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Citizens feel plan to write off loans is against social justice

Debt purchase program could cost government KD 14.6bn

News in brief

2022 among hottest on record

GENEVA: The past eight years were the hottest since records began, the United Nations confirmed Thursday, despite the cooling influence of a drawn-out La Nina weather pattern. Last year, as the world faced a cascade of unprecedented natural disasters made more likely and deadly by climate change, the average global temperature was about 1.15 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels, the World Meteorological Organization said. The hottest year on record was 2016, followed by 2019 and 2020, it found. — AFP

Saudi to use own uranium

RIYADH: Saudi Arabia plans to use its own uranium resources to develop the kingdom's civilian nuclear program, its energy minister said on Wednesday. "Recent exploration activities revealed the presence of diverse sources of uranium in various locations," the minister, Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman, told a minerals conference. "The kingdom intends to use its national uranium resources, including for joint projects with its partners," the minister added. This would be done in conformity with "international obligations and rules of transparency, covering the entire production cycle", he said. — AFP

Rare earths found in Sweden

KIRUNA, Sweden: Europe's largest known deposit of rare earth elements, essential for the manufacturing of electric vehicles, has been discovered in Sweden's far north, boosting Europe's hopes of cutting its dependence on China. Swedish mining group LKAB said Thursday the newly-explored deposit contained more than one million tons of rare earth oxides. In 2021, the European Commission said that 98 percent of the rare earths used in the EU were imported from China. — AFP

WHO alert on cough syrups

NEW DELHI: The World Health Organization has issued an alert warning against the use of two Indian cough syrups blamed for the deaths of at least 20 children in Uzbekistan. WHO said the products, manufactured by India's Marion Biotech, were "substandard" and that the firm had failed to provide guarantees about their "safety and quality". The WHO alert said an analysis of the syrup found "unacceptable amounts of diethylene glycol and/or ethylene glycol as contaminants". — AFP

By Majd Othman

KUWAIT: The issue of purchasing consumer and personal loans of Kuwaiti citizens has emerged in Kuwait as a heated subject. The issue reached the National Assembly after the parliamentary financial and economic committee prepared a special report on the cost of writing off or purchasing the loans and debts of borrowers. According to the report, the cost amounts to KD 14.6 billion (\$50 billion) for 515,000 borrowers.

The government walked out of Tuesday's National Assembly session and boycotted the session on Wednesday, after MPs insisted to debate a number of legislations that have substantial financial costs, including the draft law calling to purchase the bank loans of citizens. The Cabinet said it was not allowed to express its opinions regarding bills that have financial costs.

UAE to roll over Pakistan debt, add \$1bn more

ISLAMABAD: The United Arab Emirates has agreed to roll over \$2 billion owed by Pakistan and provide the country with an extra loan of \$1 billion, Islamabad said Thursday. The agreement comes as Pakistan grapples with a major foreign exchange crisis, holding enough reserves to pay for just three weeks of imports. Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif arrived in the UAE earlier Thursday for talks with top Gulf officials to seek help for the battered economy.

The UAE president agreed to roll over the existing loan of US\$2 billion and provide a US\$1 billion additional loan," a statement from Sharif's office said. "Both sides agreed to deepen the investment cooperation, stimulate partnerships and enable investment integration opportunities between the two countries." The statement did not provide the terms of the loan agreement.

Pakistan's national debt stands at \$274 billion - or nearly 90 percent of gross domestic product. The nation's forex reserves have dwindled to less than \$6 billion, with obligations of more than \$8 billion due in the first

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'Spare' sells 1.4m copies on day one

LONDON: Prince Harry's autobiography "Spare" sold 1.4 million English-language copies on its first day in the UK, United States and Canada, smashing Penguin Random House's sales record, the publisher said on Thursday. The figures come as the first opinion poll since the memoir's publication showed Harry's popularity in the UK continuing to nosedive.

The headline-grabbing book was

published Tuesday, accompanied by four high-profile promotional interviews with the prince. The sales outstrip Penguin Random House's previous first-day non-fiction record for Barack Obama's "A Promised Land". That sold 887,000 copies in the United States alone on its first day in 2020.

In France, the French edition, launched with a print run of 210,000, is being reprinted with an additional 130,000 copies, publisher Fayard told AFP. Demand from booksellers was about 20 percent higher than for Obama's presidential memoirs, it added. Revelations in Harry's blockbuster book have included claims

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UAE names oil chief to head COP28 talks

DUBAI: The head of the United Arab Emirates' national oil company was named Thursday as president of this year's COP28 climate talks. Sultan Al-Jaber, chief executive of the UAE's Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC), will be the first CEO to take the role at the UN summit, said a statement carried by the official WAM news agency.

"I sincerely believe that climate action today is an immense economic opportunity for investment in sustainable growth," he was quoted as saying, promising a "pragmatic" approach. Jaber, the UAE's minister of industry, is also the Gulf state's special envoy for climate change and has taken part in more than 10 COP meetings. He is CEO of Masdar, the UAE's renewable energy company, and has "played a key role in shaping the country's clean energy path", the statement said.

COP27, held in Egypt in November, concluded with the adoption of a hotly contested text on aid to poor countries affected by climate change, but failed to set new ambitions for lowering greenhouse



ABU DHABI: UAE President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan meets Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif at Al Shati Palace. — AFP



NEW YORK: Copies of "Spare" by Britain's Prince Harry are displayed at a Barnes & Noble bookstore on Jan 10, 2023. — AFP



Sultan Al-Jaber



MoH stresses importance of research and development

300 doctors, technicians participate in medical conference



KUWAIT: Dr Latifa Al-Kandari and Dr Michael Masoumi

KUWAIT: Director of the medical emergency department at the health ministry Dr Ahmad Al-Shatti said scientific research and development are keys to sustaining the services of medical care, especially in clinical improvement and quality assurance, as well as medical training. Shatti said during a conference titled "One step to excellence" organized by the scientific research and development committee of Adan Hospital on Thursday. The conference saw the participation of more than 300 doctors and technicians interested in scientific research, which is an indicator of the care for scientific research.

"The conference included three sessions. Each session reviewed five working papers that shed light on scientific research and encouraged its culture with the aim of providing attendees with the skills of thinking, planning and providing a platform that provides everything related to scientific research," Shatti said.

"During the COVID pandemic, the performance of the hospital and primary healthcare centers was evaluated with regards to emergency action plans and the improvement of healthcare services. The hospital had many achievements, including the first human heart transplant and the first liver transplant by a national surgical team. Moreover, the hospital won the international gold medal for a pump to circulate the patient's blood through an artificial lung, as well as benefiting from electronic services in the field of healthcare in terms of booking appointments, maintaining electronic files and re-dispensing medicines," Shatti added.

Dr Latifa Al-Kandari, Head of the Radiology Department and Chair of the Research and Development Committee at Al-Adan Hospital, said: "The scientific forum organized by the committee in cooperation with the Kuwait Foundation for the Advancement of Sciences was attended by a group

of distinguished doctors in scientific research. It comes under the umbrella of strategies and planning of the scientific research committee to advance the scientific level of doctors and develop the level of clinical medicine to make Adan Hospital one of the distinguished health centers in providing healthcare according to international standards."

Vice Chairman of the Research and Development Committee at Adan Hospital Dr Michael Masoumi said: "High-quality healthcare is one of the seven pillars that form the basis of the development plan of the New Kuwait 2035 vision, which is the driving force behind development efforts set by the government. During the past three years, researchers at Adan Hospital have been able to publish more than 75 collaborative research articles and 19 editorial articles in peer-reviewed accredited international journals, which reflect an outstanding achievement for the promotion of scientific research and development."



KUWAIT: Dr Ahmad Al-Shatti with Masoumi



KUWAIT: Participants of the mock evacuation drill pose for a picture.

KU and civil defense conclude mock evacuation

KUWAIT: The safety and security administration at Kuwait University has organized, in cooperation with the general administration for civil defense, a mock evacuation drill in the Engineering and Petroleum College in the northern campus in Sabah Al-Salem University city on Wednesday.

This comes within the decision of the general secretary of the University to form a committee between KU and the general administration for civil defense to put a vision to the general evacuation administration in

the University City and to train concerned teams and evacuation operators to handle calamities and emergency situations that might arise.

This comes within the university's strategy to coordinate with concerned departments in the country to put a vision and a practical procedure to deal with emergency situations by placing scenarios and performing training exercises with concerned teams.

The administration also insists on the readiness and professionalism of participating teams, as well as the cooperation of those on site, so they can adhere to instructions and to deal with the incident realistically. About 211 people were evacuated in five minutes and 12 seconds, as the evacuation period and going to the shelter took six minutes and 14 seconds for a total of 11 minutes and 26 seconds which is a record time in evacuation operations acclaimed by representatives of the civil defense administration.

Al-Shall Weekly Report

Real reform needed to bolster job generation for Kuwaiti youth

KUWAIT: Kuwait is the only country in the world whose public budget has relied 90 percent on oil revenues for nearly 60 years. The average price of Kuwait oil per barrel dropped from \$107.33 last April, the beginning of the current FY 2022/2023, to an average of \$79.21 per barrel since the beginning January till last Wednesday, indicating a decline by -26.2 percent.

Once again, Kuwait is the only country in the world whose educational institutions will graduate about 100,000 young men and women over the next four years without knowing where and how to employ them or a spatial capacity in case an artificial job is available. Kuwait's public administration has no vision of the social, political, and financial pressures this could cause during that period, not to mention the unbearable pressures of the distant future.

Its public administration's concern is to buy loyalties, which is okay if that imposes some financial cost on the decision-makers. But this is an unjust theft at the expense of the future of its youth that are the majority, and theft of the rights of all its future generations. We believe that the government has consumed more than KD 4 billion to ensure its continuity in the form of rewards for the front ranks, swapping annual leaves for cash, postponing loan installments, retirees' grants, exceptional pensions, doubling the salaries of their ministers, etc. Supplementing the attrition is now in the hands of some deputies without any assurance of its stability.

In an interview with the IMF Chairperson, Christina Georgieva said she was pessimistic for the future outlook for the three leading global economies, ie USA, albeit the best, the EU and China, all of which are massive economies with diversified sources of income. She advises them to be keen on developing their public revenues and real rationalization for their public expenditures in anticipation of the turbulent future, and the World Bank reiterated similar warnings and expectations.

The former British Prime Minister made the mistake of adopting uncontrolled financial policies described by the IMF chairperson as leading a vehicle with drivers, one pressing hard on the gas pedal and the other presses hardly on the brakes. As a result, she lost her position only one month later.

These three massive economies are the real engine of demand for oil. With the pressures that their weak growth may cause on the prices of financial assets, with a European retaliatory attack on oil with the waning of the Russian-Ukrainian war, Kuwait, which entirely depends on oil, continues to act with its economy and public finances indifferently and even denies its reality just two years ago. Young men and women are coming without a secured job in a sustainable labor market; their educational level is years behind a regular educational and not a modern distinguished education system which prevents them from competing for job opportunities in other locations; besides, the housing project is unsustainable, the public health services are expensive, and everyone is looking for an alternative to them, the infrastructure is worn out, and corruption is widespread.

