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Iraq eyes comeback with Gulf Cup

Amir congratulates Iraqi leaders • Iraq FA apologizes to Kuwait over stampede



KUWAIT: Coptic Christians attend a church service on Orthodox Christmas Eve. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat (More pics on Page 3)

BASRA: Iraq on Friday welcomed football teams from across the region for the 25th Arabian Gulf Cup (Khaleeji Zain 25), ending nearly three decades of repeated bans on international matches in the country. The tournament in the southern city of Basra brings together eight teams. HH the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah sent Friday a cable of congratulations to Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Al-Sudani and Iraqi President Abdul Latif Rashid on the successful inauguration of the 25th Arabian Gulf Cup in Basra. HH the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Ahmad Nawaf Al-Sabah also sent congratulatory cables to the Iraqi leaders.

But the opening ceremony was marred after security personnel failed to control stampeding crowds, which forced Kuwait's delegation to withdraw from the ceremony for safety reasons. Kuwait's team will still participate in the tournament after receiving assurances from Iraqi officials to protect their safety, Kuwait Football Association confirmed.

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BASRA: Kuwaiti fans wave national flags in support of the Kuwaiti football team as they arrive for The Blues' first match on Jan 7, 2023. — KUNA

News in brief

Rainfall forecast for Monday

KUWAIT: Kuwait is expecting rainfall from Monday morning until Tuesday night, Kuwait Meteorological Department of the Directorate General of Civil Aviation said Saturday. Meteorologist Abdulaziz Al-Qarawi said cold and clouds will increase gradually with light and variable southeasterly wind, accompanying moderate to heavy rainclouds. Active winds will reach over 50 km per hour, he added. — KUNA

Citizens fight at Egypt mall

CAIRO: Kuwait Embassy in Cairo said it is following up, in cooperation with the Kuwaiti cultural attaché in Alexandria governorate, developments of probes by Egyptian authorities into a recent quarrel among Kuwaiti students at an Alexandria mall that led to some minor injuries. The embassy expressed regret over such acts by some Kuwaitis and urged abidance of laws and regulations of Egypt. — KUNA

Gas cooking linked to asthma

PARIS: Cooking with gas indoors has been linked to 12.7 percent of all childhood asthma cases in the US, a new study has found, comparing its effect on health to that of second-hand smoking. The research prompted calls for more Americans to use electric and induction stovetops, as well as criticism from the gas lobby. The study used the same method as 2018 research which attributed 12.3 percent of childhood asthma in Australia to gas stoves. — AFP

Taleban slam Prince Harry

KABUL: Senior Taleban official Anas Haqqani on Friday slammed Prince Harry after the royal disclosed he killed 25 people on military duty in Afghanistan and wrote it was like removing "chess pieces" from a board. "Mr Harry! The ones you killed were not chess pieces, they were humans," Haqqani tweeted, accusing the prince of committing "war crimes". "The truth is what you've said: Our innocent people were chess pieces to your soldiers, military and political leaders. Still, you were defeated in that 'game'." — AFP

Divided US Reps elect McCarthy House speaker

WASHINGTON: Republican favorite Kevin McCarthy was finally elected speaker of the US House of Representatives on Saturday, ending a paralyzing standoff with rightwing holdouts that raised concerns about his party's ability to exercise power in Congress. McCarthy's victory required an historic 15 rounds of voting and was only secured after a late-night session of high drama that saw Republican members almost come to blows as tempers flared.

It also required major concessions to the small group of Republican conservatives who had opposed his candidacy, and turned what should be a showcase of party unity into a days-long display of internal division. The speaker wields key influence in Washington by presiding over House business and is second in line to the presidency, after the vice president.

But McCarthy has been weakened out of the gate by the protracted election and the promises he was forced to make to hardliners, who demonstrated the leverage they hold given the Republicans' wafer-thin majority in the lower house of Congress. The chaos and confusion, watched with glee and contempt by Democrat rivals across the aisle, could signal years of legislative and decision-making paralysis on consequential issues for the country - and the wider world.

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WASHINGTON: Newly elected Speaker of the US House of Representatives Kevin McCarthy takes the oath of office after he was elected at the US Capitol on Jan 7, 2023. — AFP

Iran executes 2 men, replaces police chief

PARIS: Iran drew international condemnation on Saturday as it executed two men for killing a paramilitary force member in November during unprecedented protests sparked by Mahsa Amini's death in custody. The latest hangings double the number of executions to four over the nationwide unrest, which has escalated since mid-September into calls for an end to Iran's clerical regime. They also come in defiance of a campaign by international rights groups for the lives of the two men to be spared.

Judicial news agency Mizan Online reported that "Mohammad Mehdi Karami and Seyed Mohammad Hosseini, the main perpetrators of the crime that led to the martyrdom of Ruhollah Ajamian, were hanged this morning". Prosecutors said the 27-year-old militiaman was stripped naked and killed by a group of mourners who had been paying tribute to a slain protester, Hadis Najafi.

The UN human rights office decried the executions, which it said followed "unfair trials based on forced confessions". "We urge Iran to halt all executions," it said on Twitter. The European Union said it was "appalled" by the executions. "This is yet another sign of the Iranian authorities' violent repression of civilian demonstrations," the spokesperson

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An image grab shows Mohammad Karami and Seyed Hosseini, who were executed on Jan 7, 2023, attending a court hearing in Karaj on Dec 5. — AFP

Indian police arrest exec for urinating on plane passenger

NEW DELHI: A sacked executive of US banking giant Wells Fargo accused of urinating on a fellow passenger aboard an Air India flight has been arrested, a police spokesperson said Saturday. Shankar Mishra, the former vice president of the bank's Indian operations, was on the run from authorities after an elderly woman complained about the November incident to the airline's management.

Media reports said Mishra had switched his phone off but remained in touch with his friends over social

media and made a credit card transaction in India's IT capital Bangalore, which gave away his location. He was being brought to capital New Delhi where police are investigating the allegations, the reports said. A police spokesperson in Delhi confirmed Mishra's arrest to AFP without giving any other details.

Wells Fargo said Friday its employee had been sacked after the "deeply disturbing" allegations came to light. "Wells Fargo holds employees to the highest standards of professional and personal behavior and we find these allegations deeply disturbing," the company said in a statement. "This individual has been terminated from Wells Fargo," it added, without naming Mishra or specifying his position. The bank said they were "cooperating with law enforcement and ask that any additional inquiries be directed to them".

Mishra was reportedly drunk during the journey from New York to New Delhi on Nov 26 when he allegedly unzipped his pants and urinated on a 72-year-old woman seated in business class. In a statement released by his

lawyers and reported by local media before his arrest, Mishra said he had already settled the matter by compensating the woman at the time of the incident. "The WhatsApp messages between the accused and the lady clearly show that the accused had got the clothes and bags cleaned on November 28 and the same were delivered on November 30," the statement read, according to India Today.

The airline said it had failed to properly address the incident and was reviewing its policy on serving alcohol during flights. "Air India acknowledges that it could have handled these matters better, both in the air and on the ground and is committed to taking action," chief executive Campbell Wilson said in a Saturday statement. The airline, recently bought by the Tata Group conglomerate after decades under state control, has faced severe criticism for its handling of the woman's complaint. India's aviation regulator admonished its management for not reporting the incident at the time. — AFP



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High blood pressure biggest burden on healthcare system

Sufferers 75% more likely to be admitted to hospital in Kuwait

By Nebal Snan

KUWAIT: High blood pressure is estimated to have the biggest burden on the Kuwaiti healthcare system compared to other chronic noncommunicable diseases, recent research has found. Based on the study, which was published in Dec 2022, people with high blood pressure were 75 percent more likely to be admitted to a hospital in Kuwait compared to those who don't have the disease.

The study was conducted by Abdullah Al-Ibrahim, Assistant Professor of Industrial and Management Systems Engineering at Kuwait University, and aimed to determine the rates of hospitalizations linked to several noncommunicable diseases in the country. Hospital admissions are one of the costliest elements of the financial burden on healthcare systems, the paper argued, making them a good indicator of how much of an economic strain a given disease could impose.

Noncommunicable diseases kill 41 million people each year, equivalent to 74 percent of all deaths globally, according to the World Health Organization. These diseases include cancers, cardiovascular diseases, hypertension or high blood pressure, diabetes and chronic lung illnesses. Obesity and heart disease are also associated with higher rates of hospital admissions in Kuwait, the study suggests, with heart disease linked to a 500 percent increased risk. On the other hand, asthma and chronic lung conditions are estimated to have lower rates.

The research relied on self-reported data provided by respondents to the Kuwait WHS 2010, described by Ibrahim as the only nationally representative dataset capturing health utilization data and individual characteristics to date in Kuwait. It's also the only study including both Kuwaiti and non-Kuwaiti residents in the country while covering all six governorates, he wrote. The study acknowledges limitations in the data, including entries with missing information, but says it's "the best available method to answer a critical question in the wake of inadequate national-level administrative data".

Dr Abdullateef Qutabi, a physician who specializes in the treatment and diagnosis of diabetes, said the number of hospital admissions due to high blood pressure has likely increased since the Kuwait WHS data was collected in 2010. According to 2015 data from the Kuwaiti ministry of health, about 25 percent of the population in the country have hypertension, with one-third being under 45 years old. Qutabi expects the number to have climbed to 27 percent now.

He attributes the increase to the growing obesity rates and a widespread sedentary lifestyle. Hospital admissions, whatever their rate, are also a sign of poor disease management, said Qutabi. Since high blood pressure is a "silent disease", patients often get complacent when they start feeling better and stop taking their medication, leading to grave ramifications, such as heart attacks.

The high prevalence of hypertension in Kuwait



means the disease is likely the biggest culprit, putting pressure on the Kuwaiti healthcare system compared to other diseases, the study said. "The estimates obtained from this analysis have vast implications for health care planning in Kuwait and the region," wrote Ibrahim.

Kuwait's national strategy for the prevention and response to chronic noncommunicable diseases, which was first released in 2017, set a target to reduce the prevalence of high blood pressure in the country by 25 percent by 2025. The strategy also

promised a 30 percent reduction in the average population's salt or sodium intake.

For the country to reach this target, there needs to be far-reaching and effective public awareness campaigns, said Qutabi. Such efforts will allow for the early detection of the disease which lowers the risk of further complications and eliminates the need for hospitalization. The calculated hospitalization risks are also a "sound baseline", Ibrahim wrote, to design comprehensive healthcare payment reforms and improve primary care effectiveness.

Family supervision key in protecting Kuwait from drugs

KUWAIT: An unexplained money squandering spree might usually be a sign that something is wrong, and most of the time it points towards a case of drug addiction. If this habit remains unchecked, it might grow exponentially with no way to reverse the situation; therefore, to avoid this, families must provide supervision to help their relatives beat addiction.

Speaking on the issue to KUNA, Lt Gen Mohammad Al-Ardhi of the interior ministry's drug control department said families and society as a whole have a responsibility towards helping addicts beat their demons by offering help, assistance and supervision. He affirmed that the drug control department in Kuwait is willing to help addicts in any way it can, because it

knows addiction is an illness that can be cured.

It goes without saying that minors should be supervised, families should be protective of their young ones and fix the problem from the get-go, Ardhi said, calling on families to contact the 1884141 hotline for assistance and help. Kuwait had been carrying out a campaign against the spread of narcotics since December 11 with state entities, non-government organizations, law-abiding citizens and ex-addicts chipping in for this great cause.

If a family member, a friend, or an individual you might know is suffering from narcotics addiction, it would be wise to contact the competent authorities, which offer addicts total anonymity and discretion when it comes to treatment and ongoing recovery. — KUNA



Digital drugs: Beats with narcotic effects

KUWAIT: Hearing the words "digital drugs" may mislead people into thinking that it is a case of people being addicted online to gaming or pornography; however, this kind of intangible substance is more related to musical beats and forms that sway the mind, leading to a narcotic state of existence. According to the American data-service company TechTarget, digital drugs, more accurately called binaural beats, are "sounds that are thought to be capable of changing brainwave patterns and inducing an altered state of consciousness similar to that effected by taking drugs or achieving a deep state of meditation".

While speaking to several experts, KUNA found out that some certain kinds of beats affect the brain chemicals with some creating this psychedelic muse, similar to drugs, a matter that need to be addressed and studied further. Head of the psychological ward at the Jaber Al-Ahmad armed forces hospital Col Dr Nawaf Al-Qadiri indicated that digital drugs are the latest in the line of addictive material, though intangible, still negatively affect people.

Digital drugs are illusive in terms of tracking and devising laws to prevent their proliferation, Dr Qadiri said, adding that it is important to tackle this new phenomenon before it spreads further. On the specifics, Dr Qadiri has indicated that digital drugs use sound frequencies around 440 hertz for the right ear and 400 hz for the left, inducing this drug-like state in the brain. He went on to say that a dose of digital drug is around 15 to 30 minutes, but for a heavy "out of body" experience, one might continue on for 45 minutes and more.

In contrast, Dr Kamal Al-Farraj - a Kuwait University's (KUNA) professor of psychiatry and physiologist - said the issue is tricky because some-



Dr Nawaf Al-Qadiri

times such certain beats are used in healing session of patients suffering from psychological trauma. It would be very hard to differentiate between the two, argued Farraj, citing various studies that were inconclusive when it came to the effects of so-called digital drugs on the mind. Such material did not cause addiction and

it also had no withdrawal symptoms, he pointed out. The "jury is still out" on the matter, Dr Farraj asserted, noting that until solid evidence is available, the issue is still in the realm of metaphysics.

Elaborating on the legal angle, Attorney Suad Al-Shimali said that digital drugs mostly focused on the youth because they were easy targets. Some sound files cause symptoms similar to taking actual drugs, she added, stressing that it was important to devise laws to counter digital drugs, which began proliferating since 2010. Some estimated digital drug addicts at 200 million globally, she claimed. Shimali indicated that the problem was in not having actual laws addressing the issue, revealing that the Kuwaiti law of 74/1983 does not have any mention of digital drugs.

Bringing the issue back to psychology, Dr Kheder Al-Baroun of Kuwait University said that the issue of sound affecting people is an age-old matter that is still unraveling to this day. The danger was bringing any person to a state of mind similar to one abusing drugs, affirmed the professor, who called for ways to address this matter. While the tug-of-war conversations on digital drugs continues, it would be beneficial for anti-narcotic experts to look into the matter to devise plans to counter any ill effects and outcomes. — KUNA

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KUWAIT: The 'Watheefi' (My Job) employment exhibition. — KUNA

PADA empowers people with disabilities to work

KUWAIT: The Public Authority for Persons with Disabilities (PADA) is working to increase the empowerment of people with disabilities to work in public and private sectors, in order to integrate them into the society, a senior official said Saturday. PADA is keen to offer opportunities to this segment of the society to allow them to reach comprehensive empowerment in our country, through offering various training courses to develop their capabilities and performance for their future jobs, said PADA Acting Deputy Director General of Educational and Rehabilitation Services Al-Khansaa Al-Husaini.

She was speaking to KUNA on the sidelines of "Watheefi" (My Job) employment exhibition, which is concluding its activities. The professional courses offered by PADA are of vast variation, including information technology, health and safety, library

management, customer service and handicrafts, she said. There are around 90 trainees with disabilities, whom PADA, through its training courses and activities, is trying its best to assist them, she added.

Director of the Institute of Human Construction for Training Awatif Al-Salman told KUNA that 56 PADA trainees were accepted in field work, especially in new domains like baking, communication, industries and oil. A special pavilion was allocated for people with disabilities in the exhibition, representing their aspirations and reflecting their capabilities, showing their importance in the society, she said. The society is working to invent new job descriptions in cooperation with bodies in charge in order to activate the law that obliges the appointment of 4 percent of persons with disabilities in areas of work, she said.

Taking part in new job opportunities as well as empowering and finding jobs for them are the rights of people with disabilities, she affirmed. The "Watheefi" employment exhibition kicked off on Jan 5 in Arena Hall, located in 360 Mall, being the largest expo for employment opportunities in the country, working to employ youth and national competencies in the public and private sectors. — KUNA

Local



KUWAIT: Coptic Christians celebrate Orthodox Christmas with a Mass and reception. — Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat

Architecture students present concepts for Kuwait pavilion at Osaka Expo 2025

Winning design to be chosen after groups of students showcase their visions



KUWAIT: Students display concepts for Kuwait's pavilion at Osaka Expo 2025.

By Abdellatif Sharaa

KUWAIT: Kuwait University College of Architecture organized an exhibition for its third-year students, who were asked to prepare a design for Kuwait's pavilion for the Osaka Expo 2025 in Japan. The students were divided into groups, and each group had a design, from which the winner will be chosen.

The students were dedicated and very excited to present their work in the best way possible. "Through a wonderful experiential journey that promises to be interactive and enlightening, we will show that Kuwait is a place that is welcoming and open for everyone from different countries, cultures and races to live and work there and leave their fingerprints and be part of the social fabric. The different zones of the pavilion will each have its own set of interactivities to enjoy and explore," one of the groups wrote about their concept. "The project reflects Kuwait's vision towards the future, what we are looking for and what type of devel-

opment we are seeking, and the general thinking of the society and its relation with other societies around the world. As for Kuwait University, we wanted to give the students an opportunity to design the project, as the core pillar of it is to empower and allow them to work in one of the fields," Dr Emad Al-Qattan said.

He said students were divided into seven groups, and each had a certain idea and vision of how the pavilion will be presented in Japan, while reflecting Kuwait's vision and development plans. He said what is encouraging is that each design is different from the other and shows the students' ability to interpret their ideas in their designs.

Badriya Abdelsalam, a third-year student, said "although the study and work it entails is hard and demanding, the end product proves to us that it is worth it". She said the project was teamwork, "as Fatima Al-Arbash and Louwa Al-Failakawi and I worked together on the Kuwait pavilion for Osaka Expo 2025, and today we presented it to the judges".

Architecture Professor Mohammed Khesrouh said architecture in Kuwait is still in a cradle and anything like this remains experimental, as experimentation is the gateway for it to open and expand. "Students must be given freedom to experiment and test, and this is the duty of professors and teachers to give them this freedom, because this will make them explore and study more," he argued.

Fareed Abdelsalam, a parent, said architecture in Kuwait is still premature in general, not only as a subject at the university. Students do not know what exactly is this specialty and what is the future for them. He added the government and university, and even the private sector, are not helping a lot in this matter. He gave an example that the university demands higher GPA from high school than for engineering or medical specialties, yet once they graduate, they do not know where to go. He hoped the government and private sector pay attention to this issue and encourage the students once they graduate.

Kuwaiti named head of surgery department at Creighton Hospital

WASHINGTON: The renowned Creighton University hospital and the hospitals organization CHI in the US state of Nebraska have appointed Kuwaiti surgeon Waddah Al-Rifai as head of the surgery, Technical and academic research department, effective March. Dr Rifai, the first Kuwaiti and Gulf doctor to earn the post, said in a statement to KUNA, late on Friday, that he deeply admired support by HH the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, HH the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Ahmad Nawaf Al-Sabah.

He affirmed this continuing backing effectively helped him in his professional endeavors in the US. The Kuwaiti surgeon explained that his new responsibilities include supervision over wards for treating cancer, cardiac and internal diseases, accidents and injuries. — KUNA



Waddah Al-Rifai

IUA honors former Kuwaiti awqaf minister

KHARTOUM: The International University of Africa in Sudan honored former Minister of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs of Kuwait Dr Muhammad Nasser Al-Hamdhan. This came during the opening ceremony of the meeting of the board of trustees of Africa University in its 26th session. Member of the Sovereignty Council, Minister of Higher Education and University Director Dr Al-Hadi Idris honored Dr Hamdhan in appreciation of his great contributions in supporting the university and education in Africa.

The representative of the celebrated ex-minister, his son, Mishaal Muhammad Nasser Al-Hamdhan, thanked the Sudanese government and IUA on behalf of



KHARTOUM: International University of Africa officials honor former Kuwaiti Awqaf Minister Dr Muhammad Al-Hamdhan, represented by his son — KUNA

his father, whose health condition prevented him from attending the honoring ceremony. In a statement to KUNA, Mishaal Al-Hamdhan said the honoring is an appreciation for his father's role in supporting the educational process at the International University of

Africa, which has graduated thousands of students from the African and Asian continent. A number of Kuwaitis will participate in the meetings that will be held during the next two days to promote the university's mission to service education in Africa. — KUNA

PACE: ENCON3 platinum sponsor

KUWAIT: As part of its support to the development plans in Kuwait, the Pan Arab Consulting Engineers (PACE) announced its platinum sponsorship of the 3rd Consulting Services for the Development Plan Forum "ENCON3", which is being held under the patronage of Abdulaziz Al-Mujel, Minister of State for Municipal Affairs.

