the world.

Head of Amiri Hospital's Urology and Endoscopy Dr Abdulatif Al-Turki said this is the third medical campaign organized by the KRCS in Nepal as part of Kuwait's international humanitarian and development efforts. He added that the charity's medical team had conducted 30 surgeries for poor patients at Nepal's Aarus Lifestyle Hospital. Turki said the KRCS campaign will contribute to more critical surgeries at the hospital.

He affirmed that this campaign is an extension of the first successful drive, indicating that the operations were implemented by laparoscopic to remove kidney stones, cystoscopies and ureteral stones, in addition to laparoscopic removal of enlarged prostate and kidneys. This is a humanitarian initiative launched by the KRCS that aimed at alleviating the patients' sufferings mainly the poor, he said.

Zaid said this campaign seeks to mitigate miseries of patients who could not afford the cost of the surgeries. The campaign has contributed to treating many poor patients, including men and women, who came in search for medicine, he said. He elaborated that the society had previously organized a treatment program for the needy in Yemen and Nepal, and for Syrian refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq and Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. In addition, the society provides medical equipment and clinics for a number of national societies, he concluded. — KUNA



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## Photo of the Day



KUWAIT: Hamra Tower is engulfed in fog amid cold weather conditions. —Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat

## News in brief

## 6 Kuwait projects in top 100

KUWAIT: Data from the business intelligence service in the Middle East (MEED) has revealed that Kuwait has six projects among the largest 100 projects in the Middle East and North Africa, as it is estimated that the total worth of these projects is around \$47.3 billion. The total number of all 100 largest projects in the MENA region is around \$1.4 trillion, as projects that have passed the design and study phase is around \$570 billion. "Kuwait airport's new T2 building is the largest project at a cost of \$10 billion, followed by Al-Zour petrochemical complex by KIPIC at \$10 billion. In third place is the Sabah Al-Salem University City (\$9 billion), followed by South Mutlaa residential complex and North Al-Zour project (\$8 billion), and finally the Jahra cornice project (\$2.3 billion)," data from MEED revealed.

## KD 240 allowance for teachers

KUWAIT: The administrative affairs department at the education ministry has completed its list of teachers who will receive screen allowances for the year they taught online, as the list only awaits confirmation from managers, supervisors and heads of education areas. KD 30 will be added for every month Kuwaiti teachers taught online, which is the period from Oct 7, 2020 to June 7 2021, for a total of eight months (KD 240). Deserving teachers amount to around 45,000, and the total amount of allowances is around KD 10 million, which will be credited in January or February.

## KD 700 for Philippine workers

KUWAIT: Head of the administrative council at Al-Durra Company Mohammed Al-Olayan said from this month, the price of bringing workers from the Philippines will be KD 700, including airfare. As for requests regarding drivers or cooks, the price will be KD 180 including the air ticket. Moreover, Sri Lankan domestic workers will cost around KD 650 without plane ticket with a six month company guarantee from the date of arrival.

# People with disabilities face host of difficulties

## Many complain of major lack of integration into society

By Faten Omar

KUWAIT: According to in-depth research conducted by the Arabian Gulf Center for Studies and Research (CSRGULF), most people with disabilities complain of limited access to civil and political rights, such as marriage, work and being in political

positions. The study showed that many people with disabilities complain of a major lack of integration into society, as they do not receive full recognition from society and the government, revealing that the percentage of people with disabilities in recent years has increased in Kuwait by about 1,000, as there are around 60,000 Kuwaitis with disabilities (4 percent of the Kuwaiti population).

The study addressed the issue of having a large community of people with special needs live in the country without a role or value-added productivity, where many live in the shadows and do not fully exercise their rights, and their participation in economic and operational work remains weak. "Although 12 years have passed since the issuance of a law that was classified as the leading law in supporting the rights of people with disabilities in the Arab world, the articles of law no. 8 of 2010 focused on providing financial privileges rather than granting the right to exercise civil, social and political rights," the research said.

As a result, discrimination continues to exist between people with disabilities and others in various fields, and this can be seen when joining the labor market. In addition, the gender gap remains, as women with disabilities are considered less fortunate in work and education than males. Thus, hundreds of people with disabilities complain about the problem of integration more than a lack of financial support.

In just around seven years, the number of people with disabilities in Kuwait has increased by more than 7,000 people, where an average of 1,000 people with disabilities have been added annually since

2015, according to official statistics published by the Public Authority for Disability Affairs.

Presently, Kuwait is paying attention to protecting the education and work rights of persons with disabilities. However, access to education is much lower for students with disabilities compared to students without disabilities, as well as employment. Most people with disabilities in Kuwait do not have equal opportunities to access and develop in the work environment or to practice competitive jobs, like other people.

Limited quality of education, training and rehabilitation is among the most prominent negative aspects of discrimination, along with the lack of legislation, as no people with disabilities have held any leadership position in the country, although some persons with disabilities have demonstrated distinguished skills and excelled in various fields such as sports, innovation, education and business initiatives, despite the achievements of some that reflect great sacrifices and belief in capabilities.

It is worth mentioning that several studies have affirmed that a high rate of consanguineous marriage is associated with an increased risk of congenital malformations and autosomal recessive diseases, which reach 55 percent. In Kuwait, a study found statistically significant differences for consanguineous spouses, especially cousins, in both physical and mental disabilities, compared to non-consanguineous spouses. This kind of marriage, in which habits, traditions, and families frequently overlap, has emerged as one of the fundamental reasons for the existence of diseases that help to explain why certain children develop disabilities.



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## 40 successful years of production of Al-Rawdatain water

KUWAIT: Al-Rawdatain mineral water company has succeeded throughout its 40 years of production, securing for the market natural alkaline-flavored waters. Al-Rawdatain Natural Mineral Water Bottling Company was set up in Nov 1980 on a 50 sq km mineral water field, 100 km north of Kuwait City, with an operational capacity of 9.68 MIGPY. The actual yearly production of Al-Rawdatain water in the beginning of 1983 was about 4.8 MIG. Production of Al-Rawdatain natural mineral water is increasing every year, reaching 7.26 MIG in 1995.

In a statement to KUNA, Chief Executive Officer Adel Al-Bader said the main initiative of founding Al-Rawdatain company came on the order of late Amir Sheikh Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah to Central Bank of Kuwait in order to conduct necessarily studies to launch the project. Al-Rawdatain is a closed company founded in Nov 1980 for the development, execution and management of the production, bottling and marketing of water, he added.

Bader also said at that time the shareholders of the company were the ministry of finance, Central

الروذاتين  
AlRawdatain

Bank of Kuwait, Public Institution for Social Security, Kuwait Company for Trading, Contracting and Foreign Investments, Kuwait Investments Company and Kuwait Hotels Company. In July 1990, PIFSS bought the stocks of shareholders except the share of the Central Bank, he noted. Furthermore, the first pumping process was in Sept 1962, with approximate production capacity of 1.5 to three million gallons per day, Bader pointed out.

He also said the company has a specific laboratory that had earned ISO certifications. All products are being tested by the ministry of electricity and water and renewable energy, Kuwait Municipality and Public Authority for Food and Nutrition. The company has five lines for bottled water, he said, indicating that the company has started to fill water in glass and metal bottles. Bader also said the company is heading to reduce using raw materials through recycling, besides increasing sales with new a strategy through dealing with Gulf and international markets. — KUNA





More countries roll out China traveller checks amid COVID surge

## Colombia strikes ceasefire deal with main armed groups



BRASILIA: A supporter of President-elect Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva wears a Lula costume in front of the hotel where he is staying in Brasilia on December 31, 2022. —AFP

# Lula returns as Brazil president

‘Today marks the return of a working man to the presidential palace’

BRASILIA: Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva is set to be inaugurated Sunday for a third term as Brazil's president, in a ceremony snubbed by outgoing leader Jair Bolsonaro, underlining the deep divisions the veteran leftist inherits. The swearing-in will cap a remarkable political comeback for 77-year-old Lula, who returns to the presidential palace less than five years after being jailed on controversial, since-quashed corruption charges.

In a sign of the scars that remain from Lula's brutal election showdown with far-right ex-army captain Bolsonaro in October, security will be exceptionally tight at the pomp-filled ceremony in Brasilia. Some 8,000 police have been deployed, after a Bolsonaro supporter was arrested last week for planting a tanker truck rigged with explosives near the capital's airport, a plot he said aimed to "sow chaos" in the South American country.

Bolsonaro himself left Brazil for the US state of Florida Friday—reportedly to avoid having to hand the presidential sash to his bitter enemy, as tradition dictates. The snub has hardly dampened the party spirit for Lula and the 300,000

people expected at the New Year's Day ceremony and a massive celebration concert that will feature acts ranging from samba legend Martinho da Vila to drag queen Pablo Vittar.

Thousands of Lula supporters from around the country formed massive lines to filter through the security cordon, belting out pro-Lula chants as they waited. "I'm excited beyond measure," retired teacher Zenia Maria Soares Pinto, 71, told AFP after traveling 30 hours by bus from the southern state of Santa Catarina.

"I have so much admiration for his humility, his commitment to ensuring the people live in dignity," added Pinto, part of a crowd cheering for Lula outside the hotel where the ex-metalworker turned president was staying. Machine operator Valter Gildo, 46, called it a "historic day."

"Today marks the return of a working man to the presidential palace, someone who fights for social causes, for minorities, against racism and homophobia, a person who represents Brazil," he said.

Foreign dignitaries including 19 heads of state will be in attendance as Lula, who previously led Brazil through a watershed boom from 2003 to 2010,

takes the oath of office for a new four-year term at 3:00 pm (1800 GMT).

They include the presidents of a raft of Latin American countries, Germany, Portugal and the king of Spain. After being sworn in before Congress, Lula will travel by car—traditionally a black convertible Rolls Royce, though officials said that could be changed for security reasons—to the ultra-modern capital's presidential palace, the Planalto.

There, he will walk up a ramp to the entrance and receive the gold- and diamond-embroidered presidential sash. Organizers of the ceremony—led by first lady-to-be Rosangela "Janja" da Silva—have kept secret who will give Lula the sash in Bolsonaro's absence. It will be the first time since the end of Brazil's 1965-1985 military dictatorship that an incoming president does not receive the yellow-and-green sash from his predecessor.

**Pressing to-do list**

Lula faces numerous urgent challenges for Latin America's biggest economy, which looks little like the commodities-fueled dynamo he led in the 2000s.

They include rebooting economic growth, curbing rampant destruction of the Amazon rainforest and delivering on his ambitious agenda to fight poverty and inequality.

Vice president-elect Geraldo Alckmin described the incoming administration's task as "herculean." Markets are meanwhile watching nervously how Lula will fund his promised social spending, given Brazil's overstretched government finances.

Lula will face a Congress dominated by Bolsonaro's conservative allies. In a sign of how polarized the country remains, far-right hardliners have been protesting outside army bases ever since Lula's narrow runoff win on October 30, calling for a military intervention to keep him from taking power.

The new president will have to act "assertively" in his first 100 days to show where "Lula Part Three" is headed, said political scientist Leandro Consentino. "His election win was very tight, and he'll face a divided country and a combative opposition. He'll have to lead a national unity government and restore the peace," he said. —AFP

## Russia's New Year raids on Ukraine kills 3, dozens hurt

KYIV: Russia's New Year assault on Ukraine left three people dead and wounded another 50 as Moscow on Sunday claimed to have thwarted Kyiv's "terror attacks" on the homeland. The Ukrainian capital and other cities came under fire from missiles and Iranian-made drones.

The Ukrainian air force said Sunday 45 Iranian-made drones had been destroyed overnight. Thirteen were shot down at the end of 2022 and another 32 after midnight, the air force said. Andriy Nebitov, the head of the Kyiv police, posted on Facebook a picture of wreckage of a downed drone that featured the words "Happy New Year" in Russian.

"That is everything you need to know about the terror state and its army," he wrote. Kyrylo Tymoshenko, deputy head of President Volodymyr Zelensky's office, said two people died in Kyiv and the southern region of Kherson and 50 more, including children, were injured as a result of the Russian strikes.

A 22-year-old woman was badly wounded in the western city of Khmelnytskyi and later died from her wounds, governor Sergiy Gamaliy. On New Year's Eve, Russian artillery hit the village of Naddnpianske outside the southern city of Kherson, severely wounding a 13-year-old and his 12-year-old sister, the Ukrainian presidency said.

The Russian pounding also left the city of Kherson and the surrounding settlements without electricity on Saturday night, the presidency added. Russian forces in November withdrew from Kherson, the only regional capital that was held by Moscow, but has continued to batter the city ever since.

In the eastern region of Donetsk, pro-Russian separatist authorities said Ukrainian shelling killed a civilian in the town of Yasynuvata. The attacks came as President Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine enters its 11th month. "Moral, historical rightness is on our side," Putin declared as he delivered his midnight address standing among men and women dressed in military uniform. After a series of humiliating military defeats, Russia in October began targeting Ukraine's infrastructure, leaving millions in the cold and dark.

## Former Pope Benedict's German home in mourning

MARKTL: When Kurt and Anna-Maria Spennesberger heard the news about former pope Benedict XVI's death, they immediately got into their car and drove 200 kilometres to the former pontiff's southern German birth town Marktl. They had to be at the small town bordering Austria for a special church service saying farewell to Benedict because "we knew Ratzinger personally," said Kurt, 71, using the ex-pope's birth name.

"We already had some personal conversations with him, meetings, and that was simply a very human, personal contact," he added. Renate and Dane Cupic, 58 and 68, also travelled to Marktl from Austria, about 15 kilometres (10 miles) away, on hearing about Benedict's demise.

It was "very important" to be there to "say goodbye", said Dane. The small town in the southern region of Bavaria, with a population of around 2,800, is synonymous with Benedict. The house where the former pontiff was born in 1927 stands adjacent to the town hall, which itself is just a few steps away from St Oswald church where Benedict was baptised.

Candles have been placed at the foot of the Benedict column which stands by the town hall, while a black ribbon hangs down from the flags of papal coat of arms at his birth house and at the church. Across Bavaria, flags at official buildings have also been ordered to fly at half-mast. "We are mourning our Bavarian pope," said Markus Soeder, state premier of the region.



MARKTL: People attend a worship for late former Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI in the Catholic St Oswald church in his birth place Marktl, southern Germany. —AFP

**'Humorous'**

Hours after Benedict's demise, cars began streaming into Marktl slowly as Catholics in the region travelled in to mourn one of their own. Benedict has always kept in touch with Bavaria—where he taught at the university in the town of Regensburg between 1969 and 1977, and returned

regularly to visit his brother, the leader of the cathedral choir. Speaking in Pentling, the district in Regensburg where Benedict once lived, his former gardener Robert Hofbauer described the ex-pontiff as someone who was always "nice and friendly to everyone, the entire neighbourhood".

Across Bavaria, church services planned for the last day of the year were turned into remembrance ceremonies for Benedict, including in Regensburg where the cathedral was packed with around 300 people. One parishioner paying her respects, Hilde Eisenhut, reflected on "a link with him—he was Bavarian—I did my confirmation with him," the 61-year-old recounted.

In Marktl, about 130 kilometres away, around 200 people attended the service at St Oswald church, where a portrait of Benedict draped with

black cloth stood next to a Christmas tree. Another was placed on the other side of the altar. During the service, Franz Haringer, who is theological director at Benedict's birth-house—now a museum—underlined the former pope's "humorous side" and hailed him as a teacher of the faith.

Many others present also had personal memories of the ex-pope, like Josef Oberhuber, 71, who recalled filming him during his visit in 2006. Oberhuber, a Marktl local, underlined the significance of a pope hailing from the small town. "It was naturally a great event—such great joy," he recalled. Another local, Karl Michael Nuck, 55, recalled Benedict blessing his daughter. "He was not pope yet but a cardinal. He took quite a few minutes even though it had not been planned, that was a very nice thing." —AFP



## International

# Colombia strikes ceasefire deal with main armed groups

## Indepaz recorded nearly 100 massacres last year

**BOGOTA:** Colombia's government has agreed to a six-month ceasefire with the five largest armed groups operating in the country, President Gustavo Petro announced on New Year's Eve. The truce was the main objective of Petro's "total peace" policy, which aims to end the country's armed conflict, which has persisted despite the dissolution of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in 2017.

The armed groups still operating in Colombia, the world's largest cocaine producer, are locked in deadly disputes over drug trafficking revenues and other illegal businesses, according to the Institute for Development and Peace Studies (Indepaz), an independent think tank.