All these issues need battles, while the public administration battle is entirely in the wrong arena. For the young men and women, the battlefield is not supposed to be competition over the sharing of wealth, but rather to use it to ensure the stability and benefit of all generations with justice and to ensure the sustainability of the homeland, which is the fixed entity, and everything else is temporary. The core problem in Kuwait is the insistence on the formation of governments in an approach, that is tribalism and quotas, and these governments are unable to achieve that guarantees their continuity and popularity. They only have to open the door to buy support and loyalty, which opens the door widely for popularity. When risks become intolerable, they cannot confront. The sad thing is that talking about this topic loses all its meaning if there is no hope for real reform. Still, the reality of Kuwait's abundance of visions, resources and historical experience all confirm that sustainability and even excellence are still within reach. The continuation of the "sharing approach" loses many chances of success, and greatly increases its cost if we decide late to follow its path.



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Local

Kuwait anti-drugs supreme committee reviews treatments and rehabilitation

Drug control administration keen on battling drug-traffickers



KUWAIT: Kuwait higher committee for the national anti-drug campaign holds regular meeting headed by Interior Minister Sheikh Talal Khalid Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah on Thursday. —KUNA

KUWAIT: Kuwait higher committee for the national anti-drug campaign held on Thursday its regular meeting headed by First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Interior Sheikh Talal Khalid Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah at Seif Palace.

During the meeting, many reports have been displayed from the anti-drug committee, the committee for treatments and rehabilitations, in addition to the legal and legislative committee. Minister Sheikh Talal Al-Sabah was keen on

the importance of cooperation between all committees and stressed on the hard work to combat this lethal phenomenon. Many senior officials have attended the meeting as part of the higher committee for the national anti-drug campaign.

Meanwhile, in cooperation with regional and international organizations, the General Administration of Drug Control has been on the forefront of the battle against drug traffickers,

foiling all attempts by those peddling their poison. Director General of the Administration Brigadier Mohammad Qabazard told KUNA that the main strategy in Kuwait was to curb down the spread of drugs via targeting those selling narcotics.

Experts and those with the knowhow are recruited in the efforts to fend off drugs, he affirmed, adding that the administration, established according to law 614/2006, aimed at

creating a security and preventative solution to the problem of drugs.

Whether on the Gulf, Arab, or international level, the administration welcomed all those who lend a hand in combating narcotics, he added. Brig Qabazard also noted that families and the society as a whole were involved in this fight, saying that their cooperation were necessary for the success of the campaign. —KUNA



KD 149,00 worth project approved for National Day

KUWAIT: Acting undersecretary of the social affairs ministry and head of the national project cooperation committee Abdulaziz Al-Mutairi said a contract has been signed to start construction of a "National Day Camp" at a total cost of KD 149,700. "This national entertainment project aims to celebrate National Day with Kuwaitis and will reflect the participation of the ministry during this special event," Mutairi said.

"The project will be in Sulaibikhat with the support of national cooperative projects and will be organized by the Union of Cooperatives. It will consist of a theatre for holding celebratory events, children's games, restaurants and camp areas. It will be built within a month, as the celebrations will start on February 15 and conclude on March 15," Mutairi added.



Art exhibitions build bridges of cultures



Dr Abdulhadi Al-Ajmi



Konstantinos Piperigos

KUWAIT: The Dean of the Faculty of Arts at Kuwait University, Dr Abdulhadi Al-Ajmi, stressed Thursday the importance of organizing art exhibitions in building bridges of culture. "They help the convergence of civilizations and peoples and linking them to the cultures of the East and West in the common human history," he said. Dr Al-Ajmi addressed a press conference which was held to announce that Kuwait will host the exhibition next Monday.

Greek Ambassador to Kuwait and Bahrain Konstantinos Piperigos said in a similar speech during the conference that the exhibition aims to shed light on the history of King Alexander the Great and his important role in transferring Greek civilization to the region, especially on Failaka Island, which was the land of a military base.

Ambassador Piperigos explained that Alexander the Great embodied the spirit of tolerance and coexistence of religions when he

left the peoples he controlled through their exercise of freedom of cultural and religious expression. He underlined that "we may need this global message now more than ever."

He called on the Kuwaiti public to attend the exhibition and explore the different faces of King Alexander the Great, hoping that it would be one of the successful cultural and civilizational bridges in supporting bilateral relations between Greece and historic Kuwait in various humanitarian fields. —KUNA



KUWAIT: Slow vehicular traffic on a rainy day in Kuwait. —Photo by Fouad Al-Shaikh

ture will be between 10 and 12 degrees Celsius, and the sea is light to moderate, with wave heights between 1 and 4 feet. And the weather during the day on Saturday is expected to be fair and partly

cloudy to cloudy, with light to moderate southeasterly to variable winds, with a speed between 08 and 38 kilometers per hour, with chances of light, sporadic rain that may be thundery. —KUNA

Customs and Ports Authority asked to perk up facilities

KUWAIT: Minister of Commerce and Industry and State Minister of State for Communications and Information Technology Mazen Al-Nahedh asked customs directorate officials and Kuwait Ports Authority to improve their facilities in a way that agrees with the goals of the 2035 development plan, as he toured Shuaiba Port.

He said it is important to launch a practical plan that ensures improvement of the customs and ports facilities for deep-rooted change in the efficiency of its strategic facilities. He said the ports and customs facilities constitute Kuwait's beating heart due to their increasing importance after the coronavirus pandemic in particular, and plans that followed to secure the flow of goods to the local market. Nahedh asked officials to prepare long-term strategies to ensure continuity of goods coming in and out of Kuwait ports non-stop, and improve their ability to manage expected and emergent crises according to international standards.

News in brief

Kuwait's IPG reports KD 7.6m net profit in 2022

KUWAIT: The Independent Petroleum Group (IPG) announced Thursday that it achieved net profits worth KD 7.6 million (some \$23 million) in the fiscal year ending on December 31, 2022. The company said in a statement, posted on Boursa Kuwait, that the earning per share stood at 42.3 fils, in contrast to 39.7 fils posted in the fiscal year that had ended on December 31, 2021 — with a 6.4 percent rise. Its board recommended distribution of cash earnings to the shareholders at a rate of 30 percent of the share nominal value, at a rate of 30 fils per stock, and a total amounting to KD 5.4 million (\$16.3 million). —KUNA

GCC chief decries terrorist attack in Kabul

RIYADH: GCC Secretary General Dr Nayef Al-Hajraf condemned on Thursday the terrorist attack that occurred near the foreign ministry's headquarters in the Afghan capital Kabul. Al-Hajraf, in a statement, re-affirmed the GCC rejection of all forms of terrorism, fanaticism and violence, and offered condolences to the victims' families and the Afghan government. At least 20 people perished in the suicide attack that happened in the heavily secured district in the Afghan capital.

Kuwait oil price up 78 cents to \$78.99 pb

KUWAIT: The price of Kuwaiti oil went up by 78 cents to \$78.99 per barrel on Wednesday as opposed to \$78.21 pb the day before, said the Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) Thursday. The Brent crude in the global market had jumped by \$2.57 to \$82.67, the same occurred to the West Texas Intermediate, which rose \$2.29 to \$77.41 pb. —KUNA

OPEC basket price down to \$77 pb

VIENNA: The price of OPEC basket of thirteen crudes dropped by 57 cents to \$77 a barrel on Tuesday, from the previous day level. The average price of the basket in 2022 stood at \$82.07 per barrel, OPEC Secretariat noted in its daily bulletin on Wednesday. The OPEC Reference Basket of Crudes (ORB) is made up of the following: Saharan Blend (Algeria), Girassol (Angola), Djeno (Congo), Zafiro (Equatorial Guinea), Rabi Light (Gabon), Iran Heavy (Islamic Republic of Iran), Basrah Medium (Iraq), Kuwait Export (Kuwait), Es Sider (Libya), Bonny Light (Nigeria), Arab Light (Saudi Arabia), Murban (UAE) and Meroy (Venezuela). —KUNA

Light rain forecast for Friday in Kuwait

KUWAIT: Kuwait Meteorology department forecast on Thursday a mild to cold weather, with a chance of light rain for Friday evening. In a press statement, it stated that the expected minimum temperature would be between 08 and 10 degrees Celsius, and the sea would be light to moderate, with waves between 1 and 3 feet high.

It expected the weather during the day on Saturday to be fair and partly cloudy to cloudy, with southeasterly to variable winds, light to moderate in speed between 08 and 38 kilometers per hour, with chances of light, sporadic rain that may be thundery.

It stated that the expected maximum temperatures are between 20 and 22 degrees Celsius, and the sea is light to moderate, with wave heights between 2 and 5 feet. It indicated that the weather at night will be cold and cloudy, with southeasterly winds to volatile in direction, light to moderate, with speeds between 08 and 32 kilometers per hour, with chances of light and sporadic rain that may be thundery and form fog in some areas.

It added that the expected minimum tempera-

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P.O.Box 1301 Safat, 13014 Kuwait.
 Email: info@kuwaittimes.com
 Website: www.kuwaittimes.com



Photo shows Kuwait National English School students and teachers posing at Kuwait Times and Kuwait News offices. — Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat

Kuwait National English School students tour Kuwait Times, Kuwait News

By Faten Omar

Kuwait National English School students visited Kuwait Times on Thursday on a field trip to learn more about the history of the newspaper as the first English daily in the Arabian Gulf since 1961 and about the different sections of the newspaper, such as editorial, print and circulation departments. Deputy Managing Editor Faten Omar explained the process of news gathering, writing and editing, and how a newspaper is produced on a daily basis by describing the work of reporters, editors, proofreaders and page makers.

The students were excited to see the archives and how the newspaper developed over the years since the early sixties. Meanwhile, head of the printing department engineer Al-Watheq Bellah Darwish took the students on



a tour of the printing press, where he showed them the process of printing and how Kuwait Times' staff run and maintain the presses, image scanners and other printing machines.

During their visit, Kuwait Times gave students a better appreciation of the role of journalism and the importance of independent media in society. They now have a better understanding of how media and journalism impact their daily life and learned about the ethical considerations and decision-making that goes into reporting.

Some of the students started to apply the information they received by interviewing Kuwait Times staff and some of their colleagues. They showed an interest in being in this industry; as they are young and have a great opportunity to learn about different careers in the field of journalism and media and get inspiration for their own career path.

At the end of the tour, students went to the disused printing press that Kuwait Times opened to local and regional artists to express their feelings, thoughts and ideas in paint. They took some memorable and iconic pictures for their social media accounts. The visit to Kuwait Times engaged the youths with an educational experience, providing them with a deeper understanding of the role of journalism in society and the inner workings of a news organization.



A photograph showing a man in a dark jacket and cap wading through floodwaters in a residential area. In the foreground, a person wearing a plaid shirt and a white cap is pointing towards the man in the water. The background shows houses and trees, with a car partially visible on the right.

California braces for more heavy rain

BRASILIA: Brazilian Vice Minister of Justice, Ricardo Cappelletti (C), gestures while walking through Brasilia. Brazilian government announced this Wednesday that it will block access to the headquarters of public powers in Brasilia, before a demonstration announced by supporters of former President Jair Bolsonaro, three days after the buildings of the Presidency, Congress and the Supreme Court were attacked. — AFP

International

Benedict's confidant spills beans on two-popes tension

Benedict promised to live 'hidden from the world', but broke that pledge

VATICAN: Just one week after the funeral of Benedict XVI, his closest aide released a much-trailed memoir Thursday, revealing details of tensions between the late pope emeritus and his more liberal successor Pope Francis.