ENCON3 is organized by the Federation of Kuwait Engineering Offices and Consultant Houses (KFEOCH) from Jan 10 to 12. The event convenes under the slogan "Completing the plans of the Electronic Portal for Permitting and addressing the Challenges of Building and Housing Plans", where it discusses plans for digitizing the permits system

and automated integration between concerned institutions in the public and private sectors.

Commenting on sponsorship of ENCON3, Tarek Shuaib, CEO of PACE, said: "Our sponsorship of ENCON3 is a confirmation of our support and participation in Kuwait's development plans, which cover many sectors, especially the digital sector. PACE has always been a key partner in these plans, especially in Kuwait and the region in general."

Shuaib expressed PACE's pride in actively upgrading the sustainable operations of projects



Tarek Shuaib

and enhancing the technological infrastructure in the engineering consultancy and construction sectors in Kuwait. He pointed out that PACE is at the forefront of institutions that adopt modern technologies, as it is constantly keen to bring them to Kuwait to ensure that projects are delivered according to the highest international standards. The projects implemented by PACE are the best witness, most notably the new Palace of Justice project, one of the most prominent and largest judicial buildings completed in recent years.

ENCON3 aims to study ways to develop a national strategy that makes e-government programs decisive in achieving Kuwait's renaissance in various social and economic fields. The Forum also seeks to redefine the e-government program as a comprehensive government development initiative targeting vital areas such as education, health, business development, and implementing good governance.

In my view

Rise up!



By Atyab Al-Shatti

Local@kuwaittimes.com

Only when that big rock hits you, you'll wake up to question how you ended up with the way you're established. Your identity is chosen, your name is chosen, your religion is chosen, your network of communication, allies and enemies are determined and finalized right before you acknowledge your own preferences, ambitions, hopes and aims, and the way you structure your lifestyle and future.

The power of the said system comes due to enforcing it in early stages, as childhood is the most critical, constructing, mind-opening and creation chapter in one's life. If you were told "as a child" that a certain achievement can never be accomplished, you will always look at it this way no matter how old you become.

For example, if you were told that there is no way for you to become an astronaut, or discover an eighth continent, this will remain a serious belief for the rest of your life, and you would only look back at it as a fictional or a phenomenal thing, keeping in mind that only in 2022 the James Webb Telescope brought to our attention other existing galaxies that can relate to other lives thriving in this universe, which many scientists long denied before.

The reason I abstract this example is because the big change can only take place when one changes from within. The enlightenment should start from the inside, then the world would change to a better place. If a mindset is already bestowed with barriers, blocks, obstructions, negativity and hindrance, then this mind needs to wake up. That's because it's trained to numb and exploit you and have you following the same dead system. Such a mindset leaves an individual with no life, no achievements, no ambitions and no hopes - nothing but a production machine that comes and goes to work.

And one day you'll be too old and realize that you haven't lived your life at all. Only the dreams, goals, colors and love are what makes a human being. When I see people around me, I realize that many are paralyzed by the same system, accepting the hindrances that were fed to them when they were little. I see no value but an empty fraction of matrix so hollowed that people I see are not people at all. As they are refusing to give the chance for their honest inner self to wake up and change the world.

Surrendering to any inherited mindsets and ideas is like suicide - you're dead in your twenties but you're only buried in your 70s or 80s. Life is about being it, making the change and achieving your goals. There is no perfect moment coming for you to start - if you're still waiting, then you're mistaken.

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Photo of the Day



KUWAIT: A bird flies in front of the waxing gibbous moon above Kuwait City. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

MoI to proceed with reducing unskilled workers

KUWAIT: A decision has been made by HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Ahmad Al-Nawaf Al-Sabah to assign Interior Minister Sheikh Talal Al-Khaled Al-Sabah to apply the law regarding organizing the demographics of the state. "The appointment comes because the minister is responsible for iqama affairs along with the Public Authority of Manpower, which grants permits to residents. The minister has vowed to prioritize population demographic issues according to the government agenda and take practical steps in reducing the numbers of unskilled expats," sources told Kuwait Times.

"The interior minister has given instructions to security departments at the interior ministry on this issue, as he requested to increase inspection campaigns in areas that are predominantly expat-populated in order to detain iqama violators, as well as catch those who obtained permits against the regulations, as the law will be sent to the National Assembly, which will play an active role in the process," sources said.

"The interior minister has stressed to PAM that permits should not be open to anyone except those who are needed. Many permits will not be renewed this year if the labor market does not require their jobs," the sources said. "The minister has previously spoken to a number of MPs about the iqamas of expatriates and clarified that the government will work on imposing fees on businessmen who bring in workers. The fees will be studied in order to ensure they are legal and constitutional," the sources added.

Diving team: Involving institutions key for environmental campaigns

Team has been working for more than 35 years

KUWAIT: The Kuwait diving team of the Environmental Voluntary Foundation stressed importance of involving governmental and private institutions and young people in campaigns to clean the beaches to promote environmental concepts and ensure safety of the marine environment. Head of the team Walid Al-Fadhel told KUNA on Saturday that the team organizes cleaning campaigns at all of the country's beaches, and allows volunteers to participate in its campaigns, indicating that it provides the cleaning supplies.

Fadhel explained that this environmental initiative includes carrying out dozens of campaigns to clean Kuwait's coasts with voluntary community participation and remove plastic wastes and

discarded fishing nets in order to preserve the coastal environment and its biodiversity. He added that these campaigns are a unique opportunity, providing volunteer opportunities for Kuwaiti youth wishing to contribute to environmental campaigns, supported and sponsored by several government agencies, including Public Authority for Youth and Kuwait Foundation for the Advancement of Sciences (KFAS).

In a related context, Fadhel mentioned that the team issued its annual report for 2022, reviewing the most prominent works and volunteer activities it carried out within its environmental initiative (clean seas) in cooperation with several governmental and private agencies, based on joint cooperation with the UN Environment Program

through effective projects and programs.

Fadhel said the team has been working for more than 35 years since 1986, and has many achievements in various fields, indicating that the team was able to accomplish its diligent environmental activities and tasks at the rate of environmental activity every two days during the past year, as it accomplished 120 environmental tasks. He pointed to the team's participation in many international and local exhibitions, most notably the UN exhibition at Shedadiyah University, which highlighted youth initiatives that contribute to environmental and climate action and encourage society to adopt them, in addition to the Kuwait Book Fair in its 45th edition. — KUNA

MoE prepares list of teachers to be terminated

KUWAIT: Sources revealed that the education ministry has started preparing a list of names of teachers who are going to be terminated at the end of the current school year on the instruction of Education Minister Hamad Al-Adwani, who assured there will be exceptions where there are no Kuwaitis who can replace the positions, as some specializations will be mostly for citizens.

"The ministry asked education zones to submit the names of non-Kuwaiti teachers which the ministry does not need before the end of March in order to be notified of the decision, which specified July to be their last month in service," sources revealed. The ministry has the budget to pay the teachers who will be laid off.

"Most teachers whose service will end will be those who teach Islamic studies, Arabic, history, geography and philosophy, as well as teachers in other specializations who have had a low rating during the last year. Moreover, others include those who have reached 60 years of age and expatriate teachers who would like to return to their countries," sources added. The ministry expects it will end the service of no less than 400 employees this year.



Deliveroo surprises campers with Kuwait's first desert delivery

KUWAIT: With the return of everyone's favorite season of the year, and with camping "kashta" lovers heading to the desert, Deliveroo partnered with District Butchery, % Arabica and Eighty Six for a one-off surprise delivery using an exclusive 4x4 to campers in Sabiya.

Seham AlHusaini, the General Manager of Deliveroo, commented: "Winter is one of our favorite seasons of the year in Kuwait. Deliveroo is excited to meet our customers where we are needed, providing the best variety of food and beverages - whether it's delicious ready-made sandwiches, or fresh meats ready for the grill - so that our customers can make the most out of the winter season."

Customers enjoyed making a variety of burgers and sandwiches over the campfire, as well as drinking their favorite coffees with dessert.

Abdullah Alfadhlah from District Butchery added: "This was a wonderful experience for all the participants. Seeing the happiness and gratitude on the faces of our customers in collaboration with Deliveroo inspires us to launch similar surprises in the future."

It is worth noting that Deliveroo is constantly surprising customers with fun and unique activities, bringing them their favorite foods and snacks no matter where they are. In 2022, and in celebration of the Eid holiday, Deliveroo surprised moviegoers with goodie bags filled with a variety of treats at the Cinescape 360 mall. In celebration of international ice cream day, Deliveroo also surprised Assima malgoers with free ice cream.

Deliveroo has delivered hundreds of thousands of meals to hungry customers around the country since its launch in Kuwait four years ago. Since its launch, Deliveroo has set itself apart with its unbeatable customer service, putting thousands of hungry customers at ease from the second they launch the app to the minute they start enjoying a meal from one of its many local restaurant partners. With exclusive restaurant partners, special offers and meal deals, Deliveroo Kuwait is always here to deliver.



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US House Speaker Kevin McCarthy: Driven by ambition

Thousands march in Paris in memory of 2013 murder of Kurds

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WARSAW: Participants attend the Christmas supper for Ukrainian refugees staying in Warsaw on Orthodox Christmas Eve in Warsaw, Poland. — AFP

Refugees celebrate first Christmas since fleeing Ukraine

‘The main goal is to give warmth, a sense of home’

WARSAW: Filled with sadness and hopes of a victorious 2023, hundreds of Ukrainian refugees celebrated their first Christmas since fleeing the Russian invasion at a contemporary theatre in Warsaw. The celebrants at the Nowy Teatr, a former truck repair workshop, were among the 1.5 million Ukrainians who have settled in Poland since the war began—the highest number for any country. Almost all were women as most Ukrainian men of recruitment age are not allowed to leave.

They spoke of the pain of marking the family holiday separated from husbands and sons. “How can one feel?” said Svitlana Borysova, a hairdresser, before breaking down in tears. Helped by friends, Borysova left Ukraine in the first days of the war with her two children, aged three and six, but had to leave her 21-year-old son behind. Olena Sigitova, who came to the dinner with her 10-year-old daughter Daryna, said: “We feel sad but there are new friends, new opportunities.” “At least we are not alone,” she said, wearing a paper crown typical of Polish Christmas celebrations for the Three Kings feast day. The Christmas Eve meal

was organized by the Ukrainian House in Warsaw—a non-governmental group that has helped refugees settle in Poland.

“The main goal is to give warmth, a sense of home,” Myroslava Keryk, head of the organization, told AFP. The meal included popular Ukrainian dishes such as borscht beetroot soup as well as vareniki, a type of dumpling, and kutia—a wheat grain pudding. Many wore brightly embroidered Ukrainian shirts. About 500 people attended the dinner, which also featured typical Ukrainian carols and words of support for the soldiers defending their country. “The most important thing for everyone this year is victory. We dream about it to be able to calm down and think about the future,” Keryk said.

‘I was so afraid’

Several of the women said childcare duties meant they had difficulty finding steady work but that their children were settling in and beginning to learn Polish in kindergartens and schools. Sigitova, from Dnipro in eastern Ukraine, said she found it difficult to make time

for Polish classes and was grateful to the host family who has put her and her daughter up since the beginning of the war. “They said we can count on them as long as we need,” said Sigitova, whose husband is in the army. Borysova said that during the first three months in Poland she barely left the house. “I was so afraid, panicking,” she said. Since then, she has been working as a hairdresser in people’s homes, unable to find more settled work because of having to look after her children.

But Natalia Golomsha, who attended the dinner with her eight-year-old son Marko, said she had managed to find a full-time job in a company that helps Ukrainian children study in Poland. “I was helped a little by my friends, my contacts, but also by the desire and ability to adapt to the conditions,” she said. Kateryna Krahmalova, a university researcher from Kyiv, said she had also found work and had the advantage of already speaking Polish. “The main thing is that my loved ones are with me, so my home is where they are,” she said. — AFP

Germany to send Ukraine 40 armored vehicles by spring

BERLIN: Germany will supply Ukraine with about 40 Marder infantry fighting vehicles within weeks as part of a new phase of support coordinated with the US, a government spokesman said on Friday. US President Joe Biden and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz announced on Thursday that both their countries will send powerfully armed infantry fighting vehicles to help Ukraine repel Russia’s invasion. The United States will supply Bradleys—which usually come armed with 25 mm autocannon, a 7.62 mm machine-gun and anti-tank missiles—and Germany the Marders, they said. German government spokesman Steffen Hebestreit on Friday said around 40 Marders would be sent, or enough to equip a battalion.

“These 40 vehicles are to be ready in the first quarter so that they can then be handed over to Ukraine,” he said, adding that training for Ukrainian soldiers to use the vehicles would be provided in Germany. Ukraine has long pushed for heavier weaponry, including tanks, that would allow it to go on the offensive. Western nations have been reluctant, citing fears of becoming drawn into the war or provoking Russia. But the Ukrainians have built momentum and Western nations have been expanding the range of weapons being provided.

The US-German announcement came a day after France promised to deliver AMX-10 RC light tanks—a vehicle that is wheeled rather than tracked but which shares the much heavier cannon typical on a tank. Germany also said it will follow the United States in sending a state-of-the-art Patriot missile air defense system to Ukraine.

The Russian embassy in Berlin on Friday condemned the planned new deliveries as “a further step towards the escalation of the conflict in Ukraine”. “It is particularly cynical that this decision was taken shortly before the Orthodox Christmas... against the backdrop of the ceasefire declared unilaterally by the Russian President (Vladimir Putin),” it said. Putin’s order given to stop fighting for 36 hours has been slammed by Western allies and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, who said it “cannot and should not be taken seriously”. — AFP

Little let-up in fighting as Ukraine, Russia mark Orthodox Christmas

KYIV: Ukrainians and Russians on Saturday marked Orthodox Christmas under the shadow of war, as fighting persisted despite Kremlin leader Vladimir Putin unilaterally ordering his forces to pause attacks.

Despite Putin’s ceasefire order, war-scarred cities in eastern Ukraine saw no significant let-up in the fighting as AFP journalists in the town of Chasiv Yar south of the frontline city of Bakhmut heard heavy artillery fire throughout much of Saturday morning.

The Russian defense ministry insisted its forces were observing the ceasefire but also said that the army had repelled the Kyiv forces’ attacks in eastern Ukraine and killed dozens of soldiers on Friday. Ukrainian authorities said that three people were killed on Friday.

In Moscow, 70-year-old Putin cut a lonely figure as he stood by himself at a service at a Kremlin church, the Cathedral of the Annunciation, to mark Orthodox Christmas. In Kyiv, hundreds of worshippers on Saturday attended a historic service at the 11th century Kyiv Pechersk Lavra as Metropolitan Epifaniy, head of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, led a Christmas liturgy in the pro-Western country’s most significant Orthodox monastery. The service is expected to anger the Moscow Patriarchate. Located in the capital Kyiv, the monastery used to be the seat of a branch of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church that was previously under Moscow’s jurisdiction but which severed ties after Russia invaded Ukraine in February. Orthodox Christians observe Christmas on January 7.

‘Truly historic event’

Ukrainian worshippers hailed the mass. “We’ve waited for this shrine for a long time,” Veronika Martyniuk told AFP outside the church. “This is a truly historic event, which I think every Ukrainian has been waiting for. Especially after the beginning of Russia’s full-scale invasion,” said the 19-year-old head of a choir from the western city of Ivano-Frankivsk.

Yury Slugin, a 33-year-old serviceman, said it was “especially important” for him to see the Ukrainian language and the Ukrainian church return to the Lavra. “This is a huge step for Ukraine,” he added. “Unfortunately, I am not at home today, far from my family,” Slugin added, expressing hope that he will celebrate Christmas with his loved ones next year.

Security was tight. Worshippers had their passports



MOSCOW: Russian President Vladimir Putin attends an Orthodox Christmas mass in the Cathedral of the Annunciation at the Kremlin in Moscow, late Friday. — AFP

checked and had to walk through metal detectors. In the battered town of Chasiv Yar in eastern Ukraine, worshippers gathered in the basement shelter of an apartment building rather than in their church down the street, wary of possible shelling. The congregation numbered just nine, down from its pre-war total of 100, as many residents have fled to safer territory. “It’s unusual here. Today is my first time in the basement,” said Zinaida Artyukhina, 62, the church’s sole remaining choir member. “Thank God we gathered at all.”

In Russia and Ukraine, Orthodox Christianity is the dominant religion and used to be seen as one of the strongest bonds tying the two nations. Ukrainians have now largely turned their backs on the Russian Orthodox Church whose head Patriarch Kirill has backed the invasion. Even the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate has sought to distance itself from Russia. But the branch has still come under pressure from Ukrainian authorities. The security service last year raided the Lavra, which is a UNESCO World Heritage site, over suspected links to Russian agents. The Orthodox Church of Ukraine was established in 2018. The Moscow Patriarchate does not recognize the new church.

‘Fake ceasefire’

Presidential adviser Mykhailo Podolyak on Saturday

called Moscow’s ceasefire “fake” and accused Russian troops of firing along the entire contact line. The general staff of Ukraine’s armed forces said Russia launched one missile strike and fired 20 rounds from multiple rocket launchers over the past 24 hours.

In the eastern region of Donetsk, two people died and seven were wounded, while in the southern region of Kherson one person lost his life and another seven were injured Friday, said Kyrylo Tymoshenko, deputy head of Ukraine’s presidency.

“Peaceful settlements in the region were attacked with artillery, anti-aircraft guns, mortars and tanks,” said Yaroslav Yanushevych, the head of the Kherson regional administration. Ukraine has dismissed the ceasefire — due to last until the end of Saturday (2100 GMT) — as a tactic by Russia to gain time to regroup its forces.

Putin’s order to stop fighting came after Moscow suffered its worst loss of life yet, with Ukrainian strikes killing at least 89 troops in the eastern town of Makivka. In a message released by the Kremlin, Putin congratulated Orthodox Christians, saying the holiday inspired “good deeds and aspirations.”

He also praised the Orthodox Church and said it was “supporting our soldiers taking part in a special military operation,” using the Kremlin term for the offensive in Ukraine. Patriarch Kirill has said that dying in Ukraine “washes away all sins”. — AFP

Algeria car crash kills 8 people from same family

ALGERIES: Eight people from the same family, including five children, have been killed in a car crash in eastern Algeria, the civil defense said Saturday. The children, aged four to 13, their parents and an aunt died after their vehicle collided late Friday with a semi-trailer near the city of Batna, a statement said, without elaborating on the cause of the crash.

In 2021, Algeria recorded nearly 22,000 traffic accidents that killed 3,061 people and left 29,763 injured, according to the authorities. The toll for 2022 has yet to be announced. Speed is the main cause of crashes in the North African country, according to a government road safety agency. — AFP

International

Thousands march in Paris in memory of 2013 murder of Kurds

‘The Turkish government has massacred three more Kurds’

PARIS: Thousands of demonstrators marched in central Paris on Saturday to pay tribute to three Kurdish activists murdered a decade ago. The march, an annual event since the killings on January 9, 2013, came two weeks after an eerily similar triple slaying on December 23 at the Kurdish Cultural Centre in Paris—just a few minutes’ walk from the site of the earlier shootings. The organizers said more than 25,000 people from all over Europe had joined the rally.

They carried banners with the pictures of the 2013 victims and slogans such as “The Turkish government has massacred three more Kurds” as they walked from the Gare du Nord station in the north of the capital towards Place de la Republique, a popular spot for demonstrations. In 2013, Sakine Cansiz, 54, a founder of the PKK Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), which has waged a long insurgency against Turkey, was killed execution-style with shots to the head.

Two other women were killed in the same way: Fidan Dogan, 28 and Leyla Saylemez, 24 at the Kurdish Information Centre in Paris’ 10th district. The PKK, which fights for increased autonomy for the Kurdish population, is considered a terrorist organization by Turkey, the United States and the European Union.

Turkey is a member of the NATO and considered as crucial for the protection of the military alliance’s southeastern flank. A Turkish maintenance worker at Charles de Gaulle airport had been due to go on trial for the 2013 attack, but he died from a brain tumor shortly before his trial was due to start, in December 2016.