"We have agreed to a bilateral ceasefire with the ELN, the Second Marquetalia, the Central General Staff, the AGC and the Self-Defense Forces of the Sierra Nevada from January 1 to June 30, 2023, extendable depending on progress in the negotiations," Petro tweeted.

### 50 years of conflict

Despite the government's efforts to negotiate with Colombia's various armed groups, which include a combined total of more than 10,000 fighters, it has so far failed to contain the spiral of violence engulfing the country. Indepaz recorded nearly 100 massacres last year.

The National Liberation Army (ELN), the last recognized insurgency in the country, has been negotiating with the government since November. The Segunda Marquetalia and Estado Mayor Central groups—splinter factions of FARC which broke from the 2016 peace pact—have held separate talks with the government.

AGC, the country's largest drug gang, is made up of the remnants of extreme right-wing paramilitaries that demobilized in the early 2000s. The government is offering the groups "benevolent treatment from the judicial point of view" for the armed actors "in exchange for a surrender of assets, a dismantling of these organizations and the possibility that they stop exercising these illicit economies", Senator Ivan Cepeda recently told AFP.

Some dissidents refused to lay down their arms alongside their FARC comrades six years ago, when the fearsome rebel army signed the deal with Bogota to end more than five decades of conflict. Colombia has suffered more than 50 years of armed conflict between the state and various groups of left-wing guerrillas, right-wing paramilitaries and drug traffickers.

When he took power last August, Petro, the country's first leftist president, vowed to negotiate with all Colombian armed groups as part of a "total peace" policy. There are currently around 90 political and criminal groups operating in the country, according to Indepaz. —AFP



**BOGOTA:** Colombian senator Ivan Cepeda uses his computer during an interview with AFP at his apartment in Bogota. Colombia President Gustavo Petro, a former urban guerrilla and the country's first ever left-wing president, has vowed to negotiate with armed groups, including left-wing rebels and drug traffickers, in a bid to achieve "total peace" in the country. —AFP

## 2 dead, 200 rescued in Lebanon migrant boat sinking: Army

**TRIPOLI:** Two migrants died and another 200 were rescued Saturday when their boat sank off Lebanon's northern coast, from where increasing numbers make the risky journey to flee a collapsed economy.

An AFP correspondent in the impoverished port city of Tripoli said men, women and children—mostly refugees from Syria but also about 50 Lebanese—were on board the vessel when it got into difficulty. "Three naval ships, accompanied by another from UNIFIL (the UN mission in Lebanon), arrived at the site... off Selaata and personnel saved some 200 people," the army said on Twitter.

A separate tweet said two people had died. Earlier, the army said a naval patrol had been dispatched to rescue the vessel packed with people attempting to "illegally leave Lebanese waters". On Twitter, UNIFIL confirmed it was assisting the Lebanese Navy "in search and rescue operation at sea between Beirut & Tripoli where a boat in distress with a large number of people on board was found."

Dozens of relatives of those rescued streamed into Tripoli port to await their return to shore, AFP's correspondent said. Lebanon is mired in what the World Bank describes as one of the worst economic crises in modern history. The country also hosts more than a million refugees from Syria's civil war.

It was once just a launchpad for foreign migrants, but nearly three years of economic collapse have left Lebanon's own citizens increasingly joining Syrian and Palestinian refugees clamouring to leave by dangerous sea routes.



**TRIPOLI:** Members of the Lebanese Army deploy as families await news of their relatives at the entrance of the port in the northern city of Tripoli, following a rescue operation by the navy of a sinking migrant boat in Mediterranean waters, off Lebanon. —AFP

"We can no longer live in this country—or Syria," said Younes Jomaa, a Syrian originating from Idlib and a brother of one of the surviving migrants. They are among millions displaced over more than a decade by Syria's war.

"I had planned to go with my brother, but was unable to get enough money together," Jomaa said, adding that his brother had taken on debt to fund his voyage. In late September around 100 migrants died when their boat sank off the Syrian coast after departing from Lebanon, in one of the deadliest such episodes.

Migrants departing from Lebanon head for Europe, with one of the main destinations being Cyprus, only 175 kilometres (110 miles) away. The UN's refugee agency UNHCR has said at least 1,570 individuals, including 186 Lebanese nationals, had embarked or tried to embark on illicit sea journeys from Lebanon between January and November 2021. —AFP

## 13 Moroccans drown trying to reach Spain

**RABAT:** The bodies of 13 Moroccans have been recovered after their boat sank off the country's southern coast while attempting to reach Spain's Canary Islands, Moroccan media reported.

Spain is one of the main gateways for migrants to reach Europe. Tens of thousands also try each year from the coastlines of other North African countries, including Libya where coast guards on Saturday rescued hundreds of migrants.

The 45 passengers on board the ill-fated Moroccan boat were attempting to reach the Canary Islands' main city of Las Palmas when it hit a rock and sank Friday, "10 minutes after" embarking near the town of Mirleft, according to online news service Hespres.

About half of them, 24, were rescued from the water, the Arabic-language site reported.

One woman was among the dead, and eight of the passengers remained unaccounted for.

AFP contacted Moroccan authorities to confirm the deaths but received no immediate comment.

Morocco's 2M news service reported the passengers had used an inflatable boat which was quickly "damaged and the victims found themselves in the middle of the waves". Passage on the vessel had cost between 20,000 and 25,000 Moroccan dirhams (\$1,900 to \$2,400), Hespres said. Located at Africa's northwestern tip, Morocco is a transit country for many migrants, particularly sub-Saharan Africans. Fleeing poverty and violence, they seek to reach Europe from Morocco's Atlantic or Mediterranean coasts.

Others attempt the crossing from Morocco's neighbours further east on the Mediterranean.

### Thousands dead, missing

Naval special forces in eastern Libya, northwest of Benghazi city, intercepted a trawler carrying nearly 650 migrants trying to reach Europe, according to the media bureau of eastern naval headquarters, in a Facebook statement on Saturday.

The migrants included Bangladeshis, Syrians and Egyptians, the media bureau quoted naval commander Ramzi Najem as saying.

The west of war-scarred Libya had been the centre of clandestine migrant departures. However, crossing attempts using trawlers and large-capacity fishing vessels have multiplied from Libya's east, where a rival administration is in charge.

In October, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) said more than 14,000 migrants had been intercepted and returned to Libya during the year.

Libya is regularly criticised for its treatment of migrants, with human rights groups alleging horrific treatment at the hands of smuggling gangs and inside state-run detention centres. Off the coast of neighbouring Tunisia, more than 22,500 migrants had been intercepted this year, according to official figures up to October.

Spanish human rights group Caminando Fronteras (Frontline Defenders) said in early December that more than 11,200 migrants have died or gone missing while trying to reach Spain since 2018, an average of six per day.

The route between Morocco and the Canary Islands alone accounted for 7,692 of these deaths, the group said. The second most dangerous route is between Algeria and Spain where 1,526 people died over the same period.

Since late 2019, the number of migrants attempting clandestine crossings along the perilous Atlantic migration route surged as patrols in the Mediterranean intensified.

Spain's interior ministry said on December 15 that a total of 27,789 migrants had reached Spanish territory illegally this year, including 15,742 arrivals in the Canary Islands. —AFP



**MANILA:** Passengers wait for information about their flights at terminal 3 of Ninoy International Airport in Pasay on Jan 1, 2023. — AFP

## Power outage strands travelers...

Continued from Page 1

More than 360 flights in and out of Manila were cancelled, diverted or delayed, affecting around 56,000 passengers. The outage hit as many people began returning to the capital for work and school after the Christmas and New Year break. There were chaotic scenes at check-in counters across the country as thousands of people tried to re-book tickets or find when their flights might take off. Others who had boarded their aircraft before the glitch was announced waited for hours and were then disembarked.

Airport officials did not initially specify the cause of the problem. But transportation department secretary Jaime Bautista said the air traffic management center, which controls inbound and outbound flights, "went down" due to a power outage that resulted in the loss of communication, radio, radar and Internet. "The secondary problem was the power surge due to the power outage which affected the equipment," he said.

Airport authorities said the air traffic management

system was partially restored by 4:00 pm (0800 GMT) and flights were beginning to take off and land in Manila. "The flight delays and diversions are only precautionary measures to ensure the safety of passengers, crew, and aircraft," the Civil Aviation Authority of the Philippines said. Stranded travelers were outraged and annoyed by the malfunction and lack of information given by airport staff.

A woman who was supposed to fly to Singapore said she spent several hours sitting in a plane on the tarmac. She and her fellow passengers were eventually taken off the plane and offered hotel rooms. "We were told it was a complete failure of radio comms at air traffic control," she told AFP. Tycoon Manny Pangilinan tweeted that he had been flying from Tokyo to Manila when the plane was diverted to Haneda due to "radar and navigation facilities" going down.

"6 hours of useless flying but inconvenience to travelers and losses to tourism and business are horrendous. Only in the PH. Sigh," Pangilinan wrote. Manila passenger Daryll Delgado said she had managed to rebook her flight for a later date after a "frustrating" experience. An AFP reporter in the southern city of Davao said travelers were advised not to go to the airport but many only found out their flights had been cancelled after they arrived to check in. — AFP

## Croatia adopts euro, enters

Continued from Page 1

She met Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic and Slovenian President Nataša Pirc Musar at a border crossing with EU member Slovenia, and was then to head on to Zagreb.

Experts say the adoption of the euro will help shield Croatia's economy at a time when inflation is soaring worldwide after Russia's invasion of Ukraine sent food and fuel prices through the roof. But feelings among Croatians are mixed. While they welcome the end of border controls, some fear the euro switch will lead to an increase in the cost of living as businesses round up prices when they convert them. "It will be difficult. Prices that are already high will become even higher," said Ivana Toncic, a teacher from Zagreb.

But tourist agency employee Marko Pavic said Croatia was joining "an elite club". "The euro was already a value measure - psychologically it's nothing new - while entry into Schengen is fantastic news for tourism," he told AFP. Use of the euro is already widespread in Croatia. Croatians have long valued their most precious assets such as cars and apartments in euros, displaying a lack of confidence in the local currency.

About 80 percent of bank deposits are denominated in euros and Zagreb's main trading partners are in the eurozone. Officials have defended the decision to join the eurozone and Schengen, saying that the country thus completes its full EU integration. Croatia, a former Yugoslav republic of 3.9 million people that fought a war of independence in the 1990s, joined the European Union in 2013.

Experts say the adoption of the euro will lower borrowing conditions amid economic hardship. Croatia's inflation rate reached 13.5 percent in November compared to 10 percent in the eurozone. Analysts stress that eastern EU members with currencies outside of the eurozone, such as Poland or Hungary, have been even more vulnerable to surging inflation. French President Emmanuel Macron on Sunday hailed Croatia's switch to the euro, describing it as a "stable and solid" currency that had con-



**BREGANA, Croatia:** Vehicles pass without stopping at the Bregana border crossing between Croatia and Slovenia on Jan 1, 2023. — AFP

tributed to Europe's resilience in facing the consequences of the war in Ukraine.

Earlier on Sunday, Croatian National Bank governor Boris Vujcic symbolically withdrew euros from a cash machine in downtown Zagreb. In recent days, customers have queued at banks and ATMs to withdraw cash, fearing payment problems during the immediate aftermath of the transition period. As the clock struck midnight, a series of events were held along Croatia's borders with its EU neighbors to symbolize barrier-free travel.

Foreign Minister Gordan Grljic-Radman took part in a ceremony at a crossing point with EU member Hungary, where the New Year countdown ended with a traffic barrier being raised. A similar ceremony was held at the Slovenia border, with Interior Minister Davor Bozovic and Slovenian Public Administration Minister Sanja Ajanovic Hovnik. "Tonight we are celebrating New Year, new Europe with Croatia in Schengen," Bozovic told reporters.

Croatia's entry into the Schengen borderless area is expected to provide a boost to the Adriatic nation's key tourism industry, which accounts for 20 percent of its GDP. Previously long queues at the 73 land border crossings with Slovenia and Hungary will become history. But border checks will only end on March 26 at airports due to technical issues. And Croatia will still apply strict border checks on its eastern frontier with non-EU neighbors Bosnia, Montenegro and Serbia. —AFP



## International

# More countries roll out China traveller checks amid COVID surge

## Australia the latest to demand a negative test before arrival

BEIJING: Travellers from China now face restrictions when entering more than a dozen countries as concern grows over its surge in COVID-19 cases, with Australia the latest to demand a negative test before arrival. Last month, Beijing abruptly began dismantling its "zero-COVID" containment policy of lockdowns and mass testing, three years after the coronavirus first emerged in the city of Wuhan. As COVID overwhelms Chinese hospitals and crematoriums, officials have insisted that the wave is "under control" despite acknowledging that the true scale of infections is "impossible" to track.

Australia's health minister on Sunday cited Beijing's "lack of comprehensive information" about COVID cases as the reasoning behind the travel requirement, which will take effect on January 5. The move will "safeguard Australia from the risk of potential new emerging variants," he said. In recent days, Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Italy, Spain, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan have also imposed either a negative COVID test requirement or testing upon arrival for travellers from China.

Canada cited "the limited epidemiological and viral genomic sequence data available" on recent COVID cases in China for its negative test demand. Meanwhile, Morocco moved to ban all arrivals from China on Saturday, "to avoid a new wave of contaminations in Morocco and all its consequences".

The flurry of global travel restrictions began as countries anticipated a surge in Chinese visitors after Beijing announced mandatory quarantine for inbound passengers would end on January 8. The World Health Organization has called the precautionary measures "understandable" in light of the lack of outbreak information provided by Beijing.

But the European branch of the International Airports Council—which represents more than 500 airports in 55 European countries—said the restrictions were not justified or risk-based. European countries will meet next week to discuss a joint response to the issue, with incoming EU presidency holder Sweden saying it was "seeking a common policy for the entire EU when it comes to the introduction of possible entry restrictions".



ROISSY-CHARLES DE GAULLE AIRPORT: Passengers of a flight from China wait in a line for checking their COVID-19 vaccination documents as a preventive measure against the COVID-19 coronavirus, after arriving at the Paris-Charles-de-Gaulle airport in Roissy. — AFP

### 'Light of hope'

While a few major Chinese cities seem to be emerging from the current wave of infections, under-resourced smaller cities and rural areas have been hit especially hard. In response to the outbreak, Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen said on Sunday that she is "willing to provide necessary assistance based on humanitarian concerns," but did not specify what kind of aid might be extended to Beijing, which considers the self-ruled island a breakaway province.

But in his televised New Year address, Chinese President Xi Jinping struck an optimistic note. "Epidemic prevention and control is entering a new phase...

Everyone is working resolutely, and the light of hope is right in front of us," Xi said in a speech broadcast on state media on Saturday.

It was Xi's second time commenting on the outbreak this week. On Monday, he called for measures to "effectively protect people's lives". Despite the jump in infections, large crowds still gathered for New Year's Eve celebrations in Shanghai and Wuhan, although some social media users said the festivities seemed more subdued than in past years. China on Sunday reported more than 5,100 new infections and one death linked to COVID out of its population of 1.4 billion—but the figures appear to be out of step with the reality on the ground. — AFP

## Suu Kyi's party condemns latest Myanmar sentence

BANGKOK: The political party headed by jailed Myanmar leader Aung San Suu Kyi condemned her latest sentence and said on Saturday it would continue to oppose the junta whose court imposed it. Suu Kyi was handed a seven-year jail term for corruption on Friday in the last of a slew of trials in a junta court that rights groups have said were a sham.

The Nobel laureate, 77, has now been sentenced to a total of 33 years in prison. Former president and Suu Kyi ally Win Myint received the same sentence on Friday. The junta-appointed judge "did not respect the law",

the National League for Democracy's (NLD) central committee said in a statement.

Win Myint and Aung San Suu Kyi "worked for development in the country during the time they were in power, and they worked according to the law".

The NLD "will continue to work with the people... for the release of all political prisoners, to get rid of the military dictatorship and fight for justice", it said.

The military has cited alleged widespread voter fraud during elections in November 2020, which were won resoundingly by the NLD, as a reason for its coup, which sparked huge protests and a bloody crackdown.

International observers said at the time the polls were largely free and fair.

The NLD was decimated by the February 2021 coup, with many senior members in hiding or in jail. Myanmar has been in turmoil since, with the junta razing villages and conducting mass extrajudicial killings and air strikes on civilians, according to rights groups. — AFP



YANGON: File photo shows Myanmar opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi gesturing towards supporters as she travels in a motorcade ahead of a campaign rally for the National League for Democracy in Yangon. — AFP

## IS claims deadly attack in Egypt Suez Canal city

CAIRO: The Islamic State group said Saturday that it carried out a deadly attack on an Egyptian police checkpoint in the Suez Canal city of Ismailia the previous day. "A cell of soldiers of the caliphate managed to attack an Egyptian police roadblock... with a machine gun," the jihadist group's Amaq news agency said.