Georg Gaenswein's book reveals private conversations with both popes in charting the German ex-pontiff's rise to power and the decade spent in retirement following his shock resignation in 2013. The Vatican has not officially responded but Pope Francis called Gaenswein in to a private meeting on Monday, following days of pre-publication interviews in which the 66-year-old German aired years of grievances.

In one, he claimed it had "pained Benedict's heart" when Francis effectively reversed his predecessor's decision to relax restrictions on the use of the traditional Latin mass. Up until his death on December 31 at the age of 95, Benedict had remained a figurehead for the conservative wing of the Catholic Church, which views Pope Francis as too liberal.

Shocked and speechless

As his secretary since 2003, Gaenswein was a constant presence at Benedict's side, and during his final years living in a monastery in the Vatican grounds, his gatekeeper. After Benedict's death, Gaenswein led the mourners, greeting visitors to his mentor's lying-in-state and kissing the coffin in front of tens of thousands at St Peter's Square during the funeral led by Pope Francis.

In "Nothing But the Truth: My Life Beside Pope Benedict XVI", Gaenswein describes Benedict's perplexity at some of Francis's decisions, and the

latter's apparent attempts to keep his predecessor in check. After becoming in 2013 the first pope in six centuries to resign, Benedict promised to live "hidden from the world", but broke that pledge to speak out on several explosive issues.

The last straw appears to have been a book Benedict co-authored on priestly celibacy in 2020 — a PR disaster that Gaenswein said Francis appeared to blame in part on him. Gaenswein was effectively fired as head of the papal household with immediate effect. "Stay home from now on. Accompany Benedict, who needs you, and act as a shield," he said Francis told him.

Gaenswein, who had been propelled into the limelight on Benedict's election, says he was left "shocked and speechless" by his demotion. On hearing the news, Benedict half-jokingly said "it seems Pope Francis doesn't trust me anymore, and is making you my guardian". The ex-pontiff intervened and tried to get Francis to change his mind, but to no avail, Gaenswein wrote.

'Gorgeous George'

Like Benedict, Gaenswein was born in Bavaria. He describes his young self as "a bit transgressive", sporting unruly locks and listening to Pink Floyd. The son of a blacksmith, he was ordained in 1984 and rose through the ranks to become secretary to the then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger. When Ratzinger was elected to the papacy in 2005, the international media was instantly smitten by his dashing blond-haired assistant.

He was nicknamed "Bel Giorgio" ("Gorgeous George") and gossip magazines gleefully began splashing paparazzi-style photographs of him in



VATICAN CITY: File photo shows, German Archbishop Georg Gaenswein (R) attends during the funeral mass of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI at St. Peter's square in the Vatican. — AFP

his tennis whites. His close relationship with Benedict sparked jealousy, he said in the memoir.

But the new pope, Francis, appeared not to want him nearby, Gaenswein said, citing the pontiff's refusal to allow him to live in the palace apartment that Benedict had used. The memoir is

not expected to improve relations between the pair, and it was not clear what job Gaenswein will be given now.

Some Vatican commentators have speculated he could be appointed as a Vatican ambassador, or as director of an important shrine. — AFP

Lurid 'partygate' details imperil Johnson comeback

LONDON: Former UK prime minister Boris Johnson has made no secret of his hopes of a dramatic political comeback. But the enduring "partygate" scandal threatens that, as graphic new revelations emerge. Contradicting his later denials that any lockdown rules were broken, Johnson allegedly joked at a boozy 10 Downing Street event in November 2020 that it was "the most unsocially distanced party in the UK".

Staff shredded documents when civil service and police investigations loomed, and some had sex at one riotous party the night before Prince Philip's funeral, according to aides interviewed for an ITV podcast. "As the disgraced former prime minister plots his comeback, he reminds us all yet again why he's totally unfit for office," Angela Rayner, the opposition Labour party's deputy leader, responded.

"While people were unable to say goodbye to loved ones or mourn with their families, he was breaking his own rules with reckless abandon and then lying to the British people." The ITV podcast came out this week just as a parliamentary committee is due to open an investigation that could see Johnson suspended or even expelled from the House of Commons. The "privileges" committee is looking into whether he lied to the Commons, starting in December 2021 after one damning video emerged, when he told MPs that "the rules were



Former UK prime minister Boris Johnson.

followed at all times". "We all watched it live and we were just gobsmacked," one Downing Street source who attended parties told ITV.

"We were all just shocked that he would even deny it. He was there. We were there. We were all there together." Johnson-along with eventual successor Rishi Sunak—was fined by London police for another Downing Street event in June 2020 that violated his own government's rules on social distancing. Sunak's spokesman said on Thursday: "At all time staff were given clear guidance to retain any relevant information and cooperate with the investigation."

After his fellow Conservative MPs tired of the non-stop scandal and forced him to resign, Johnson tried to stage a sensational return in October when Liz Truss was herself forced out of Number 10. But after a hurried dash back from a Caribbean holiday and a fevered weekend of campaigning, he bowed out of the race, allowing Sunak to take over. — AFP

French hunter dodges jail over killing man mistaken for boar

CAHORS: A French hunter on Thursday avoided prison over the killing of a Franco-British man he had mistaken for a boar, disappointing relatives and friends who had wanted a stiffer penalty. Morgan Keane, 25, was shot dead in December 2020 in southwestern France by Julien Feral, 35, while he was chopping wood on his land. The verdict came days after the French government outlined tighter rules for the sport designed to prevent such accidents, as controversy grows over what for many remains a proud tradition of France's countryside.

Feral was given a two-year suspended jail term and banned from hunting for life following his trial for involuntary homicide in the southwestern French town of Cahors. Meanwhile the organiser of the hunt received an 18-month suspended sentence and a five-year hunting ban.

Prosecutors had called for both men to serve at least some jail time. "The justice system has done its work" within the limits of existing laws, said Benoit Coussy, lawyer for Keane's brother. "Now lawmakers have to do their work and create a specific 'hunting offence' that could allow harsher punishments," he added.

"The message has been sent that if you kill someone, there are absolutely no consequences," said

Peggy, a friend of Keane's, who did not give her last name. "I know he isn't necessarily a danger to the public, but for me you have to send a message that killing someone isn't nothing," she added.

'Marked for life'

Keane was shot while cutting wood near his house in the village of Calvignac in December 2020. "There isn't a day I don't think about it, it's marked me for life. I'm sorry," Feral told the court at the November opening of the trial, admitting that he had not "identified the target".

The investigation found the hunter didn't know the area and had been stationed at a poorly-chosen spot without proper safety instructions. "We're relatively happy with removing the hunting license for life" from the shooter, said Zoe Monchecourt, who heads an association launched by Keane's friends to push for updated hunting laws.

"On the other hand, we're not at all happy regarding the hunt organiser" and his ban of only five years, she added. The case revived tensions between anti-hunting activists and defenders of a rural hobby and practice that is seen as necessary by farmers to keep down deer and boar populations in particular. During the busy times of the hunting season, large parts of the French countryside reverberate with the sound of gunshots, leading many walkers to avoid forested areas for their own safety.

On Monday, President Emmanuel Macron's government said it would tighten rules against hunting under the influence of drugs or alcohol, strengthen training and safety requirements and set up digital systems to warn other countryside users away from active hunting zones. — AFP

Citizens feel plan to write off...

Continued from Page 1

"Nothing in the law prevents the authorities from taking a decision to drop loans," Foudari added. "But they don't think about the possible effects the decision will have on prices of essential commodities or if this will encourage citizens to take loans again because they will not have any financial obligations eventually. What worries us is that continuous loan waivers may prompt people to lead a luxury lifestyle oblivious of the fact that their irresponsible lifestyle puts a burden on the government and the people," he said.

UAE to roll over Pakistan debt...

Continued from Page 1

quarter alone. A \$7 billion loan agreement with the IMF - about half of which has already been disbursed - has stalled because Pakistan has not

UAE names oil chief to head...

Continued from Page 1

gas emissions. The UAE, one of the world's biggest crude producers, will host the next edition in Dubai in November and December. It had the largest contingent of oil and gas lobbyists at last year's talks.

The Gulf monarchy argues that oil remains indispensable to the global economy and is pushing the merits of carbon capture - removing carbon dioxide, the main greenhouse gas, as fuel is burned or from the air. "Limiting global warming to 1.5C will require significant reductions in emissions, a pragmatic, practical and realistic approach to the energy transition and more help

"In addition, if repayment of the loans is to fix some of the legal problems of the borrower, it can be resolved by creating a fund such as a delinquent fund. But bringing up the issue of writing off loans encourages many people to obtain loans to take advantage of the benevolent government policy," Foudari said. "There are some voices calling for dropping the loans for popular support or personal benefit during elections. That is the reason why people in Kuwait are getting emotional about the issue and are getting carried away by their speeches," he added.

Kuwait Times asked Foudari whether writing off loans will benefit the borrowers who are currently in jail for defaulting on their loans. "It could be a solution for some of the borrowers who have defaulted. But mostly, the persons who are in jail due to this issue have debts not only with banks. Therefore, their release from prison cannot be that easy," he concluded.

fully implemented tough economic measures including slashing subsidies and raising taxes.

The economy has also been hammered by devastating monsoon floods that left almost a third of the country under water last year, and the government says it needs more than \$16 billion over the next three years to rebuild. Islamabad won some relief earlier this week when nations pledged over \$9 billion to help with recovery efforts. — AFP

for emerging economies," the UAE's statement said, referring to the goal set at previous COP summits.

The UAE is one of the countries at the sharp end of climate change as it lies in one of the world's hottest regions, with summer temperatures nudging 50 degrees Celsius. According to a study published in 2021, parts of the Gulf could become too hot for human habitation by the end of this century. The UAE has announced ambitious environmental initiatives, including plans for 20 gigawatts of installed solar capacity by 2030 and a fully operational nuclear power station by 2024.

But the Gulf state also forecasts that the oil and gas industry would need to invest more than \$600 billion every year until 2030 to keep up with expected demand. Former UN climate chief Yvo de Boer offered support for the UAE and Jaber, saying his work in "green growth strategy" and renewable energy give him the "understanding, experience and responsibility" to make COP28 a success. — AFP



LONDON: Caroline Lennon, first customer to buy "Spare" by Prince Harry, poses with her copy outside Waterstones' flagship Piccadilly bookshop on Jan 10, 2023. — AFP

'Spare' sells 1.4m copies...

Continued from Page 1

Prince William physically attacked him in a row in 2019 and that the once-close brothers begged their father not to marry his wife, Queen Consort Camilla.

The 38-year-old former soldier also said he had killed 25 Taliban during his time in Afghanistan, sparking condemnation from military personnel and the Taliban. Parts of the book were widely leaked but its contents have continued to fill airtime and newspaper and online pages. Gina Centrelo, president and publisher of the Random House Group, said in a statement that "Spare" was far more than a celebrity memoir.

"Vulnerable and heartfelt, brave and intimate, 'Spare' is the story of someone we may have thought we already knew, but now we can truly come to understand Prince Harry through his own words," she said. "Looking at these extraordinary first day sales, readers clearly agree, Spare is a book that demands to be read, and it is a book we are proud to publish," she added.