Kurdish activists in France, home to the second-biggest Kurdish community in the European Union after Germany, have always alleged that the Turkish secret service ordered the killings. In May 2019, a French anti-terrorist judge was tasked with re-opening



MARSEILLE: People take part in a tribute march in the memory of three Kurdish activists, who were murdered in January 2013, in Marseille, on Saturday.—AFP

the investigation. The victims’ families say the probe has been hampered by lack of access to secret documents that they say France was refusing to declassify. “France has a debt of justice towards us,” Metin Cansiz, the brother of Sakine Cansiz, told AFP ahead of Saturday’s march.

His family, he said, had lost a loved one “sacrificed” on the altar of Franco-Turkish relations. In last month’s attack, Abdurrahman Kizil, singer Mir Perwer and

Emine Kara, leader of the Movement of Kurdish Women in France linked to the PKK, were shot dead by a man named as William Malet. French prosecutors say the suspect, a retired rail worker, had admitted to wanting to “murder migrants”, but several Kurds who spoke to AFP said they suspected a “terror” act orchestrated by the Turkish state. The murders sparked a major demonstration by Kurds in Paris on December 24.—AFP

opposition Moele-Benin party, told AFP. More than 80% of his party’s candidates in Sunday’s poll are under 50, and one in two are under 40. Ayadji said. “The youth must go to learn about politics. We must prepare the next generation.”

Elected in 2016, re-elected in 2021, the wealthy businessman Talon has launched all-out political and economic reforms with a view to putting his West African country on the path to development. But critics say this modernization has also been accompanied by a significant democratic decline. Two of the main adversaries of

Talon-Joel Aivo and Reckya Madougou—are still imprisoned after receiving heavy jail terms. The Republican Bloc (BR), a pro-government party, claims to have listened to the “aspirations” of the population for better representation. “Young people from the agricultural or craft sector represent 45% of our candidates,” says Distel Amoussou, a BR party representative. His party, he said, “wishes to empower women to go far beyond the 24 seats reserved for them”.

Transparency

The new electoral code requires that there be one woman elected per constituency, meaning at least 24 deputies out of 109 seats. For Tahiratou Toko, 33-year-old incumbent candidate in the north of the country, “it’s a big step forward” explaining “the enthusiasm of women voters”. “They feel more concerned, especially since there are only young candidates”, which is “totally unprecedented.” But do the many women and young people have a chance of being elected?

Marlene Agbatan, lawyer, asks the question and rejects the optimism of party leaders. “Most young people and women are with the parties without much base. The major political parties have preferred to put them as alternates or in the last positions to make them just voter mobilizers,” she said. “So I don’t see how young people are taking over in politics.” And the fears that the ballot results have already been fixed have not been erased, four years after the one-sided legislative elections, when abstention exceeded 70%. If the incumbent parties emerge as the big winner of the elections, many will question the transparency of the results, warns Expedit Ologou, a Beninese political scientist. Ballots will be counted into next week.—AFP



COTONOU: A woman with her child walks past a banner of the Popular Liberation Movement (MPL) at their headquarters.—AFP

In Benin election, women and youth chase parliament seats

COTONOU: Beninese vote on Sunday for new lawmakers with the strong presence of women and young candidates giving voters a sense of fresh start in a poll also marked by the return of the opposition. Sunday’s vote will be a key test for Beninese democracy, once seen as a model in West Africa, as the opposition will look to gain ground in Parliament after they were de facto barred from the 2019 elections. The majority of key opposition figures are in prison or in exile. Seven parties, including three claiming to be from the opposition, were finally authorized to take part in the ballot.

“The majority of candidates are barely thirty and the rest under 40,” said Boconon Adihou Gerardo, activist of the Popular Liberation Movement (MPL), opposition party. “These are the ones we need... It is time to bring new blood into politics in Benin.” In 2019, only two political parties supporting President Patrice Talon were able to stand in the legislative elections, angering part of the population. The ballot was marked by historic abstention, deadly violence and a total internet shutdown, rare events in Benin. In 2021, the main opposition leaders had also failed to participate in the presidential election.

Democracy ‘held hostage’

“Our democracy is taken hostage by a minority that crushes the majority,” Jacques Ayadji, president of the

Iraq eyes comeback with Gulf...

Continued from Page 1

Iraq Football Association (IFA) expressed Saturday its regret to the Kuwaiti delegation for being unable to attend the inauguration ceremony of the Gulf Cup due to the stampede that occurred in front of the stadium in Basra. In a statement, the association expressed its great sorrow over some incidents during the inauguration ceremony.

Head of IFA Adnan Darjal apologized to the Kuwaiti delegation for obstacles that prevented it from entering the stadium, forcing Sheikh Fahad Al-Nasser, representative of HH the Amir and head of the Kuwaiti Olympic Committee, and head of Kuwait Football Association and members to leave. Darjal voiced sorrow over the stampede, stressing that IFA and those responsible for organizing the event will take into consideration to put all things in good shape.

What has happened will not affect the deep-rooted relations between Iraq and Kuwait, he affirmed, also noting that Kuwait Football Association greatly supported holding the championship in Basra. He urged fans to continue providing the necessary support to make the championship successful, which will help the country host sports events after a long period of suspension.

Later on Saturday, Iraqi Interior Minister Abdul-Amir Al-Shammari said Prime Minister Sudani directed a comprehensive probe into and analysis of all incidents that accompanied the opening ceremony of the Gulf Cup. Shammari held several meetings with governor of Basra, commanders of Basra operations and other security leaders to review all matters and find solutions to them, according to Iraqi News Agency.

Shammari noted that the ministry of interior conducted a complete reorganization of the security plan and review of traffic to and from the stadiums. Shammari referred to the reinforcement of the stadium’s security force from Baghdad, pledging incidents that happened at the tournament’s

opening ceremony will never be repeated in the upcoming matches.

More than 10,000 foreign fans had arrived by the afternoon in Basra, located a short distance from Iraq’s borders with Kuwait and Iran, an official from Basra’s provincial government told AFP. Flags of the participating countries fluttered in the breeze at Basra’s corniche, which runs along the Shatt al-Arab river, and the scent of shisha wafted from coffee shops.

Omar Badr, a 22-year-old from Kuwait, was enthused by the local hospitality. He said some restaurants have offered fans free meals “and people invite us to their homes”. Teams from Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen have all arrived in town. It is the first time Iraq hosts the regional competition since 1979, the same year Saddam Hussein seized power in Baghdad.

Decades of turmoil followed with the 1980-1988 war against Iran, Iraq’s 1990 invasion of Kuwait and the subsequent Gulf War, the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and a bloody sectarian civil war lasting from 2006 to 2008. The invasion of Kuwait saw Iraq banned by FIFA, world football’s governing body, and subsequent sporadic bans were imposed until early 2022 due to instability in the country.

Three decades after the Kuwait invasion, Iraqis are now enthusiastically welcoming their neighbors. Mohammed Al-Azemi, a 39-year-old football fan from Kuwait, said “social and family ties” unite the two countries. “The brotherly relationship between (us)... is back on track.” Louay Mansour, a nurse from Basra, said: “God be praised, the Gulf Cup is back. We hope it will be crowned with success.”

Tournament organizers have undertaken major infrastructure projects to help Iraqis forget their years in the football wilderness. Basra is now home to two stadiums: the 65,000-capacity International Stadium, opened in 2013, and the 30,000-seat Minaa Olympic Stadium, inaugurated just two weeks before the tournament. The city has had a makeover, with renovations to the corniche, new hotels built and streets repaved. In total, Baghdad allocated \$33 million to the Iraq Football Association to organize the Gulf Cup.—Agencies

Iran executes 2 men, replaces...

Continued from Page 1

for the bloc’s foreign affairs chief Josep Borrell said in a statement, urging an immediate end to death sentences against protesters.

Iranian authorities have arrested thousands in their crackdown on the wave of demonstrations that began after the September 16 death of Iranian Kurdish woman Amini, 22, after her arrest for allegedly breaching Iran’s dress code for women. Two other men were put to death in December,

Divided US Reps elect McCarthy...

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As he accepted the gavel in the early hours of Saturday, McCarthy, who was backed by former president Donald Trump, outlined the Republicans’ aggressive lines of attack ahead of the 2024 presidential race. He vowed to “pass bills to fix the nation’s challenges, from the wide open southern border to ‘America last’ energy policies, to woke indoctrination in our schools”. “America’s long-term challenges - the debt and the rise of the Chinese Communist Party - Congress must be with one voice on both of these issues,” the 57-year-old Californian told the House.

As the 14th vote got underway before midnight Friday, McCarthy suffered a shock setback amid heated exchanges as he came up short of a majority by just one vote out of more than 400 cast. As Matt Gaetz voted “present” to deny McCarthy, the disappointed Republican leader walked over to the Florida lawmaker-elect for face-to-face talks in the chamber. In scenes shown on live television, Gaetz pointed a finger at McCarthy, who backed off

Brazil’s Lula gets to work vowing clean break with Bolsonaro

BRASILIA: President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva held his first cabinet meeting Friday, vowing to work with Congress and run a government of traditional technocrats to “rebuild” Brazil after the “authoritarianism” of predecessor Jair Bolsonaro. “We face an arduous but noble task. We’re going to have to leave this country better, healthier and wealthier... with better education and a return to civility,” the veteran leftist, who took office Sunday for a third term, said at the first full meeting of his 37-member cabinet. “We’ll have to get our hands dirty,” Lula, 77, said in his return to the meeting table at the Planalto Palace in Brasilia. Lula vowed to fight to “rebuild the country” and protect the Amazon rainforest after four years under far-right Bolsonaro’s “authoritarian government,” which he accused of undermining democracy and blamed for Brazil’s massive Covid-19 death toll, currently almost 700,000.



BRASILIA: Brazil’s President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva speaks during his government’s first cabinet meeting at the Planalto Palace in Brasilia.—AFP

Lula’s 37 ministers-up from 23 under Bolsonaro—are a diverse, experienced group including 11 women, five black people and two Indigenous Brazilians—another break with the previous government, which was dominated by white men, political outsiders and military generals. The new administration faces huge challenges in the Latin American power, which is politically polarized after Lula’s divisive October election win, and struggling economically—a far gloomier outlook than the boom years of his first presidency (2003-2010).

Lula, who narrowly won the October 30 runoff election, has already faced some hiccups in his first week, particularly on the economy. Stocks in Latin America’s biggest economy fell more than three percent Monday, with investors nervous over how Lula will fund his promised social spending, given Brazil’s already overstretched government finances. Exacerbating market jitters, the new government has had a series of communications glitches.

The administration overruled Finance Minister Fernando Haddad after he tried to put an end to federal fuel-tax cuts introduced by the Bolsonaro administration. Haddad was worried about the cost of the tax cuts—an estimated \$10.3 billion in this year’s government budget. But the administration decided to extend them for two more months, a move analysts said was likely aimed at preventing Lula’s approval rating from taking a hit in his first weeks in office.—AFP

sparking global outrage and new Western sanctions against Iran.

The slain Ajamian belonged to the Basij paramilitary force, linked to the powerful Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. He died in Karaj, west of Tehran, on Nov 3 after being attacked with “knives, stones, fists, kicks” and dragged along a street, a judiciary spokesman said at the time. Karami and Hosseini were sentenced to death in early December, Mizan said, while the supreme court upheld the decision on Tuesday.

Mahmood Amiry-Moghaddam, director of Oslo-based group Iran Human Rights (IHR), said both men “were subjected to torture, sentenced after sham trials... without the minimum standards for due process”. IHR gave Karami’s age as 22. Hossein was 39, according to another Norway-based rights group, Hengaw.—AFP

before Alabama’s Mike Rogers lunged at Gaetz and had to be held back with a restraining arm across his face.

“The ‘Speaker’ selection process, as crazy as it may seem, has made it all much bigger and more important than if done the more conventional way,” Trump chimed in on his Truth Social platform. “Congratulations to Kevin McCarthy and our GREAT Republican Party!” added the former president who has launched his 2024 election campaign to return to White House.

Democratic President Joe Biden optimistically called for more cooperation between the two parties. “I am prepared to work with Republicans when I can and voters made clear that they expect Republicans to be prepared to work with me,” Biden said after McCarthy’s victory. There were more rounds of voting in the fractious 2023 contest than in any speaker election since the Civil War.

McCarthy had projected confidence all week, even as he was bleeding votes rather than adding to the base of around 200 Republicans who have backed him all along. His party’s takeover of Congress is also expected to herald investigations into most aspects of Biden’s administration and his family. Democrats and some of McCarthy’s supporters, in private, are concerned that he has offered his far-right critics radical policy commitments that will make the House ungovernable.—AFP

International

US House Speaker Kevin McCarthy: Driven by ambition

McCarthy faces tall task of charming hardline conservative Republicans

WASHINGTON: Kevin McCarthy's election to his dream job of speaker of the US House of Representatives was secured through a mix of bombproof ambition, a talent for cutting deals and a proven track record of getting Republicans what they need.

Affable in the face of adversity, and a prolific fundraiser for his fellow lawmakers, McCarthy is no policy strategist or conservative ideologue. Instead, his rise has come from his willingness to tackle the tricky task of trying to keep his party — which has been turned upside down by Donald Trump — on the rails and focused on opposing the Democrats' agenda.

His career has soared since he became the minority Republican leader in the California Assembly in 2003, just one year after being elected. Four years later, he was elected to Washington, and moved rapidly up the ladder in the House as a team player and organizer who readily bared his ambition to become party leader.

But it remains to be seen if the 57-year-old can charm hardline conservative dissidents. He only won election as speaker after they forced him to endure 15 rounds of voting — a torrid spectacle unseen in the US Capitol since 1859.

They attacked the things that underpinned his approach: chummy business ties, fundraising and keeping others happy, rather than turning conservative ideals into legislation. But for McCarthy, the job was the hard-won payoff for his labors and his troubled election. "He's relentless, the man does not quit," longtime ally Patrick McHenry told the chamber late on Friday.

Firefighter's son

McCarthy, who represents the conservative enclave of Bakersfield, California, has been in politics since his late teens. The son of a firefighter and

grandson of a cattle rancher, he married his high school sweetheart.

The couple still live in the first house they bought, where they raised two children. He became a Republican activist while at California State University in Bakersfield, and worked for local politicians and in national Republican organizations after graduating.

In 2002 he won election to the state assembly. A year later, his fellow Republicans made the freshman legislator their leader. And four years later, he captured the Bakersfield seat in the US House of Representatives.

Patient and pragmatic, since entering Congress, McCarthy has focused most of his efforts on propelling his party forward. He has led the Republican caucus in the lower house since 2014, and in 2015 made his first bid for the speakers gavel.

'My Kevin'

But in his years in Congress, he lacks any major legislative achievements of his own. He never chaired a House committee, where most Congressional leaders build their names and hone legislative skills. And he is not known for any well-defined set of principles, beyond defeating Democratic interests and stalling the agenda of President Joe Biden.

In the immediate aftermath of the January 6, 2021 assault on the Capitol by supporters of president Donald Trump, for example, he told fellow lawmakers that Trump should resign. But weeks later he visited the Trump at his Florida home to make amends.

Since then, McCarthy has labelled investigations by Congress and the Justice Department of the insurrection politically motivated. Trump, who is running for the presidency again in 2024, meanwhile refers to McCarthy as "My Kevin."



WASHINGTON: US Speaker of the House Kevin McCarthy (R-CA) delivers remarks after being elected as Speaker in the House Chamber at the US Capitol Building on January 07, 2023 in Washington, DC. —AFP

Underestimated

McCarthy's seeming lack of deep ideological underpinnings and his skepticism of party hardliners has made him a regular target of the Republican right, especially Trump supporters. Matt Gaetz, the lawmaker who led the challenge to McCarthy becoming speaker, called him someone who "has sold shares in himself for more than a decade."

Nevertheless, McCarthy is a consummate net-

worker, admired for his people management: meeting his members' demands when he can, and assuaging their concerns when he cannot.

That even includes supporting the lawmakers who opposed him. According to Politico, the conservative activist groups close to him put some \$1 million into the election campaigns of the 20 lawmakers who initially blocked his election to speaker. —AFP

29 killed in arrest of Mexico drug kingpin's son

CULIACAN: Ten soldiers and 19 suspected criminals were killed in an operation to arrest a son of jailed drug trafficker Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman, Mexico's government said Friday, with a dramatic shootout sowing terror at an airport.

Thousands of soldiers retook control of the Sinaloa cartel stronghold of Culiacan, which resembled a war zone after furious gunmen went on the rampage to try to free their boss. Ovidio Guzman was captured in the northwestern city on Thursday and flown to Mexico City before being transferred to the high-security Altiplano prison in central Mexico from which "El Chapo" once escaped.

The 32-year-old, nicknamed "El Raton" (The Mouse), had allegedly helped to run his father's operations since the former Sinaloa cartel boss was extradited to the United States in 2017. A colonel who commanded an infantry battalion was among those killed after his team came under attack following the arrest, Defense Minister Luis Cresencio Sandoval told reporters.

Another 35 soldiers sustained gunshot wounds and were taken to hospital, while 21 gunmen were arrested. Sandoval said a civilian airliner that was about to take off from Culiacan International Airport, as well as two Mexican Air Force aircraft, were hit by gunfire as cartel henchmen tried to free Ovidio Guzman. The military planes "had to make an emergency landing" after receiving "a significant number of impacts," said Sandoval. No injuries resulted from the plane attacks and Culiacan airport resumed operations on Friday.

Multimillion-dollar bounty

The United States had issued a reward of up to \$5 million for information leading to Ovidio Guzman's capture. It accuses him of being a key



CULIACAN: Members of the national guards and Mexican army drive on a road a day after an operation to arrest the son of Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman, Ovidio Guzman, in Culiacan, Sinaloa state, Mexico, on January 6, 2023. —AFP

player in the Sinaloa cartel founded by his father.

The arrest came as Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador prepared to welcome his US counterpart Joe Biden for a North America leaders' summit next week where security is expected to be high on the agenda. The drug trafficker's detention was "not an insignificant accomplishment by Mexican authorities," US National Security Council spokesman John Kirby said.

"And we're certainly grateful for that," he said, adding that the United States would keep working "in lockstep" with Mexico, notably to tackle trafficking of the powerful synthetic opioid fentanyl. Mexico denied that the United States had been involved in the operation to catch Ovidio Guzman.

"We act autonomously, independently. Yes there is cooperation and there will continue to be, but we make the decisions as a sovereign government," Lopez Obrador told reporters. Ovidio Guzman secured a court order blocking his immediate extra-

dition to the United States. In any case, Mexico's government ruled out a fast-track extradition, saying the proper legal process would be followed.

Authorities said calm had returned to Culiacan, where security forces removed dozens of stolen and burnt out vehicles scattered throughout the city of 800,000 people. Videos on social media Thursday had shown passengers and Aeromexico airline employees ducking behind counters as gunfire rang out at Culiacan airport. Cartel gunmen set cars and trucks ablaze at several intersections in the city, and authorities reported 19 roadblocks.

El Chapo is serving a life sentence in the United States for trafficking hundreds of tons of drugs into the country over the course of 25 years. However, his cartel remains one of the most powerful in Mexico, accused by Washington of exploiting an opioid epidemic by flooding communities in the United States with fentanyl, a synthetic drug about 50 times more potent than heroin. —AFP

On anniversary of US Capitol assault, Biden decries violence

WASHINGTON: Two years after the violent assault on the US Capitol, President Joe Biden said Friday that America has "no place" for political violence as he honored police who fought off the mob of Donald Trump supporters.

The somber White House ceremony took place as a group of congressional Republicans — including some who still back Trump's false claim that the 2020 election was fraudulent — held the US House of Representatives in a state of limbo, repeatedly blocking the election of a speaker.

"Despite our differences in opinion, we must say clearly with a united voice... there's no place, zero, zero place in America for voter intimidation... for political violence," Biden said in a speech.

He awarded 14 Presidential Citizens Medals, the country's second-highest civilian honor, to police officers present at the Capitol on January 6, 2021, as well as others who publicly pushed back against Trump's attempts to overturn his 2020 election loss.

"History will remember your names," Biden told the honorees, including some now known nationwide for their activism since the deadly assault and from their appearances during the televised con-



WASHINGTON: US President Joe Biden presents Capitol Police Officer Eugene Goodman a Presidential Citizens Medal during a ceremony to mark the two-year anniversary of the January 6, 2021, attack on the US Capitol in the East Room of the White House January 6, 2023. —AFP

gressional probe into the attack.

Some of those awarded medals were elected officials and poll workers in states where Trump and his allies attempted to block Biden's win from being certified. "America is a land of laws and not chaos," Biden said.

Three of the awards were given posthumously to police officers who responded to the attack — two

of whom committed suicide after the riots, and one to Brian Sicknick, who had a stroke the day after.