Three Egyptian policemen were killed in the attack, the first of its kind in nearly three years in mainland Egypt, which has largely been spared the deadly insurgency in the nearby Sinai peninsula. In the past few years, attacks against Egyptian security forces have been concentrated in the Sinai, where jihadists affiliated with IS operate.

Eleven soldiers were killed on May 7 in an attack in western Sinai. Days later, another five soldiers and seven jihadists died when the army was attacked in the peninsula. Ismailia is one of the key cities overlooking Egypt's Suez Canal, a vital waterway between Asia and Europe that sees about 10 percent of the world's maritime trade. — AFP

## EU urges Rwanda to stop supporting M23 rebels

KINSHASA: The European Union on Saturday urged Rwanda to stop supporting the M23 rebel group, which has captured swathes of territory in North Kivu province in neighbouring DR Congo. The DRC — along with the United States and several European countries — has repeatedly accused its smaller central African neighbour Rwanda of backing the M23, although Kigali denies the charge. The Tutsi rebel group has in recent months advanced to within a few dozen kilometres of provincial capital Goma. EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said Saturday that the European bloc had urged Rwanda to "stop supporting the M23 and use all means to press the M23 to comply with the decisions taken by the EAC (East African Community)" and at a November summit in Angola.

"It also firmly urges all states of the region to prevent the provision of any support to armed groups active in the DRC," said Borrell. He called on Kinshasa to "take all measures necessary to protect the civilian population in its territory". Under heavy international pressure to disarm, M23 joined a ceremony last week

## Nine dead in Uganda New Year stampede

KAMPALA: At least nine people died, most aged between 10 and 20, in a shopping mall crush as revellers rang in the New Year in Uganda's capital, police said on Sunday. After fireworks outside the Freedom City mall in Kampala, "a stampede ensued, resulting in the instant deaths of five people and injuries to several others," national police spokesman Luke Owoyesigire said.

Four others died on their way to hospital "largely due to suffocation". "Emergency responders arrived on the scene and transported the injured individuals to the hospital, where nine were confirmed dead," said Owoyesigire. "Rash" acts and "negligence" led to the tragedy, he added.

The celebrations to welcome in 2023 were the first in the east African country in three years, after restrictions linked to the COVID-19 pandemic and security issues. "Most of the dead were juveniles, ages 10, 11, 14 and 20," Kampala police spokesman Patrick Onyango told AFP.

"There are several injured and our team of investigators are following up to get the exact number." One of the survivors, businesswoman Sylvia Nakalema, said the stampede started "when we went to view the fireworks on the platform and while returning downstairs". "There was a huge crowd. People began pushing each other for space leading some to fall and the stampede ensued," she said. "Children were crying and there was chaos. I survived because I was pushed in a corner by the crowd," said the 27-year-old.

"I felt losing breath but I stayed put since I had no exit until the situation calmed down but some people were already lying down gasping for breath." Uganda's NTV channel broadcast images of relatives of the dead gathered outside a morgue in the Ugandan capital on Sunday. In 2009, one person died and three were injured in a stampede at Kampala's Kansanga amusement park. — AFP

to deliver the strategic town of Kibumba to an East African military force as a "goodwill gesture" for peace. The EAC also said the group had to withdraw to the border between the DRC, Uganda and Rwanda. However, the Congolese army promptly dubbed the Kibumba handover a "sham."

### UN experts' report

Borrell's comments came after a UN experts' report on DR Congo indicated it had collected proof of "direct intervention" by Rwandan defence forces inside DRC territory between at least November 2021 and last October. The experts' report says Rwandan troops launched operations to reinforce the M23 against the mainly Hutu Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) — notably by supplying weapons, ammunition and uniforms. Kigali sees the FDLR as a threat which justifies interventions inside the DRC.

Rwanda has also accused the DRC — where presidential elections are due next December — of using the conflict for political purposes as well as of "fabricating" a November massacre of at least 131 civilians. A UN probe blamed the deaths on M23 rebels. Prior to the massacre, Angola had been mediating peace talks designed to pave the way for a truce agreement.

In a statement Saturday, Kinshasa welcomed the findings of the UN experts, which it said "put an end to the lies and manipulations" of Rwanda. — AFP

## North's Kim seeks exponential boost in nuclear arsenal

SEOUL: Kim Jong Un has called for an "exponential" increase in North Korea's nuclear arsenal, including mass producing tactical nuclear weapons and developing new missiles for nuclear counterstrikes, state media said Sunday.

In a report at the end of a key party meeting in Pyongyang, Kim said the country must "overwhelmingly beef up the military muscle" in 2023 in response to what it called US and South Korean hostility, the official KCNA reported. Claiming that Washington and Seoul were set on "isolating and stifling" the North, Kim said his country would focus on the "mass-producing of tactical nuclear weapons" and develop "another ICBM (intercontinental ballistic missile) system whose main mission is quick nuclear counterstrike".

Such goals form the "main orientation" of the 2023 nuclear and defence strategy, the report said. Military tensions on the Korean peninsula rose sharply in 2022 as the North conducted sanctions-busting weapons tests nearly every month, including firing its most advanced ICBM ever.

It capped the record-breaking year of launches by firing three short range ballistic missiles early Saturday, and conducting another rare late-night launch at 2:50 am (1750 GMT Saturday) on Sunday, Seoul's military said. The official KCNA reported Sunday that the launches had been "a test-fire of the super-large multiple rocket launchers". In a separate KCNA report, Kim said the weapons put South Korea "as a whole within the range of strike and (were) capable of carrying (a) tactical nuclear warhead". North Korea was emphasising "the possibility of actual action", said Yang Moo-jin, professor at Seoul's University of North Korean Studies.



PYONGYANG: Picture shows North Korean leader Kim Jong Un attending the 6th expanded plenary session of the 8th Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea at the Party Central Committee headquarters in Pyongyang. — AFP

"North Korea is signalling a tactical shift of indirectly pressuring the United States by pressuring South Korea and escalating tensions on the Korean peninsula starting this year," Seoul's defence ministry called North Korea's latest threats "provocative rhetoric that seriously damages the peace and stability on the Korean peninsula" and urged Pyongyang to immediately give up its nuclear programmes. "We sternly warn that if North Korea attempts to use nuclear weapons, the Kim Jong Un regime will face an end," the ministry added in a statement. The launches come just days after Seoul scrambled fighter jets as five North Korean drones made an incursion into the South's airspace Monday.

### Another Ukraine?

Lim Eul-chul, a professor at Kyungnam University, said that the North's latest statement indicated "they are preparing for the possibility of actual war beyond the collapse of inter-Korean relations". He warned that if the United States and South Korea responded, as was likely, by further ramping up military drills, tensions between the two Koreas would reach "an unprecedented level" in 2023.

"It would indeed be a reasonable prediction that the Korean peninsula could become a second Ukraine if the situation is mismanaged," he added. In 2022, Kim said he wanted his country to have the world's most powerful nuclear force and declared the North an "irreversible" nuclear state. North Korea has talked about mass producing nuclear weapons before, said Go Myong-hyun, researcher at the Asan Institute for Policy Studies.

"The intention is that if North Korea mass produces nuclear weapons, even without aggressive provocations, the United States will have no choice but to someday recognise North Korea as a nuclear state," he told AFP. The reports come at the end of a major party meeting in Pyongyang at which Kim and other senior officials outlined 2023 goals in key areas including diplomacy, security and the economy.

In past years, Kim had delivered a speech on January 1, but he recently dropped the tradition in favour of making announcements at the year-end plenary meeting. North Korea also plans to launch its first military satellite "at the earliest date possible". KCNA said-a goal South Korea is also chasing, having successfully tested a solid-fuel space launch vehicle on Friday.

"North Korea ended the year with a bang but its recent missile launches were not technically impressive," said Leif-Eric Easley, a professor at Ewha University in Seoul. But the "provocations, including drone incursions, appear excessive for deterrence and may be intended to scare South Korea into taking a softer policy". — AFP



MONDAY, JANUARY 2, 2023

# Business

## Effects of reforms on Kuwait economy still unclear: Expert

### Oil price scenario remains foggy: Ramadan

By Majd Othman

**KUWAIT:** Economic researcher Mohammad Ramadan spoke to Kuwait Times about the economic expectations for Kuwait for 2023, saying that due to the political instability in the country and the economic situation that is not a priority for the government, representatives or citizens themselves, therefore, it is hard to predict the economic situation for the country in 2023.

He said although the country is witnessing clear indications of a decrease in corruption in various governmental entities, the effect of these reforms on the local economy is still unclear, as it depends on the type of reforms that the new officials will achieve after take charge of various bodies in the country.

On oil prices, Ramadan said the current status globally is still foggy due to the sudden decisions that could be taken by Russia and OPEC+, with the West imposing sanctions, while expectations from international credit bodies vary greatly, as some of them expect oil price in 2023 to be \$80 to \$90, while others forecast prices will drop to \$60 or \$50 per barrel.

Ramadan pointed out Kuwait is still facing some basic issues that can change the economic situation if approved, such as wage hikes, especially with the approval of the government in principle, which will definitely affect the purchasing habits of citizens



Mohammad Ramadan

and residents, and could determine which economic activity will witness growth and therefore improve parts of the local economy.

"Improving capital spending is one of the most important annual promises the government makes consistently, but administrative obstacles hinder spending and disserve the results the country is waiting for, not to mention the local economy suffers from a lack of development. Getting rid of these obstacles will take the economy at a higher speed," Ramadan said.

#### Kuwait's economic growth indicators

Ramadan clarified there are some main indicators in Kuwait that determine the economic status of the country, which is related to the Corruptions Perceptions and Ease of Doing Business indices, in addition to the improvement of government procedures. "The index reports will give us a clear view of the situation at the beginning of the year and also help us predict what could happen in the economy this year," he said.



#### Zero-COVID Policy

After China decided to abandon its zero-COVID strategy, Kuwait Times asked Ramadan how this can positively reflect on the Kuwaiti market. "It would benefit Kuwait and the GCC area in general. China

buys Russian oil at a cheap price and dropped its zero-COVID policy, which will help the country to increase production and reduce costs. This will lead to a decline in commodity prices and reduce inflation," he said.



### Saudi economy forecast to grow in 2023

**RIYADH:** The global economy is heading towards a recession in 2023 as higher borrowing costs aimed at tackling inflation are set to push a number of economies into contraction, according to the Centre for Economics and Business Research.

While the global economy surpassed \$100 trillion for the first time in 2022, the British consultancy firm noted that the growth is going to stall in 2023, as the world continues its fight against soaring prices.

"It's likely that the world economy will face recession next year as a result of the rises in interest rates in response to higher inflation," Kay Daniel Neufeld, director and head of forecasting at CEBR, said.

The report added that "the battle against inflation is not won yet" as central banks across the world will have to continue to "stick to their guns in 2023 despite the economic costs."

"The cost of bringing inflation down to more comfortable levels is a poorer growth outlook for a number of years to come," it added.

CEBR's findings are more pessimistic than the

latest forecast from the International Monetary Fund which warned in October that there is a 25 percent chance of global GDP growing by less than 2 percent in 2023. IMF defines this as a global recession.

Despite the gloomy global outlook, Saudi Arabia's economy is expected to grow strongly in 2022, with its output set to be 4.8 percent higher than in 2021, as the recovery from the pandemic continues, CEBR noted.

The British firm, which released its annual World Economic League Table, said the Kingdom is forecasted to witness an average annual growth rate of 2.2 percent between 2023 and 2036. "This will see Saudi Arabia climb from 19th place in the World Economic League Table in 2021 to 17th place by the end of that period," it added.

CEBR pointed out that Middle East's second-largest economy is heavily dependent on natural resources, with oil accounting for 90 percent of Saudi Arabia's total exports and 42 percent of the national gross domestic product, according to the CIA World Factbook.

It stressed that the diversification efforts undertaken by the Kingdom will be key to its future prosperity. With the Saudi Government taking active steps towards this goal via strategic frameworks such as Saudi Vision 2030, the report said this framework will seek to increase non-oil international trade, promote investment opportunities and strengthen the public sector. — Agencies

room, where two of them work from home, but they use an electric heater during the day rather than firing up the boiler.

Arguments can flare up, particularly when housemates bring partners to stay over. Notes are sometimes left as a reminder to turn the heating down. "We have had a few passive-aggressive messages: If you're not in the room, turn the lights off," added Joe. Other London flatmates opted to avoid all heating unless the temperature dips to a really cold level, as it did over Christmas.

Household electricity and gas bills have rocketed across Europe this year, after key energy producer Russia invaded Ukraine in February. In Britain, the average domestic energy bill has roughly doubled over the last 12 months. That has helped push inflation to the highest level in four decades, in turn creating a cost-of-living crisis as wages fail to keep pace, despite the government's partial subsidy for fuel.

Simon Francis, campaigner at pressure group End Fuel Poverty, told AFP that the fuel crisis was hitting everyone. "People are all just suffering from this cost-of-living crisis—so no matter really how much you're earning, you are going to be suffering," he told AFP. — AFP

### 2023 doesn't look good for media stocks like Netflix and Disney

**NEW YORK:** Media stocks got rocked this year, with companies losing billions of dollars in market value, as streaming subscriber growth waned and the advertising market worsened. The pain is likely to continue in the first half of 2023, according to media executives and industry analysts.

Disney and Warner Bros Discovery, two companies undergoing transitions, especially when it comes to streaming, each hit 52-week lows in recent days. So far this year, Warner's stock is down more than 60 percent and Disney is off more than 45 percent. The media industry has come to a turning point as competition among streaming services is at an all-time high and consumers are getting pickier about their number of subscriptions. On top of that, companies are contending with lower ad revenue and more cord cutting. Some expect consolidation to occur in the near future.

"Across the sector, it's chaos," said Mark Bojman, head of media and entertainment investment banking at Solomon Partners. "Everyone has been saying for years that technology is going to change the media world, and it has. But we're at this real point now where it's crunch time." He predicts bundled streaming will become more important in 2023. It's been a tough year across the board for the market. The Nasdaq Composite is headed for its worst decline since 2008, and it's positioned to underperform the S&P 500 for a second straight year. Other industries' stocks, including tech, have been clobbered.

Major tech stocks have lost at least half of their value. Streaming giant Netflix's stock has dropped more than 50 percent, with its market cap cut in half to roughly \$123 billion.

#### Streaming woes

When Netflix reported it lost subscribers in the first quarter - the first time in more than 10 years - the news sent a shock wave through the sector. The streaming giant blamed heightened competition. It also started exploring an ad-supported, cheaper option for customers, something the company had long said it wouldn't do. Since then, other media company stocks have followed suit.

Disney, meanwhile, has been facing challenges since the early days of the pandemic, when movie theaters and theme parks were closed for months. Disney's financial performance has been scrutinized in recent months, and following its disappointing earnings report in November, the company's board ousted Bob Chapek and brought back longtime former boss Bob Iger.

Although Disney investors were immediately elated over Iger's return, the stock soon after faltered, most recently due in part to a lower-than-expected opening box office weekend for "Avatar: The Way of Water." Warner's stock got slammed this year as management for the newly combined company - the merger between Warner Bros. and Discovery closed this spring - has been cutting costs, warning of the tough ad market, and focusing on making its streaming business profitable in the future.

Since Netflix's losses earlier this year, Wall Street has been questioning the viability of streaming business models. "I think everyone was trying to emulate Netflix with the hope of seeing a similar valuation, and at this point the jig is up,"

said John Hodulik, an analyst at UBS. "Netflix is no longer being valued at a revenue multiple. Investors are asking how direct-to-consumer gets to profitability."

The sentiment also has weighed on Warner, which plans to combine HBO Max and Discovery next year, as well as Paramount Global and Comcast's NBCUniversal. Investors have a magnifying glass on subscriber counts and content spending, which has mounted to tens of billions of dollars for these companies.

"Now there's a new focus on these costs," said Hodulik. "I think Warner Bros. Discovery is leading the charge, but we're going to see other companies pare back their ambitions in the streaming space over time."