The book is one of a number of lucrative contracts

struck by Harry and his American wife Meghan crashing in on their royal connections. The couple dramatically quit royal life and moved to California in 2020 and have complained bitterly about their treatment in the UK. A YouGov survey published in The Times found only 24 percent of people now have a positive view of the prince - down from 80 percent a decade ago - with 68 percent critical.

Among over-65s, Harry and Meghan's popularity ratings were even worse than those of the disgraced Prince Andrew, the survey found. "Spare" was published in a total of 16 languages worldwide and released simultaneously in print and digital formats in North America by Random House US and Random House Canada, and in the United Kingdom by Transworld. An unabridged audio edition of the book, read by Harry himself, was also published by Penguin Random House Audio.

The first US printing of Spare was two million copies, however the book has now gone back to press for additional copies to meet demand, according to Penguin Random House. Bookshops in the UK opened early Tuesday to offer Harry's book although buyers were sparse after the extensive leaks ahead of publication. The blockbuster publication comes as the royal family prepares for the coronation of Harry's father King Charles III on May 6. The royal family has not commented on the book. — AFP

International

US to defend space with Japan, deploy mobile Marines as China worries grow

China claims Taiwan, a self-governing democracy with strong links to Japan

WASHINGTON: The United States said Wednesday that attacks in space would invoke its defense treaty with Japan and announced the deployment of a more agile Marine unit on its ally's soil as alarm grows over China.

Weeks after unveiling plans to ramp up security spending, Japan sent its defense and foreign ministers to Washington where the two countries issued a statement vowing to "modernize the alliance in order to address the increasingly severe security environment."

The talks come two days before a visit by Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, who is touring Group of Seven nations to kick off Japan's leadership year of the elite club and earlier Wednesday in London also boosted defense ties with Britain. As China makes rapid advances in satellites, the United States and Japan warned in their statement that "attacks to, from or within space present a clear challenge to the security of the alliance" that could invoke Article Five of their mutual defense treaty, which considers an attack on one an attack on both.

The talks finalized a plan by the United States to send a so-called Marine Littoral Regiment, a more agile unit that can operate defenses both by sea and air, to Okinawa, the southern Japanese island strategically close to Taiwan. US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said the unit would be in place by 2025 from a reorganization of an existing artillery regiment. "I think this is going to contribute in a major way in our effort to help defend Japan and also promote a free and open Indo-Pacific," Austin said, using the US turn of phrase for an Asia without Chinese dominance. He reiterated the US commitment to defend Japan including over islets, known as the Senkaku by Tokyo and the Diaoyu by Beijing, which are contested by China.

Taiwan risks but no 'imminent' invasion

Japan has been officially pacifist since its defeat in World War II but has increasingly shed past sensitivity



WASHINGTON: US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin (R) shakes hands with Japanese Defense Minister Yasukazu Hamada following meetings at the US Department of State in Washington. — AFP

ties as China under President Xi Jinping exerts itself and as North Korea keeps firing missiles, some of them over Japanese territory.

China claims Taiwan, a self-governing democracy with strong links to Japan, and in August carried out major exercises after a defiant visit to Taipei by Nancy Pelosi, then speaker of the US House of Representatives. The United States and Japan condemned China's "dangerous and provocative" military activities and called for "peace and stability" in the Taiwan Strait.

Austin, however, played down fears that China is planning an imminent invasion. "I won't second-guess Mr. Xi but what I will tell you, what we are seeing recently is some very provocative behavior on the part

of China's forces," Austin said.

"We believe that they endeavor to establish a new normal but whether or not that means that an invasion is imminent, I seriously doubt that," he said. A war simulation recently released by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a Washington think tank, found that Beijing would hit Japanese bases, causing major damage, in an invasion of Taiwan but would most likely fail in its end goal.

Wang Wenbin, spokesman for China's foreign ministry, told a regular press briefing on Thursday: "In conducting bilateral military cooperation, the United States and Japan should ensure that it does not harm the interests of a third party or regional peace and stability."

Addressing local concerns

Okinawa, under US control until 1972, remains home to more than half of the 50,000 US troops in Japan and many have long seethed with resentment at the burden of the bases including the noise and occasional crimes by US troops.

Japanese Defense Minister Yasukazu Hamada promised to "continue to work on the reduction of the impact on Okinawa" and speak to local communities. Kishida's government said last month that Japan would increase defense spending by 2027 to two percent of GDP-in line with a separate goal by NATO nations, whose security concerns have also spiked due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

The United States praised the spending boost as well as Japan's decision to build a "counterstrike capacity"-being able to hit launch sites that threaten the country. The talks with Japan come ahead of a rare visit to Beijing by Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who said President Joe Biden was committed to "guardrails" on tensions. "We're not looking for conflict. We'll manage the competition responsibly," Blinken said. — AFP

S Lanka ex-leader failed to stop Easter attacks

COLOMBO: Former Sri Lankan president Maithripala Sirisena and four other top officials were responsible for failing to prevent the 2019 Easter Sunday bombings that killed 279 people, the Supreme Court said in a landmark decision Thursday.

The island nation's worst terror attack since the end of its ethnic civil war saw coordinated suicide blasts on hotels and Catholic churches, which also killed up to 45 foreign nationals and wounded over 500 people. The seven-judge bench ruled that Sirisena had been negligent in not taking measures to thwart the attack, despite solid intelligence warnings two weeks earlier.

They ordered Sirisena, 71, to pay 100 million rupees (\$273,000) to family members of victims who brought the civil case before the court. Sri Lanka's former police, intelligence and defence chiefs were also held responsible and instructed to compensate victims' relatives. It is the first time that a head of state in Sri Lanka has been held responsible for failing to prevent a terror attack. Sri Lanka's Catholic Church has regularly criticised the government's investigation into the Easter Sunday bombings and petitioned the United Nations for an international probe. A local jihadist group was blamed for the attack but authorities failed to identify the masterminds. — AFP

Romania conducts raids in probe of influencer Tate

BUCHAREST: Romanian police raided more houses as part of their probe of controversial influencer Andrew Tate, who is being investigated for alleged human trafficking and rape, prosecutors said on Thursday. The British-US citizen, his younger brother and two Romanian women are under investigation for allegedly coercing women into "forced labour... and pornographic acts", which they intended to publish online for "substantial financial benefits".

Tate, 36, and his brother, 34, deny the charges, according to their lawyer Eugen Vidineac. Seven properties in Bucharest and its surrounding areas were being searched as part of the investigation, Romania's anti-organised crime and terrorism directorate (DIICOT) said in a statement.



BUCHAREST: British-US former professional kickboxer and controversial influencer Andrew Tate (3rd R), his brother Tristan Tate (2nd R), and two unidentified Romanian women, arrive handcuffed and escorted by police at a courthouse in Bucharest. — AFP

Turkmenistan moves to consolidate power of ex-president

ASHGABAT: Central Asia's Turkmenistan on Thursday introduced an initiative to abolish its upper house of parliament and create a supreme body, a move that would strengthen the role of the former leader of the gas-rich authoritarian country. The tightly-controlled ex-Soviet country tolerates no political opposition or free press, with its economy largely depending on natural gas exports, especially to China.

For nearly two decades the country has been ruled by one family since the coming to power of Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov in 2006, who was replaced by his son Serdar last year in a presidential election with token opposition. The 65-year-old former leader-also called Arkadag or "Protector"-has

kept a hand on the reins, retaining his position as chairman of the upper house of parliament.

Observers say Berdimukhamedov senior remains the real holder of power and has met with several foreign leaders since stepping down, including with Russian President Vladimir Putin last year. "I propose to create a supreme representative body of people's power, the Halk Maslahaty ("People's Council") of Turkmenistan," Berdimukhamedov said in remarks reported Thursday by the state-run newspaper Neutral Turkmenistan.

According to him, the new institution will in particular "consider and approve the main directions of domestic and foreign policy". He said that "due to the establishment of the People's Council of Turkmenistan and it receiving broad powers", the upper house of parliament "will be abolished".

The ex-president appeared first on a list of members who he believes should join the People's Council, ahead of his 41-year-old son. The two chambers of parliament will meet on January 21 and are expected to ratify the proposal.—AFP



COTONOU: Members of the observers and the CENA (Commission Electorale Nationale Autonome) check the number of votes following the legislative elections at the public primary school, Charles Guilloit de Zongo in Cotonou. — AFP

Benin opposition rejects results of parliament vote

COTONOU: Benin's main opposition on Thursday rejected the results of this week's parliamentary election, claiming vote buying and fraud allowed allies of President Patrice Talon to win a majority of legislative seats. Sunday's vote was a key test for Benin, where Talon has promoted a programme of economic and political development, but critics say his mandate has eroded a once thriving multi-party democracy. Pro-Talon Republican Bloc and Progressive Union for Renewal parties together won 81 seats in the 109-member parliament with opposition Democrats gaining 28 seats, according to preliminary results on Wednesday. In an early Thursday press conference, Democrats party leader Eric Houndete denounced "flagrant" ballot box stuffing, rigging and vote buying by the two pro-government parties, without providing immediate evidence. "The Democrats party rejects this result, which does not reflect the will of the people to make our party the first political force in our country," Houndete said.

"The count attributed to the Siamese parties (the two pro-Talon parties) could only be achieved thanks to the schemes put in place to distort the democratic game." The election marked the return of the opposition to parliament in the West African nation, following a four-year absence and for the first time since Talon came to power in 2016. Final results are expected to be released on Friday by the National Electoral Commission (CENA). There was

no immediate reaction from CENA or the two pro-Talon parties.

Return to parliament

In 2019, opposition parties were effectively barred from participating in a legislative ballot due to stricter of election rules, resulting in a parliament dominated by Talon supporters. Sunday's vote was marred by deadly clashes in an opposition stronghold, historic low turnout and an internet blackout, rare events in Benin.

Most of Talon's key opponents have also been jailed or gone into exile after the cotton magnate came to office. Democrats hoped to gain seats in preparation for 2026 presidential elections, when candidates will need lawmaker support to be registered. Parliament also plays a role in the composition of the Constitutional Court, which oversees rulings on election disputes. Its mandate ends this year and four new judges will be appointed by lawmakers while three are chosen by the president.

The Democrats party also said it would propose an amnesty law in parliament to free jailed colleagues and allow the return of political exiles. In December 2021, Reckya Madougou was sentenced to 20 years in prison on a charge of terrorism, while Joel Aivo-another opposition leader and academic-was jailed for 10 years for alleged conspiracy against the authority of the state. Both were sentenced by a special court dealing with terrorism and economic crimes, known as the CRIET. Critics say the court has been used to crack down on Talon's opponents since his government established it in 2016. Sunday's legislative vote took place as Benin and other Gulf of Guinea coastal countries, Ghana, Togo and Ivory Coast, face a growing threat from jihadist violence spilling over their northern borders with the Sahel. — AFP

News in brief

Women jihadists jailed

TUNIS: Tunisia has jailed nine members of an all-women "terrorist" gang accused of plotting to assassinate a government minister, media reported Thursday. In the North African nation's first known case of an all-woman jihadist group, two of the ring-leaders were jailed for 25 years, while the other seven were handed sentences ranging between three and 14 years. One woman was acquitted. The sentences were handed out by a court in the capital Tunis on Tuesday, but Tunisia's prosecution service has no spokesperson and has not responded to journalists for months. The justice minister declined to give further information on the case. The case dates back to 2016, when reports appeared on social media of an attempt to assassinate then-interior minister Hedi Majdoub during a visit to his parents — something his office denied. Private radio station Mosaïque FM reported that one of the gang lived next door to Majdoub's parents, and was accused of passing along information about his visits.