Sicknick's girlfriend on Thursday filed suit against two men who have already pleaded guilty to Capitol assault-related charges, as well as Trump, whom she accuses of intentionally riling up his supporters and encouraging them to attack. She is seeking \$10 million from each defendant. —AFP

US Congress' crazy week: The movie

WASHINGTON: Better than Hollywood? For the United States Congress the week began as a feel-good movie, turning into a slapstick farce and finally a taut political thriller. The basic plot was simple: the election of a speaker in the House of Representatives — in normal times a routine formality — is sent off the rails by two dozen right-wing lawmakers-elect. And from there it took quite a twist: House members would go on to vote 14 times in a row without electing their speaker — something not seen since the Civil War.

The baby and the dog

The fun and games started on Tuesday in a festive, back-to-school-like atmosphere. The representatives elected in November's midterms were on Capitol Hill to be sworn into office, many for the first time. They had brought along family members, ready to applaud from the balcony when their loved one took the oath.

First though, under the rules, a House speaker had to be elected. Kevin McCarthy was expected to be voted in without much fuss, his Republican Party having regained control of the lower chamber with a narrow majority.

But a handful of diehards from the hard right of the party had other plans. They refused to back the Californian, accusing him variously of being too soft on Democrats, not sufficiently supportive of ex-president Donald Trump, or of lacking political convictions.

In one drawn-out ballot after another, McCarthy emerged short of the necessary majority. As the impasse deepened, families took the opportunity to visit America's capital. Some children clambered down to the floor of the House — but seemed resolutely bored by the unfolding drama.

Democrat Jimmy Gomez got a few laughs when he voted with his four-month-old baby, Hodge, hanging on his front in a sling. On Thursday, it was a pet's turn when Republican Nancy Mace voted with her dog Libby tucked under her arm.

Popcorn and booze

The scene was quickly turning absurd. Ordinarily, House sessions are governed by strict rules that prohibit things like dogs, the criticism of other elected officials, speculation about their motives, booing etc. But these rules only come into force after the speaker has been voted in.

Republican Kat Cammack accused Democrats of bringing in "popcorn, blankets and booze" to watch the infighting amongst their opponents. Amid rising commotion, the House clerk, Cheryl Johnson insisted that order and decorum be maintained until the speaker is elected. Her plea did little to sway the more boisterous lawmakers.

"I love it," declared rebel Republican Lauren Boebert, for whom the chaos was a hallmark of a healthy democracy. A growing number of officials started to show their exasperation however, as vote after vote failed to deliver a speaker.

Democrat Maxine Waters crossed her arms, made a face and exhaled loudly while several Republicans walked out during a speech by Matt Gaetz, one of the most vocal of the "Taleban 20" — as the rebels were dubbed by their peers.

With confusion reigning on the House floor, non-stop negotiations were churning backstage, with McCarthy offering concessions to try to pull the rebels into line. Meanwhile, intriguing sub-plots proliferated. C-Span, the TV channel that broadcasts federal government hearings, captured left-winger Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in deep discussion with the Republican Paul Gosar. —AFP

SUNDAY, JANUARY 8, 2023

Business

Jack Ma to cede control of Ant Group

Adjustment will not change economic interests of any shareholders

BEIJING: Jack Ma will cede control of Chinese fintech giant Ant Group, the company announced Saturday, following a Communist Party crackdown on the nation's tech sector that targeted the charismatic billionaire.

One of China's most recognisable entrepreneurs, Ma once exemplified a generation of Chinese technology moguls with his rags-to-riches personal tale and penchant for public showmanship. But the former English teacher has retreated from public view since Beijing torched Ant's planned initial public offering in Hong Kong in 2020 following his barbed comments about government regulators.

His company said in a statement on Saturday it was adjusting its ownership structure so that "no shareholder, alone or jointly with other parties, will have control over Ant Group". Laying out the firm's previous complex structure, the announcement showed Ma indirectly controlled 53.46 percent of Ant's shares and deemed him the company's "control person".

He will hold just 6.2 percent of the voting rights following the adjustment, based on information in the statement. "The adjustment is being implemented to further enhance the stability of our corporate structure and sustainability of our long-term development," the Ant statement said.

Ten individuals—including the founder, management and staff—will "exercise their voting rights independently", it said. The adjustment will not change the economic interests of any shareholders. Ant operates Alipay, the world's largest digital payments platform, which boasts hundreds of millions of monthly users in China and beyond.

Crackdown

Ant's planned IPO would have been a world-record listing at the time, and its damaging withdrawal came days after Ma launched a stinging public attack on Chinese regulators. In a speech at a summit in Shanghai, the mercurial tycoon said banks operated with a "pawnshop" mentality and accused financial watchdogs of stifling growth.

A riled Beijing also later hit Alibaba—the internet titan co-founded by Ma that operates popular Chinese shopping platforms Taobao and Tmall—with a record \$2.75 billion fine for alleged unfair practices.

However, in a sign that the official grip may now be loosening, authorities said last month Ant had won approval to raise 10.5 billion yuan (\$1.5 billion) for its consumer finance arm. An office of the China Banking and Insurance Regulatory Commission in the southwestern city of Chongqing will let the firm raise its registered capital from eight billion yuan to 18.5 billion yuan, according to a notice issued on December 30.

News of the approval sent shares in Alibaba soaring almost nine percent in Hong Kong trading, while other tech firms were also boosted on hopes the sector crackdown could be easing. Alibaba's latest earnings data in November showed a loss of 20.6 billion yuan for the third quarter. The company did not release full sales figures for its Singles Day shopping bonanza in 2022 for the first time.

The e-commerce festival is seen as an important gauge of Chinese consumer sentiment, and once saw Ma share a stage with major Chinese



SHANGHAI: File photo shows Alibaba Group Executive Chairman Jack Ma preparing to deliver a speech during the main forum of the World Artificial Intelligence Conference 2018 (WAIC 2018) in Shanghai. — AFP

and Western celebrities, but has become more muted in recent years. Ma has maintained a lower profile since Ant's failed IPO, punctuated by

appearances at charity events and occasional sojourns overseas. He was in Thailand this week, Bloomberg News reported Saturday. — AFP

US job gains robust in December, wage growth slows

WASHINGTON: US job gains exceeded expectations in December while unemployment ticked down, a closely-watched government report said Friday, in a sign the labor market remains hotter than hoped by policymakers seeking to lower inflation. While a strong labor market may fuel optimism that the world's biggest economy can stave off a major downturn despite an aggressive series of interest rate hikes, it is also an area of concern for the Federal Reserve as high wages can feed into inflation.

But in an encouraging sign for the Fed, the latest data showed a tempering of wage growth. Last month, average hourly earnings rose less than anticipated by 0.3 percent to \$32.82, while November's jump was revised lower, the Labor Department said. Overall, employers added 223,000 workers, down from the revised 256,000 figure in November, though still higher than analysts expected.

While unemployment is typically expected to edge up as interest rates rise, the jobless rate dipped to 3.5 percent as participation moved higher. Unemployment has hovered between 3.5 percent and 3.7 percent in recent months, and the latest figure is the lowest since February 2020.

President Joe Biden touted the fall in joblessness while striking an optimistic note on broader efforts to combat inflation. "This moderation in job growth is appropriate, and we should expect it to continue in the months ahead, even as we maintain resilience in our labor market recovery," Biden said in a statement. "We still have work to do to bring down inflation... But we are moving in the right direction," he added.

Struggle to fill vacancies

In December, "notable job gains occurred in leisure and hospitality, health care, construction, and social assistance," the Labor Department said. But it added that employment in leisure and hospitality still remains below its pre-pandemic level.

Because the labor market remains tight, "compa-



BENSENVILLE: A sign advertises job openings outside a business on January 06, 2023 in Bensenville, Illinois. Employers added 223,000 jobs in December, a sign that the US economy is continuing to produce jobs. — AFP

nies are still being forced to raise wages to retain workers, and are still struggling to fill vacancies," said Julia Pollak, chief economist at job search platform ZipRecruiter.

This risks pushing wages higher. Average hourly earnings have risen 4.6 percent in the past 12 months, the Labor Department said, as many companies experiencing labor shortages after disruption from the pandemic have been keen to find and retain workers.

In a promising sign, that figure was still lower than the 4.8 percent annual jump in November and larger spikes earlier this year. "For inflation to fall, we have to see wages have a healthy pace of growth that doesn't outpace the ability of firms to absorb those costs without raising their prices," said Nela Richardson, chief economist at payroll firm ADP. "Any slowdown in wage growth is a good signal in terms of inflation," she told reporters this week.

Slowing wage growth

Employment data has been signaling "positive momentum in job growth and moderating wages,"

hydrogen—which can be extracted from seawater—will create a safer and almost inexhaustible form of energy compared with splitting atoms from uranium or plutonium.

ITER's previously-stated goal was to create the plasma by 2025. But that deadline will have to be postponed, Pietro Barabaschi—who in September became the project's director-general—told AFP during a visit to the facility.

The date "wasn't realistic in the first place," even before two major problems surfaced, Barabaschi said. One problem, he said, was wrong sizes for the joints of blocks to be welded together for the installation's 19-by-11-metre (62-by-36-foot) chamber.

The second was traces of corrosion in a thermal shield designed to protect the outside world from the enormous heat created during nuclear fusion. Fixing the problems "is not a question of weeks, but months, even years," Barabaschi said.

A new timetable is to be worked out by the end of this year, he said, including some modification to contain the expected cost overrun, and to meet the French nuclear safety agency's security require-

ments. Barabaschi said he hoped ITER would be able to make up for the delays as it prepares to enter the full phase, currently scheduled for 2035.

On December 13, US researchers working separately from ITER announced an important technical breakthrough. Scientists at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory (LLNL) in California said they had used the world's largest laser to create, for the first time, a fusion reaction generating more energy than it took to produce.

"Some competition is healthy in any environment," Barabaschi said about the success. "If tomorrow somebody found another breakthrough that would make my work redundant, I would be very happy," he added.

ITER was set in motion after a 1985 summit between US president Ronald Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. Its seven partners are China, the European Union, India, Japan, South Korea, Russia and the United States. Russia still participates in ITER despite the start of the Ukraine conflict. In November it dispatched one of six giant magnets needed for the top part of the tokamak. — AFP

World food prices hit record high

PARIS: World food prices fell for a ninth month in a row in December but hit their highest level on record for the full year in 2022, UN data showed Friday. Food prices soared to a monthly record high in March after Russia invaded agricultural powerhouse Ukraine, a major supplier of wheat and cooking oil to the world.

But prices have dropped since then, with more relief brought by a deal brokered by Turkey and the United Nations in July that lifted a Russian naval blockade on Ukrainian grain exports. The Food and Agriculture Organization said Friday its price index, which tracks the monthly change in international prices of a basket of food commodities, fell to 132.4 points in December, a 1.9 percent drop from November.

It was also one percent lower than in December 2021. But the index was 14.3 percent higher overall in 2022 compared to the previous year as it reached an all-time high of 143.7 points. "Calmer food commodity prices are welcome after two very volatile years," FAO chief economist Maximo Torero said in a statement.

"It is important to remain vigilant and keep a strong focus on mitigating global food insecurity given that world food prices remain at elevated levels," he said. Torero said many staples are near record highs, with prices of rice rising and "still many risks associated with future supplies".

World prices of maize were 24.8 percent higher on average in 2022 than in 2021, according to the FAO. Wheat was 15.6 percent more expensive. But maize prices fell in December, mostly due to "strong competition" from Brazil, the FAO said. — AFP

International fusion energy project faces delays: Chief

SAINT-PAUL-LES-DURANCE: An international project in nuclear fusion may face "years" of delays, its boss has told AFP, weeks after scientists in the United States announced a breakthrough in their own quest for the coveted goal.

The International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor (ITER) project seeks to prove the feasibility of fusion as a large-scale and carbon-free source of energy. Installed at a site in southern France, the decades-old initiative has a long history of technical challenges and cost overruns.

Fusion entails forcing together the nuclei of light atomic elements in a super-heated plasma, held by powerful magnetic forces in a doughnut-shaped chamber called a tokamak. The idea is that fusing the particles together from isotopes of



SAINT-PAUL-LES-DURANCE: Italian Pietro Barabaschi, CEO of the international nuclear fusion project Iter, gestures before an interview in his office in Saint-Paul-les-Durance, southern France. — AFP

Business

From tracking moods to putting on a show, it's AI-everything at CES

AI is the big buzzword at the Las Vegas tech extravaganza

LAS VEGAS: Entrepreneur Antony Perzo introduces a small device called Emobot, which looks like a cross between a speaker and a piece of abstract art, and explains: "It's an emotional thermometer!" Like hundreds of other exhibitors at CES, the world's biggest tech expo, French engineer Perzo is selling the merits of an object that depends on the latest breakthroughs in artificial intelligence.

AI is the big buzzword at the Las Vegas tech extravaganza, with companies big and small unveiling anything from TVs to toothbrushes that depend on big data and connected computing to impress. Perzo's Emobot, shown in a corner of Sin City's Venetian hotel, is used to detect possible psychiatric disorders in the elderly and could help caregivers in nursing homes adjust treatment without waiting for the psychiatrist.

The technology can "analyze micro facial expressions" that reflect human emotions, themselves a magnifier of our "psychological and psychiatric state," said the engineer. Nuva, another startup, defines itself as a "pioneer in body transformation through AI."

The mobile app allows users to edit a photo to see themselves with a slim and athletic body, and motivate themselves to follow a 90-day plan to achieve this result "in real life." In Las Vegas, AI-powered gadgets cram the hallways—there are AI bird feeders, baby carriages or fatigue-fighting wristwatches—to the point that some wonder if the phenomenon is being oversold.

But AI "isn't just a buzzword to win the CES bingo," noted tech analyst Avi Greengart. The technology "is



LAS VEGAS: Razer Chroma lights are displayed above a computer station with accessories for video gaming and lifestyle content creation at the Razer Inc. booth during the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) in Las Vegas. — AFP

used in smartphone cameras, in factories to spot defective products, in agriculture to identify weeds and spray them with weed killer. AI is here to stay," he said.

Using AI to explore emotions is also the ambition of Emil Jimenez, who founded MindBank AI in a "quest for

immortality... so my daughter could always ask her daddy a question." His app asks users to record their answers to deeply personal questions ("What does love mean to you?") in order to "save your mind forever on the cloud" by creating a personal digital twin.



LAS VEGAS: Examples of computing hardware architecture supporting an AR and IR environment inside a car of the near future are displayed. — AFP

Green tech fights for limelight at CES gadget fest

LAS VEGAS: At the CES tech megashow in Las Vegas, it is unusual to see an entrepreneur hold up a plant and present it as the latest breakthrough in consumer technology. But for NeoPlants co-founder Patrick Torbey, the gathering held annually just after the new year should not be thought of as "only about machine technology and electronics."

"It's also about natural technology that we can leverage using these really cool engineering techniques," Torbey told AFP. NeoPlants, a Paris-based startup, was showing off a bioengineered plant capable of purifying indoor air of toxic pollutants "by doing the work of 30 regular houseplants," according to its website.

Technology geared towards helping the environment has steadily increased in number at CES since the Sin City expo began fifty years ago. But observers often doubt the seriousness of the consumer tech industry's commitment to protect the environment, with all the real excitement focused on smart TVs and robots instead of the more complicated and less profitable project of saving the planet.

"Until it really, really matters for consumers, it's just going to kind of be this trend that's over here on the side," said Ben Arnold, research firm NPD's consumer electronics analyst. "As somebody who studies the market, I'm just not seeing yet where (environmental-minded tech) makes a difference in terms of units and dollars," he added.

Ran Roth, the head of tech company Sensibo, agreed that successful devices were the ones that made financial sense and believed his products did just that. Roth's devices use artificial intelligence and sen-

sors to better manage air conditioning, an important concern in the often blistering heat of the Zionist entity, where his company is based.

Sensibo's sensors measure humidity and temperature, and use software that learns a user's habits, thereby saving energy and money. Roth said new technology should have a "path to profitability" if it is going to thrive, a recurrent shortcoming of so called green tech that so often fails to be bankable.

"What is good about smart thermostats is that they are readily available and they offer the highest return on investment," said Roth, who called air conditioning a "human right."

'What matters'

But as the climate emergency worsens, industry observers said major tech companies were under more pressure to commit to sustainability goals. "We have seen the public naming and shaming of organizations who indulged in greenwashing over the past year," said Abhijit Sunil of Forrester Research.

"So a lot of organizations are kind of careful in what they mention as their sustainability initiatives and they are now as transparent as possible," he said. Sunil said that the real advances on the environment were to be seen in the industrial sector, agreeing that the consumer gadget business may be a step behind when it came to doubling down on going green.

Product design, manufacturing and packaging with an eye on a company's waste and carbon footprint were the low hanging fruits when it came to environmental technology, he said. One such company, ACWA Robotics, won plaudits at CES for a robot dedicated to the detection and prevention of water leaks in underground pipes. In France, where the startup is located, 20 percent of drinking water is estimated to be lost due to leaky pipes. Fighting for the environment "is the challenge of a century," ACWA Robotics engineer Elise Lengrand told AFP. "I mean sure it's really cool to make big TVs and stuff, but this is really what matters," she said. — AFP

holds a ship in position or thrusts it sharply to the right or left. Volvo Penta unveiled a prototype in 2018 that was capable of letting the boat dock by itself, but customers weren't ready to park their ships at the click of a button, Inden said. Instead, the company developed the docking assistance system "that gives the captain a certain level of control" when mooring the boat, a moment "that remains one of the most stressful in sailing."

In general, the idea is to improve "safety, comfort, relaxation" and eventually make boating more accessible, he said. A boat prototype by US company Brunswick offers the best trajectory to enter a port, avoid collisions and finds available places to dock a boat and does the job without human intervention.

Another software program, offered by Hyundai's Avikus, can help maximize pleasure at sea. One setting will ensure that the boat is ideally positioned for sunbathing or will find the best spot to enjoy the sunset and get there in time to see it. The goal, according to company executive Carl Johansson, is to provide fuel savings, safety, and "peace of mind."

Ukraine startups at CES strive to help nation triumph

LAS VEGAS: A dozen Ukrainian startups proudly showed off innovations at CES on Friday, striving to help their nation triumph economically as well as on the battlefield. The contingent was welcomed to the premier consumer electronics gathering in Las Vegas, while Russian firms were not allowed due to Moscow's invasion of Ukraine and the ongoing war.

Before the conflict, Ukraine was an up-and-coming tech hotbed, but the war forced entrepreneurs to relocate and rethink their business plans. But they have kept going, said Karyna Kudriavtseva, a project manager at the Ukrainian Startup Fund that sent the entrepreneurs to CES.

"This is a chance to represent the Ukrainian ecosystem with pride and dignity," Kudriavtseva said. "We are trying to save the startup ecosystem, to make it grow, even during the war." She said that people in the Ukraine now typically have three jobs - their routine employment, volunteer work, and helping the military however they can. "I think it takes a lot of courage for our Ukrainian friends to be here," said Gary Shapiro, president of the Consumer Technology Association, which runs CES. "They have proven how they are protecting themselves against Russia; but they're also very entrepreneurial."

The startup fund has put an emphasis on military tech, with events such as drone hackathons where engineers brainstorm ideas that can be quickly used in the warzone, according to Kudriavtseva. "Startups present what they have done, and if the solution is great they are going to take it to the armed forces and directly to the battlefield," she told AFP.

But the ideas are not all about war—the Ukrainian contingent included Nanit, a small robot and device company that teaches electronics and computer coding skills sorely needed for tech jobs. "When we created the startup, we were trying to focus on kids," Nanit



LAS VEGAS: Releaf Paper co-founder Alexander Sobolenko displays a bag at the Ukraine startup area in Eureka Park during the Consumer Electronics Show. — AFP

'Reduce crew'

For merchant mariners, autonomous sailing is in test phase. In Norway, an autonomous electric cargo ship has been transporting fertilizer from factory to port since last year, with the aim of reducing truck traffic. While in Japan, an automated full-sized ferry has been in operation between two islands since last year, though for now with a crew on board.

If the reality of ships entirely without human sailors remains elusive, many navigation tools can provide valuable help, in ports or to calculate the best route according to weather. A computer guided journey "provides much more reliable transportation," said John Cross of Memorial University in Canada.

HD Hyundai, which at CES unveiled a project to collect and analyze shipping data, said that its software will slow a ship's speed if the destination port is congested, thereby reducing fuel consumption. Autonomy tools can also be useful in helping with maintenance by monitoring the condition of engines or propellers.