#### Tightening ad market

On top of this, the ad market has worsened. During times of economic uncertainty, companies often pull back on advertising spending, which is often seen as discretionary. Paramount missed third-quarter estimates after its ad revenue dropped, with its stock hitting a low in the following days. The stock is down more than 45 percent this



NEW YORK: A trader works on the New York Stock Exchange in this file photo.

year. Paramount's shares did get a boost recently after Warren Buffett's Berkshire Hathaway upped its stake in the company, fueling speculation that it could be an acquisition target.

Earlier this month at an industry conference, CEO Bob Bakish lowered expectations for the company's fourth-quarter ad sales. NBCUniversal CEO Jeff Shell also said at the same conference advertising has steadily worsened in the last six to nine months, although he noted ad revenue would be up in the fourth quarter. "These stocks have been down a lot, and investors are asking themselves why would I buy this ahead of bad news not just next quarter, but the next few quarters," Hodulik said. "Things might get worse before they get better." There were some bright spots on the advertising front, however.

Streamers like Netflix and Disney now offer ad-supported, cheaper options for customers, which is expected to be a positive for their businesses. "We also anticipate that advertising streaming will become more important in the year to come," Solomon Partners' Bojman said. Political advertising revenue was also up in the third and fourth quarters due to the heated midterm elections, with broadcast station owners like Nexstar Broadcast Group and Tegna reaping the benefits. These stocks, particularly Nexstar, were both up year to date, despite their industry's overall weakness, as their revenues heavily rely on the high fees distributors pay to air their local networks. — Agencies

### Surging UK energy bills spark tensions among tenants

**LONDON:** Britain's cost-of-living crisis has turned into a bitter winter in households trying to keep their energy bills down: Some lecture flatmates for keeping the lights on. Others move to better heated homes. Common energy-saving measures also include not using heating during the day-and buying an electric blanket instead of switching on radiators.

It can be complicated for people in shared accommodation, with relationships complicated by different lifestyles and salaries, which means they must compromise to lower their bills.

"Everyone is conscious about not leaving lights on," said Joe, a 33-year-old schoolteacher who shares an east London home with five other people. The housemates have together agreed to turn off heating in bedrooms. They still warm the living



## Business

# Arab economies will continue to expand in 2023, 2024: UN report

## GCC countries will grow at 4.6% rate in 2023 as inflation eases

KUWAIT/ABU DHABI: Arab economies are poised to expand this year and the next as they continue to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, record lower inflation rates and benefit from improved fiscal positions, the UN said in its latest survey.

The gross domestic product of 22 Arab countries is forecast to grow an average 4.5 per cent in 2023 and 3.4 per cent in 2024, albeit at a slower pace from 5.2 per cent last year, with some discrepancies as the Ukraine war affects economies differently, the UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (Escwa) said in a report. "While some Arab countries benefited from spikes in energy prices, others suffered from rising energy costs, food supply shortages, and drops in both tourism and international aid inflows," Escwa said in its Survey of Economic and Social Developments in the Arab Region.

"This outlook faces many risks and uncertainties, including fears of a new COVID-19 wave, a protracted war in Ukraine and expanding sanctions on the Russian Federation, economic collapse in some Arab countries suffering from dire socio-economic conditions and persistence of conflict and political instability." The regional outlook comes after some Arab countries benefited from a surge in energy prices, while non-oil importing states faced rising energy costs, food supply shortages, drops in tourism and lower international aid inflows in the wake of the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war. GCC countries will grow at their fastest pace since 2014, expanding 4.6 per cent and 3.3 per cent in 2023 and 2024 respectively, from 6.3 per cent in 2022, as they benefit from a recovery in oil markets that started in 2021.

"The current situation presents an opportunity for oil-exporting Arab countries to diversify their economies away from the energy sector by accumulating reserves and investing in projects that generate inclusive growth and sustainable development," Ahmed Moumni, head of the Escwa survey, said.

Arab middle-income countries (MICs) are expected to grow by around 3.6 per cent this year and next, respectively, from 4.3 per cent last year, as most face higher energy and commodity prices and depreciation



RABAT: Moroccans shop at a vegetable market.

of their national currencies. Egypt, the Arab world's third largest economy, will outpace these rates with growth of 5.4 per cent in 2022 and 4.3 per cent over 2023-2024, driven by an increase in demand for and prices of Egyptian gas.

Conflict-affected countries or CACs's collective GDP is expected to grow 6.8 per cent this year and 3.6 per cent the next, up from 2.8 per cent last in 2022, led by Iraq which has benefited from higher oil prices. Arab least-developed countries (LDCs) are forecast to grow by 3.3 per cent and 4.6 per cent in 2023 and 2024 respectively, up from only 0.9 per cent in 2022, the UN said. They face an increase in energy and essential commodities prices, while risking a drop in official development assistance as more aid is redirected to support Ukraine and countries hosting Ukrainian refugees.

### Inflation to ease in 2023-2024

While inflation rates in Arab countries jumped this year to an aggregate 14 per cent, they are projected to drop to 8 per cent and 4.5 per cent respectively in 2023 and 2024, according to the UN survey. Inflation in MICs is expected to reach as high as 17.7 per cent in 2022 before dropping to 10.9 per cent in 2023, driven mainly by high inflation rates in crisis-hit Lebanon. The country will register an inflation rate of about 86.9 per cent in 2022 and about 13.7 per cent in 2023, as grapples with an economic and financial meltdown and sharp currency depreciation.

The fiscal position of Arab countries is expected to have improved in 2022 as a result of higher energy prices, though this will be partially offset by an

increase in metal and food prices, the UN survey said. GCC countries are expected to record a fiscal surplus of 5.6 per cent of GDP in 2022, allowing the bloc to decrease its debt-to-GDP ratio to about 30 per cent in 2022 from 36.4 per cent in 2021.

The fiscal deficit in Arab MICs is expected to reach 8 per cent of their collective GDP, as non-oil importing states face higher oil prices. Debt-to-GDP ratio is expected to decline in MICs to 76.3 per cent in 2024 from 79.1 per cent in 2022, as a result of the drop in the value of Lebanese debt following the massive depreciation of its currency.

CACs will record a 4.7 per cent fiscal surplus as percentage of GDP, driven by a significant improvement in the fiscal position of Iraq. Arab LDCs are also projected to record a significant reduction of their debt-to-GDP level to 47.3 this year from 78.1 per cent in 2022, driven mainly by a significant reduction of the debt level in Sudan.

### Gender inequalities

In terms of gender parity, Arab countries are still "characterized by structural barriers" that hinder women's economic participation, with only 5 per cent of businesses in the region having top female managers, the survey showed. The female labor force participation rate in Arab countries continues to be the lowest worldwide, estimated at 19.9 per cent in 2022 and below the global average of 46.6 per cent.

Arab female unemployment rate is the highest worldwide, estimated at 22.1 per cent compared with a global average of 6 per cent. For both men and women, joblessness remained a problem. The Arab world registered a 12 per cent unemployment rate in 2022, the highest in the world, the survey showed. Poverty also surged, affecting 130 million people in Arab countries, the UN said.

Excluding Libya and GCC countries, more than one-third of the region's population is hit by poverty. Poverty levels are expected to rise over the next two years, reaching 36 per cent of the population in 2024, the UN said. — Agencies

## Debt spiral engulfs Turkish voters months before polls

ISTANBUL: The growing pile of debt notices covering the Ankara district mayor's desk hints at the scale of the economic crisis facing Turkish voters months before crucial presidential polls. The warnings and court summonses end up being forwarded to Ali Golpinar—the "muhtar" of one of the Turkish capital's working-class suburbs—when they cannot be delivered to the debtor's stated address. Golpinar says the number of them he gets daily has doubled to about 40 in the past two years.

That generally reflects what has happened to Turkey's consumer prices over the same span. The official inflation rate hit 85 percent in the past year alone. "And these are only the undelivered letters," Golpinar said from behind his messy desk.



ANKARA: Cemal Aygun works in his bakery in the Keçioren district, northern suburbs of Ankara in this file photo. — AFP

"Imagine how many there are in all. People can no longer pay their debts." Turkish media say the total number of debt recovery cases rose by about 1.5 million in a year and exceeded 24 million at the height of the crisis in August. The main banking regulator says the value of unpaid individual loans in the nation of 85 million people rose from 17 billion to 29 billion liras (\$1.6 billion) between March and September.

### Friendly grocers

Turkey's most recent economic problems started when President Recep Tayyip Erdogan—a lifelong foe of high interest rates—pushed the central bank to start

fighting persistent inflation by lowering borrowing costs in September 2021. The policy contradicted conventional economics and turned Turkey into a no-go zone for foreign investors.

A resulting currency crisis wiped out savings and forced Erdogan to launch an expensive social support system that tried to preserve living standards—and his own ratings before elections due by June.

His government has tripled the minimum wage in the past year and raised state salaries and pensions. But soaring rents—up 163 percent in the past year in Ankara—and household expenses have forced many to revive the ancient tradition of buying on credit at friendly neighborhood shops.

"Asking for a bank loan is risky, but the local grocer knows you," Golpinar said. "He will not refuse you." The system operates entirely on trust and involves no interest payments or signed papers. "More and more customers are asking to buy on credit," grocer Yuksel Kurt agreed. Kurt writes down all the money he is owed in a worn notebook that he keeps next to his cash register. The grocer said he ends up refusing some people "because I know they will never pay it back. If a debt hasn't been paid back after six months, we know we have to write it off."

### Debt dilemma

Economist Eric Yeldan said Turkey was experiencing fallout from a years-long policy that encouraged cheap lending to achieve rapid rates of economic growth. Turkey's growth continued throughout the coronavirus pandemic and reached 11 percent of gross domestic product in 2021 — the highest rate among the Group of 20 major economies. Erdogan cites these figures while promoting a "new economic model" built on domestic production and exports.

"Turkey has voluntarily increased its foreign and domestic debt," Yeldan said.

The main opposition CHP party's anti-poverty campaigner Hacer Foggo said this policy allowed people without fixed incomes to obtain cheap loans. These same people "are facing the dilemma of choosing between paying their rent, taking their child to the doctor or repaying their loans," she said.

City governments run by the opposition—including Ankara and Istanbul—have set up websites that take donations to help the needy pay their utility bills.

Erdogan's government is also announcing a steady stream of populist measures entering the election campaign. One of the latest involves pushing creditors to cancel debts of less than 2,000 liras (\$105).

These announcements have helped prop up Erdogan's sagging numbers as he tries to extend his rule into a third decade in what promises to be a tight vote. But Golpinar said he is yet to hear of anyone who has filled out all the paperwork needed to get a debt writeoff. "I don't know of a single person who has benefited from it," the district mayor said. — AFP

## Manufacturing activity in China drops

BEIJING: China's manufacturing activity contracted sharply in December for the third month in a row, according to official figures released Saturday, despite Beijing's loosening of COVID restrictions at the beginning of the month. The Purchasing Managers' Index (PMI) — a key gauge of manufacturing in the world's second-biggest economy—came in at 47 points, down from November's 48 and well below the 50-point mark separating growth from contraction, according to data from the National Bureau of Statistics. For more than

two years, China had insisted on a zero-COVID strategy of stamping out outbreaks with strict quarantines, lockdowns and mass testing—a hardline policy that reverberated across the global economy.

On December 7, Beijing abruptly loosened pandemic restrictions, but despite that, the country is still struggling to recover due to a surge in COVID cases. "In December, due to the impact of the epidemic and other factors... China's economic prosperity has generally declined," NBS senior statistician Zhao Qinghe said in a statement.

"The epidemic has had a significant impact on business production and demand, staff presence, logistics and distribution." The index has not been in positive territory since September, and December's figure was lower than the 47.8 reading predicted by Bloomberg analysts.

Zhao, however, struck a note of optimism in his



Gautam Adani

## Indian tycoon Adani finalizes NDTV takeover

NEW DELHI: Indian tycoon Gautam Adani on Friday secured a majority stake in leading news broadcaster NDTV, finalizing a hostile takeover that has sparked press freedom fears in the world's biggest democracy. Adani, 60, is the world's third-richest person, with an estimated net worth of \$130 billion and interests ranging from Australian coal mines to India's busiest ports.

He is also seen as a close acolyte of Hindu nationalist Prime Minister Narendra Modi, often publicly supporting his policies. His business empire first began buying up NDTV shares in August, a move its founders Prannoy and Radhika Roy said had come without their involvement or consent.

But after months of negotiations, the Roy family agreed to sell most of their remaining equity, and the Adani Group said in a Friday stock market disclosure that its subsidiary RRPR had bought a 27.26 percent stake in the company. The latest purchase gives Adani's conglomerate a 64.71 percent stake in NDTV, renowned for inviting government criticism and its hard-hitting reporting in a TV news landscape dominated by pro-Modi coverage. Adani has pledged to guarantee the channel's editorial independence but also told the Financial Times last month that journalists should acknowledge when the government was performing well.

"Independence means if government has done something wrong, you say it's wrong," Adani told the British broadsheet. "But at the same time, you should have courage when the government is doing the right thing every day. You have to also say that."

Under Modi, India has slipped 10 places in the Reporters Without Borders global press freedom ranking and is now 150 out of 180 surveyed countries. Critical reporters often find themselves behind bars and hounded on social media by supporters of Modi's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). — AFP

statement. "As the epidemic situation gradually improves, the market trend is expected to pick up later," he wrote. China's zero-COVID strategy was based on widespread testing, strict monitoring of movement, and quarantine for those testing positive. Those measures, which led to unannounced plant closures, disrupted supply chains and forced some companies to close permanently.

For its part, the non-manufacturing PMI—which includes the services and construction sectors—also contracted further this month, to 41.6 points from 46.7 in November.

The government has set a growth target of about 5.5 percent this year, after reaching its goal of over 8 percent in 2021. But many economists now consider the 2022 target unrealistic. China will unveil its gross domestic product (GDP) performance for the year in January. — AFP



## FTX's Japanese users can start withdrawing funds from February

TOKYO: Japanese FTX users will be able to start moving their funds out of the collapsed cryptocurrency exchange starting in February, according to a statement from the company's Japan subsidiary.

FTX Japan said Thursday it was developing a system to resume withdrawals through the website of Liquid Japan, a crypto exchange it acquired earlier this year. Customers will be able to view their balance on Liquid Japan, and then take out their funds. "We deeply apologize for causing great concern and inconvenience to our customers due to the long-term suspension of the service," the company said in a Japanese language blogpost on its website, which was translated via Google.

FTX Japan laid out a timeline for the restoration of customer funds, starting with opening of a Liquid Japan account in mid-January, and then transferring assets from FTX Japan to Liquid Japan and reopening withdrawals by mid-February. It comes after FTX Japan said on Dec. 1 that it had confirmed with lawyers for the FTX Group that "Japanese customer cash and crypto currency should not be part of FTX Japan's estate given how these assets are held and property interests under Japanese law."

The news offers some relief for FTX customers. Clients of FTX worldwide have been unable to get access to their money since the company entered bankruptcy last month and placed a block on withdrawals. — AFP

## Peru to invest \$1.6 billion to boost economy

LIMA: Peru's economy minister pledged on Thursday to launch an investment program of \$1.6 billion to ramp up growth hampered by constant political crises. Alex Contreras said his plan has 19 component parts and will generate 130,000 jobs and add an additional 1.2 percent to the nation's economic growth in the first half of 2023. Contreras said his goal is for Peru's economy to grow 3.9 percent next year.

"We are prioritizing the region's most affected by conflict... It is a package of measures to strengthen household economies," he said. Political upheaval has roiled Peru in the last three weeks. Then-president Pedro Castillo on December 7 sought to dissolve Congress and rule by decree, only to be ousted and thrown in jail. Castillo was replaced by his vice president, Dina Boluarte. But Boluarte has faced a wave of often violent demonstrations calling for Castillo to be returned to power. The unrest has caused 22 deaths and more than 600 injuries. — AFP



## Business

# Between new rivals and distracted boss, Tesla suffers on Wall Street

## The electric carmaker lost a staggering two-thirds of its market value in 2022

**NEW YORK:** Tesla lost a staggering two-thirds of its market value in 2022, a victim of fears about demand for electric vehicles, dismay at Elon Musk's tribulations as head of Twitter and the end of easy money on Wall Street. On paper, everything was going well for the iconic electric vehicle maker that overcame supply problems and made nearly \$9 billion in profit in the first three quarters of the year despite soaring costs.

But this is slower than the furious pace of growth that CEO Musk demands of his company with his stated ambition that Tesla unseat Apple as the world's most valued company.