Russian jailed for 5 years

MOSCOW: A Russian court sentenced a 24-year-old professional soldier to five years in prison for refusing to fight in Ukraine, officials said on Thursday. The soldier, "not wanting to take part in a special military operation", did not report for duty in May 2022, said the press service for courts in the region of Bashkortostan in the southern Urals. Law enforcement located the man, Marsel Kandarov, in September, the statement added. Separately, a military tribunal said it sentenced Kandarov to five years behind bars for evading military service during mobilisation for more than a month. Russia announced the mobilisation of 300,000 men in late September to buttress Russian troops on the ground in Ukraine. The announcement triggered an exodus of men from Russia, with many fleeing to neighbouring countries including Armenia, Georgia and Kazakhstan.

Missing Mexican journalists

MEXICO CITY: Media rights activists voiced concern on Wednesday for three Mexican journalists feared to have been abducted two weeks ago in an area controlled by drug traffickers. Jesus Pintor Alegre, Fernando Moreno Villegas and Alan Garcia Aguilar, who worked for the news website Escenario Calentano, disappeared on December 27 in Guerrero state. In a video posted by unknown persons on social networks, two of the missing journalists appear chained hand and foot. One states that they are "paying the consequences" for their reporting in the violent southern region. The area where the journalists went missing is "very difficult, very complex, controlled almost 100 percent by the Familia Michoacana" drug cartel, Reporters Without Borders representative Balbina Flores told AFP. RSF, the Committee to Protect Journalists and fellow rights group Article 19 made a joint appeal for the authorities to "find the journalists immediately," as well as provide protection to relatives and other media workers in the area. — AFP

Tate, a former professional kickboxer, and the three others were arrested in December and ordered held for 30 days while investigations are ongoing. DIICOT prosecutors already searched Tate's villa in April, and Romanian police raided five locations across the country in late December. So far six potential victims have been identified. Many of the men's assets, including their collection of luxury cars, were seized. Just days before Tate was arrested, he had a heated Twitter exchange with Swedish activist Greta Thunberg, which went viral, on subjects ranging from cars with "enormous emissions" to pizza boxes.

In 2016, Tate appeared on the "Big Brother" reality television show, but he was removed after a video emerged showing him attacking a woman. He then turned to social media platforms to promote his divisive views, before being banned for misogynistic remarks and hate speech. Tate was allowed back on Twitter after Elon Musk bought the company, and his handle "Cobratate" currently has 4.5 million followers. Tate and his brother moved to Romania several years ago. — AFP

FRIDAY, JANUARY 13, 2023

Business

Zain Iraq finalizes sale and leaseback of 4,968 towers to TASC Towers Iraq

Al-Kharafi: The landmark deal will be instrumental in developing Iraq's digital economy

Bader Al-Kharafi:

- Zain's '4Sight' strategy aims to create significant value for shareholders through the unlocking of capital and optimization of infrastructure assets which will flourish under the management of an independent team.
- This landmark deal will be instrumental in developing Iraq's digital economy and paves the way for tower infrastructure sharing and reducing the local telecom industry's carbon footprint

BAGHDAD/KUWAIT: Zain Group announced that its operation in Iraq has entered into a definite 15-year agreement to sell and leaseback, as well as the management rights of the passive physical infrastructure of its 4,968-tower portfolio in Iraq to TASC Towers Iraq for \$180 million.

The deal also comprises of TASC Towers Iraq expanding the network and building new tower sites across the country to meet the growing demand for data connectivity as per local market requirements, including an agreed 198 new sites over the next 12 months. Furthermore, TASC Towers will manage Zain Iraq's supporting facilities such as power generators, fuel tanks and shelters.

Zain Iraq will retain its active infrastructure, including wireless communication radios, antennas, intelligent software, transmission systems, and intellectual property with respect to managing its telecom network.

TASC Towers (www.tasctowers.com), headquartered in Dubai, is an international tower operator focused on sale and leaseback, build-to-suit and

tower related investments in the MENEASA market (Middle East, North & East Africa and South Asia). As an independent tower operator, TASC Towers' subsidiary in Iraq will work on optimizing co-location of mobile network sites with other telecom operators in the country, that will result in a better utilization of mobile site infrastructure, the reduction of power generators and hence the industry's carbon footprint.

Bader Al-Kharafi, Zain Vice-Chairman and Group CEO said: "Zain's '4Sight' strategy aims to create significant value for shareholders through the unlocking of capital and optimization of infrastructure assets which will flourish under the management of an independent team. This transaction will enhance operational efficiencies and empower Zain Iraq with greater flexibility to invest in network upgrades and cutting-edge ICT technologies to meet the ever-increasing demand for reliable and high-speed connectivity."

Al-Kharafi added, "I congratulate both the Zain and TASC Towers teams for their competence in



completing this landmark deal that will be instrumental in developing Iraq's digital economy and paves the way for tower infrastructure sharing, an important element in our group wide carbon footprint reduction strategy that aims for Zain to transition to Net-Zero by 2050."

Iyad Mazhar, CEO of TASC Towers commented, "As we expand TASC Towers' presence across the region, we look forward to playing a key role in the evolution of Iraq's digital economy and the positive impact it has on socio-economic growth for the community. Our independent operating model enhances the operational and carbon efficiency of passive tower infrastructure, which will allow mobile operators to invest more in technology upgrades and connectivity speeds."

This Iraq tower sale is the fourth tower transaction undertaken by Zain following similar pioneering deals including the transfer of 2,830 towers in Jordan, 1,620 towers in Kuwait and 8,100 towers in Saudi Arabia.

By freeing a telecom's resources, tower sale and leaseback deals enable Zain operations to laser focus on the telecom's core business and customers,



therefore providing them an exceptional mobile and data experience. FTI Capital Advisors acted as exclusive financial advisor to Zain Group on this transaction.

Al-Shall Weekly Economic Report

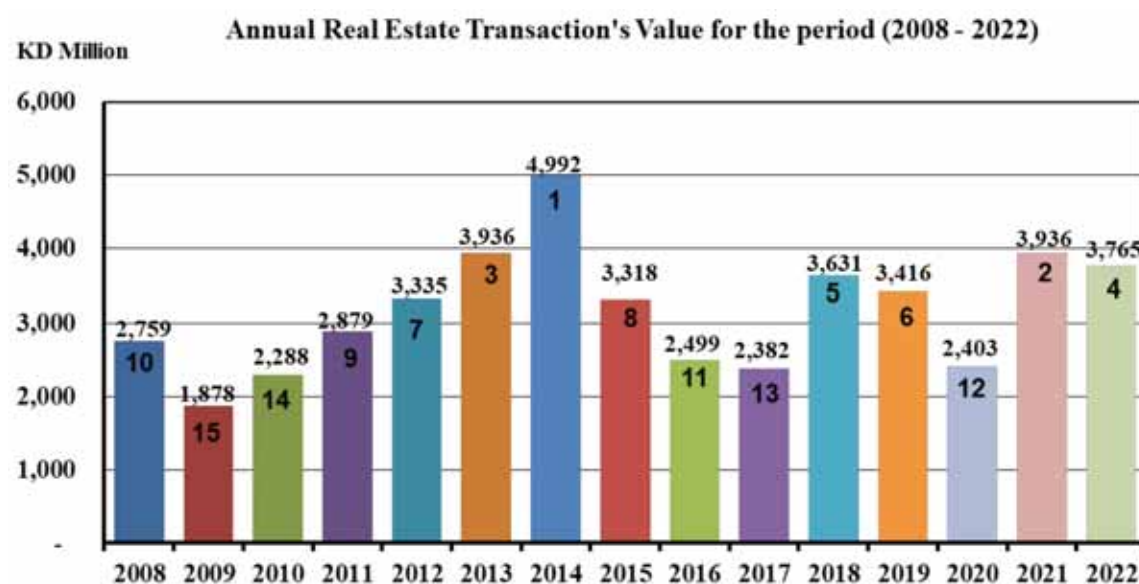
Real estate sector liquidity reached KD 3.765bn in 2022

KUWAIT: According to the data at the Ministry of Justice -Real Estate Registration and Authentication Department- (after excluding both the craft activity and the coastal strip system), real estate market liquidity for 2022 reached KD 3.765 billion, -4.4 percent lower than 2021 liquidity at KD 3.936 billion. The liquidity of the second half of 2022 was KD 1.694 billion, lower than first half liquidity at KD 2.071 billion, indicating a downward liquidity movement throughout the year accompanied by the rise of the discount rates.

The real estate market began to decline in 2008 —the global financial crisis year— to reach KD 2.759 billion, and the decline continued in 2009 and reached the lowest level over the last 15 years at KD 1.878 billion. It recovered again in 2010 and continued to 2014 and registered its highest level for said period at KD 4.992 billion. The fall in liquidity level began in 2015 when oil prices dropped sharply and reached KD 3.318 billion. This decline continued in 2016 and reached KD 2.499 billion when oil prices reached a very low level, and stretching the decline in 2017 despite the improvement in oil prices when real estate liquidity reached KD 2.382 billion.

Liquidity rose to KD 3.631 billion in 2018 but quickly dropped again in 2019 and witnessed a greater decline in 2020 to KD 2.403 billion as a result of the pandemic repercussions. The real estate market liquidity rebounded in 2021 recovering from the pandemic and reached KD 3.936 billion (second highest level during 2008-2022), representing an absolute increase of KD 1.533 billion versus 2020 liquidity. Finally, in 2022 real estate market liquidity dropped by -4.4 percent to reach KD 3.765 billion as mentioned previously.

Liquidity of the private residential activity decreased by -32 percent in 2022 compared to



Liquidity & Indices Movement of GCC's Stock Markets							
GCC Stock Markets	Value in US\$		*Change		% out of Total		Stock Indices
	2021	2022	Value	%	2021	2022	
Qatar	27,904,249	39,682,468	11,778,219	42.2%	3.5%	5.7%	-8.1%
Dubai	19,692,354	24,512,215	4,819,861	24.5%	2.5%	3.5%	4.4%
Abu Dhabi	100,595,103	122,638,168	22,043,064	21.9%	12.7%	17.7%	20.3%
Muscat	2,128,056	2,453,291	325,235	15.3%	0.3%	0.4%	17.6%
Kuwait (ASM Index)	45,135,847	48,085,868	2,950,021	6.5%	5.7%	6.9%	3.5%
Bahrain	520,422	451,565	-68,856	-13.2%	0.1%	0.1%	5.5%
Saudi Arabia	596,240,809	455,477,961	-140,762,849	-23.6%	75.3%	65.7%	-7.1%
Total	792,216,839	693,301,535	-98,915,304	-12.5%			

*There are some superficial differences in the rate of change due to conversion to the US\$.