'Huge opportunity'

AI can also be used to understand crowds. Canadian company Advanced Symbolics has developed Askpoll, which trawls through social media to conduct market research in just minutes. The user asks it a question—for example, "Is this a good time to buy an apartment?" or "Should underage criminals go to jail?"—and the program scans social networks like Twitter and Instagram to survey public opinion on a large scale.

The biggest AI headlines lately have been on algorithms that make it possible to create original content at the click of a mouse. California-based company OpenAI has impressed with ChatGPT, an easy to use software that generates a poem or school essay in seconds, and DALL-E which creates visual art.

In a similar way, French start-up Imki has designed a sound and light show for an ancient Roman theater in southern France using similar programs. "This allows us to create content quickly with very low production costs," said Marie Lathoud, marketing director of Imki.

While he sees AI as a tool for artists, Saket Dandotia, director of operations at Magnifi, admitted that so-called generative AI represented a threat to the designers it will replace, much like robots in factories.

AI tools like ChatGPT are "faster, less costly," Dandotia said. His team created Strobe, an automated video software. "For us, AI is a huge opportunity, which will transform the entire creative design industry," he said. — AFP

chief executive Vladyslav Konovets told AFP.

"But in the worst case situation, we cannot teach children locally because of the missile attacks and all that stuff." While still developing educational toys, Nanit has been teaching programming to soldiers on the front. Skills learned will also be able to help soldiers find jobs after the war is ended, Konovets noted.

"We are supporting the war for sure, because this is our main goal," Miminets said. "Being a startup is hard, but being a startup in war is three or four times harder."

Saving the planet

Several of the Ukrainian startups at CES were focused on saving the planet as well as the country. Releaf Paper boasted being the first producer of bags, drink trays, fruit boxes and other paper goods made from fallen leaves. Samples on display were indistinguishable from paper products made from trees, and were said to decompose quickly on the ground. Releaf is looking to build its first production facility in Europe this year, said chief executive Alexander Sobolenko. The war has forced the startup to be more efficient, and to look to markets outside the Ukraine because the local economy is suffering, Sobolenko said.

Startup Rekava takes used coffee grounds from cafes and turns them into cups complete with lids as well packaging, all of which is easily biodegradable. After the war started, Rekava started making scented candles, in used coffee-ground containers. Fragrances are dedicated to Ukrainian cities.

Lviv candles are coffee scented, given the love of coffee there, said Rekava chief business officer Nazar Trokhymchuk. Crimea candles smelled of grapes. Another firm, Startup Corner, lets people make kitchen remodel designs online, then custom builds them from reclaimed wood at prices just a fraction of new cabinetry, according to chief product officer Julia Holovko.

"We're really proud to show not just our success in the war, but to show our success in startups and in business," Holovko told AFP. Startups that can't help directly with the war effort volunteer in other ways, according to Kudriavtseva. "We're doing our best to speed it up and to win, to bring the victory to Ukraine," Kudriavtseva said. — AFP

Sailor-less ships head to port on AI wave

LAS VEGAS: Whether on pleasure yachts or deep-sea cargo ships, AI-backed navigation assistance and autonomy are helping captains set sail for sunsets or simply moor in a port scratch-free. At the CES technology show in Las Vegas, boat builders are putting a big focus on technologies and artificial intelligence that make it easier for both the weekend yachting and seasoned sailor to head out to sea.

"On the water, there is wind, currents, sometimes waves, the boat does not stay in place, you always have to compensate," said Johan Inden, president of the marine business at Swedish company Volvo Penta. For more than ten years, the company's boats have helped mariners maneuver using a simple joystick that

In the long run, the goal of companies is to "reduce the number of crew members," said John Cross. They may see it as a way to save money, but also to reduce risks as accidents on board are still frequent. It is also a way of dealing with the ageing of professional seafarers and difficulties in recruiting.

The growth of work on autonomous navigation has recently been helped by the decision of the International Maritime Organization (IMO) to work on setting rules, said Rudy Negenborn of Delft University in the Netherlands.

It is still forbidden to operate an autonomous boat in international waters and new regulations are not expected before 2028. The technologies also need refining to enhance safety, reduce energy consumption and determine which are the best sensors and what to do if they fail, said Negenborn.

In any case, "there will always be a human somewhere," he said. Whether it's a sailor following a computer on board or a supervisor on land managing several boats. — AFP

Business

US services activity shrinks for first time since May 2020

Holiday season contributed to the continued growth in business activity

WASHINGTON: The dominant US services sector contracted for the first time in more than two years in December, survey data showed on Friday, as business activity slumped. The Institute for Supply Management's services index dipped below a key 50-percent threshold, indicating a contraction and surprising economists.

The sector accounts for two-thirds of the world's largest economy and has held up in spite of a forceful campaign by the Federal Reserve to cool demand and rein in surging inflation—but the higher interest rates now appear to be biting.

The ISM services index "ended a 30-month period of growth, contracting for the first time since two straight months of sub-50 percent readings in April and May 2020," said ISM survey chair Anthony Nieves. The December reading came in at 49.6 percent, with the business activity index and new orders index both plunging.

While supplier deliveries were faster in December as logistics problems eased, "employment contracted due to a combination of decreased hiring due to economic uncertainty and an inability to backfill open positions," Nieves said. "The holiday season contributed to the continued growth in business activity, albeit at a

slower rate," he added.

'Startling'

"The alarming 10.8-point plunge in new orders came out of the blue," said Ian Shepherdson, chief economist at Pantheon Macroeconomics. According to the ISM survey, comments from respondents noted that "high interest rates for mortgages have slowed sales dramatically," while orders were softening or in some cases, being canceled.

The real estate and entertainment sectors were among industries reporting a decline in new orders last month, ISM added. While monthly numbers may fluctuate, "the headline number is startling and a repeat performance in January should set alarm bells ringing," Shepherdson warned.

For now, "business is slower than usual," said a survey respondent in the agriculture sector. Another respondent from the property sector added: "We are optimistic, although concerned, about continued inflation pressures... and supply chain issues that just won't go away."

"Increasing interest rates are dampening the residential housing construction market, which only adds to the concerns," the respondent said.



NEW YORK: File photo shows, chefs prepare food in the kitchen of the Amali restaurant in New York. The dominant US services sector contracted for the first time in more than two years, survey data showed, as business activity slumped. —AFP

But Oren Klachkin of Oxford Economics said although the latest data point to weaker activity in 2023, "we are still quite a ways from a significant

slowdown." "It's important to remember that softer readings on the economy are a feature, not a bug, of the Fed's rate hiking campaign," he said. — AFP

India GDP growth forecast to slow

MUMBAI: India's economic growth will slow to 7.0 percent this financial year, according to official estimates released Friday, as weaker global demand and high inflation weigh on the world's fifth-largest economy.

The National Statistics Office forecast for the year ending March 31 still ranks India's economic outlook above every other major country but is down from the 8.7 percent growth recorded in 2021-22.

India bounced back strongly from the coronavirus pandemic but is now grappling with the same headwinds buffeting the global economy. Rising petrol costs following Russia's invasion of Ukraine have had a ripple effect on prices for the country's 1.4 billion people.

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has hiked rates by 2.25 percentage points between May and December in an aggressive response to rising consumer inflation, which hit a high of 7.79 percent in April before moderating. Higher commodity costs and a falling rupee have left India struggling with a deteriorating trade balance and its current account deficit hit a record high of \$36.4 billion in the September 2022 quarter.

The Indian rupee hit record lows last year, plunging more than 11 percent against the US dollar as the greenback rallied on risk-averse market sentiment. But India's currency has proven more resilient than its Asian peers, aided by regular central bank intervention. — AFP

Europe, US stocks rise as market eyes fewer Fed rate hikes

NEW YORK: European and US stocks advanced Friday and the dollar fell as investors digested key American jobs data that dampened expectations of more aggressive Federal Reserve interest rate hikes.

After firm gains in Europe, major indices in New York shook off early weakness and finished firmly higher, with the Dow piling on more than two percent. The much-anticipated monthly government jobs report was solid, with the United States economy adding a better-than-expected 223,000 jobs in December as unemployment dipped to 3.5 percent.

But analysts pointed to a tempering of wage growth, which was up 4.6 percent on a 12-month basis through December, compared with a 4.8 percent reading for the prior month. That was followed by a surprisingly poor services sector report from the Institute for Supply Management.

The report showed the first contraction since spring of 2020, with the business activity index and new orders index both plunging. "We're still in a 'bad news is good news' type of market reaction," said Nick Reece, a vice president at Merk Investments. "I'm not sure if that dynamic is going to last forever."

"I feel like at some point, we're going to get into 'a bad news is bad news' dynamic with respect to a potential recession being bad for the stock market," he said. Global equities have enjoyed a largely upbeat start to the new year after a dismal 2022 marked by concerns over the war in Ukraine and central bank rate hikes aimed at taming soaring prices.

The dollar fell Friday versus the euro and other



TOKYO: The opening numbers of the Nikkei 225 are displayed on the first trading day of the new year at the Tokyo Stock Exchange in Tokyo. —AFP

currencies over what dealers said were dimming expectations of more aggressive rate hikes from the Fed. "A combination of slightly slower US wages growth, and a disappointing ISM services report for December has seen the US dollar slide back sharply, pulling the pound off its lowest levels since November... as traders pare back bets that the Fed might hike by (50 basis points) in February," CMC Markets analyst Michael Hewson told AFP.

Optimism

Bourses in London, Paris and Frankfurt all climbed about one percent or more. Official data Friday showed that annual inflation in the eurozone

dropped for a second month in a row, to 9.2 percent in December.

It was the first decline into single digits since September and while inflation shows signs of cooling around the world, it remains at sky-high levels. In Asia, Hong Kong's stock market dipped after three days of gains, while Singapore, Mumbai, Wellington and Manila were also in the red.

Shanghai edged up, with help from reports saying China was considering relaxing strict rules on borrowing for property developers. Tokyo, Sydney, Seoul, Taipei, Bangkok and Jakarta also rose. There is a general sense of optimism in Asia as China emerges from almost three years of zero-COVID lockdowns and other strict containment measures. — AFP

Maduro replaces oil company chief

CARACAS: Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro on Friday replaced a cousin of his predecessor Hugo Chavez as head of state oil company PDVSA with engineer and military officer Pedro Rafael Tellechea. The change comes as Venezuela, once an oil-exporting giant, seeks to regain some of its former glory and play a bigger role in a market rattled by the war in Ukraine.

Tellechea, head of the Pequiven petrochemical company, "will consolidate the momentum of the national oil industry," Maduro wrote on Twitter. Outgoing PDVSA head Asdrubal Chavez, at the helm since April 2020, "will soon have new responsibilities," he added. Venezuela was once one of the world's largest oil producers, with output of more than three million barrels per day in 2008. Production plummeted over time to about 300,000 barrels per day due to a combination of poor management and lacking investment, but has recently risen again to about 700,000 barrels per day.

Maduro blames US sanctions for the decline, but most experts say it predates the punitive measures against a president whose 2018 reelection was dismissed as fraudulent by dozens of countries. Washington insisted this week it still did not consider Maduro to be Venezuela's legitimate president.

But in March last year, shortly after the start of the Ukraine war, the Biden administration sent a delegation to meet Maduro and in November gave the green light for US oil giant Chevron to resume operations in Venezuela.

Tellechea had led a successful offensive of the Maduro government to reclaim control in Colombia of petrochemical company Monomeros, a subsidiary of Pequiven. Colombia's former president Ivan Duque had entrusted control of Monomeros to Juan Guaido, who the US and dozens of other countries had viewed as Venezuela's legitimate president.

Maduro clung on to power and ties between the neighbors, suspended under Duque, have been reset under Gustavo Petro, Colombia's first-ever leftist president. Maduro also announced that Yvan Gil Pinto, deputy foreign minister for Europe, would take over as foreign minister from Carlos Faria, in the post since May 2022. — AFP



KARACHI: Shopkeepers fix the price tags of rice at a market in Karachi. Pakistan's central bank forex reserves have plunged to an eight-year low of \$5.6 billion, posing a serious challenge for the country in financing imports. — AFP

Pakistan imports threatened as forex reserves hit low

KARACHI: Pakistan's central bank forex reserves have plunged to an eight-year low of \$5.6 billion, posing a serious challenge for the country in financing imports. Coupled with another \$5.8 billion held by commercial banks, the nation has \$11.4 billion in reserves-enough to pay for just three weeks of imports, traders and economists say.

"This is a very grave situation. If things get worse, Pakistan will need to have its loans restructured," said Mohammad Sohail, the head of economic watchdog Topline Securities in Karachi, alluding to a possible default. Pakistan's economy has crumbled alongside a simmering political crisis, with the rupee plummeting and inflation at decades-high levels, but devastating floods and a global energy crisis have piled on further pressure.

The latest data from the central bank released overnight—for the week ending December 30 —

show the country has half the foreign exchange reserves it held a year ago. Servicing foreign debt and paying for crucial commodities such as medicine, food and energy are among the chief concerns. Thousands of shipping containers are held up at a Karachi port because banks have been unable to guarantee foreign exchange payments. Cargo includes perishable foodstuffs and medical equipment worth tens of millions of dollars.

"A major hospital in Karachi could not carry out eye surgeries for a month because of a lack of equipment," said Masood Ahmed, chairman of the Healthcare Devices Association of Pakistan.

Successive governments have failed to shore up multilateral or bilateral aid to meet foreign payments, although a \$6 billion International Monetary Fund deal was restarted after Pakistan finally met conditions such as ending subsidies on fuel. But Islamabad has so far only received half the funds—the last payment in August—with a further review of the package ongoing. "All hopes are pinned on the release of the remaining amount," Sohail said. Pakistan often looks for financial rescue from allies including China and Saudi Arabia, but analysts say the two countries are holding off until Pakistan gets the IMF green light. — AFP

Samsung Electronics quarterly profits to plunge to 8-year low

SEOUL: Samsung Electronics said Friday it expected its fourth-quarter operating profits to plunge 69 percent to an eight-year low as the global downturn hammers demand for memory chips and smartphones. The South Korean tech giant said operating profits for the October-December period had likely slumped to 4.3 trillion won (\$3.4 billion), a stinging year-on-year drop from 13.87 trillion won. It would be the company's worst decline in quarterly profits since the third quarter of 2014.

In a statement, Samsung said fourth-quarter profits were "well below current market expectations", blaming the performance on macroeconomic issues, spurred by central banks around the world raising interest rates. Weak demand for memory chips was "greater than expected as customers adjusted inventories... to further tighten finances," it said. It added that this was "spurred by concerns over deteriorating consumer sentiment caused [by] continued high global interest rates and weak economic outlooks".

Against that backdrop, the Galaxy smartphone maker also "saw a significant drop in the memory business results due to lackluster demand and also weaker sales of smartphones," it added. It was the first time in four years that Samsung issued an explanatory statement alongside their earnings predictions. The firm is the flagship subsidiary of the giant Samsung Group, by far the biggest of the family-controlled conglomerates that dominate business in Asia's fourth-largest economy and one that is crucial to South Korea's economy. "Samsung Electronics is extremely crucial to the South Korean economy," Kim Dae-jong, professor of business at Sejong University in Seoul, told AFP.

"Looking at today's announcement, this year will be a very difficult year. Not only Samsung, but the entire Korean economy seems to have to come up with a good survival strategy for the year ahead."

The widely expected fourth-quarter drop is the second consecutive margin squeeze for Samsung, which saw a 31.39 percent fall in operating profits in the third quarter year-on-year. — AFP

Lifestyle | Features



This photograph shows social media influencer Nipattanachai 'James' Thepkamdee, who is a superfan of popular South Korean girl band Blackpink, rehearsing on Blackpink songs in Bangkok. — AFP photos



This photograph shows posters and other memorabilia of popular South Korean girl band Blackpink in the bedroom of social media influencer Nipattanachai 'James' Thepkamdee and Blackpink superfan in Bangkok.

Young Thug, rap's offbeat maestro facing racketeering charges

A rap vanguard essential to the Atlanta scene that's for years been the genre's nerve center, Young Thug is one of contemporary hip hop's most famous, most idiosyncratic figures. The artist's arrest last May on racketeering charges rattled the community the 31-year-old came up in, as he and 27 other alleged street gang members were swept up in a sprawling RICO indictment.



In this file photo US rapper Young Thug performs during the 61st Annual Grammy Awards in Los Angeles, California. — AFP

State prosecutors allege the chart-topping artist born Jeffery Williams is the founder and head of YSL, or Young Slime Life, an affiliate of the Bloods street gang. But defense attorneys assert that YSL is nothing but a record label and family of artists known as Young Stoner Life—the same name of the label Young Thug founded in 2016 as an imprint of 300 Entertainment, a subsidiary of Warner Music Group. Starting Monday the rapper, who maintains he is innocent, is among 14 defendants set to stand in the wide-ranging trial expected to last at least six months.

Six others will be tried separately, while eight more have already taken plea deals. The case has sparked widespread attention not least because prosecutors are citing rap lyrics as evidence of criminal activity, a practice that for years has prompted accusations of racism and curbing of artistic expression.

The month after his arrest, Young Thug urged fans in a video shown at a concert presented by a New York radio station to sign a petition calling for legislation to restrict courts from using rap lyrics against defendants. "You know, this isn't just about me or YSL. I always use my music as a form of artistic expression, and now I see that Black artists and rappers don't have that, you know, freedom. Everybody please sign the 'Protect Black Art' petition and keep praying for us. I love you all," he said in the message. The petition has since garnered tens of thousands of signatures.

'Rap weirdo'
Born August 16, 1991, Young Thug grew up in the Jonesboro South projects of Atlanta, where other renowned rappers including Waka Flocka Flame, 2 Chainz and Ludacris also came from. As a teen he declared his future as the "next Lil Wayne," another southern rapper he idolized in his youth before becoming friends with him, getting bigger than him, and eventually beefing with him. The young rapper released mixtape after mixtape beginning in 2011, drawing the attention of Atlanta legend Gucci Mane, who signed him.

His debut commercial single "Stoner" gained acclaim, while fan favorite "Danny Glover" earned him remixes from prominent rappers including Nicki Minaj. Beloved for his experimentation in the booth, Young Thug pulled off avant-garde flows rife with voice cracks and squeals, made trippier by mind-bending rhymes and scrambled words. One critic at the hip hop magazine XXL dubbed the prolific artist a "rap weirdo," while Billboard applauded his vocal contortions: "He finds a new way to distress and warp his tone, to burrow resourcefully into rhythmic cracks and crevices."

Over more than a decade Young Thug has won legions of fans, though for years his psychedelic, flamboyant style and famously outlandish personality overwhelmed the infectious peculiarities and mastery of his music.

But today he's one of rap's most emulated artists, spawning a new generation of Thug clones including Gunna, Lil Duke, the late Lil Keed. Gunna, one of Young Thug's most famous proteges, was also swept up in the indictment but recently took a plea deal.

Critics have declared Young Thug among the most influential voices of his generation, crediting the rapper with concocting rap's current flavor by infusing it with his singular uncanny expression. "I love when people ask me what I'm saying," he told The Fader magazine in 2014. "Even though I ain't gonna tell them. I'll let them listen 10 more years before I tell them." — AFP

Lisa-mania: Thai Blackpink fans in frenzy over Bangkok concert

When Blackpink mega-star Lisa takes to the stage in Bangkok Saturday, seeing the Thai-born K-pop sensation dance in the flesh will be a life-defining moment for many local superfans. Lalisa Manobal, 25, who hails from Buriram province in northeastern Thailand, last performed on home turf in 2019 with her South Korean girl band. With speculation rife over the group's future, Thai Blink fans—as they call themselves—are anxious to see a potential last hurrah. "She is very charming when she dances and she is the best dancer in the band," said Nipattanachai Thepkamdee, an influencer who goes by the nickname "James" on his TikTok and YouTube fan club channels—which amass hundreds of thousands of followers.

"I like Lisa the most. Partly because of her skills and the fact that she is Thai," he said. The Thai government is also fond of the young rapper. It hailed her as a soft power icon after she wore traditional Thai headgear and performed in front of Phnom Rung stone castle—a Hindu Khmer Empire temple complex—in a 2021 music video for her first solo album. "When foreigners think of Lisa, they will definitely think of Thailand," Nipattanachai said. Saturday will be his first Blackpink concert. "I will freak out and probably cry, because I really, really want to see them live once in my life," he said.

The 21-year-old university student's bedroom resembles a shrine to the girl group, with floor-to-ceiling posters and a collection of Blackpink-branded paraphernalia from chocolates, biscuits and

soft drink bottles. "I have spent more than 100,000 baht (\$3000)," he said. Nipattanachai hopes to one day dance on the international stage like his idol.