Even if the share price is subject "to a lot of emotional elements... Tesla will be by my best guess the most valuable company in the world in less than five years," a defiant Musk told a forum on Twitter this month. Blaming problems on "macroeconomic conditions" and high interest rates, Musk said he "can't say enough good things" about Tesla, asking his listeners to ignore his misadventures at Twitter where the mercurial CEO has captured headlines since taking over in October.

But to some analysts, the problems at Tesla are more serious and unrelated to Twitter—mainly because the days where it was the sole player on the electric vehicle market are over. The New Year "is shaping up to be a 'reset' year for the EV market" with supply flooding the market, analyst Adam Jonas of Morgan Stanley said in a note.

"There are hurdles to overcome," added Jonasciting increasing competition and a worsening economy, with living costs sent soaring by inflation.

### Rare discounts

In 2023, the quiet hum of EV motors will be coming from vehicles other than Teslas as tradi-

tional automakers roll out models at an unprecedented pace. In Tesla's luxury car category, Mercedes-Benz, BMW, Audi, Polestar and Rivian have entered the fray and the change is coming fast for Tesla. While Musk's Texas-based company still captured 65 percent of market share in the first nine months of the year, S&P Global analysts predicted Tesla's market share will shrink to just 20 percent by 2025.

The situation in China is also not helping matters: according to press reports, production is currently suspended in Tesla's Shanghai factory due to COVID-related issues. To ramp up sales, Tesla has offered a rare \$7,500 discount to US customers on the new Model 3 or Model Y, along with 10,000 miles of free fast charging.

### Twitter 'storm'

Tesla, partly due to its superstar CEO, still has its diehard fans and Tesla is still seen as undisputed in terms of technology, cost management and scale in the fast-growing market. The investment firm Robert W. Baird believes that the group is the "best positioned in the automotive market" and still recommends buying Tesla stock despite the crash. Looming over everything is the shadow of Twitter, the influential social network bought in October by Musk—who fired more than half its staff, inviting controversy.

Tesla needs "a CEO to navigate this Category 5 storm" and not a boss "focused on Twitter," said Wedbush's Dan Ives in a note published Tuesday. The multi-billionaire sold several billion dollars of Tesla shares to finance his new venture, and has offloaded billions more since the \$44-billion buyout-in breach of pledges to stop selling the stock. He also provoked critics by inviting Donald Trump and hundreds of other banned users back to



**HAWTHORNE, US:** In this file photo taken on March 26, 2009, Tesla Motors Chairman and CEO, Elon Musk, introduces the new Tesla Model S all-electric sedan in Hawthorne, California. —AFP

Twitter and suspended certain journalists in an apparent fit of pique. It has become "untenable" to separate the future of Tesla from Musk's erratic management of Twitter, said Colin Rusch, of Oppenheimer.

The events at Twitter are "too much for a majority of consumers to continue supporting Musk and Tesla," said Rusch, predicting the billionaire's antics

would drive at least some buyers towards other EV options-untainted by controversy.

The stock debacle comes after Tesla shares jumped by more than 700 percent in 2020 and 50 percent in 2021. They have recovered nearly 12 percent in the last two days, but were still down 65 percent on Thursday evening compared to the beginning of the year. —AFP

## Tesla set for record delivery despite demand concerns

**NEW YORK:** Tesla is expected to announce record quarterly deliveries in early January but that may not be enough to satisfy investors as the electric-vehicle leader grapples with inflation, rising interest rates, cramped production in China and concerns about softening demand, according to a Bloomberg report.

In an effort to clear inventory, Tesla offered a rare \$7,500 discount to US customers who took delivery of a new Model 3 or Model Y at the end of the year, along with 16,000 kilometers of free Supercharging. The Inflation Reduction Act, or IRA, will restore up to \$7,500 in federal tax credits for certain EVs starting January 1.

Deliveries are one of the most closely watched metrics by investors eager to see if Tesla can maintain its rapid growth. Global fourth-quarter deliveries could reach 420,760 vehicles, according to 16 analysts surveyed by Bloomberg. That estimate, which doesn't include some of the more recent analyst projections, exceeds the record 343,830 cars delivered in the third quarter.

Tesla is the world's dominant seller of electric vehicles and is well positioned to take advantage of some of the IRA's tax credits for battery cell manufacturing and locally assembled EVs. But in order to meet its goal to grow deliveries by 50 per cent annually over several years - an objective Tesla warned it will fall just short of in 2022 - Tesla will likely make compromises when it comes to gross margins. Tesla has cut prices across its line-up in China and scheduled down time at its plant in Shanghai. However, investors are signaling skepticism. Tesla shares plunged 65 per cent this year, more than triple the 19 per cent decline in the S&P 500 Index.

In April, Musk said Tesla would produce more than 1.5 million vehicles in 2022. The company made 929,910 cars through the first three quarters, so it would need to crank out more than 570,000 vehicles to meet that goal. In the third quarter, production exceeded deliveries by more than 22,000 vehicles, a gap that could continue this quarter with cars still in transit as the year comes to an end.

Tesla's Model 3 sedans and Model Y sport utility vehicles account for the vast majority of sales. The company will sell cars until midnight on New Year's Eve and will report the global delivery and production totals within three days of the quarter's end. The Austin, Texas-based company has a long history of going all-out at the end of the quarter, with Tesla employees from across the company pitching in to help hand over cars to customers.

On the last earnings call, chief financial officer Zachary Kirkhorn said that one-third of the quarter's deliveries happened in the final two weeks of the third quarter. —Agencies

## Twitter alternatives get traction after Musk takeover

**SAN FRANCISCO:** Never before have there been so many possible alternatives to Twitter, even if none seem to be anywhere close to a real replacement for the platform.

Long before Elon Musk came along, Twitter users bemoaned the service yet remained addicted to it. A potent mix of news, opinion, comedy, cringe and unpredictable drama has kept it a fixture for a decade-plus. And it is easy to use, the hallmark of American-born social media companies. Whatever the benefits of a decentralized network like Mastodon, easy to use it is not.

"There is a usability hurdle," said David Carr, senior insights manager at SimilarWeb, who has been tracking Mastodon's trajectory. "You have to choose a server and really, people don't like to make decisions. It's more like, 'Just tell me what to do.'" Still, Mastodon and other new potential Twitter rivals have grown, particularly since Musk officially took control of Twitter at the end of October, data gathered by Insider shows. Daily usage of Mastodon, Hive Social, and Counter Social are all up dramatically over the last two months. Meanwhile, at least half a dozen other Twitter-like platforms have recently been launched in beta or are set to be early next year, including Post.

If ever there was a time for a text-based platform to threaten the hold Twitter has over its user base, it's now. Investors are looking to back new social media companies, as not only Twitter, but Instagram and Facebook, have lost some of their edge. These emerging services probably won't be acquired, with antitrust authorities limiting Big Tech M&A, so they have a chance to grow on their own.

Most importantly, people seem ready and willing to try something new. With refinement and good features, any of these platforms could feasibly be the next Twitter. Or they could fizzle out, and instead be the next Clubhouse. There are already signs of trouble for several of these new offerings: Downloads have plunged recently, suggesting interest may already be waning. See below for a complete look at some of the new platforms so far available for use and their performance since Musk took over Twitter.

### Mastodon

Mastodon's emphasis on decentralization only appeals to the most tech-savvy. Mastodon was founded in 2016 in

## Global equities stumble to end 'miserable' year

**NEW YORK:** Stock markets wrapped up their worst performances in years on Friday before heading into 2023 under recession fears following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, high inflation and rising interest rates. Both US and European indices closed their final sessions of the year in the red.

For the year, Frankfurt was down more than 12 percent and Paris lost 9.5 percent for their worst performances since 2018. London, however, was up 0.9 percent in 2022 as the energy sector was buoyed by soaring energy prices. Wall Street saw its worst annual drop since 2008, with the S&P 500 index down around 20 percent and the tech-heavy Nasdaq losing about 30 percent for the year.

Equities were slammed as the US Federal Reserve, European Central Bank and Bank of England aggressively lifted interest rates in a bid to tackle rampant consumer price rises. The move carries the risk of sparking recession as higher borrowing costs slow economic activity.

US tech companies were hit particularly hard as they are usually boosted by lower interest rates.

The MCSI World Equity Index has lost almost a fifth in its worst annual performance since 2008, when markets were ravaged by the global financial

crisis. Asia-Pacific markets finished their last sessions mostly in the green on Friday. But for the year, Hong Kong tumbled 15.5 percent and Shanghai dived 15.1 percent in the biggest annual slumps since 2011 and 2018, respectively.

COVID spiked once more in China in December, after Beijing relaxed its strict curbs in the face of rare public outcry. The surge has also prompted worries about the impact on stretched global supply chains. Tokyo plunged 9.4 percent in the first annual fall since 2018 but the Bank of Japan maintained its ultra-easy monetary policy, in contrast with other central banks, to help its fragile economy.

### Hive Social

Hive was first launched in 2019 by Raluca Pop, now 24 years old. Unlike Mastodon, Hive is a centralized platform and its user interface is more straightforward and similar to the set-up process of Twitter or Instagram, in that all it takes to get an account and start posting is some basic information. The app is easiest to describe as a cross between Twitter and Instagram, with a focus on images and text and similar features like re-posting, comments and likes, with the addition of easy to add music and other themes.

Like Mastodon, the service has seen huge growth since Musk took over Twitter. Downloads of the iOS app have grown 290,000 percent to 1.5 million since Oct 24, with daily users up 660,000 percent to 321,000, according to Apptopia data. A major user security issue revealed at the end of November is at least partly to blame for Hive's 88 percent drop in downloads over the last month. Yet, it has maintained more than 500,000 daily users.

### Counter Social

Counter Social launched in 2020, started by the pseudonymous self-identified "hactivist" The Jester. The platform is not trying to be all things to all people - it blocks entire countries from access, like Russia, China and Iran. It has a more unique interface that defaults to a dashboard

crisis. Asia-Pacific markets finished their last sessions mostly in the green on Friday. But for the year, Hong Kong tumbled 15.5 percent and Shanghai dived 15.1 percent in the biggest annual slumps since 2011 and 2018, respectively.

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### 'Pitiful end to miserable year'

"It's shaping up to be a pitiful end to a miserable year in stock markets," OANDA trading platform analyst Craig Erlam told AFP. He said 2022 had "brought an end to an era" of low interest rates that fueled tech and crypto booms. "That's been replaced with soaring inflation and interest rates, immense economic uncertainty and the reshaping of energy markets in the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine," Erlam added.

In commodities, oil prices rallied in 2022 with Brent gaining about 10 percent and the West Texas Intermediate adding around seven percent. However, they remain significantly below peaks struck in March on supply woes after key producer Russia invaded its neighbor, sending natural gas prices also spiking. Britain and other major economies now face the likely prospect of grim recessions next year, as consumers and businesses battle rampant inflation and rising rates after years of ultra-low borrowing costs.



showing a few columns of posts similar in look to TweetDeck. It refreshes constantly, offering a more kinetic feel than other social platforms, and there is a \$4.99 per month upgrade available that unlocks a number of features, including live streams of network news, emergency radio traffic, and ephemeral file sharing and voice calls and various additional privacy features.

The platform has received less public and media attention than Mastodon or Hive, but that doesn't mean it hasn't also grown in the wake of Musk's Twitter takeover. It's reached 110,000 downloads of its iOS app, an increase of 4,500 percent since the end of October, with daily users up 2,500 percent to about 18,000, according to Apptopia. Monthly usage is still up by 44 percent, although, like Mastodon and Hive, downloads have dropped off in the last month, falling by 83 percent.

### Post.News (beta)

Post launched only in November, earlier than planned because as founder and former Waze CEO Noam Bardin wanted to capitalize on the moment created by Musk of people actively looking for alternatives to Twitter. It may have worked. Still in Beta, Post now has more than 300,000 active users and more than 600,000 people on a waitlist to join, according to Bardin. It has also received an undisclosed amount of funding from VC fund Andreessen Horowitz and Scott Galloway, the NYU professor and media personality.

### Bluesky (expected to launch in 2023)

Born in 2019 as a research project at Twitter still under Jack Dorsey, Bluesky is now being built wholly independent of the platform he founded. Dorsey has shared little detail about Bluesky, beyond it being designed as a decentralized social network protocol. In October, not long before Musk took control of Twitter, Bluesky began to allow signups for a waitlist, saying its beta will "launch soon." —Agencies



**FRANKFURT:** A broker is seen working while in the background a display shows the development of the German Stock Market Index DAX at the stock exchange in Frankfurt am Main, western Germany, on December 30, 2022. —AFP

"The most important take of the year is: the era of easy money ended, and ended for good," noted SwissQuote analyst Ipek Ozkardeskaya. "And given that there is still plenty of cheap central bank liquidity waiting to be pulled back, the situation may not get better before it gets worse," she said. "Recession, inflation, stagflation will likely dominate headlines next year." London was down 0.8 percent and Frankfurt shed 1.1 percent in half-day sessions ahead of the New Year holiday. Paris closed 1.5 percent lower. On Wall Street, the Dow ended 0.2 percent lower while the tech-heavy Nasdaq shed 0.1 percent. "It would appear that people have checked out for the year-and have settled back into holiday mode for New Year celebrations," Erlam said. —AFP



Lifestyle | Features



A child wearing a costume with bearskin looks on during the Bearskin Parade in Comanesti, Romania.



Onlookers watch as revelers wearing bearskin costumes march during the Bearskin Parade in Comanesti, Romania.



Revelers wearing bearskin costumes march during the bearskin parade in Comanesti city, Romania.



A reveler wearing a bearskin costume poses during the Bearskin Parade in Comanesti, Romania.

# BEARSKIN DANCE RECONNECTS ROMANIA YOUTH WITH TRADITION

Romanian teenager Cosmin sweats profusely under a gigantic bearskin costume as he prances to the exhilarating sound of drums, flutes and whistles to welcome the New Year. The parade Cosmin stars in has ancient roots and is increasingly a tourist attraction in Romania, especially for youngsters looking to reconnect with national traditions. Performing in a costume made of real bearskin and weighing 40 kilograms (88 pounds) is physically demanding, but Cosmin would not miss the dance for the world.

"The skin I'm wearing belonged to my grandfather," the 17-year-old student says with pride, swaying the animal's head from side to side. The northeastern town of Comanesti puts on the colorful and noisy display between Christmas

and New Year's Day to chase away evil spirits. The centuries-old tradition is held across the country but is most fervently celebrated in the region that includes Comanesti, which has emerged as the hub for troupes of bearskin-clad dancers.

Preparations begin in autumn and the local council selects the hundreds of mostly young performers, with their ages starting from as young as eight and rarely exceeding 30. The most expressive acts win prizes, while the imposing bearskin costumes come with the animal's most fearsome features, including the paws, claws and mouth.

Small traditional "mici" sausages and kebabs are on the menu for spectators and dancers, and boards list the names of the participants' home villages.

Romania is home to more than half of Europe's brown bear population, an animal believed to embody strength and bravery but now protected as threatened by deforestation. The dance, which has pre-Christian roots, has become a magnet for tourists and an important source of income in recent years.

### 'Search for an identity'

Anthropologist Valer Simion Cosma believes the festival has undergone a "renaissance" since 2007 and Romania's entry into the European Union. As many citizens choose to leave the country of 19 million people for brighter prospects abroad, the younger generation has grasped the event's value as part of a "search for an identity", he said. Cosma noted that the almost six million

Romanians living abroad want to preserve local customs with family when they come back home.

That breaks with the recent trend whereby Romania's "cultural interest was directed towards the outside" and folklore was "seen as outdated and confined to the older generations", the researcher added. The renewed enthusiasm for the bear dance, encouraged by television coverage, has given a new lease of life to the industry producing the costumes and attracted tourists in their thousands. "The value of folklore no longer lies in the meaning it was once given, but in its role as a spectacle and its economic impact," Cosma said.—AFP

## McCartney daughter gives intimate tour of Abbey Road

The daughter of pop megastar Paul McCartney has given an intimate peek into the hallowed halls of Abbey Road, the studio where he and many other music stars recorded masterpieces. Mary McCartney directed the new documentary, "If These Walls Could Sing", which gets a worldwide release on Disney+ on January 6 after premiering in North America in December. The London studio gave its name to arguably The Beatles' most beloved record, 1969's "Abbey Road", and it was on the nearby zebra crossing that the Fab Four shot their legendary cover photo.

"I have a personal connection with the studio," Mary McCartney told AFP. "I grew up coming here, we lived nearby. I have a very funny picture that I love-my mum (Linda McCartney) leading a pony across the zebra crossing." Inevitably, The Beatles occupy a major part of the 90-minute documentary, since they recorded no less than 190 of their 210 songs there. But Abbey Road has a long history, established in 1931 by record company EMI.