2021, as its volume in contracts and POAs reached KD 2.009 billion; contributing to 53.4 percent of market liquidity versus 75.1 percent for 2021. While the residential investment activity liquidity increased to KD 1.116 billion, a 43.3 percent growth rate compared to 2021, with an increase to 29.6 percent in its contribution to market liquidity versus 19.8 percent of market liquidity in 2021. Also, trading of the commercial activity increased to KD 606 million, a 233.8 percent increase and its contribution to total market liquidity rose to 16.1 percent in 2022 versus 4.6 percent for 2021.

Private and investment residential accounted for

83 percent of real estate market liquidity in 2022, leaving 17 percent of liquidity for commercial and warehousing activity.

The average value per deal for the private residential activity increased in 2022 to KD 442.0 thousand versus KD 326.8 thousand in 2021. Likewise, the average value per deal of the investment residential activity increased to KD 803.1 thousand versus KD 703.2 thousand. The average value per deal for commercial activity rose to KD 3.8 million compared to KD 2.1 million in 2021. The overall average per deal in the real estate market increased by 60.4 percent in 2022.

more difficult and expensive, the report added.

In a first, rising cobalt, lithium and nickel prices in 2022 led to an increase in the global price of electric vehicle batteries by almost 10 percent. The cost of building wind turbines outside China has also crept up after years of declining prices, while similar trends are affecting solar panels.

IEA executive director Fatih Birol urged countries to diversify supply chains, citing Europe's dependence on Russian gas as a prime of example of the potential exposure to disruption caused by depending excessively on one trade source. "As we have seen with Europe's reliance on Russian gas, when you depend too much on one company, one country or one trade route-you risk paying a heavy price if there is disruption," he said. Birol also stressed the importance of international collaboration, "since no country is an energy island and energy transitions will be more costly and slow if countries do not work together." —AFP

World enters 'new age' of clean energy manufacturing: IEA

PARIS: The world is at the "dawn of a new industrial age" of clean energy technology manufacturing that will triple in value by 2030 and create millions of jobs, the International Energy Agency said on Thursday. The global market for key mass-manufactured technologies including solar panels, wind turbines, electric vehicle batteries, heat pumps and electrolyzers for hydrogen will be worth around \$650 billion a year by the end of the decade, the IEA predicted in a report.

The figure is more than three times larger than current levels but is conditional on countries fully

implementing their energy and climate pledges, it added. Related jobs in clean energy manufacturing will more than double from six million to nearly 14 million by 2030, the agency said.

"The energy world is at the dawn of a new industrial age—the age of clean energy technology manufacturing," the IEA said. But the Paris-based organization warned that the concentration of resource extraction and manufacturing poses risks to supply chains.

Three countries account for 70 percent of the manufacturing capacity for solar, wind, battery, electrolyser and heat pump technology, with China "dominant in all of them". The Democratic Republic of Congo produces more than 70 percent of the world's cobalt, and three countries—Australia, Chile and China—account for more than 90 percent of the global production of lithium, a key resource for electric vehicle batteries. Supply chain tensions risk making the energy transition

Burgan Bank gets nod to complete sale of Bank of Baghdad

KUWAIT: Burgan Bank has received approvals from Central Bank of Iraq to sell its ownership stake of 51.8 percent in Bank of Baghdad to Jordan Kuwait Bank for \$125 million. Burgan has therefore completed all the necessary regulatory approvals to execute and conclude the sale. Burgan has agreed the transaction terms with the buyer and is now expected to complete all required legal documentations and Iraqi Stock Exchange requirements over the next few weeks.



Masoud M J Hayat

Masoud M J Hayat, Vice Chairman and Group CEO of Burgan Bank commented saying "The decision of selling our stake in Bank of Baghdad was taken to ensure the best outcome for the Bank and for our shareholders. This sale is in line with Burgan Bank's pursuit of strategic asset reallocation, which is one of our key strategic priorities and it will enable us to focus on Burgan's core market, Kuwait." "This transaction shall improve Burgan's financial metrics, with protection of its NPL Ratio by avoiding an increase of 60 bps and with improvement in its capital ratios by 70 bps," added Hayat.

Established in 1977, Burgan Bank is currently the third largest bank by assets in Kuwait. From its earliest days, the Bank has significantly focused on the corporate and financial institution sectors, in addition to diversifying its offering to cater to its growing retail and private banking customer base.

Boubyan Bank opts out of digital bank project

KUWAIT: Boubyan Bank has withdrawn from a consortium for setting up a digital bank under umbrella of the Central Bank of Kuwait. The bank said in a disclosure on Boursa Kuwait website on Thursday that following discussions among parties of the consortium, they "had all agreed on the pullout of Boubyan Bank." The bank was established in 2004 and was listed on the bourse in 2006. Its capital amounts to KD 373.8 million (\$1.13 billion). Its operations cover deposits, funding of various terms according to the Islamic sharia (law), banking and financial services, dealing in stocks and bonds. — KUNA

Business

US aviation authorities probing system outage after disruption

Halt on US domestic takeoffs triggers thousands of delays, cancellations

NEWARK: Aviation authorities were racing Wednesday to figure out what caused the outage of a crucial alert system that forced the temporary halt on all US domestic takeoffs, triggering thousands of delays and cancellations. The US Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) said normal operations were being restored but the early morning halt created knock-on effects that snarled travel throughout the day.

The grounding order was issued after the FAA identified an issue with the Notice to Air Missions system (NOTAM), which provides information to pilots about hazards, changes to airport facilities and information that can affect flights. "Our preliminary work has traced the outage to a damaged database file," the FAA said in a tweet Wednesday evening, adding that "at this time, there is no evidence of a cyberattack." The temporary outage spelled yet another hellish day for US travelers—less than a month after a bad winter storm roiled the system.

"I just learned that my flight was delayed again," said Vince Hamilton, who was at Reagan National Airport near Washington seeking to travel to Chicago, and then on to St. Louis-where, he said, "I have to catch a bus that I'm probably going to miss." Wednesday's nationwide order was believed to be the first time since the attacks of 9/11 that such a broad command had been issued, according to aviation experts cited in US media. The FAA did not respond to queries seeking confirmation.

Near 8 pm eastern time (0100 GMT Thursday), more than 1,300 flights within, into or out of the United States had been canceled, with more than 9,800 suffering delays, according to flight tracking website Flight Aware. The difficulties sparked fresh criticism on Capitol Hill and throughout Washington of the FAA, which has had no confirmed administrator since March.

Cause unknown

The FAA reported the problem on Twitter at 6.29am EST (1129 GMT), saying it was working to restore the NOTAM system, before announcing 50 minutes later that it ordered a pause on all domestic departures until 9am. Flying experts say the system in question contains a range of highly relevant details, such as a closed runway, to less significant matters, like the presence of a crane somewhere in or near the airport. About 30 minutes after the FAA lifted the stop order, a screen at Reagan National Airport was overwhelmed by red with flight delays and just a handful of departures.



NEWARK, US: Passengers check in for flights at Newark International Airport, in Newark, New Jersey, on January 11, 2023. The US Federal Aviation Authority said Wednesday that normal flight operations “are resuming gradually” across the country following an overnight systems outage that grounded departures. — AFP

tures. "Customers may continue to see some delays and cancellations as we work to restore our schedule," United Airlines said shortly after the stop order was lifted, adding it would refund customers who no longer wished to travel.

Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg also said on MSNBC that there was no evidence of “nefarious” causes to the attack—but that it could not yet be ruled out. Noting that the FAA systems have backups, Buttigieg said the inquiry would look at “why, with all that redundancy, it still rose to the level where... there had to be a ground stop lasting about an hour and a half, and all the delays we saw.”

Senator Maria Cantwell, the Democratic Chair of the Senate Commerce Committee, also vowed to shed light on the incident. “We will be looking into what caused this outage and how redundancy plays a role in preventing future outages,” Cantwell said.

Republican Senator Ted Cruz of Texas said the “completely unacceptable” outage “highlights why the public needs a competent, proven leader with substan-

tive aviation experience leading the FAA.”

The White House last week renominated Phillip Washington to be the lead US aviation regulator, replacing former head Stephen Dickson, who left office on March 31. Washington was originally nominated in July, but the Senate did not schedule a confirmation hearing, with some lawmakers questioning his lack of background in aviation. Washington served as head of Denver International Airport in 2021 after a long US Army career followed by other non-aviation transportation posts. Travel industry officials said Wednesday's crisis points to key vulnerabilities in US infrastructure.

“Today’s FAA catastrophic system failure is a clear sign that America’s transportation network desperately needs significant upgrades,” said US Travel Association President Geoff Freeman. The halt comes in the wake of a large-scale aviation meltdown in the United States over the Christmas holiday, as a storm brought unseasonably cold temperatures and travel chaos to the majority of the country. — AFP


US labor board upholds landmark Amazon union vote

WASHINGTON: Amazon's objections to a landmark unionization vote by workers in one of the retail giant's US warehouses have been thrown out, the US National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) ruled Wednesday. The federal agency tossed out the arguments put forth by Amazon against the 2022 vote at its warehouse in Staten Island, New York, and said in a statement that the company "must now begin bargaining in good faith with the union or may request a review" of its decision by the end of January.

The Amazon employees voted overwhelmingly in late March last year to join the Amazon Labor Union, but the company claimed the union had intimidated the workers and that the local NLRB office had facilitated its victory. “This is a huge moment for the labor movement,” ALU vice president Derrick Palmer tweeted, adding: “we will continue fighting for a better contract for all Amazon workers across the world.”

An Amazon spokesperson said the company intends to appeal. “We knew it was unlikely that the NLRB Regional Office would rule against itself,” spokesperson Kelly Nantel told AFP.







“As we’ve said since the beginning, we don’t believe this election process was fair, legitimate, or representative of the majority of what our team wants.” The case had been moved to the NLRB’s office in Phoenix, Arizona where an official ruled that some objections could be sustained and ordered a hearing. In an election conducted at another Amazon warehouse in Alabama in the spring of 2021, which resulted in a “no” vote for a union, the agency ordered a new vote on the grounds that the company had violated US rules on labor organizing. Many ballots were contested in a second vote in February and March this year, and the result has still not yet been certified. —AFP



شركة الصفاة للاستثمار
 AL SAFAT INVESTMENT COMPANY

KUWAIT BOURSA WEEKLY REPORT

WEEK ENDED ON 12 JANUARY 2023

 (965) 22 675 140
 Al-Safat Tower, Hawalli, Beirut St.
 alsafatinvest.com
 research@alsafatinvest.com
 alsafatinvestment
 al-safat-investment-company