For weeks, he has been busy rehearsing Blackpink choreography to be a part of warm-up festivities ahead of the first Born Pink World Tour performance in the Thai capital Saturday. "I always look at her photo and tell myself that if Lisa can do it, I can do it as well. I really love her," he said.

'Because she is Thai'
Outside of Saphachalasai National Stadium, at least a thousand early bird fans—many decked out in pink and black clothes—started gathering around noon to buy merchandise, take selfies and participate in dance flash mobs with a giant blue

bear mascot. "I like every single one of the band members but I like Lisa the most because she is Thai," Blackpink fan Sittipong Jituae, 29, told AFP. Pornthip Dumklang, 25, who travelled from another province for the concert, said she was filled with a sense of national pride to see Lisa perform. "From a scale of one to 10, my excitement is at 10 because this is my first Blackpink concert," she said. #BORNPIKINBangkok and #LisaHomeComing were trending hashtags on Twitter in Thailand on Saturday. Formed in 2016, Blackpink—made up of Lisa, two South Korean members Kim Jisoo and Jennie Kim, and New Zealand-born Australian-raised Roseanne "Rose" Park—has helped to raise K-pop's global profile with tens of millions of fans. — AFP



This photograph shows social media influencer Nipattanachai 'James' Thepkamdee, who is a superfan of popular South Korean girl band Blackpink, checking himself in front of a mirror in his bedroom in Bangkok.



This photograph shows social media influencer Nipattanachai 'James' Thepkamdee, who is a superfan of popular South Korean girl band Blackpink, working on his laptop in his bedroom in Bangkok.

Italian pleads guilty to manuscript scam that shook literary world

An Italian man admitted Friday to stealing more than 1,000 unpublished manuscripts, including from distinguished authors, solving a mystery that had rocked the literary world for years. Filippo Bernardini, 30, pleaded guilty to one count of wire fraud, federal prosecutors in New York announced in a statement. Bernardini, who worked in London for publisher Simon & Schuster, impersonated agents and publishers over email to obtain novels and other works from writers and their representatives.

The scam had been known in literary circles for several years with Margaret Atwood, Ian McEwan and Sally Rooney among the novelists reportedly targeted. It became public knowledge in January last year when Bernardini was arrested by FBI agents at New York's JFK Airport.

Beginning in August 2016, and continuing up to his arrest, the Italian impersonated hundreds of real people in the world of publishing by sending emails from fake accounts. The addresses resembled the domain names of legitimate publishers but with a letter changed here and there. Prosecutors say he registered more than 160 fraudulent domains. "Filippo Bernardini used his insider knowledge of the publishing industry to create a scheme that stole precious works from authors and menaced the publishing industry," said Damian Williams, the US Attorney for the Southern District of New York (SDNY).

In 2019, Atwood's agent revealed that the manuscript for "The Testaments" had been targeted. In 2021, New York Magazine reported that the Swedish editors of Stieg Larsson's "Millennium" series had been approached by a purported colleague in Italy who requested an advance copy so that it could be translated before release.

A New York Times investigation at the end of 2020 found that "Normal People" author Rooney, "Atonement" author McEwan, and actor Ethan Hawke had also been targeted. Bernardini's motive has never been clear. Alleged victims were baffled by the fact the thefts were never followed by demands for money, nor did the works ever seem to appear online or on the dark web.



In this file photo Canadian poet/author Margaret Atwood attends the 2019 Glamour Women Of The Year Awards at Alice Tully Hall, Lincoln Center, in New York City. — AFP

Screenshots from Bernardini's LinkedIn profile shortly after his arrest described him as a "rights coordinator" at Simon & Schuster. The profile also said he obtained a bachelors in Chinese Language in Milan and a masters in publishing from UCL in London owing to his "obsession for the written word and languages."

Simon & Schuster, which was not accused of wrongdoing, said at the time it had been "shocked and horrified to learn of the allegations." "Protection of authors' intellectual property is of the highest priority for Simon & Schuster," the publisher said in a statement Friday. "We are grateful to the FBI and Department of Justice for its defense and support of the intellectual property rights of authors throughout the world," it added. Bernardini initially pleaded not guilty. As part of his guilty plea, he agreed to pay restitution of \$88,000, the SDNY said. His crime carries a maximum sentence of 20 years in prison. Bernardini will be sentenced in Manhattan federal court on April 5. — AFP

Animal rights activists blast Paris' Moulin Rouge over snake act

Animal rights activists have launched a campaign against Paris institution the Moulin Rouge, complaining that the storied cabaret is immersing non-aquatic snakes in water on stage. The daily show at the Moulin Rouge includes a sequence with a dancer playing with large pythons in a pool of water. "The snakes have no business being there," said Amandine Sanvisens, co-founder of the PAZ animal rights group, which has launched a petition against the act.

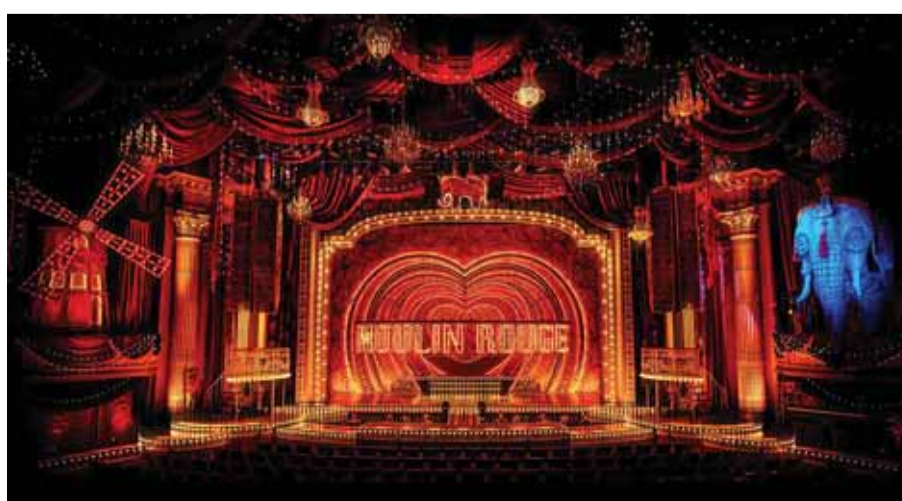
"Throughout the scene, the snake is trying to keep its head out of the water. This isn't the right environment for reptiles," added Sanvisens, who demonstrated outside the Moulin Rouge in late December. The cabaret founded in 1889 told the Parisien newspaper last month: "We have never mistreated and will never mistreat animals." It claimed it used "a species of aquatic python, equally at home in the water as on land" in the show.

But Alice Georges, a keeper at exotic pet shop Ferme Tropicale de Paris, said she had spotted reticulated pythons and

Indian pythons in videos of the act posted online. "These aren't aquatic snakes. What they're being forced to endure is horrible," she said. Paris city hall told AFP the show does not fall under its jurisdiction.

Meanwhile the Moulin Rouge appears to sit in a loophole in a 2021 law that forbids using wild animals in nightclubs or on TV from this year and bans owning them from 2028. Hailed by President Emmanuel Macron's camp at the time as an animal rights coup, the law has both sparked a backlash from circus owners and been criticized by animal rights groups for not going far enough on issues like hunting, industrial farming or bull-fighting.

"The law hasn't managed to cover every case and will have to be improved," said Loic Dombreval, an MP who co-wrote the original text. "We're waiting to see what comes next, whether or not a criminal complaint will be filed," a Moulin Rouge spokeswoman told AFP. — AFP



Lifestyle | Features

Once in 50,000-year comet may be visible to the naked eye

A newly discovered comet could be visible to the naked eye as it shoots past Earth and the Sun in the coming weeks for the first time in 50,000 years, astronomers have said. The comet is called C/2022 E3 (ZTF) after the Zwicky Transient Facility, which first spotted it passing Jupiter in March last year. After travelling from the icy reaches of our Solar System it will come closest to the Sun on January 12 and pass nearest to Earth on February 1. It will be easy to spot with a good pair of binoculars and likely even with the naked eye, provided the sky is not too illuminated by city lights or the Moon.

The comet "will be brightest when it is closest to the Earth", Thomas Prince, a physics professor at the California Institute of Technology who works at the Zwicky Transient Facility, told AFP. Made of ice and dust and emitting a greenish aura, the comet is estimated to have a diameter of around a kilometer, said



Nicolas Biver, an astrophysicist at the Paris Observatory.

That makes it significantly smaller than NEOWISE, the last comet visible with an unaided eye, which passed Earth in

March 2020, and Hale-Bopp, which swept by in 1997 with a potentially life-ending diameter of around 60 kilometers. But the newest visit will come closer to Earth, which "may make up for the fact that it is

not very big", Biver said.

While the comet will be brightest as it passes Earth in early February, a fuller moon could make spotting it difficult. For the Northern Hemisphere, Biver suggested the last week of January, when the comet passes between the Ursa Minor and Ursa Major constellations. The new moon during the weekend of January 21-22 offers a good chance for stargazers, he said.

"We could also get a nice surprise and the object could be twice as bright as expected," Biver added. Prince said another opportunity to locate the comet in the sky will come on February 10, when it passes close to Mars.

'Rare visitor'

The comet has spent most of its life "at least 2,500 times more distant than the Earth is from the Sun", Prince said. Biver said the comet was believed to have come from the Oort Cloud, a theorized

vast sphere surrounding the Solar System that is home to mysterious icy objects. The last time the comet passed Earth was during the Upper Paleolithic period, when Neanderthals still roamed Earth.

Prince said the comet's next visit to the inner Solar System was expected in another 50,000 years. But Biver said there was a possibility that after this visit the comet will be "permanently ejected from the Solar System". Among those closely watching will be the James Webb Space Telescope. However, it will not take images, instead studying the comet's composition, Biver said.

The closer the comet is to Earth, the easier it is for telescopes to measure its composition "as the Sun boils off its outer layers", Prince said. This "rare visitor" will give "us information about the inhabitants of our Solar system well beyond the most distant planets", he added. — AFP

'Three Amigos' friendship key to success, say Mexican filmmakers

Dubbed the "Three Amigos," directors Guillermo del Toro, Alejandro Inarritu and Alfonso Cuaron have amassed multiple Oscars between them and forged a golden age of Mexican filmmaking. At a Los Angeles event Friday celebrating their new films, the trio told AFP their long-standing friendship had been essential to their success—even if they don't take their Hollywood nickname too seriously. "Amigo one calling amigo two!" said del Toro, nudging Cuaron.

"I could have been a good director without their intervention. But they have intervened and I survived!" joked Inarritu. The bond between the directors—born just a few years apart—goes back decades, with Cuaron and del Toro finding success together in television, and Inarritu in radio, before each switching to filmmaking. Back as far back as breakthrough hits such as Inarritu's "Amores Perros" in 2000, the compatriots have frequently traded notes on new projects, and even helped to totally re-edit each other's works.

"Honestly, I think it has been crucial... To not be walking lonely in this job is a beautiful gift for us," said Inarritu. "Either we talk or we don't talk, but I know that the other two are there for anything," agreed Cuaron. "Sometimes you even avoid their opinion! You go 'I will just keep going because I know what they're gonna tell me!'" joked del Toro.

'A little easier'

In 2018, Cuaron—marginally the oldest of the triumvirate—made waves in Hollywood by teaming with Netflix to cre-

ate "Roma," an intimate black-and-white drama that earned him his second Oscar for best director (after "Gravity.") Inarritu and del Toro have recently followed him to partner with the streaming giant.

For Inarritu, who won back-to-back Academy Awards with "Birdman" and "The Revenant," Netflix provided the opportunity to make his most personal film yet. The sprawling, dreamlike "BARDO, False Chronicle of a Handful of Truths" follows a celebrated Mexican filmmaker as he explores the fuzzy lines between reality and memory, life and death, and the US and Mexico.

Its main character is granted a prestigious global award by a US institution, prompting a period of dramatic soul-searching—and evoking parallels with the careers of the "Three Amigos." "I don't think that it has changed us as filmmakers... but definitely recognition like the Oscars or awards, they make sometimes the journey a little easier later on," said Cuaron.

'Life-changing'

For del Toro, his best picture and best director Oscars for "The Shape of Water" in 2018 were "a life-changing thing." "You don't know you have a chip on your shoulder until it disappears. And it kind of disappeared that night for me," he said. "It was beautiful. And it was very, very moving."

His latest movie "Guillermo del Toro's Pinocchio," a dark, animated take on the Italian novel about an exuberant living puppet, has been another hit. It is tipped to win best animation prizes at next week's Golden Globes and Critics Choice Awards, and is a likely frontrunner for the Oscars in March. But when asked what the joint secret to their success has been, the trio refused to be drawn into a serious answer. "I think our craving for tacos maybe, that's what we share... but he always wins!" said Inarritu, pointing at del Toro. "I think humor," responded del Toro. "And good breath!" — AFP



Mexican filmmakers Alfonso Cuaron (center), Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu (left) and Guillermo del Toro (right) attend Netflix's "Three Amigos in Conversation" at David Geffen Theater at The Academy Museum in Los Angeles. — AFP

The oven won't talk to the fridge: 'Smart' homes struggle

Tech firms have spent years hawking the idea of a connected home filled with "smart" devices that help smooth daily domestic lives—and this year's CES gadget show in Las Vegas is no different. The world's biggest tech trade show features everything from televisions that ping when your clothes dryer is done, to mirrors that fire up your coffee machine in the morning.

But the vision on display at CES remains far from reality as the devices are pricey and they do not yet talk to each other with any fluency. French company Baracoda is at CES, which runs from 5 to 8 January, to show off a prototype connected mirror that can interact with bathroom scales, the toilet or a toothbrush.

"You can see immediately if you've brushed your teeth properly or if you need to put on sunscreen, for example," says the firm's Baptiste Quiniou. But it can only work to its full capacity with devices developed by Baracoda or its partners. For

start-ups and multinationals, making these products work with other brands is becoming crucial. "Sometimes they can do incredibly useful things, but if they're not connected to the wider info system, information dies alone," said analyst Avi Greengart.

Battle of ecosystems

Big players from Amazon and Apple to Google and Samsung have built entire ecosystems for their devices, often around a voice assistant like Alexa or Siri. Greengart said each company thought its

ecosystem would draw in enough people and devices to dominate the others. "What ended up happening is that nobody grew," he said, and the industry "to an extent stagnated."

The biggest firms have spent years trying to tackle the "interoperability" problem, finally agreeing a protocol last year called "Matter" that sets a standard for connected home products. "You can think about it as the USB of the smart home," said Mark Benson of Smart Things, Samsung's connected home subsidiary.

Just as USB ports allowed all devices

to plug into all machines, so the Matter protocol means all connected devices will work with each other, he said, and users will no longer need to download a different app for each device. But Matter will not kill off Alexa, Siri and their friends just yet. Jeff Wang of Accenture said making the devices work with each other was the easier part.

"The hard part is the app model, the data model, the sharing of this, because the human nature of companies is to be very selfish about this," he said. Each brand is now trying to convince the public to adopt its app to centralize control of household appliances.

At CES, Samsung presented a vision of consumers using its Smart Things app to monitor the chicken in the Samsung oven while watching a Samsung TV that would also tell them when their Samsung washing machine was finishing its cycle.

Mark Benson reckoned more than half of homes in America now have a smart device in them. "And more than half of those started their smart home journey just in the last three years," he said. Yet for now, consumers have largely limited their buy-in to the connected home to inexpensive "smart" speakers, using them as timers or to listen to music. — AFP



A product expert demonstrates features on a refrigerator during a preview of Samsung Electronics Co.'s Bespoke Home appliances and SmartThings home technologies ahead of the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) in Las Vegas.



A representative demonstrates Samsung's AI OptiWash washing machine technology during a preview of Samsung Electronics Co.'s Bespoke Home appliances and SmartThings home technologies.



A product expert demonstrates the oven beneath an electric induction stove cooktop during a preview of Samsung Electronics Co.'s Bespoke Home appliances and SmartThings home technologies ahead of the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) in Las Vegas.



This file photo shows Britain's Prince Harry, Duke of Sussex (left) and Britain's Prince William, Duke of Cambridge at the unveiling of a statue of their mother, Princess Diana at The Sunken Garden in Kensington Palace, London. — AFP photos



British daily newspaper, leading with stories about the publication of the book 'Spare' by Britain's Prince Harry, Duke of Sussex, are pictured displayed for sale in London.

Prince Harry faces growing criticism over memoir revelations

Prince Harry faced a backlash Friday over his memoir "Spare", with criticism from the media, commentators, army veterans and even the Taliban, while Buckingham Palace kept silent on its widely leaked contents. Days before the official publication on Tuesday, disclosures from the book dominated headlines and airwaves after a Spanish-language version of the memoir mistakenly went on sale in Spain.

Revelations, including an alleged physical attack on him by heir to the throne Prince William, how he lost his virginity, took drugs and killed 25 people in Afghanistan, have prompted both condemnation and derision. Writer A.N. Wilson called the ghostwritten tome—the biggest royal book since Harry's mother Princess Diana collaborated with Andrew Morton for a 1992 biography—"calculated and despicable" and a work of "malice". Describing his decision to go public "idiotic", Wilson said the book had merely succeeded in making the public sympathize with the royal family, "not with him".

'Idiotic'

The book is the latest broadside from Harry and his American wife Meghan after they quit royal duties and moved to California in 2020. The Duke and Duchess of Sussex, as they are formally known, have since cashed in on their royal connections with several lucrative contracts for tell-all books and programs. The Spanish-language version of the book was hurriedly withdrawn from shelves after the blunder on Thursday but not before it had been

purchased by media outlets, wrecking the publisher's strict worldwide embargo.

The Sun tabloid said public sympathy for Harry over losing his mother as a child could not "justify the destructive, vengeful path he has chosen, throwing his own family under a bus for millions of dollars". In an editorial, it pointed to "countless discrepancies" in his claims and advised him to listen to friends who have urged him to



A poster advertising the forthcoming publication of the book 'Spare' by Britain's Prince Harry, Duke of Sussex, is pictured in the window of a book store in London.

"stop for his own good".

The Guardian's Gaby Hinsliff said the book had moved beyond issues of "awkward public interest" into the "washing of dirty linen" in public. The US edition of the left-leaning newspaper was the first to publish a leaked extract of the book this week, in which Harry described his physical altercation with William. "The details of the brothers' alleged punch-up in a palace cottage are at once almost ridiculously trivial and heartbreakingly sad," she wrote.

'Trashed'

Harry's claim to have killed 25 people in Afghanistan and likening his actions to removing "chess pieces" from a board, has been seen as boastful and inappropriate, and enraged some veterans. Retired colonel Tim Collins, who led a British battalion in Iraq in 2003, condemned a "tragic

money-making scam", adding: "That's not how you behave in the army. It's not how we think. "Harry has now turned against the other family, the military, that once embraced him, having trashed his birth family," he added.

Another high-ranking veteran who served in Afghanistan, colonel Richard Kemp, said his comments would "feed jihadist propaganda". Senior Taliban official Anas Haqqani tweeted: "Mr Harry! The ones you killed were not chess pieces, they were humans; They had families who were waiting for their return."

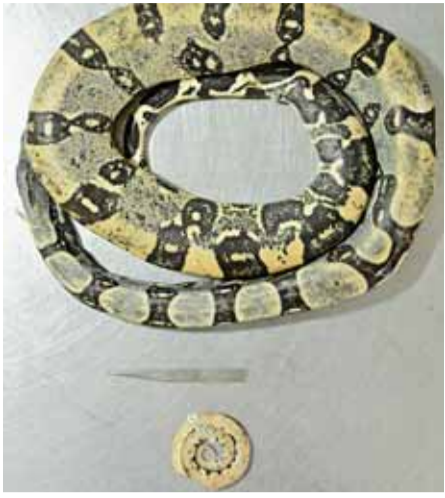
Jealousy claims

As the hashtag #ShutUpHarry began trending on Twitter, The Sun quoted sources close to his father, King Charles III, as saying he had been saddened by the book. But there was no official palace comment. In fresh claims in the memoir reported by the Daily Telegraph late Friday, Harry alleges that his father wanted to avoid supporting him and Meghan financially because he was jealous of her.

The duke writes he realized Charles feared "a novel and resplendent" royal who would "dominate" the limelight after the now-king raised concerns about the monarchy supporting the couple monetarily after their 2018 wedding. "He had experienced that before and he had no interest in letting it happen to him again," Harry writes, referring to Diana, the Telegraph said.