Initially dedicated to classical music, it had cutting edge technology for the time, and was used by composer and conductor Edward Elgar shortly before his death in 1934. "So many people come to Abbey Road to the zebra crossing but don't come inside because it's a busy working studio, so I wanted to bring the viewer inside," said McCartney.



The studio became "the bunker" for The Beatles after the hysteria surrounding the group led them to quit touring in 1966, recalls Giles Martin, son of their producer George Martin, in the film. Many stars have since sought to tap into the magic of the place, from Elton John and Pink Floyd to Led Zeppelin and Oasis—all of whom feature in the new film. "Each person tells a different story, different aspects of what makes Abbey Road a whole," said Mary McCartney. Beatles fans have been spoiled recently, with the new documentary coming little over a year after "Get Back" in which director Peter Jackson painstakingly reworked footage of the band writing and rehearsing the album "Let it Be", including their famous performance on the roof of Abbey Road. — AFP

## Ukraine clings to holiday vibe despite New Year strikes

Viktoria Lukovenko was making a salad for a New Year's Eve party on Saturday when explosions overhead sent her running for cover in a Kyiv metro station. Two hours later, as the air raid warning lifted, she was back in her kitchen peeling boiled eggs and trying on outfits, determined not to let the latest Russian strikes derail her holiday plans. "We will ring in the new year with our circle of friends," the 18-year-old university student told AFP. "I think it's really cool that even in these conditions we can have this luxury for ourselves."

Saturday's volley of strikes killed at least one man in Kyiv and injured 20 other people, officials said, with attacks also reported in the southern Mykolaiv region and the western Khmelnytskyi region. Yet across the capital, residents weary from 10 months of war said they had no intention of changing their party plans—many involving all-night gatherings because of a curfew which lasts from 11 pm to 5 am.

Filmmaker Yaroslav Mutenko, 23, was in the shower when a loud explosion tore open one corner of the four-star Hotel



Viktoria Lukovenko answers AFP journalists' questions before her New Year's Eve party in Kyiv.

Alfavitto just down the street from his apartment. As he watched rescue workers cordon off the rubble-strewn street in front of the hotel, he told AFP that he, too, would go to a friend's house for a party in the evening. "Our enemies, the Russians, can destroy our calm but they cannot destroy our spirit," he said. "Why do I go celebrate with friends? Because this year I understand that it is important to have people near."

### 'Important to be here'

As Russian President Vladimir Putin asserted in his annual New Year's address that Russia had "moral, historical rightness" on its side, Ukrainian officials denounced the latest attacks. "War criminal Putin celebrates New Year by killing people," Ukraine's Foreign Minister



Viktoria Lukovenko cooks for her New Year's Eve party in Kyiv.

Dmytro Kuleba said on Twitter. Kyrylo Tymoshenko, deputy head of the presidency, said Moscow's idea of a New Year's Eve celebration appeared to involve "footage of destroyed residential buildings in Ukraine".

Waiting for the air raid warning to lift, Kyiv residents huddled in underground metro stations, some women already donning the brightly embroidered traditional skirts they would wear to parties later in the evening. Khrystyna, a 30-year-old financial analyst who gave only her first name, told AFP she was visiting Kyiv from her current base in Norway and said she had no regrets about coming home for the holidays. "It's still important to be here, and I think it also helps to experience it as it is," she said. Last year her friends hosted a "Viking" themed New Year's Eve party, but

this year they planned a more subdued gathering with fewer people, she said. "I'm really looking forward to when the air raid finishes so that I can go and meet them," she said.

### Dreaming of 'victory'

The strikes on Saturday immediately raised concerns about more power cuts, which have plunged millions into darkness in recent weeks as Russia has ramped up what it describes as attacks on energy infrastructure.

Shopping for fresh fruit and sushi at a market in central Kyiv, 45-year-old Yevgeny Starovoytov said he had already been planning for a quiet evening at home and that his family had gotten used to the blackouts. "It is even good. When there is no light, there is no internet connection, then there is a chance to play and talk," he said, noting that in normal times it can be hard to tear his seven-year-old son away from mobile phones and digital devices.

Not everyone was in high spirits, however. At a nearby caviar stand, 40-year-old vendor Oleksiy Tykhonov bemoaned the lack of customers. "Apparently there is no festive mood, and there are not enough funds," he said, adding that in peacetime the market would be full with last-minute shoppers. The empty scene left him with just one wish for 2023: military victory. "There is no need for holidays—the new year, the old year, it does not matter," he said. "The main thing is that we win and as soon as possible." — AFP



Anita Pointer

## Grammy-winning singer Anita Pointer dies at 74

Grammy-winning singer Anita Pointer died on Saturday at the age of 74 following a battle with cancer, her publicist said. One of the founding members of R&B group The Pointer Sisters, she delighted fans across the world with hits including "I'm So Excited," "Jump," and "Fire."

Along with sisters June and Ruth, the group from Oakland, California released their first album in 1973 before going on to win three Grammy Awards. "Sad to report my client Grammy Winner Anita Pointer of the Pointer Sisters has passed away after a heroic battle with cancer," Roger Neal said on Instagram.

She died on New Year's Eve at her home in Los Angeles where she was surrounded by family, Neal told CNN. "While we are deeply saddened by the loss of Anita, we are comforted in knowing she is now with her daughter, Jada and her sisters June & Bonnie and at peace," Pointer's family said in a statement. "Heaven is a more loving beautiful place with Anita there." — AFP



A woman and her daughters sell souvenirs to donate money to Ukrainian army ahead of the New Year's Eve celebrations in the center of the Ukrainian capital of Kyiv.



A man wearing a Santa Claus costume rides a motorbike as an air raid siren sounds ahead of the New Year's Eve celebrations in the center of the Ukrainian capital of Kyiv amid the Russian invasion of Ukraine.—AFP photos





# World steps into 2023 after turbulent year

New Year's Eve fireworks light the landmark Burj Khalifa tower at midnight in the Gulf emirate of Dubai on December 31, 2022. — AFP photos

The world's eight billion people Saturday ushered in 2023, bidding farewell to a turbulent 12 months marked by war in Europe, stinging price rises, Lionel Messi's World Cup glory and the deaths of Queen Elizabeth, Pele and former pope Benedict. Many were ready to set aside pinched budgets and a virus that is increasingly forgotten but not gone, and embrace a party atmosphere on New Year's Eve after a few pandemic-dampened years. In New York, confetti rained down on crowds after the famous ball drop in Times Square, a tradition that dates back to 1907, with visitors from across the world waiting for hours in the chilly rain to take part.

Thousands of people packed Rio de Janeiro's Copacabana Beach-up to two million were expected for music and fireworks, without the coronavirus safety measures of the past few years. The festivities came only hours before Brazil inaugurates new president Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva Sunday, following his razor-thin win in October polls.

After the widely criticized pandemic policies of outgoing President Jair Bolsonaro, Copacabana partygoer Ana



Fireworks explode next to the Arc de Triomphe at the Avenue des Champs-Elysees during New Year celebrations in Paris, early on January 1, 2023.



Fireworks light up the sky above the Boulevard World entertainment area in the Saudi capital Riyadh amid New Year's celebrations early on January 1, 2023.

Carolina Rodrigues-wearing the evening's traditional white-says she hopes 2023 brings a new government that "looks more at people's health." Across the Atlantic, Parisians-and a "normal" amount of tourists, comparable to 2018 or 2019, according to officials-took the opportunity to crowd together shoulder-to-shoulder for a fireworks show

along the Champs-Elysees.

Police said about a million people showed up for the celebration, where children in pushchairs and partiers with drinks were equally visible. "We're here for the ambiance, to have a good time and to be together," said 19-year-old stu-

dent Ilyes Hachelef. "And it's beautiful!"

Hours earlier, Sydney became one of the first major cities to ring in 2023, restaking its claim as the "New Year's Eve capital of the world" after two years of lockdowns and coronavirus-muted festivities with a fireworks display over the Sydney Harbor Bridge.



Fireworks explode over Berlin's landmark the Brandenburg Gate during a New Year's light and music show before midnight to welcome the year 2023, on December 31, 2022.



Fireworks light up over the Prambanan temple complex in Yogyakarta on January 1, 2023.



People gather on the Champs-Elysee as they wait for the New Year's Eve fireworks in Paris on December 31, 2022.



Fireworks explode around the London Eye during New Year's celebrations in central London just after midnight on January 1, 2023.



Fireworks explode above the Houses of Parliament and the London Eye during the New Year celebrations in central London just after midnight on January 1, 2023.



Lifestyle | Feature



This photograph taken on January 1, 2023 shows fireworks over the Selamat Datang (Welcome) Monument during New Year celebrations at the Hotel Indonesia roundabout in Jakarta.



Fireworks explode over the Acropolis in Athens early on January 1, 2023 during a New year celebrations.



People celebrate the new year with fireworks on a beach in Houhai, in Sanya in China's southern Hainan province on January 1, 2023.



This aerial photo taken on December 31, 2022, shows fireworks lighting up the sky over the Xiyou World theme park ahead of the new year in Huaian, in China's eastern Jiangsu province.

an 11:00 pm to 5:00 am curfew will be in place amid periodic blackouts and Russian missile barrages.

The latest Russian strikes on Ukraine Saturday claimed at least one more life and wounded several others, said Ukrainian officials, while an explosion was heard in Kyiv just after the New Year. "We do not know for sure what the new year 2023 will bring us," Zelensky said, promising that Ukrainians would fight on and offering a wish for "victory" in 2023. In Kyiv, filmmaker Yaroslav Mutenko, 23, was defiant after a shell hit the four-star Hotel Alfavito near his apartment, insisting the blast would not stop him from partying. "Our enemies, the Russians, can destroy our calm but they cannot destroy our spirit," he said.

carried messages including "Hugging again," an apparent reference to the end of COVID restrictions. However, China begins 2023 battling a surge in COVID infections.



People look at fireworks launching from the building of Old Mutual Tower to celebrate the new year in Nairobi on January 1, 2023.

**London fireworks**

There seemed to be a dulled appetite for grand celebrations in Vladimir Putin's Russia. Moscow canceled its traditional fireworks show, as Putin said in a New Year's address that "moral, historical rightness" is on Russia's side as the country faces international condemnation over the war. London was meanwhile welcoming crowds to its official New Year's Eve fireworks display for the first time since the pandemic.

One place that wasn't joining in the pyrotechnics was the English seaside town of Scarborough, which called off its display in order not to disturb "Thor" the walrus, who recently appeared in the harbor. Councillor Steve Siddons said the town was disappointed, "but the welfare of the walrus has to take precedence."

But New Year's Eve parties still went on as planned, even as hospitals in the world's most populous nation have been overwhelmed by an explosion of cases following the decision to lift strict "zero-COVID" rules. In Beijing revelers flocked to clubs, music venues and bars, while downtown Shanghai saw masked youngsters celebrating in the streets near the famed Bund waterfront, according to social media videos.

Meanwhile in Wuhan, where COVID-19 first emerged, large crowds set off festive balloons in a central square as the clock struck midnight. Chinese President Xi Jinping told the country in a televised New Year's Eve address that, despite the outbreak, "the light of hope is right in front of us". — AFP

**Shadow of COVID**

The Middle East region welcomed 2023 with a traditional fireworks show from the world's tallest building, the 830-meter (2,723-feet) Burj Khalifa in Dubai, United Arab Emirates. Laser lights added to the spectacle at the landmark, which

**'Year of Ukraine'**

For some, 2022 was a year of Wordle, the Great Resignation, a new Taylor Swift album, an Oscar slap and billionaire meltdowns. It also saw the deaths of Queen Elizabeth II, Brazilian football icon Pele, Mikhail Gorbachev, Jiang Zemin and Shinzo Abe. Former pope Benedict XVI also died on New Year's Eve. The

global population surpassed the historic milestone of eight billion people in November.

But 2022 is most likely to be remembered for armed conflict returning to Europe—a continent that was the crucible of two world wars. "It was our year. Year of Ukraine," President Volodymyr Zelensky said in his nightly address

Saturday, reflecting on his country's war effort throughout the year.

More than 300 days into Russia's botched invasion of Ukraine, about 7,000 civilians have been killed and 10,000 more injured, according to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. About 16 million Ukrainians have fled their homes. For those who remain,



Fireworks are seen early on New Year's day in front of the Alps mountains' Northern Range (Nordkette) near Innsbruck, Austria, early on January 1, 2023.



This photograph taken on January 1, 2023 shows a fireworks show over Wat Arun Buddhist temple on the Chao Phraya River during New Year celebrations in Bangkok.



New Year's Eve fireworks light up the sky over the Sydney Opera House (left) and Harbour Bridge during the fireworks display in Sydney on January 1, 2023.



People wear 2023 glasses while awaiting the ball drop on New Year's Eve, in Times Square, New York City, on December 31, 2022.



Fireworks explode in the sky over the Ortakoy Mosque by the July 15 Martyrs' Bridge during the New Year's celebrations, in Istanbul on January 1, 2020.



Fireworks explode over the Kremlin in Moscow during New Year celebrations, on January 1, 2020.



Confetti fills the air to mark the beginning of the new year, in Times Square, New York City, on January 1, 2023.



## Sports

# World number three Ruud, Kvitova cruise at United Cup

## Andreescu makes gritty comeback to beat Muguruza at Adelaide International

**BRISBANE:** World number three Casper Ruud cruised past Thiago Monteiro in straight sets but it was in vain as Norway crashed in their mixed teams United Cup tie against Brazil in Brisbane on Sunday. After the Brazilians won both opening singles rubbers Saturday, Ruud's 6-3, 6-2 victory brought his country back into contention.

But the comeback was short-lived with the South Americans taking the tie when Laura Pigossi outlasted Ulrikke Eikeri 6-3, 6-4 in almost two hours at Pat Rafter Arena. Brazil won the mixed doubles to give them a 4-1 win.

Ruud was far too consistent for the 71st ranked Monteiro, who made 27 unforced errors, wrapping up a dominant win in only 70 minutes to at least give him confidence heading into the new season. "It was a must-win match for Norway so I was maybe feeling the pressure a little bit," Ruud said. "But I was able to come out with a good start."

The Norwegian was a runner-up at last year's French and US Opens and said he was feeling confident ahead of the Australian Open later this month where he will bid to win a first Grand Slam title. He did not play at Melbourne Park last year after rolling his ankle the day before his first match and said he wanted to make amends. "I always feel very motivated coming down here playing in Australia. Last year was a bit unfortunate," he said. "Hopefully I'll have a good start to the season down here and this is a perfect way for me to start the year on tour."

In Sydney, two-time Wimbledon champion Petra Kvitova proved too strong for Germany's Laura Siegemund, romping home 6-4, 6-2. It ensured the Czech Republic won the tie with an unassailable 3-0 lead, having lost their opening clash with the United

States 4-1. "Playing Laura is always difficult. She's changing her game a lot, so I had to be ready for everything. I'm glad I got the point," said Kvitova, who beat American world number three Jessica Pegula earlier in the tournament.

"This group is very difficult but we are enjoying the event a lot and really happy that we (the Czech team) are all together here in Sydney." German Oscar Otte defeated Dalibor Srvcina 7-6 (7/1), 6-2 and Germany won the mixed doubles, but the Czechs won the tie 3-2. In Perth, Belgium and Bulgaria were locked at 2-2 heading into the mixed doubles. Elise Mertens beat Gergana Topalova 6-4, 3-6, 6-0 before Bulgaria levelled the tie when Dimitar Kuzmanov downed Zizou Bergs 6-2, 6-0.

Bianca Andreescu staged a dramatic comeback Sunday to topple Garbine Muguruza in a battle of former Grand Slam champions on day one of the Adelaide International. The Canadian, who won the 2019 US Open, was crushed in the first set and slipped 2-5 behind in the second before surging home 0-6, 7-6 (7/3), 6-1 to get her 2023 season off to a winning start. It maintained her perfect record against two-time Grand Slam winner and former world number one Muguruza, improving to 3-0. "In the second set I really had to change my game plan," said the 22-year-old, who has slipped to 46 in the world.

"I told myself to go for it, whatever happens happens. I put more returns in the court, more serves in the court. I'm so glad I pulled that out, I have no idea how." Spain's Muguruza, who won the French Open in 2016 and Wimbledon a year later, claimed the first set in commanding fashion, outnumbering Andreescu in winners eight to two, not facing a break point.