No.	Ticker	Sector	Price Movement & Performance											Valuation Multiples *			
			Open Price	Close Price	Week High	Week Low	Range	Volume	WTD Change	WTD %	YTD %	Support Level	Resistance Level	P/E	P/B	Yield	Beta
101	National Bank of Kuwait	Banking	1,090	1,070	1,097	1,062	35	21,576,023	-7	-0.65%	-0.74%	1,064	1,080	17.8	2.08	2.2%	1.01
102	Gulf Bank	Banking	300	305	311	300	11	16,907,254	5	1.67%	-2.87%	303	310	16.1	1.39	2.2%	1.27
106	Kuwait International Bank	Banking	194	193	197	192	5	6,961,422	0	0.00%	-1.53%	186	194	35.1	0.62	2.0%	1.16
107	Burgan Bank	Banking	219	221	225	217	8	6,079,101	3	1.38%	0.91%	217	222	22.3	0.81	2.1%	1.28
108	Kuwait Finance House	Banking	793	802	828	788	40	63,819,566	11	1.39%	-2.55%	796	825	27.7	3.38	1.3%	1.16
109	Boubyan Bank	Banking	770	777	799	762	37	4,630,997	10	1.30%	-2.63%	773	791	51.1	3.11	0.6%	1.09
204	National Investments	Financial Services	246	238	250	236	14	2,701,150	-7	-2.86%	0.42%	237	244	17.5	0.97	18.9%	1.87
205	Kuwait Projects	Financial Services	101	107	111	100	11	58,191,429	7.5	7.54%	-4.46%	101	110	-	0.56	4.5%	1.00
252	Al Imtiaz Investment	Financial Services	72.2	70.4	72.9	70	3	2,710,389	-0.6	-0.85%	-6.01%	70.1	72.8	-	0.42	12.7%	1.23
401	Kuwait Real Estate	Real Estate	108	108	110	106	4	41,651,038	1	0.93%	0.00%	106	108	15.9	0.80	2.7%	1.08
413	Mabaneer	Real Estate	829	828	865	821	44	1,479,112	-1	-0.12%	-2.36%	825	839	17.2	1.84	1.6%	1.03
501	National Industries	Financial Services	207	207	215	205	10	20,271,597	2	0.98%	-4.61%	202	210	10.6	0.93	5.3%	1.51
505	Gulf Cable	Industrials	1,190	1,192	1,192	1,145	47	111,819	12	1.02%	-1.89%	1,176	1,202	11.5	1.15	5.0%	1.02
514	Boubyan Petrochemical	Basic Materials	770	771	777	768	9	1,068,310	1	0.13%	-3.63%	770	790	8.1	1.52	7.8%	0.93
603	Agility	Industrials	682	595	685	595	90	66,369,056	-87	-12.76%	-17.36%	593	656	42.3	1.19	2.6%	1.57
605	Zain	Telecommunications	555	542	560	542	18	20,906,235	-9	-1.63%	-3.73%	542	557	12.7	1.99	6.0%	0.77
623	Human Soft Holding	Industrials	3,450	3,470	3,550	3,401	149	764,952	20	0.58%	-1.42%	3,461	3,499	7.4	3.52	11.4%	0.65
642	ALAFCO	Industrials	189	199	205	189	16	8,878,483	10	5.29%	-1.97%	195	206	-	0.85	0.0%	1.18
654	JAZEERA	Consumer Discretionary	1,665	1,699	1,750	1,640	110	2,545,000	49	2.97%	-10.58%	1,680	1,700	13.1	10.11	2.7%	1.43
821	Warba Bank	Banking	229	234	238	229	9	13,512,483	7	3.08%	-0.43%	229	240	23.8	1.29	0.0%	1.09
823	Mezzan Holding	Consumer Staples	390	394	422	388	34	3,380,125	4	1.03%	0.25%	380	405	-	1.25	4.0%	0.48

Business

Analysts expect slowing US inflation, fueling hopes of less hawkish Fed

Data add to signs that worst of surging prices may be over

WASHINGTON: Consumer inflation in the United States is set to ease further in December, analysts say, in an encouraging trend that could bring some reprieve from rising interest rates. As American households struggle with decades-high inflation, the Federal Reserve hiked its benchmark lending rate at a pace unheard of since the 1980s in hopes of cooling the world's biggest economy.

But analysts expect the consumer price index (CPI), a key inflation gauge, to flatline between November and December in figures due to be released Thursday. The data point could add to signs that the worst of surging prices may be over. "The trend is an encouraging one," Moody's Analytics economist Matt Colyar told AFP, noting that figures have come down from a recent peak.

But Rubeela Farooqi of High Frequency Economics warned that "rates of change remain well above levels Fed officials are comfortable with." US consumer inflation climbed rapidly to a blistering 9.1 percent last June, a 40-year high, as the war in Ukraine sent global food and energy costs rocketing.

While annual CPI growth eased to 7.1 percent in November, it remains a far cry from the Fed's two-percent target.

'Steep drop'

"A steep drop in gas prices" is behind the easing trend in December, said Ian Shepherdson of Pantheon Macroeconomics. Prices at the pump-a-

key symbol for US consumers-dropped last month on lower global demand and falling oil prices, in welcome news to policymakers.

Airline fares and health insurance prices are set to fall too, said Shepherdson.

But stripping out the volatile food and energy segments, the "core" CPI index likely rose 0.3 percent thanks to elevated rents, he said. This would be a slight pick-up from November's 0.2 percent reading, signaling that more work needs to be done. Colyar of Moody's Analytics added that although motor fuel prices have fallen, policymakers cannot rely on its momentary downward trend to bring down overall inflation.

For now, the Fed is keeping a close eye on the labor market and the pace of wage growth, as rapidly rising earnings could provoke a continued increase in the costs of services. Fed Chair Jerome Powell cautioned Tuesday that "restoring price stability when inflation is high can require measures that are not popular in the short term as we raise interest rates to slow the economy."

The Fed's moves aim to raise the costs of borrowing, lowering demand by making it more expensive to get funds for big-ticket purchases or to expand businesses. Fed governor Michelle Bowman added in a separate address Tuesday that despite a decline in some measures of inflation, "we have a lot more work to do."

In December, the Fed's policy-setting Federal Open Market Committee said it expected "ongoing increases" in the target range of rates.



WASHINGTON: As American households struggle with decades-high inflation, the Federal Reserve hiked its benchmark lending rate at a pace unheard of since the 1980s in hopes of cooling the world's biggest economy.

Minutes from the committee's latest meeting also suggested there would not be rate cuts this year. "I expect that once we achieve a suffi-

ciently restrictive federal funds rate, it will need to remain at that level for some time," said Bowman. —AFP

China sees modest rise in inflation in December

BEIJING: China's consumer inflation rose modestly in December, official figures released Thursday showed, though it remained below two percent in a sign the economy is still struggling with the effects of years of zero-COVID. The consumer price index—the main gauge of inflation-hit 1.8 percent on-year, up from 1.6 percent in November, the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) said.

Inflation for the whole of 2022 rose by an average of two percent, making China an outlier compared with other major economies where prices have soared on the back of a spike in energy and food costs, and supply chain snarls. Beijing had targeted an average inflation rate of three percent for 2022, and the lower figure will give authorities room to provide much-needed stimulus to the economy.

But the world's second largest economy is still reeling from the effects of years of its zero-COVID policy, which hammered businesses and supply chains and dampened consumption, though many restrictions have now been lifted. The producer price index, which measures the cost of goods leaving factories, contracted in December for the third consecutive month. The 0.7 percent shrinkage is a further sign of weak demand and reduced margins for businesses.

"The economy is still running below potential," Zhiwei Zhang of Pinpoint Asset Management wrote in a note. "High-frequency indicators such as traffic flows picked up recently, but demand is still not strong enough to lead to inflationary pressure. Inflation is not a constraint for monetary policy to loosen further this year."

Taiwan's TSMC sees record Q4 net profits

TAIPEI: Taiwanese chip giant TSMC reported record fourth-quarter net profits on Thursday, but also predicted slowing sales for the start of 2023 as a potential recession dampens global demand. Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company operates the world's largest silicon wafer factories and produces some of the most advanced microchips used in everything from smartphones and cars to missiles.

It is regarded as a global economic bellwether because so many of its chips are in such a wide



NANJING, China: A woman shops for vegetables at a supermarket in Nanjing, in China's eastern Jiangsu province on January 12, 2023. —AFP

China has been relatively unaffected by a global surge in food prices since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February. But officials are keeping a close eye on pork, widely consumed in China, to avoid popular discontent. While food prices in general rose a moderate 2.6 percent on-year in December, pork surged 22 percent.

China began lifting most of its zero-COVID measures at the beginning of last month. Despite the

end of the restrictions, economic activity has struggled to recover as the virus has spread rapidly across the country, hitting economic activity. China will unveil its 2022 growth figures on Tuesday.

Beijing has set an annual economic growth target of about 5.5 percent, but many observers think the country will struggle to hit that, despite announcing a better-than-expected 3.9 percent expansion in the third quarter. —AFP

ductors with military uses. Despite reporting continuously strong profits, TSMC-Taiwan's most valuable company-saw its share price fall 27 percent last year.

It is up 7.4 percent so far this year. While chip-makers globally are bracing for dampened demand, TSMC is more shielded from a downturn in part because it produces some of the most advanced and smallest chips, which are still highly sought after and in short supply. It controls more than half of global foundry output, with clients including Apple and Qualcomm. Last month TSMC announced it had started mass production of its 3-nanometre chips, among the most advanced to come to market.

Only South Korean rival Samsung has reached the mass production stage for 3nm chips.

But TSMC is much larger, accounting for nearly 50 percent of the world's production of chips below 10nm. —AFP



MUMBAI: Infosys chief executive and managing director Salil Parekh briefs the media on Thursday. —AFP

India's Infosys hikes revenue guidance

BENGALURU: Indian IT giant Infosys raised its revenue guidance for the current financial year on Thursday after the outsourcing behemoth beat quarterly earnings forecasts on sustained demand for its digital services. Net profit rose 13.4 percent year-on-year to 65.86 billion rupees (\$807.3 million) for the December quarter.

Revenue was up 20.2 percent to 383.18 billion rupees for the same period, helped by strong demand in North America and Europe. The company, based in India's tech hub Bengaluru, tweaked its constant-currency revenue guidance for the financial year ending March 31 to the range of 16-16.5 percent, up from 15-16 percent forecast in July. Infosys said it won large deals worth \$3.3 billion in the quarter, the highest in eight quarters and a sharp jump from \$2.7 billion at the end of September.

"As reflected in the large deals momentum, we continue to gain market share as a trusted transformation and operational partner for our clients," chief executive Salil Parekh said in a statement. The company said its employee attrition rate—a key metric for software companies in India's competitive IT market—was down to 24.3 percent from 27.1 percent in the September quarter.

"Attrition reduced meaningfully during the quarter and is expected to decline further in the near-term," chief financial officer Nilanjan Roy said. Infosys is India's second-largest information technology company and earns more than 85 percent of its revenue from North American and European markets. —AFP

French Oil workers' union calls for strikes over pensions

PARIS: Unions representing French oil workers on Thursday called for strikes against President Emmanuel Macron's pension reforms, threatening a repeat of the refinery and depot closures that caused chaos for motorists last year. The walkouts planned for January 19 and 26 and February 6 would include "shutdowns of refinery installations if necessary," said Eric Sellini, national coordinator of the CGT union federation at energy giant TotalEnergies.

Strikes will mean "reductions in output" and "a halt to deliveries", he told AFP. A walkout on January 19 will coincide with a national day of strikes and demonstrations, backed by all France's major trade union federations, against Macron's pension plans.

Worker representatives object to the government's proposed raising of the legal retirement age by two years, to 64, and faster increases in the minimum number of years of contributions required to receive a full pension. A 24-hour strike by oil workers on January 19 could be followed up by 48 hours from January 26 and 72 hours from February 6. —AFP

UK retailer Tesco posts sales boost

LONDON: Supermarket giant Tesco, the largest retailer in Britain, reported bumper revenue Thursday for the key Christmas season, even as customers switch to less expensive rivals as prices soar during a cost-of-living crisis. Tesco has benefitted from passing on some of its own rising costs to consumers, many of whom appear willing to stay loyal to the group even as UK inflation sits at the highest level in decades. At the same time, Tesco is keen to match the prices of some similar goods offered by supermarkets run by German discounters Aldi and Lidl to retain business from cash-strapped shoppers.