Craig Prescott, a constitutional expert at Bangor University in north Wales, told AFP the "scale" and "ferocity" of the current royal rift was unprecedented but the royal family would probably "ride this out". But any moves to remove Harry and Meghan's royal titles would require political intervention and new legislation. The royals would likely regard that as "pouring fuel onto the fire" at a time when they wanted to focus on Charles's looming coronation on May 6, he said. — AFP

Lifestyle | Features



A specimen of a new species of dwarf boa (center-bottom), "Tropidophis cacuangoae," is compared at a laboratory of the National Institute of Biodiversity INABIO in Quito.



Ecuadorian scientist Mario Yanez shows a specimen of a new species of dwarf boa, "Tropidophis cacuangoae," at a laboratory of the National Institute of Biodiversity INABIO in Quito.



Ecuadorian scientist Mario Yanez shows a specimen of a new species of dwarf boa.



Ecuadorian scientist Mario Yanez gestures during an interview to show a specimen of a new species of dwarf boa, "Tropidophis cacuangoae."



Ecuadorian scientist Mario Yanez shows a specimen of a new species of dwarf boa, "Tropidophis cacuangoae."

New dwarf boa found in Ecuadorian Amazon

Scientists have discovered a new species of dwarf boa in the Ecuadorian Amazon and named it after an Indigenous activist. Up to 20 centimeters (7.8 inches) long and with skin coloring similar to those of the boa constrictor—the previously unknown snake was named *Tropidophis cacuangoae*. The second part of the name honors early 20th century Indigenous rights activist Dolores Cacungo, according to

Ecuador's environment ministry.

Two specimens were found in the Colonso Chalupas national reserve and in the private Sumak Kawsay park, the discoverers reported. These snakes "are a relic of time, they are animals so old that finding or bumping into one of them is a privilege," Ecuadorian researcher Mario Yanez of the National Biodiversity Institute (INABIO) told AFP.

The species is unusual for having a

"vestigial pelvis" characteristic of primitive snakes and taken as evidence by some that snakes descended from lizards that lost their limbs over millions of years. The team's findings were published in the *European Journal of Taxonomy*. The ministry said the discovery brought to six the number of known *Tropidophis* species, endemic to South America.—AFP



Itziar Abascal gets into the ocean next to two men dressed as people from the Moche civilization paddling their "Caballitos de Totora", a type of boat used to navigate since ancient times, as she departs from the Regatas Lima Club in Lima.

Six women in Peru embark on transoceanic voyage on paddle board

Six women are attempting to paddle 8,000 kilometers (5,000 miles) across the Pacific Ocean to raise awareness about how sport can help cancer patients overcome emotional distress. These women—one from Spain and the others French—set off on Wednesday from Lima with their single board and paddles heading for Mo'orea in French Polynesia. "We're going to attempt an unprecedented challenge: connecting Lima to Mo'orea on a board. We're six water women," Stephanie Geyer Barneix told AFP from the Lima Rowing Club before setting off.

"It is a project that has been three years in the making. Today it is being realized," added the 47-year-old, a survivor of breast cancer. "We're going to paddle day and night to try to arrive at the end of March in Mo'orea." The women will take turns on one board, swapping places every hour, to paddle standing up while the other five rest in a catamaran traveling behind it with first aid personnel aboard.

All six are athletes and trained coast guards, aged between 22 and 47. They will each paddle for about four hours a day, with Geyer Barneix expecting them to advance five to six kilometers every

hour. This attempt is inspired by the 1947 Kon-Tiki expedition led by Norwegian explorer Thor Heyerdahl. He built a wooden raft using centuries old materials and technologies in a bid to prove that ancient South American people could have reached Polynesia by sea.

"Originally we saw that the shortest route was from Mexico but then we discovered the history of Kon-Tiki, which inspired us quite a bit as it was comprised of six men and we're six women," said Geyer Barneix. Also taking part in the "Cape Optimist" adventure are Alexandra Lux, Emmanuelle Bescheron, Itziar Abascal, Marie Goyeneche and Margot Calvet.

Spaniard Abascal, 34, powered the first paddle strokes from the Peruvian coast. She was escorted off by two local fishermen aboard rustic rafts made from an indigenous aquatic plant that has been used in navigation vessels for centuries. "It's a huge sporting challenge to be able to tackle this great journey," said Abascal, whose parents both had cancer.

"They taught me to never give up. You always have to keep going." "That's our motto: taking it day by day, stroke by stroke all the way to Polynesia. It's a bit like how the illness progresses, day by day, step by step." The expedition aims to raise funds for Hope Team East, an association that supports people suffering from or recovering from cancer through sport. "We're here to paddle for sick children ... we all have oceans to cross," said Geyer Barneix.—AFP



(From left) Marie Goyeneche, Emmanuelle Bescheron, Alexandra Lux, Margot Calvet, Itziar Abascal and Stephanie Geyer say goodbye to friends and family from a phone before departing from the Regatas Lima Club in Lima.—AFP photos



(From left) Emmanuelle Bescheron, Itziar Abascal, Margot Calvet, Marie Goyeneche, Alexandra Lux and Stephanie Geyer pose for a picture before departing from Club Regatas Lima in Lima.



Itziar Abascal (right) prepares the paddleboard before departing from Club Regatas Lima in Lima.



Itziar Abascal (center) prepares her paddleboard next to two men dressed as people from the Moche civilization paddling their "Caballitos de Totora" as she departs from the Regatas Lima Club in Lima.

Vermeer works inspired by pinhole camera, new book says

Dutch master Johannes Vermeer's photo-like paintings were likely inspired by a 17th-century pinhole camera that was first introduced to him by Jesuit priests, a new biography said on Friday. The book also reveals for the first time the extent of the influence of the Catholic church on Vermeer (1632-1675), who was born Protestant but later converted, Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum said.

The museum will in February stage the biggest ever exhibition by the Dutch Golden Age painter, whose works such as "Girl with a Pearl Earring" are world famous but about whose life little is known. His home in Delft was next to a Jesuit mission with a hidden church where he "quite possibly first came into contact with the Jesuits in connection with the camera obscura," says the biography by Gregor Weber, the Rijksmuseum's fine arts department head.



Used in various forms for thousands of years, the "camera obscura" involves a darkened room or box into which the outside image is projected through a small hole or lens. "Lighting effects which are particular to the camera can also be found in Vermeer's paintings, leaving little room for doubt that the artist drew inspiration from the device," the museum said.

Speculation has swirled for years that Vermeer experimented with a camera obscura for his works, which are renowned for their use of light and shade. The Jesuits "regarded the camera obscura as a tool for the observation of God's divine light" and Weber had discovered a drawing by the priest living next door to Vermeer that shows its effects, the Rijksmuseum said.

The characteristic effect produced by the device, with the centre in focus but other areas blurred, is "precisely what Vermeer achieves" in his painting *The Lacemaker*, which hangs in the Louvre in Paris, it added. Although Vermeer was baptized in the Reformed Church, he likely converted to Catholicism just before marrying Catharina Bolnes in 1653.

Public Catholic worship was outlawed in the late 16th century by the Calvinist Dutch, but around a third of the population remained faithful to the Vatican. Vermeer's fame has soared in recent years but he died in relative obscurity, leaving his wife and children in debt.—AFP

Sports

Injury scare as Djokovic beats Medvedev to make Adelaide final

Czech teenager Linda Noskova stunned world number two Ons Jabeur

ADELAIDE: An intense Novak Djokovic brushed aside Daniil Medvedev on Saturday to set up an Adelaide International final against Sebastian Korda and played down injury concerns after appearing to tweak his hamstring. The top seed, who has an ominous 22-1 record since September, was breathtaking at times as he cruised past the former world number one Russian 6-3, 6-4 in preparation for the Australian Open, where he is a nine-time champion.

In the women's draw, unheralded Czech teenager Linda Noskova stunned world number two Ons Jabeur 6-3, 1-6, 6-3, with the qualifier into her first-ever final against second seed Aryna Sabalenka. World number five Djokovic broke in both sets on Medvedev double-faults before lifting his intensity to storm home.

But he had a scare in the first set, clutching his left hamstring as he attempted to reach for a Medvedev cross-court forehand. He continued but then took a medical timeout. "Thankfully nothing too serious, if it was I wouldn't be able to continue," he said. "I just tried with some anti-inflammatories and it kind of settled in after a few games."

"I was just trying to keep the momentum going and don't allow him to break my serve. The longer the match went my hamstring was warmer, I guess, and bothering me less. "Hopefully for tomorrow it will be all fine," he added.

Unseeded Korda, son of former world number two

Petr Korda, was in charge 7-6 (7/5), 1-0 of his match when Japan's Yoshihito Nishioka called for a medical timeout for treatment in his upper right leg before pulling out of the match.

"Very excited for the way I'm playing and a lot of confidence leading into the big one (final)," said Korda, 22, who won his first and only title on clay in Parma in 2021, while making two finals last year. "Excited to play either one (Djokovic or Medvedev). It's always a great thing to learn from different kinds of players. "It's going to be a great learning experience whatever the outcome and, you know, I'm going to go for the win."

'100 percent'

Noskova, 18, had already upset two-time Australian Open champion Victoria Azarenka en route to the semis and carried that into her clash with Jabeur in only her sixth tour-level event. "I don't think either of us played 100 percent and I'm glad I got that last point to win, just really glad to play like this," said the world number 102.

"I'm just going for it 100 percent all the time, just trying to push through." Jabeur had treatment on a lower back problem at 2-5 in the first set, but she bounced back to easily take the second before struggling in the third.

Sabalenka surged into the final by crushing Romanian veteran Irina-Camelia Begu 6-3, 6-2. "I'm



ADELAIDE: Serbian tennis player Novak Djokovic hits a return during his semi-final match against Russian Daniil Medvedev at the ATP Adelaide International tournament in Adelaide on January 7, 2023. — AFP

happy with the level I played today," said the Belarusian, who is targeting an 11th career title and a first since Abu Dhabi and Madrid in 2021.

"She's playing a different style so super happy that

I was able to be in the match. "We did everything right in the pre-season, I think this is the key," she added in explaining her good early-season form, where she is yet to drop a set. — AFP

NFL agrees to possible neutral site for AFC game

MIAMI: The NFL has voted to change the rules for the AFC playoffs after the cancellation of the regular-season game between the Buffalo Bills and the Cincinnati Bengals, paving the way for a possible neutral site title game.

Monday's game between the two AFC teams was postponed and then fully cancelled after Bills safety Damar Hamlin suffered a cardiac arrest on the field. The 24-year-old, who has been in hospital since the nationally televised game, had his breathing tube removed overnight and had a video call with his team-mates as his condition continues to improve.

But the unusual situation of two teams having played one game less than the rest of the league has led the NFL to adjust their system for choosing home field advantage in the AFC post-season. Normally match-ups and home field advantage are determined by seeding based on the better regular-season records.

The league's previous ruling for cases where teams played less than the full regular season schedule used a calculation based on winning percentage over the season. But on Friday, the league voted for a resolution which would see the AFC Championship game played at a neutral site in certain scenarios where team's do not have a clear difference in records.

The decision was taken ahead of this weekend's final round of regular season games. The most likely case in which a neutral venue would be used is if the Bills (12-3) and the Kansas Chiefs (13-3) reached the AFC Championship game having both either won or both lost their final regular season game.

If the Baltimore Ravens (10-6) defeat Cincinnati this weekend and the Los Angeles Chargers (10-6) beat the Denver Broncos, the venue for a possible wildcard game between the Ravens and Bengals would be determined by a coin toss. "We believe this is a focused approach that will only affect four teams, and directly address the potential for competitive inequity resulting from 30 teams playing 17 games and two playing 16 games," NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell said on Friday.

"It was critical for the owners to vote today so that clubs know going into this weekend what they're playing for," he added. But Bengals coach Zac Taylor was critical of the decision. "As far as I'm concerned, we just want the rules to be followed," Taylor said in comments reported by the Cincinnati Enquirer.

"When a game is cancelled, you just turn to winning percentage to clarify everything so we don't have to make up rules. It seems like there are positives for a lot of teams and just negatives for us," he added. None of the changes impact the NFC Conference, where all teams will have completed their full 17 regular season games. The winners of the AFC and NFC Championship games will meet in the Super Bowl on February 12 in Glendale, Arizona. — AFP

Farrell kicks Saracens to narrow win

LONDON: Owen Farrell landed a long-range drop goal with the game's final kick as Premiership leaders Saracens edged out Gloucester 19-16 at Kingsholm on Friday. The Saracens and England fly-half had endured a miserable night with his goalkicking, missing four shots at goal from six attempts, including three from around Gloucester's 22-metre line.

But he came up trumps when it mattered as Saracens surged 14 points clear at the Premiership



SYDNEY: Italy's Matteo Berrettini takes a selfie with team members after Lucia Bronzetti's victory against Greece's Valentini Grammatikopoulou in the women's singles in the semi-final of the United Cup tennis tournament in Sydney on January 7, 2023. — AFP

Italy into United Cup final against US

SYDNEY: Stefanos Tsitsipas battled from a set down to topple Matteo Berrettini Saturday but it was in vain as an unstoppable Lucia Bronzetti powered Italy into the final of the inaugural United Cup against a dominant United States.

World number four Tsitsipas came through a do-or-die clash in Sydney 4-6, 7-6 (7/2), 6-4 to earn a crucial point for his country and boost his confidence ahead of the Australian Open. But it wasn't enough with Bronzetti pummeling Greece's Valentini Grammatikopoulou 6-2, 6-3 in the following match to give Italy an unassailable 3-1 lead.

They meet the United States in Sunday's final after the red-hot Americans swept past Poland 5-0. Italy went into day two of the semi-finals with a 2-0 advantage after a gutsy Martina Trevisan upset world number six Maria Sakkari 6-3, 6-7 (4/7), 7-5 in a gripping encounter on Friday. Trevisan's team-mate Lorenzo Musetti then crushed Greek teenager Stefanos Sakellariadis 6-1, 6-1. With Tsitsipas winning, the pressure was on Grammatikopoulou, a late replacement for Despina Papatichail.

But she was outgunned by Bronzetti and reduced to tears in the first set. "It's a special moment to bring such an important point to Italy. We are a great team, great friends and I'm so excited and so happy right now," said Bronzetti.

Berrettini, ranked 16, took a grip on his high-quality match with an unanswered break in game seven of the first set. They went toe-to-toe in set two before the pumped-up Tsitsipas prevailed in a tiebreaker to take it to a third set where he ground down his tiring opponent.

"I hung in there and was just waiting for my chances, he's a big server," said Tsitsipas. "I was able to play with a lot of intensity."

summit. Farrell, though, could face an anxious wait after a high shoulder-led challenge on a Gloucester player five minutes from time might yet attract the citing commissioner's attention.

England kick off their Six Nations campaign against Scotland at Twickenham on February 4. Farrell booted two penalties, while Max Malins and scrum-half Ivan van Zyl scored tries, yet his opposite number Santiago Carreras enjoyed an 80 percent success rate, landing three penalties and a conversion of wing Ollie Thorley's first-half try.

The visitors breached Gloucester's defence through an early touchdown for Malins. But Gloucester hit back in the 15th minute as Thorley showcased blistering pace, smashing through two tackles on a 50-metre run to the line, and Carreras' conversion made it 7-5.

Served well

Earlier, a composed Taylor Fritz beat Poland's Hubert Hurkacz in a battle of top 10 players to power the United States into the final. The world number nine was too good for his big-serving opponent, ranked one place behind him, winning 7-6 (7/5), 7-6 (7/5).

Fritz came into the match with the United States already 2-0 up after Jessica Pegula stunned world number one Iga Swiatek 6-2, 6-2 on Friday and Frances Tiafoe swept past Kacper Zuk 6-3, 6-3. His victory gave them an insurmountable lead before Madison Keys made it 4-0 by beating Magda Linette 6-4, 6-2.

"I think the difference in the tiebreakers was I just served well and I put some returns in the court, played some really solid points and didn't give him anything," said Fritz. "I'm super excited going into the finals and I think we have been the favourites all week," he said.

Fritz earned break points at 4-4 in set one after putting pressure on Hurkacz's booming serve, but the lanky Pole saved them both and turned the tables to earn two set points at 5-4. But he too was denied and it went to a tiebreak, where the American dug deep.

Nothing separated them in the second set, with Hurkacz slamming his racket to the ground as his frustrations grew. It again went to the tiebreak, where two unforced errors from the Pole handed Fritz victory.

Keys kept her unbeaten record at the tournament intact with a battling display against Linette. After grinding through the first set, she went a break down in the second but was ultimately too strong. "I feel like I've been playing really well on these courts and to be able to have so many matches on them already and get as comfortable as possible definitely helped me today," said the world number 11. Keys and Fritz then teamed up to win a dead mixed doubles rubber to ensure a clean-sweep. — AFP

A Farrell penalty nudged Saracens back in front, only for Carreras to restore Gloucester's advantage, but the England fly-half struck again in the closing moments of the first half and secured a one-point interval advantage.

A Carreras penalty early in the second half made it 13-11 before Carreras and Farrell both missed penalties. Saracens claimed a second try with a quarter of an hour to go after Farrell's kick caused uncertainty in the Gloucester defence, before a slick handling move allowed Van Zyl to cross wide out. Farrell missed the conversion and Saracens led by three points entering the closing stages. Another Carreras penalty tied things up eight minutes from time, before Farrell kept his composure and Saracens could celebrate an 11th league win from 12 starts this season. — AFP

Morikawa takes two-shot lead at Kapalua

LOS ANGELES: Two-time major winner Collin Morikawa fired seven birdies in a seven-under par 66 on Friday to grab a two-shot lead in the US PGA Tour Tournament of Champions in Hawaii. As the wind picked up at Kapalua, Morikawa was the only player in the field to remain bogey-free through 36 holes.

His 16-under par second-round total of 130 put him two clear of world number two Scottie Scheffler and fellow American J.J. Spaun. Scheffler, who could regain the world number one ranking from Rory McIlroy with a top-three finish this week, closed with four straight birdies in his 66 for 14-under 132.

Spaun, who was part of a three-way tie for the lead on Thursday with Morikawa and Jon Rahm, carded a five-under 68. Morikawa, who won the 2020 PGA Championship and the 2021 Open Championship, pulled away early, opening his round with a 19-foot birdie at the first hole. He added birdies at the third, fourth and fifth to make the turn at 13-under, then drilled a 30-foot birdie putt at the 10th. After saving par from greenside bunkers at the 12th and 13th, Morikawa blasted out of a greenside trap to eight feet at 14 and made that for birdie.

He added a two-putt birdie at the par-five 15th. He was unable to convert and eight-foot birdie chance at 17 and his 30-foot birdie try at 18 lipped out, leaving him one shy of the Plantation Course 36-hole record. "Pretty solid, made some good putts. Obviously it played a lot harder with kind of the wind, and just the fairways rolling pretty fast, you end up in a lot of spots where you're just going to end up in the rough," said Morikawa. The 25-year-old Californian has family connections to Hawaii and said he felt the local support. "It's great. It definitely feels like home. Even though I never lived here. My Dad used to come all the time as a kid and grandparents are from here and great grandparents are from here and there's a long lineage throughout the Hawaii islands for me."

"It's nice to kind of feel that family, that ohana spirit around and just have people rooting you on," he added. Scheffler also got off to a quick start, with birdies at the first, third and fifth before a bogey at the sixth, where he needed three shots to reach the green. He bounced back with a 14-foot birdie at the seventh and a birdie at 12 before surrendering a shot at 13.

Scheffler stormed home, however, reaching the green in two for a birdie at the par-five 15th, then draining a six-footer and a five-footer for birdies at 16 and 17 before another two-putt birdie at the last.

"I hit some good shots toward the end, made a few nice putts, too," said Scheffler, who said putting isn't always easy on the grainy greens at Kapalua. The American, who first rose to number one on the world after his triumph at the Masters last April, said he didn't focus on the chance to return to the top. — AFP



LAHAINA: Collin Morikawa of the United States plays his shot from the 17th tee during the second round of the Sentry Tournament of Champions at Plantation Course at Kapalua Golf Club. — AFP

Sports

Durant leads Nets to win at Pelicans, Hornets equal record first quarter

Philadelphia 76ers' streak of 11 straight home wins comes to an end

MIAMI: Kevin Durant scored 33 points and Kyrie Irving turned it on late in the game as the Brooklyn Nets beat the New Orleans Pelicans 108-102 on Friday. The Nets, who had seen their 12-game NBA winning streak end at Chicago on Wednesday, trailed 64-53 at half-time but got a grip on the contest in the third quarter.