Andreescu started the second set more strongly,



SYDNEY: Czech Republic's Petra Kvitova hits a return against Germany's Laura Siegemund during their women's singles match of the United Cup tennis tournament in Sydney on January 1, 2023. —AFP

only for Muguruza to break for 4-2 then consolidate for 5-2 with serve. But she couldn't close out the victory and Andreescu took it to a tie-break where a sizzling backhand winner gave her pivotal 4-2 lead.

A demoralised Muguruza had no answers as the Canadian swept her aside in the third set to set up a

second-round clash against either fourth seed Veronika Kudermetova or Amanda Anisimova. In other singles action, Estonian veteran Kaia Kanepi also came from behind to outlast Belarusian Aliaksandra Sasnovich 4-6, 6-1, 6-4 and will next meet either Ekaterina Alexandrova or Marketa Vondrousova. —AFP

## India's Pant recovering, to miss Australia Tests

**NEW DELHI:** Indian cricketer Rishabh Pant is in "high spirits" and recovering from surgery after his horror car crash but will likely miss the upcoming Test series against Australia, media reports said Sunday. The star wicketkeeper-batsman suffered several injuries when his Mercedes SUV crashed into the median before dawn on Friday as he was travelling alone from New Delhi to his hometown Roorkee, a few hours north of the Indian capital.

His car immediately caught fire and the 25-year-old was rescued by a bus driver and conductor on the highway. Pant "is in high spirits and responding well to treatment... He underwent a plastic surgery on his left eyebrow where he suffered a cut in the accident," Shyam Sharma of the Delhi and District Cricket Association told The Times of India.

The cricketer also suffered a ligament injury in his right knee, hurt his wrist, ankle, and has abrasion injuries on his back, the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) said in a statement. Sharma said the BCCI was monitoring Pant's treatment and was in "constant touch" with his medical team.

"As far as the ligament injury in his right knee is concerned, he will take some time to recover. He will be provided the best possible treatment," he added. A BCCI staffer quoted by the Press Trust of India news agency said Pant faced a prolonged absence from competitive cricket and would likely miss the four-Test Australia series at home starting February 9.

A maverick batsman, Pant is the mainstay of the Test squad and has played a key role in some of India's most memorable wins in the last three years. But his white-ball form has been inconsistent lately and Pant was left out of the squad for the T20 and ODI tour by Sri Lanka starting next week.

The wicketkeeper's omission came days after his match-winning innings of 93 in the second Test against Bangladesh, helping India secure a 2-0 series whitewash. Fans and members of India's cricket fraternity have expressed shock at the news and wished Pant a speedy recovery.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi said Friday he was distressed by the accident and had prayed for Pant's good health. Bus driver Sushil Kumar and his conductor, who helped Pant out of his car, have been hailed as heroes for their response to the near-fatal crash. —AFP

## Farrell stars as Saracens hammer Exeter in Premiership

**LONDON:** Owen Farrell took centre stage as Saracens responded to their surprise defeat by London Irish with a 35-3 thrashing of bitter rivals Exeter in the English Premiership on Saturday. Despite driving rain and fierce winds at their north London base, Saracens inflicted Exeter's largest league defeat for over two years. England mainstay Farrell provided one of the highlights of the match when his no-look, reverse pass, sent in Alex Lewington for one of Saracens' five tries as they went 10 points clear at the top of the table.

## Doncic scores 51 as Dallas NBA win streak reaches six

**WASHINGTON:** Luka Doncic scored 51 points to lead the Dallas Mavericks to their sixth victory in a row while the Brooklyn Nets stretched their NBA win streak to 11 on Saturday. Doncic added nine assists, six rebounds, four steals and a blocked shot in a maestro performance for the Mavericks in a 126-125 victory at San Antonio.

"I'm exhausted," Doncic said. "Our defense wasn't great. At the end we got a couple stops. Overall we win the game and that's it." The 23-year-old Slovenian guard sank two free throws with 4.1 seconds remaining for the last Dallas points, then grabbed a rebound after the Spurs' Tre Jones missed a tying free throw attempt with 2.1 seconds remaining to seal the Mavs' triumph.

It was the third 50-point effort in five games for NBA scoring leader Doncic, who was at a loss to explain his high-point nights of the season. "I don't know,"

Doncic said. "Some games they are going to double (cover) me, some games they are going to let me run the pick and roll. I just accept the coverage and go from there."

Spurs coach Gregg Popovich joked that San Antonio's goal had been to keep Doncic to 50 points after he had 60 in a triple double on Tuesday in a Dallas victory. Christian Wood, who added 25 points and seven rebounds for Dallas, marveled at what he sees as a Most Valuable Player-style effort.

"It's incredible," Wood said. "In my seven years in the league, I've never seen anybody do what he's able to do. He's on an incredible run. He's playing like an MVP, clearly one of the best players in the league."

Brooklyn's Kyrie Irving scored 28 points and Kevin Durant added 23 to spark the Nets to a 123-106 victory at Charlotte, extending their win streak to 11. The Nets improved to 24-12 and moved into second place in the Eastern Conference, becoming only the second club this season to reach 24 wins.

LaMelo Ball had 23 points and 11 assists while Mason Plumlee added 22 points and 10 rebounds for Charlotte, which fell to 10-27.

## Pakistan, NZ seek Test turnaround

**KARACHI:** A draw last week having stopped a run of defeats for Pakistan and New Zealand, both sides will be seeking to go one better in the second and final Test in Karachi starting Monday. The tame draw halted Pakistan's four-Test losing streak at home including their first-ever 3-0 whitewash by England.

New Zealand also arrived in Pakistan on the back of a 3-0 drubbing by England. Pakistan skipper Babar Azam vowed his team will play "positive and aggressive cricket" after they finished 2022 without a Test win at home. "We need to take things session-by-session and day-by-day," he said. "We're working on it. It's not that we need to play different cricket."

New Zealand were in a good position to win the first Test on the final day with Pakistan on 77-2, needing 97 runs to avoid an innings defeat.

But Saud Shakeel, who scored 55 not out, and Mohammad Wasim with 43 averted the danger with a 71-run eighth wicket stand eating up time and overs to salvage a draw.

Pakistan declared on 311-8 but a target of 138 in

15 overs under fading light was tough for New Zealand, who finished on 59-1.

"We need to credit New Zealand with the way they played and dominated," said Azam, who finished the year as the highest scorer in Tests with 1,184 in nine matches.

The National Stadium pitch helped slow bowlers as 23 of the 28 wickets in the first Test went to the spinners. At the same venue but on a different pitch, New Zealand will also look for a win after going without in their last five Tests.

"It does look different from the first Test... It has a bit more moisture," said batting coach Luke Ronchi on Sunday. "The preparations are shorter than normal, obviously we had just a two-day turnaround."

"It's going to be a hard slog to get a result, you have to bat really well and need to take 20 wickets."

Pakistan will look to bring in pacer Naseem Shah or Hasan Ali, while New Zealand may consider Matt Henry in place of a spinner if they find the pitch suitable for pace.

### Teams (from):

**Pakistan:** Babar Azam (captain), Abdullah Shafique, Abrar Ahmed, Hasan Ali, Imam-ul-Haq, Kamran Ghulam, Mohammad Nawaz, Mohammad Rizwan, Mohammad Wasim, Naseem Shah, Nauman Ali, Sarfaraz Ahmed, Agha Salman, Saud Shakeel, Shan Masood, Zahid Mahmood  
**New Zealand:** Tim Southee (captain), Michael

### 'Unbelievable talent'

Saracens coach Joe Shaw was in no doubt of the 31-year-old Farrell's enduring qualities, saying: "If you know anything about rugby you realise what an unbelievable and special talent we have had for this generation."

"He has just turned 31, he has got (over) 100 caps for England, been on three (British and Irish) Lions tours, won everything domestically and captained his country. He is absolutely fantastic." Exeter believe they were unfairly deprived of three possible English top-flight titles as a result of losing a trio of finals to Saracens before the London club were effectively relegated after being hit with a huge 105-point penalty in the 2019/20 season for salary cap breaches.

Saracens, however, were not stripped of any silverware by English rugby chiefs. Exeter had no complaints on Saturday as an under-strength side weakened by injury and illness were left sixth in the table,



MEMPHIS: Zion Williamson #1 of the New Orleans Pelicans drives to the basket against the Memphis Grizzlies on December 31, 2022 at FedExForum in Memphis, Tennessee. —AFP

At the other end of the spectrum, the Minnesota Timberwolves suffered their sixth straight defeat, a humbling 116-104 home loss to league-worst Detroit (10-29). Bojan Bogdanovic scored 28 points to lead the Pistons while Anthony Edwards netted 30 in a losing cause.

Philadelphia's Joel Embiid achieved his fifth career triple double with 16 points, 13 rebounds and 10 assists in the 76ers' 115-96 triumph at Oklahoma City. Tobias Harris led the Sixers with 23 points while Shake Milton added 18 and De'Anthony Melton had 17 points for Philadelphia. —AFP



KARACHI: New Zealand's Kane Williamson bats during a practice session on the eve of the second Test cricket match against Pakistan at the National Stadium in Karachi on January 1, 2023. —AFP

Bracewell, Tom Blundell, Devon Conway, Matt Henry, Tom Latham, Daryl Mitchell, Henry Nicholls, Ajaz Patel, Glenn Phillips, Ish Sodhi, Blair Tackler, Neil Wagner, Kane Williamson, Will Young

**Umpires:** Alex Wharf (ENG) and Aleem Dar (PAK) **TV umpire:** Ahsan Raza (PAK) **Match referee:** David Boon (AUS). —AFP

with coach Ali Hephher saying: "You have to give Saracens credit for their performance."

Bath boss Johann van Graan lauded captain Ben Spencer's "absolutely brilliant" display in a come from behind 24-16 win at home to Newcastle. "Ben was really good," said van Graan. "It was his best performance of the season."

Saturday's other Premiership match saw two Argentina stars play key roles as Gloucester edged London Irish 8-6. Pumas lock Matias Alemanno scored the game's lone try but the Cherry and Whites were still 6-5 behind heading into the last minute when fly-half Santiago Carreras landed a 45-metre penalty.

"Santi (Carreras) is a world class player and he delivered under pressure," said Gloucester coach George Skivington. "He made a hash of the conversion attempt but by then kicking the match-winner he went from zero to hero." —AFP



Sports

# Barcelona drop points in heated Catalan derby

Both teams finished with 10 men as Jordi, Vinicius were sent off

**BARCELONA:** Barcelona stumbled in the Spanish title race with a 1-1 draw against rivals Espanyol in a bad-tempered Catalan derby on Saturday, levelling Real Madrid at the top of La Liga. The duelling Spanish giants have 38 points each from 15 games, nine ahead of third-place Real Sociedad, who beat Osasuna 2-0 later on Saturday.

Xavi's Barcelona threw away the two-point advantage they had earned before the World Cup break, with Josep Guardiola's Barcelona back after Marcos Alonso's opener. Both teams finished with 10 men as Jordi Alba and Vinicius Souza were sent off, with referee Mateu Lahoz allowing the game to spiral out of control at Camp Nou.

"The draw is our fault, we can talk about the referee and other things but they are our mistakes," said Xavi. "I think Mateu is a referee who controls games but today it got away from him in my opinion, he let the game get totally out of control."

"(But) I don't blame him for anything, the fault is ours. We lowered our intensity." The teams were at loggerheads before a ball was kicked because Barcelona started Robert Lewandowski, who had been banned before a late court ruling allowed him to play.

The forward, due to miss three league matches, was only allowed to feature thanks to a controversial decision announced on Friday, suspending his punishment. It greatly angered Espanyol, whose president and directors boycotted the match, while Barca coach Xavi admitted his team had prepared all week expecting to be without the division's top goalscorer. The Spanish football federation said in a statement on Saturday they could not override the court's decision.

**Fiery derby**

Lewandowski was not at his best but Barcelona took the lead after just seven minutes with Alonso capitalising on shoddy set-piece defending from Espanyol to head home. The former Chelsea defender, deployed as a centre-back, should have doubled his tally but sent Alba's cross wide from point-blank range.

Espanyol's only chance of the first half came when Nico Melamed had a shot deflected wide of Marc-Andre ter Stegen's far post, with the hosts looking comfortable. "We wanted to leave with a win, to leave as leaders," said Sergi Roberto.

"We had a very good first half, we lacked the goal to kill the game. In the second half there were a lot of cards, sendings off and the game stopped a lot." Barcelona faded after the break with wingers Ansu Fati and Raphinha struggling to create danger.

The visitors, 16th, weren't particularly threatening either but won a penalty after Alonso tangled with Joselu in the area, and the forward dispatched it down the middle. Lahoz, racking up the bookings, sent off Alba for two in quick succession, before dismissing both Souza, for a foul, and Leandro Cabrera for a clash with Lewandowski seconds later.

However he cancelled the latter dismissal after watching the incident again with VAR, and Barcelona could not find a winner in the nine minutes added on. Xavi also received a booking from Lahoz for complaining from the sidelines late on, and the official left the stadium to jeers and whistles from the home fans.

"These games are very hard to referee, what's important is the result," said Joselu. "There were a lot of interruptions because there were a lot of fouls, but we had to make sure that we played our game." Real



**BARCELONA:** Barcelona's Spanish defender Alejandro Balde jumps over Espanyol's Spanish defender Aleix Vidal during the Spanish League football match between FC Barcelona and RCD Espanyol at the Camp Nou stadium in Barcelona. —AFP

Sociedad earned a solid victory over Osasuna to show they can compete for a Champions League place this season.

Veteran playmaker David Silva pulled the strings for

La Real and Brais Mendes opened the scoring in the first half. Alexander Sorloth doubled their lead after the break and Mikel Oyarzabal made his return from a knee injury he suffered in March as a substitute. —AFP

## Rashford hits United winner at Wolves after benching

**WOLVERHAMPTON:** Erik ten Hag insisted Marcus Rashford was back in favour after the Manchester United forward responded to his benching for missing a team meeting with the late strike that clinched a 1-0 win at Wolves on Saturday.

United manager Ten Hag sprang a pre-match surprise when he revealed Rashford had been dropped because of an "internal disciplinary" issue that broke "our rules". The 25-year-old had been in excellent form this season and also scored three goals for England at the World Cup, so United fans were startled to learn of his demotion.

But Rashford's exile only lasted until half-time when he was sent on by Ten Hag in a move that proved the catalyst for United to seal their fifth successive win in all competitions. Rashford looked determined to prove Ten Hag was wrong to drop him as he rampaged through the Wolves defence to score his 11th goal in all competitions this season and his third in three appearances since the World Cup.

In a post-match television interview, Rashford said he was disappointed to be left out after missing the meeting because he over-slept. But both Ten Hag and Rashford appear ready to bury the hatchet and move on.

"We draw a line under it and move on. I was a little bit late for a meeting. I overslept but it can happen," Rashford said. "Obviously it's team rules. I made a mistake. That can happen. I'm obviously disappointed not to play but I understand the decision and I'm happy we managed to win anyway. I think I'm in a good place."

Ten Hag added: "It's good after the decision. I think it happens often. Coming in he was bright, lively, he scored a goal and that is the right reaction," Ten Hag said. "Of course (that is the end of the matter). Everyone has to match the rules. This is the right answer."

United climbed into fourth place in the Premier League, two points above Tottenham who have a game in hand, as they bid to qualify for next season's Champions League. "I was not happy at half-time and I told them with this attitude they will not win this game and everyone had to give 10 percent more," Ten Hag said.

Julen Lopetegui's Wolves remain in the relegation zone after the Spaniard's first defeat in three games since replacing the sacked Bruno Lage. Having come in to replace Rashford, Alejandro Garnacho should have put United ahead in the 16th minute when he pounced on Nelson Semedo's woeful backpass.

Garnacho has earned rave reviews for his impres-



**WOLVERHAMPTON:** Manchester United's English striker Marcus Rashford scores a second goal, but it is disallowed for handball after a VAR (Video Assistant Referee) review during the English Premier League football match between Wolverhampton Wanderers and Manchester United at the Molineux stadium in Wolverhampton. —AFP

sive form this season, but the 18-year-old Argentine showed a lack of composure to shoot straight at Jose Sa.

**Immediate impact**

Rashford was introduced for Garnacho at the start of the second half and made an immediate impact, setting up Bruno Fernandes for a blocked shot that was grabbed by Sa before Antony could apply the finishing touch.

In a rare Wolves threat, Ruben Neves' 25-yard free-kick curled over the United wall and forced a fine save from David De Gea. But United finally made the breakthrough in the 76th minute. Taking possession wide on the left flank, Rashford played a one-two with Fernandes and showed his desire by holding off the Wolves defence before drilling a low shot past Sa from six yards.

Ten Hag's fist-pumping celebration suggested Rashford was no longer persona non grata. Rashford thought he had scored again moments later, but this time his close-range finish was disallowed for a clear handball.

An eventful afternoon for Rashford also featured a yellow card for kicking the ball away to waste time in the closing minutes. That was one indiscretion Ten Hag might be willing to overlook after his match-winning contribution.

In a dramatic denouement, Wolves striker Raul Jimenez almost stole Rashford's thunder with a powerful stoppage-time header, but De Gea parried to preserve the points. —AFP

## Arabian Gulf Cup... 53 years of football legacy in region

**KUWAIT:** The Arabian Gulf Cup is one of the most prominent sporting events in the region and has drawn a large audience and strong competition since its inception, remarkably developing at all technical, organizing and media levels. The tournament initially began in 1970 with the participation of only four teams, namely Kuwait, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, then the number increased to five teams in the second tournament and to six teams in the third tourney.

In 1976, the tournament witnessed an increase in the number of teams to seven, and with the evolution of the Gulf Cup, the number of participating teams in (Gulf 17) reached eight teams with the addition of Yemen. Kuwait was crowned as champion in the first four tournaments in a row, 1970, 1972, 1974 and 1976. In 1979, the Kuwaiti dominance over the tournament was broken with Iraq winning the cup it hosted. The UAE hosted the sixth cup in 1982 with participation of the seven countries.

Kuwait came back and retained the title. In 1984, Oman hosted the seventh version of the cup. The

Iraqis returned home as champions. Kuwait won the title in 1986, where the eighth cup was held in Bahrain. Saudi Arabia hosted the ninth tournament in 1988. Iraq won the cup for third time. In 1990, Kuwait hosted the competition and won the title. Iraq withdrew from the tourney. Qatar hosted the Cup in 1992, which saw the Iraqi team's absence and hosts Qatar winning the title for the very first time. In 1994, the UAE hosted the cup and the Saudi team won the title for the first time since the tournament kicked off.

The 13th tournament was held in Oman in 1996 and Kuwait came back to the podium and clinched its eighth title. In 1998, Kuwait also won the cup, which was held in Bahrain. In 2002, Saudi Arabia hosted the cup and won its second title. Kuwait's 2003 tournament saw Saudi Arabia continuing as champion. Qatar's 2004 tournament, which witnessed the participation of eight teams for first time, saw Qatar winning the title for second time.

In 2007, the UAE hosted the tournament and won the title for first time. Yemen, the new team to be included in the tournament, hosted the 2010 cup. Kuwait won the title for tenth time. Bahrain's 2013 tournament saw the UAE winning the title for second time. In 2014, Qatar snatched its third title in the tournament held in Saudi Arabia. In 2017, Kuwait hosted the 23rd Gulf Cup. Oman won the title for first time in its history. Bahrain won its first title in Qatar in 2019. The 25th Gulf Cup will be held in Iraq's southern province of Basra from January 6-19, 2023. —KUNA

## US soccer owes almost everything to 'King' Pele

**ROBBINSVILLE:** US footballer Bobby Smith does not hold back his tears when paying tribute to "King" Pele: the rise of the game in the United States owes almost everything to the Brazilian legend, says his former New York Cosmos teammate.

Still athletic at 71, Robert "Bobby" Smith spoke to AFP at his training center for budding players, the Bob Smith Soccer Academy, in his native New Jersey. At the edge of the indoor synthetic fields where children train, Smith, who was a top defender in his younger days, gazes fondly at a giant poster of him and Pele, who died Thursday of cancer at the age of 82.

Smith, a professional player in Philadelphia in the 1970s, signed in 1976 with the New York Cosmos for \$100,000. Pele, coming out of semi-retirement at 34, had signed a year earlier for at least 10 times that amount and would lead the Cosmos to the 1977 North American soccer championship, with 31 goals in 56 games. Smith is an ardent, lifelong fan of Pele. As a young boy, he said he "never thought for a second that we'd be on the same team." The thought brings a smile to his face even today.

**'Like little kids'**

Pele was key in attracting an array of other talent to

the Cosmos team: After American goalie Bob Rigby, recruited at the same time as Smith, came Italian Giorgio Chinaglia, German Franz Beckenbauer and Brazilian Carlos Alberto.

"It's almost like we were little kids every day when we were around him," Smith says. He is moved to tears as he stands before a photo of Pele's last match, in late 1977, when the star reached out to affectionately touch the younger man's cheek.

He was a surprisingly humble man, says Smith, "just so kind to everybody. He had no big ego." Pele, who was born Edson Arantes do Nascimento, "was a great teammate, and he cared about his teammates, all of us. He wasn't just a superstar."

And yet Pele was undisputedly one of the world's greatest sports superstars, the only player in history to win three World Cups (in 1958, 1962 and 1970). The global icon hung up his boots for good after a friendly match at New York's Giants Stadium in October 1977 between Cosmos and his old Brazilian club Santos.

But he was already "the biggest influence on soccer in this country" in its still faltering early days in the 1970s and '80s, Smith says.

**'Legitimacy'**

"Him coming here just brought so much, like, legitimacy to the sport. You know, people started wanting to watch it. And he brought all the stars to the game," Smith said, referring to foreign standouts like Johan Cruyff, Bobby Moore and George Best. "He played New York and it was 70,000 people" who came to watch. "We wouldn't have the national program we have without Pele coming here. Not even close. (We) would be years and years behind," Smith says. —AFP

# Classifieds

**Hospitals & Clinics**

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

**Clinics**

Kaizen center	25716707
Rawda	22517733
Adaliya	22517144
Khaldiya	24848075
Kaifan	24849807
Shamiya	24848913
Shuwaikh	24814507
Abdullah Salem	22549134
Nuzha	22526804

**Industrial Shuwaikh**

Qadsiya	24814764
Dasmah	22515088
Bneid Al-Gar	22532265
Shaab	22531908
Qibla	22518752
Ayoun Al-Qibla	22459381
Mirqab	22451082
Sharq	22456536
Salmiya	22465401
	25746401

**CHANGE OF NAME**

I, Hussain, Holder of Passport No. Z2690374, do hereby change my name to Hussain (as Given name) Captain (as Surname) for all purposes. I will henceforth be known in the name

Hussain Captain and I also undertake to carry out this name change in all my documents. (C# 2825) 30-12-2022

I, ALI ASGAR S/o JAKIR HUSSAIN, do hereby change my name to ALI ASGAR MAIMOON S/o

ZAKIR HUSSAIN MAIMOON for all purposes. (Address: 13 Sector-A, Slice-3, Scheme No. 78, Aranay Nagar, Indore (M.P.). I will henceforth be known in the name ALI ASGAR MAIMOON and I also undertake to carry out this name change in all my documents. (C# 0876) 29-12-2022

Automated enquiry about the CivilID card is 1889988



## Saudis flock to buy Ronaldo shirts after Al Nassr deal

Ronaldo expected to appear before fans next Thursday



MADRID: A handout picture released by Saudi Arabia's Al Nassr football club on their Twitter account shows Portugal's forward Cristiano Ronaldo being presented with the club's number seven jersey by club president Musalli Al-Muammar in Madrid, (right) a young fan holds t-shirt bearing the name Ronaldo and number 7, at the Saudi Al Nassr FC shop in the Saudi capital Riyadh. — AFP photos



**RIYADH:** Only hours after Cristiano Ronaldo penned a two-year contract with Saudi Arabia's Al Nassr, crowds flocked to a football kit store in Riyadh to buy the five-time Ballon d'Or winner's new club jersey. Abdulmohsen al-Ayyban, 41, and his nine-year old son, Nayef, were among those queuing at Al Nassr club's official kit store on Saturday where clerks were busy pressing Ronaldo's name onto t-shirts.

"We are witnessing a historic moment," al-Ayyban told AFP of the deal which he believes "will elevate the Saudi football league". Ronaldo on Friday signed for Al Nassr until June 2025 in a deal believed to be worth more than 200 million euros.

A wide smile stretched across Nayef's face as he proudly held his new jersey aloft. For the young Saudi, a dream has come true. "I have always wanted Al Nassr to acquire the best player in the world," he said. "I will make sure to watch all his games at the stadium."

Ronaldo, 37, is expected to appear before fans next Thursday, an official from the Al Nassr club told AFP. For Saudi Arabia, Ronaldo is the latest high-priced sporting jewel acquired to add lustre to their international image.

At home, the deal further fuelled national fervour that spiked after the kingdom defeated eventual winners Argentina in the early stages of the 2022 World Cup, a vic-

tory hailed as one of greatest shocks in the tournament's history.

An unprecedented rush at the Al Nassr kit store started as soon as reports of the deal were leaked to the local press on Friday night-hours before the official announcement. Abdulqader, the store manager said queues snaked all the way outside the shop and have only grown since.

T-shirt stocks have nearly emptied, pushing customers to bring in their own to have the player's name printed on them—a process which will take up to two days. "I have never seen anything like this in my life," Abdulqader told AFP.

### Social media explosion

Inside the store, a festive mood prevailed, as Lebanese, Egyptian and Chinese nationals bolstered the massive number of Saudis hoping to get their Ronaldo merch. "I have been a fan of Ronaldo since I was a child and now the Saudi club I support has bought him... my joy is doubled," said Saudi university student Mohammad al-Johni, decked out in the Al Nassr club's official shirt.

"I will be the first person attending his welcoming ceremony," the 23-year-old added. Rakan Mohammad, a 21-year old university student, echoed the excitement. "The deal confirms the value of the Al Nassr club," he said. "Enthusiasm and

expectations are high."

On social media networks, Al Nassr's channels saw a major boost. Millions of new users followed the club's Instagram page, bringing the total tally to nearly 4 million, up from around 800,000 prior to the announcement.

"The impact of the deal has already been felt, even before Ronaldo arrives in Saudi Arabia," Ahmed Al-Zabani, a 19-year-old Saudi university student told AFP. "The impact will continue to grow in the days to come". Many Saudis took to social media to praise the move. "The dream has become a reality," read an Instagram post by a shop printing Ronaldo t-shirts in the colours of the Al Nassr team. The comments quickly flooded in with customers requesting shirts in their size.

"A picture for the history books," wrote one Saudi user on Twitter, captioning an image of Ronaldo holding up his Al Nassr jersey. Ronaldo heads to the Gulf after a year that saw him relegated to the bench for Portugal and cut adrift by Manchester United.

United parted ways with the Portuguese star after the veteran forward gave an explosive TV interview in which he said he felt "betrayed" by the club and had no respect for coach Erik ten Hag. United terminated his contract while Ronaldo was with Portugal at the World Cup. — AFP

## Sainz wins Dakar stage, Sunderland crashes out

**YANBU:** Three-time winner Carlos Sainz took the overall lead in the car section of the Dakar Rally on Sunday after winning the first stage despite suffering a puncture early on. Sainz, 60, seeking to add this year's edition to his wins in 2010, 2018 and 2020 finished 23 seconds faster for his 42nd career stage win than fellow former world rally champion Sebastien Loeb of France.

Saturday's prologue winner and Sainz's Audi hybrid team-mate Mattias Ekstrom was third 47sec adrift. Sainz leads Loeb by 10sec with Ekstrom in third 33sec off the pace. "Everything went smoothly except for a puncture near the start of the special, which also meant I was extra cautious the rest of the stage," said Sainz.

"From then on we had no problems and the car worked like a charm. We'll see what approach we take tomorrow (Monday)." For 48-year-old Loeb—who is seeking to go one better than last year's runners-up spot—it was a largely satisfying day. "It was a nice special overall, but there were big rocks at the beginning, so we stayed vigilant to avoid punctures," said Loeb, who won a record nine world rally titles.

"I took it easy in this part, but then we upped the pace gradually. "We lost just under a minute due to navigation, but it was no big deal, so it was a good special for us. "Tomorrow we will be second on the road, which is probably not a great place to be if you want to attack, but..."

Defending champion Nasser al-Attiyah is an already daunting seven minutes behind Sainz but at least he is still in the race. There will be a new winner of the motorbike category as 2022 champion Sam Sunderland came to grief on the 52nd kilometre of the 368km ride down the west coast of Saudi Arabia.

The 33-year-old Englishman suffered a concussion and a broken shoulder when he came off his GasGas bike. The motorbike stage was a messy one overall with Sunderland's Australian team-mate Daniel Sanders being stripped of the victory.

He along with second-placed Pablo Quintanilla of Chile and Spaniard Joan Barreda were given time penalties for exceeding the speed limit of 160km per hour. Sanders and Quintilla were docked two minutes (for exceeding it by 20-40km per hour) and Barreda one (exceeding it by less than 20km per hour). Their punishments resulted in Honda's American rider Ricky Brabec being awarded the stage win.

This year's Dakar stretches 8,549 km over 15 days of racing, including a four-day excursion into the as yet unexplored desert dunes of the vast Rub' al-Khali, or Empty Quarter. Some 790 riders, drivers and co-drivers set off in an array of motorcycles, cars, quads, trucks and light vehicles when the race started on the shores of the Red Sea. It finishes in the eastern Saudi city of Dammam on January 15. — AFP

## Arsenal go seven points clear

**LONDON:** Arsenal head into 2023 with a formidable seven-point lead at the top of the Premier League after a 4-2 win at Brighton, while Manchester City's title defence suffered a major setback as Everton snatched a 1-1 draw against the champions on Saturday.

Mikel Arteta's side powered to a fifth successive league victory thanks to goals from Bukayo Saka, Martin Odegaard, Eddie Nketiah and Gabriel Martinelli on New Year's Eve at the Amex Stadium. The Gunners stormed into the lead after just two minutes when Martinelli's deflected effort reached England forward Saka, who took a deft touch before slotting past Brighton keeper Robert Sanchez.

Arsenal were in complete control and Danish midfielder Odegaard netted with a thumping 39th minute strike after a corner was cleared to the edge of the Brighton area. Nketiah scored Arsenal's third in the 47th minute, poking home after Sanchez failed to hold Martinelli's effort.

Kaoru Mitoma's 65th minute strike for Brighton would have shaken Arsenal's nerves in the past, but the current crop are made of sterner stuff. Six minutes later Martinelli bagged the fourth from Odegaard's sublime long pass, a strike that rendered irrelevant Evan Ferguson's first league goal for Brighton in the 77th minute.

"It's a big win against a really good side," Arteta said. "We know the other results, but we know our success will be



BRIGHTON: Brighton's English midfielder Tariq Lamptey (L) vies with Arsenal's Brazilian midfielder Gabriel Martinelli (R) during the English Premier League football match between Brighton and Hove Albion and Arsenal at the American Express Community Stadium in Brighton. — AFP

from what we do. "This is what we want to continue, to improve as a team and play better, to dominate all the areas like today."

Arsenal's ninth win in their last 10 league matches was even sweeter coming just hours after second placed City stumbled at the Etihad Stadium. Pep Guardiola's side blew the lead given to them by Erling Haaland as Demarai Gray scored an eye-catching equaliser for struggling Everton.

City have failed to win two of their last three league games and head into 2023 in danger of surrendering the title they have won four times in the last five seasons.

Haaland put City ahead in the 24th minute with his 27th goal in 20 competitive appearances since his close-season move from Borussia Dortmund.

Riyad Mahrez provided the assist with a dazzling run and pin-point pass to the Norway striker, who slotted past Jordan Pickford in ruthless fashion. But Everton equalised against the run of play in the 64th minute as Gray robbed City midfielder Rodri and curled a blistering strike into the top corner, in the process buying under-fire boss Frank Lampard some much-needed breathing space. — AFP

## Kuwait lose to Iraq in friendly game



BAGHDAD: Kuwait soccer team lose to Iraq in friendly game. — KUNA

**BAGHDAD:** The national football team of Kuwait lost to the Iraqi hosts 1-0 in a friendly match on Friday in the run-up to the 25th Arabian Gulf Cup. Ali Fayed scored the sole goal as early as in minute 9.

The game, held at Al-Minaa Olympic Stadium, in Basra Governorate, southeast Iraq, gathered large number of spectators, notably Iraqi

Minister of Youth and Sports Ahmad Mohammad Al-Mubaraq'a, President of Kuwait Football Association Abdullah Al-Shaheen and President of Iraq Football Association Adnan Dirjal. The Blue are scheduled to wrap up their training camp, go back home and return to Iraq on January 4 just two days ahead of the start of the Arabian Gulf Cup. — KUNA