Durant also grabbed 10 rebounds, the 11th time in his career he has combined 30-plus points with double-figure rebounds. The Pelicans were without their two star performers with Zion Williamson and Brandon Ingram both still sidelined with injuries, but they delivered an aggressive performance in what was an intense encounter.

New Orleans made a strong start, taking a 10-point lead in the first quarter after a fine three-pointer from Naji Marshall and they then started the second quarter with a 13-1 run. But the Nets grew into the game and outscored the Pelicans 35-21 in the third quarter and Irving, who scored 19 points, made a 30-foot three-point jumper with 43 seconds remaining to make it 106-100 before putting away two free throws to secure the win.

"It was a tale of two halves, even though we didn't get our shots to fire early on, or throughout the whole game, we just kept on pushing, it was a solid win for us," said Durant. Brooklyn improve to 26-13 while the Pelicans are 24-15 after their fifth loss on home court this season.

The Charlotte Hornets equalled the NBA record for the most point in the opening quarter of game when they put up 51 against the Milwaukee Bucks. The haul matched the record set by the Golden State Warriors against the Denver Nuggets in 2019.

The Hornets, bottom of the standings in the East, ran out 138-109 winners against the second-placed Bucks. Terry Rozier had a season-high 39 points for the Hornets while the normally free-scoring Giannis Antetokounmpo, who was averaging 32.7 points per game, was restricted to just nine. Bucks head coach Mike Budenholzer said he was concerned about some common threads in several of their defeats this season.

"We haven't matched what it takes to be competitive in an NBA game on multiple occasions now and it's concerning," he said. The Los Angeles Lakers have their first four-game winning streak of the season thanks to a 130-114 victory home victory over the Atlanta Hawks.

LeBron James scored 25 points, pulled down seven rebounds and handed out 10 assists. Kendrick Nunn added 23 points off the bench and Dennis Schroder scored 21 for the Lakers, who are still without injured star Anthony Davis.

In Denver, Nikola Jokic put together his league-leading 10th triple-double of the season, scoring 28 points with 15 rebounds and 10 assists in a 121-108 victory over the Cleveland Cavaliers. The Western Conference-leading Nuggets have won nine of their last 10 games.

Caris LeVert scored 22 points and Darius Garland added 21 for Cleveland, but with star Donovan Mitchell sitting out the Cavs saw their three-game winning streak end.

LaVine leads Bulls

The Philadelphia 76ers' streak of 11 straight home wins came to an end with a 126-112 loss to the



NEW ORLEANS: Kevin Durant #7 of the Brooklyn Nets drives to the basket during the game against the New Orleans Pelicans on January 6, 2023 at the Smoothie King Center in New Orleans, Louisiana. —AFP

Chicago Bulls, who were powered by the three-point shooting of Zach LaVine. LaVine made 11 of 13 three-pointers and scored 41 points while Nikola Vucevic had a 19-point, 18-rebound, 10-assist, triple-double.

The 76ers were without key man Joel Embiid, who missed his second consecutive game with a sore left foot as their 12-game winning streak against the Bulls ended. The New York Knicks won

their fourth straight game with a 112-108 win at the Toronto Raptors with Julius Randle producing 32 points and 11 rebounds.

"He's playing really well, he's playing with confidence," Knicks point guard Jalen Brunson said. "It's awesome to see how he bounced back. He still has a lot more to prove. Not just to everyone else, but to himself because has a whole other level he can unleash." — AFP



SYDNEY: Australia's captain Pat Cummins (C) appeals successfully with team mates for LBW to dismiss South Africa's Khaya Zondo during the third cricket Test match between Australia and South Africa at the Sydney Cricket Ground (SCG) in Sydney on January 7, 2023. —AFP

Cummins bowls Australia for series whitewash

SYDNEY: Skipper Pat Cummins bowled Australia into contention to pull off a stunning victory with a fiery spell against South Africa in an absorbing third Sydney Test on Saturday. Cummins captured three for 29 in a hostile 14 overs to set up the Australians for a dramatic final day charge for victory to complete a series clean sweep against the hapless Proteas.

At the close on day four, South Africa were battling for survival at 149 for six in reply to Australia's 475 for four declared first innings with Marco Jansen on 10 and Simon Harmer six. The outgunned South Africans have only passed 200 once so far in this series. The Australians need 14 more wickets to pull off an astonishing victory despite so much time lost and cannot be counted out after rocking the tourists in Saturday's two compelling sessions of the rain-marred Test.

"I'm pretty excited about tomorrow," said spinner Nathan Lyon. "It's going to be an exciting day's cricket, we know what we have to do." Josh Hazlewood made the initial breakthrough, removing Dean Elgar for 15 continuing the Proteas' skipper's wretched series of low scores.

Hazlewood, bowling a lively opening spell, got

Elgar with a brutal short-pitched delivery which clipped his glove for a catch by wicketkeeper Alex Carey. Lyon stunned Sarel Elwee who did not play a shot and was bowled top of off-stump for 18 leaving the tourists 37-2 in the 18th over.

Four balls later Cummins claimed his first victim with Heinrich Klaasen, caught off a vicious left leg-side by Carey for two. Hazlewood broke through again after tea with an inswinger that kissed the edge of Temba Bavuma's bat for Carey to do the rest.

Bavuma clouted two sixes off Lyon in his 35 off 74 balls but was a big wicket for the Aussies to leave the visitors 85-4 in the 39th over. "Reverse swing is in play, with a little bit of variable bounce, the short ball is difficult to play because of how slow it is coming off the wicket," Hazlewood said.

"I think Ash (Agar) and Gazza (Lyon), it's a big day tomorrow for them with the ball spinning with lefties and righties for them both to work with, there will be plenty happening tomorrow." Cummins removed Khaya Zondo with a superb yorker that trapped him leg before wicket for 39 and South Africa's fifth wicket.

The skipper charged in to lead the Australian bowling assault with two fearsome deliveries thudding into Marco Jansen's upper body. Cummins quickly got another wicket, with Kyle Verreyne edging to Steve Smith at slip for 19 for Smith's 151st Test catch. "We've just got to stick to our basics, that's what we've done over the last 10 years or so... thrilling day tomorrow, do the basics well and see how we go," Lyon said. —AFP

SKY's ton powers India to T20 series win over S Lanka

RAJKOT: Suryakumar Yadav smashed a blazing century to help India extend their unbeaten streak of Twenty20 series wins at home to 12 with a 91-run thrashing of Sri Lanka on Saturday. The hosts rode on Suryakumar's unbeaten 112 off 51 deliveries to post 228-5 after electing to bat first in the series decider in Rajkot.

India then bowled out Sri Lanka for 137 in 16.4 overs for a 2-1 triumph and keep their win record in bi-lateral series on home turf which stretches back to February 2019. Suryakumar, known as a 360-degree player for his ability to play all around the ground, stood out with his third T20 hundred-in 45 balls-as he stamped his class as the world's number one batsman in the format.

The T20 sensation smashed seven fours and nine sixes including three off his trademark scoop shot over fine leg to entertain the raucous home crowd. India lost two wickets inside six overs after electing to bat first but Suryakumar and Shubman Gill, who hit 46 off 36 deliveries, put on 111 runs to lay the foundations for the total.

Left-arm quick Dilshan Madushanka struck in the opening over to send back the left-handed Ishan Kishan, caught at slip for one by Dhananjaya de Silva. Rahul Tripathi, 31, who made his debut in the previous match, then hit back with Gill for company as he hit Maheesh Theekshana for three fours in the fifth over.

Tripathi smashed fast bowler Chamika Karunaratne for two successive sixes but got caught out in an attempt to get another boundary. He made 35 off 16 deliveries. Suryakumar, who reached his fifty in 26 balls, then took charge with his all-round hitting including three sixes with his scoop shot over fine leg.

Gill joined in the charge as he and Suryakumar smashed 23 runs in the 14th over from Theekshana. But after three fours and two sixes in his 36-ball knock, Gill got bowled by leg-spinner Wanindu Hasaranga and two more wickets fell before Suryakumar kept up the charge till the end.

In reply, Kusal Mendis started briskly but fell to Axar Patel's left-arm spin for 23 in the fifth over. Wickets kept tumbling at regular intervals with skipper Hardik Pandya, fellow quick Umran Malik and leg-spinner Yuzvendra Chahal taking two each.

Left-arm quick Arshdeep Singh took three including the final wicket. Skipper Dasun Shanaka,



RAJKOT: India's Suryakumar Yadav celebrates after scoring a century (100 runs) during the third Twenty20 international cricket match between India and Sri Lanka. — AFP

who helped the tourists bounce back from their opening loss in the previous match, hit 23 off 17 balls before departing. India's top stars, including regular captain Rohit Sharma and star batsman Virat Kohli, will return for the three one-day internationals between the two teams starting Tuesday. — AFP

Today's matches on TV

SPANISH LEAGUE

UD Almeria v Real Sociedad 16:00
beIN Sports HD 1

Rayo Vallecano v Real Betis 18:15
beIN Sports HD 1

Sevilla FC v Getafe CF 20:30
beIN Sports HD 1:

Atletico de Madrid v FC Barcelona 23:00
beIN Sports 1 HD

ENGLAND FA CUP

Cardiff City v Leeds United 17:00
beIN Sports 1 HD

Manchester City v Chelsea 19:30
beIN Sports 1 HD

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
Khalidiya	24848075

Kaifan	24849807
Shamiya	24848913
Shuwaikh	24814507
Abdullah Salem	22549134
Nuzha	22526804
Industrial Shuwaikh	24814764
Qadsiya	22515088
Dasmah	22532265
Bneid Al-Gar	22531908
Shaab	22518752
Qibla	22459381
Ayoum Al-Qibla	22451082
Mirqab	22456536
Sharq	22465401
Salmiya	25746401

CHANGE OF NAME

I, Sandeep (current name), holder of Indian Passport No. V 7778715 residing in Kuwait hereby declare that henceforth my new name will read as given name Sandeep Kumar and surname Panchal. (C#0881)

I, JOHAR JOHAR, holder of Passport No. Z 2816653 do hereby change my name to JOHAR (as Given name) LOKHANDWALA (as Surname) for all purposes. I will henceforth be known in the name JOHAR LOKHANDWALA and I also undertake to carry out this name change in all my documents.

I, HAKIMUDDIN, holder of Passport No. S4698016 do hereby change my name to HAKIMUDDIN (as Given name) KAGDI (as Surname) for all purposes. I will henceforth be known in the name HAKIMUDDIN KAGDI and I also undertake to carry out this name change in all my documents. (C#0882)

I, AMATULLAH, holder of Passport No. M 5451208 do hereby change my name to AMATULLAH (as Given name) VOHRA (as Surname) for all purposes. I will henceforth be known in the name AMATULLAH VOHRA and I also undertake to carry out this name change in all my documents. (C#0883) - 05-01-2023

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Kuwait lose to Qatar in opener

Bahrain beat UAE 2-1 in Khaleeji Zain 25



BASRA: Kuwait's forward vies with Qatar's midfielder and goal keeper (C) during the 25th Arabian Gulf Cup currently held in the Iraqi city of Basra.

BASRA: Kuwaiti lost its first match in the Arabian Gulf Cup (Khaleeji Zain 25) against Qatar on Saturday, with two clean goals in the first-round match of the second group of the tournament, which is being held in Basra and will continue until Jan 19. Qatar advanced in the first half of the match, which was held at Al Mina Stadium, with goals scored by Amr Abdel Fattah in the 23rd minute through a perfect shot from the edge of the penalty area and Ahmed Alaa El-Din in the 38th minute through a penalty kick.

The Kuwaiti team was active in the second half, and its players missed several chances through

Eid Al-Rashidi, Shuaib Al-Khalidi, Mubarak Al-Fenini and Faisal Zayed. Qatar now tops the group with three points on goal difference from Bahrain, which finished second after winning earlier against the UAE. UAE and Kuwait occupy third and fourth places respectively without any points.

Sunday will be a rest day for all participating teams. Matches resume on Monday with two matches in the second round of Group A, as leaders Saudi Arabia play Iraq, the host of the tournament, and Oman play Yemen.

Titleholders Bahrain gained three points after Kamil Al-Aswad and Jassim Al-Sheikh scored in

the 60th and 77th minute, respectively. UAE's sole goal was scored in the 92nd minute.

The media center for the 25th Arabian Gulf Cup is working to overcome all obstacles and facilitate procedures for media professionals to enable them to cover the tournament. The media outlets include television channels, radio stations, news agencies and newspapers in the media center. Everyone works to keep abreast of the tournament and its accompanying events through interviews, reports, and newsletters. The 25th Arabian Gulf Cup is being hosted by Iraq for the second time after the edition of 1979. The participation of

teams of Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, the Emirates, Oman, Bahrain, Qatar, and Yemen, were divided into two groups so that the first and second of each group qualified for the semi-finals. The opening matches of the football tournament are Iraq against Oman at 7:00 pm local time (16:00 GMT), followed by Saudi Arabia against Yemen in the same stadium. The Gulf Cup Federation approved the two stadiums, Basra International (capacity of 65,000 spectators) and Al-Minaa (30,000 spectators), for the "Gulf 25" group of matches, two stadiums located within the Sports City in Basra. — KUNA

Villarreal dent champions Real's title hopes

VILA-REAL: Real Madrid blew a chance to ramp up the pressure on La Liga leaders Barcelona in the title race as they fell 2-1 at Villarreal in a disjointed display on Saturday. Jeremy Pino and Gerard Moreno's strikes either side of Karim Benzema's penalty were enough to give the hosts a sixth consecutive victory across all competitions and dent the Spanish champions' bid to retain the trophy.

Madrid remain level on points with league leaders Barcelona, who face Atletico Madrid on Sunday, and this season the country's two giants seem destined to tussle over the title themselves. Carlo Ancelotti's side caught up with Barcelona last weekend after Xavi's team drew with Espanyol in the Catalan derby, but Madrid have not started 2023 particularly well.

Madrid's slim Spanish Cup victory over fourth-tier opponents Cacereno was followed by this bruising wake-up call at the renovated and newly reopened Estadio de la Ceramica, their second league defeat. Ancelotti selected a Madrid starting line-up without a Spanish player in it for the first time in the club's history, according to media reports in Spain.

"Sometimes you can think too much. Obviously I feel in good form and I feel fit. My mindset is to help the team and hopefully the goals will come."

Leicester avoid shock

Leicester manager Brendan Rodgers, who led his side to the trophy two years ago, made multiple changes after his team's third straight Premier League defeat this week. But he retained veteran forward Jamie Vardy for the match against fourth-tier Gillingham, who are rock bottom of England's Football League.

Vardy was the provider as Kelechi Iheanacho scored the only goal of the game in the 56th minute—only his second goal of the season. Leicester squandered chances to double their lead but held out and will now turn their attention to Tuesday's League Cup quarter-final against Newcastle.

Nigerian international forward Iheanacho said it had been tough to break down their opponents in the early stages of the match but hailed an important win. "This gave us momentum to go to the next cup competition," he said. "We are playing Newcastle. Sort of revenge because they beat us in the Premier League."

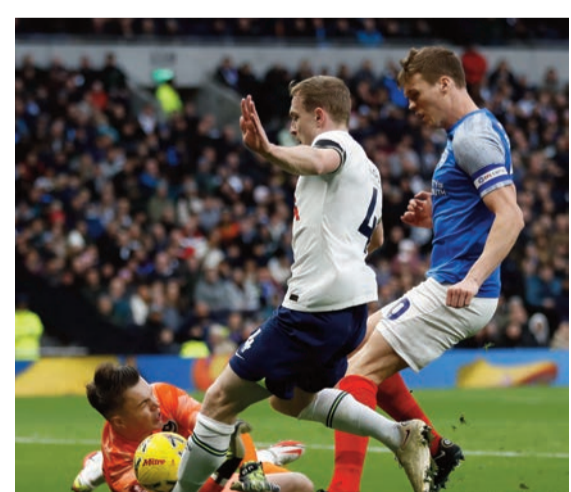
"It is not going to be easy but fingers crossed we will go there and fight to our last breath to make sure that we win." Last year's semi-finalists Palace took the lead against Premier League basement club Southampton through Odsone Edouard.

But Saints levelled in the 37th minute after some poor defending from the hosts. James Ward-Prowse sent what looked to be an innocuous free-kick into the area but Joel Ward mistimed his effort to head clear.

The ball took a bounce inside the box before evading goalkeeper Vicente Guaita, who moved in the right direction but could not stop it from going into the net. Southampton took the lead for the first time midway

through the second half. Guaita was attempting to make a routine clearance from outside the area when Adam Armstrong rushed in, stole the ball from the Spaniard and had plenty of time to find the empty net. Preston came from behind to beat Huddersfield 3-1 while Reading beat Watford 2-0.

Liverpool take on Wolves in the standout match of the day later on Saturday, with Manchester City hosting Chelsea on Sunday. Manchester United beat Everton 3-1 on Friday in another all-Premier League clash. Forest Green's tie against Birmingham was postponed on Saturday due to a waterlogged pitch. — AFP



LONDON: Portsmouth's English goalkeeper Josh Griffiths (L) saves at the feet of Tottenham Hotspur's English midfielder Oliver Skipp (C) during the English FA Cup third round football match in London. — AFP

through the second half. Guaita was attempting to make a routine clearance from outside the area when Adam Armstrong rushed in, stole the ball from the Spaniard and had plenty of time to find the empty net. Preston came from behind to beat Huddersfield 3-1 while Reading beat Watford 2-0. Liverpool take on Wolves in the standout match of the day later on Saturday, with Manchester City hosting Chelsea on Sunday. Manchester United beat Everton 3-1 on Friday in another all-Premier League clash. Forest Green's tie against Birmingham was postponed on Saturday due to a waterlogged pitch. — AFP

Al-Attiyah retains overall lead in Dakar Rally car race



AL DUWADIMI: Belgian driver Guillaume De Mevius and his French co-driver Francois Cazalet compete during Stage 7 of the Dakar 2023 between Riyadh and Al Duwadimi, Saudi Arabia. — AFP

RIYADH: Saudi driver Yazeed Al-Rajhi won the seventh stage of the Dakar Rally on Saturday with Qatari Nasser Al-Attiyah holding the overall lead in the car race. The motorbike stage was cancelled because of heavy rain. Toyota driver Al-Rajhi and his German co-driver Dirk von Zitzewitz mastered the testing stage in Saudi Arabia to bounce back after losing over five hours on Friday because of technical problems.

Despite starting in 40th place near the back of the field, Al-Rajhi finished 8min 54sec ahead of Lithuanian driver Vaidotas Zala after the shortened 333km timed special to Al Duwadimi. The Saudi picked up his third career Dakar stage win and the first one in this year's race, but remains over five hours behind the overall leader.

"I'd say I have the best co-driver," said Al-Rajhi. "We attacked. It wasn't easy to start from the back and overtake all the little cars, often going left and right in the wadis, but we did a great job." Al-Attiyah finished 14th but retains a comfortable lead of one hour and one minute in the overall race.

His South African Toyota teammate Henk Lategan is second overall. France's Stephane Peterhansel, a record 14-time winner of the race, crashed out of the 2023 edition on Friday. Organisers decided Friday to cancel Saturday's motorbike stage because heavy rain had delayed the arrival of the competitors and put their safety in danger. American rider Skyler Howes is leading the motorbike category. — AFP

Kane fires Spurs into FA Cup fourth round

LONDON: Harry Kane fired Tottenham past third-tier Portsmouth and into the FA Cup fourth round on Saturday as 2021 winners Leicester emerged unscathed from a tricky tie against lowly Gillingham. Elsewhere on a packed day of third-round action, Southampton came from behind to beat Crystal Palace 2-1 in an all-Premier League tie to give beleaguered manager Nathan Jones something to smile about.

Antonio Conte rang the changes for Spurs for the match against League One Portsmouth but retained a heavyweight forward line including Kane and Son Heung-min. The in-form Kane broke the deadlock in the 50th minute, receiving the ball on the edge of the box and bending a fine curled effort past the despairing dive of Josh Griffiths.

Kane, with four goals in four matches since missing the penalty against France that led to England's elimination at the World Cup, now has 265 goals for Spurs—just one behind the club's all-time record scorer, Jimmy Greaves. Spurs, who have won the FA Cup eight times, were unable to add to their tally but saw out the match fairly comfortably to win 1-0. "It was a tough game," Kane told the BBC. "We were clear favourites and people probably expected a bigger score but credit to them, they stayed compact and made it difficult."

The 29-year-old said he was trying not to focus on overtaking Greaves. "I try to not think about it," he said.