British inflation stands at about 11 percent, the highest level in

around 40 years.

Tesco's revenue climbed to 21.8 billion pounds (\$26.5 billion) in the 19 weeks to January 7 compared with a year earlier, a like-for-like increase of 6.4 percent, it said in a statement. For the six-week holiday period alone, sales grew nearly eight percent. "Tesco has stepped forward to help customers dealing with tough times this Christmas," chief executive Ken Murphy said.

Elsewhere Thursday, clothing-to-food retailer Marks and Spencer said revenue jumped 9.7 percent in its third quarter, which covers the 13 weeks to end-December.

M&S chief executive Stuart Machin conceded that inflationary pressures were impacting its customers and group performance. Markets.com analyst Neil Wilson noted that while consumers were willing to shoulder higher prices over the festive period, "the current situation is more disruptive".

Energy and food prices are



expected to remain high for some time, which analysts expect will cause the Bank of England (BoE) to carry on raising interest rates. That in turn would lead retail banks to increase their borrowing costs on home loans, further pressuring consumer spending

power. On Wednesday, the Financial Conduct Authority warned that some 770,000 British households are either at risk of a mortgage shortfall over the next two years or are already behind with payments. —AFP

Four dinosaur species found in Chilean valley for first time



Scientists working in the fossil site in the Cerro Guido, in the Las Chinas river valley, an unpopulated area near the border with Argentina.

Scientists have found the remains of four species of dinosaurs, including a megaraptor, in an inhospitable valley in Chilean Patagonia that has emerged over the past decade as an important fossil deposit, researchers said Wednesday. The fossils were found in Cerro Guido, in southern Chile's Las Chinas valley near the border with Argentina, and taken to a laboratory in 2021. The researchers said they belong to dinosaurs that have not previously been identified in the area.

"It's always super exciting in scientific terms to find something that has not previously been discovered or described in the Las Chinas valley, where we have become used to finding new fossil remains," Marcelo Leppe, director of the Chilean Antarctic Institute (Inach) which was part of the research team, told AFP. Inach collaborated with the University of Chile and the University of Texas on the expedition.



Handout picture showing a scientist arranging fossil remains found in the Cerro Guido.

They identified the remains—including teeth and postcranial bone pieces—of four species of dinosaur including the megaraptor, which belongs to the theropod family. These carnivorous dinosaurs had



A scientist working in the fossil site in the Cerro Guido, in the Las Chinas river valley.



Handout picture showing fossil remains found at the Cerro Guido.

raptor claws, small teeth for tearing, and large upper limbs which, according to the research, put them at the top of the food chain in the region, which they inhabited between 66 and 75 million years ago, at

the end of the Cretaceous period.

"One of the characteristics that allowed us to identify with great confidence that they belong to megaraptorids are, first of all, that the teeth are very curved towards the back," said Jared Amudeo, a researcher with the University of Chile, in a statement. They also identified two specimens of Unenlagiinae, closely related to velociraptors and which have a "novel evolutionary character, which would indicate that this is a new species of unenlagiine or perhaps a representative of a different clade (group)," said Amudeo.

They also found remains of two bird species: an Enantiornithine, the most diverse and abundant group of birds of the Mesozoic; and Ornithurinae, a group directly related to present-day birds. The scientists' work was compiled in a study published last December in the prestigious Journal of South American Earth Sciences. —AFP



In this file photo actor Johnny Depp smokes during a break in his trial at a Fairfax County Courthouse in Fairfax, Virginia. —AFP

Saudi fund invests in Johnny Depp French period film

A Saudi film fund announced Thursday that it is investing in Johnny Depp's new movie, a French period drama in which he plays King Louis XV. The Red Sea Film Foundation said in a statement that it was backing the new film, "Jeanne du Barry", directed by France's Maiwenn, who also stars in the title role as the famous 18th century courtesan. "We hope this collaboration will strengthen the ties between Saudi and French cinema and be the first of many international films that we can support that advocate for women filmmakers," said Mohammed Al Turki, CEO of the Red Sea International Film Festival, which is linked to the foundation.

It is the first major role for Depp since his high-profile defamation trial with ex-wife Amber Heard

over her claims that he was physically abusive. The Saudi foundation, formed in 2019, has already funded some 170 African and Arab movies, it said, but this is its first foray into European cinema.

It runs the annual festival in Jeddah, which had its first edition in 2021, part of a spate of reforms in a country that had banned cinemas until 2017. Critics including Human Rights Watch have claimed the festival is part of the Saudi monarchy's efforts to "whitewash" its image. "Jeanne du Barry", which has a distribution deal with Netflix, is the sixth film directed by Maiwenn, who goes by a single name. It was not immediately clear how much Saudi money was being invested in the film, which has already been shot on location in France and is currently in post-production —AFP



ChatGPT bot 'for professional use' on the way

Hot startup OpenAI on Wednesday initiated a waitlist for a professional and paid version of its software ChatGPT, which has sparked debate about artificial intelligence and the future of work. OpenAI co-founder Greg Brockman teased an upcoming version of ChatGPT "geared for professional use" as media reports swirled that Microsoft plans to invest \$10 billion in the startup.

Microsoft, which makes its own Cortana digital assistant, declined to comment. "Working on a professional version of ChatGPT; will offer higher limits and faster performance," Brockman said in a tweet. OpenAI late last year released its free version of the ChatGPT chatbot that is capable of answering questions so well that it reopened the debate on risks linked to artificial intelligence (AI) technologies.

ChatGPT has also prompted concerns it could be used by students for homework assignments or to replace authors or others with writing jobs. The professional model will come with a fee and be faster than the free version, which will remain available, the company said. A waiting list page asked people what prices they think would be too high, too low, and just right for ChatGPT and how upset they would be if they could no longer use the chatbot. "If you are selected, we'll reach out to you to set up a payment process and a pilot," the page explained. "Please keep in mind that this is an early experimental program that is subject to change."

Claude de Loupy, head of Syllabs, a French company specialized in automatic text generation, said "ChatGPT's response can be off the mark," but that its overall performance remains "really impressive." Conversations with the chatbot, posted online by fascinated users, show a kind of omniscient machine that is capable of explaining scientific concepts or writing scenes for a play or even lines of computer code.

Its level of sophistication both fascinates and worries some observers, who voice concern these technologies could be misused to trick people, by spreading false information or by creating increasingly credible scams. Asked about these dangers, a response from ChatGPT said that human-like chatbots could be hazardous if misused. "There are potential dangers in building highly sophisticated chatbots, particularly if they are designed to be indistinguishable from humans in their language and behavior," the chatbot told AFP.

On its welcome page, OpenAI lays out disclaimers, saying the chatbot "may occasionally generate incorrect information" or "produce harmful instructions or biased content". OpenAI, cofounded in 2015 in San Francisco by billionaire tech mogul Elon Musk, who left the business in 2018, received \$1 billion from Microsoft in 2019. —AFP

Cloned horse raises hopes for equestrian sports in China

A Chinese company presented a cloned horse to the public on Thursday that is the first of its kind born in the country and approved for equestrian sport. The cloning of competition and thoroughbred horses has been practiced in several countries since the early 2000s, particularly for genetic improvements. Born last June from a surrogate mother, "Zhuang Zhuang" was produced by the Beijing laboratory Sinogene and is a clone of a horse imported from Germany.

The black animal is the first from the "warmblood" group of breeds to be born in China and to be officially approved by the China Horse Industry Association. "Warmbloods" are generally light horses with a lively temperament. Equestrian sports, especially show jumping, have been making

strides in China in recent years. But a shortage of high-performance horses and a lag in breeding technologies are limiting growth.

"I spoke with (Chinese) riders who participate in the Olympics. All of them have more than one horse, usually two or three. Each horse costs from a few million to 10 million yuan (\$1.5 million)," Mi Jidong, CEO of Sinogene, told AFP. "Cloning can help reduce the price of breeding and raising horses."

Producing competitive horses in China by cloning should make it less dependent on costly imported animals to supply Chinese equestrian sports. The world's first cloned horse was born in Italy in 2003. Chinese animal cloning companies have made significant progress in recent years, with technologies now relatively mature for sheep, cows, pigs, dogs and cats. —AFP



Golden Globes slump to new ratings low on return from scandal

Golden Globes television ratings slumped to a new low of just 6.3 million viewers, even as the troubled award show tried to bounce back from its recent scandals, broadcaster NBC's preliminary figures showed Wednesday. The audience on Tuesday night fell from 6.9 million in 2021 — itself a massive drop suffered during the COVID-19 pandemic, when award shows were held remotely—and was down from more than 18 million in 2020.

The Globes were not televised at all last year, when NBC pulled the plug due to outrage over the lack of diversity and alleged ethical shortcomings of the Hollywood Foreign Press Association, which organizes the awards. Tuesday's ratings—the lowest ever for a full Golden Globes gala on NBC, and marginally higher than the audience for a stripped-down press conference held to announce winners during the Hollywood writers' strike in 2008 — will add to uncertainty over the Globes' future.

The event has no television deal currently in place from next year. NBC tore up its

longstanding multi-year Globes broadcast deal, and only agreed to bring back this year's show on a one-off basis. Still, the 80th Golden Globes on Tuesday night saw many A-list stars return to the event's Beverly Hills gala, with Steven Spielberg winning best director, Colin Farrell collecting best actor in a comedy, and Eddie Murphy receiving a lifetime achievement award.

While the presence of so many stars suggested many in Hollywood are happy with the reforms the HFPA has recently enacted—including the admission of Black members, after a Los Angeles Times expose revealed the group had none—questions remain. A plan by US billionaire Todd Boehly to spin off the awards show into a for-profit entity and pay salaries to members has raised eyebrows.

And several prominent winners did not attend on Tuesday, citing scheduling difficulties, including Cate Blanchett, who best actress in a drama for "Tar." In an email to AFP, an NBC spokesman pointed out that the "Globes historically airs on Sunday nights," when ratings are usually higher, and



US director Steven Spielberg (center) poses with the awards for Best Director - Drama for "The Fabelmans" alongside US author Tony Kushner (left), Canadian-US actor Seth Rogen (second left), US actor Judd Hirsch (third left), Canadian-US actor Gabriel LaBelle (fourth left), US actress Michelle Williams (third right), US actor Paul Dano (second right) and US producer Kristie Macosko Krieger (right) in the press room during the 80th annual Golden Globe Awards at The Beverly Hilton hotel in Beverly Hills, California. —AFP

in previous years benefited from following an NFL game on the channel.

The awards were moved to a Tuesday evening slot this year to avoid clashing with the wildly popular American football league. Updated final figures including ratings from streaming platform Peacock, which also showed the Globes live on Tuesday, will be issued at a later date. Live television ratings

have slumped generally for awards show in recent years, as younger audiences in particular change the way they consume entertainment, gravitating more toward social media and streaming. But the Oscars last March bounced back significantly from their pandemic slump, recording over 16 million US viewers, up from around 10 million a year earlier. —AFP



Egyptian youth recycles rubbish into artistic pieces



Some people have such talent that anything falling into their palm would turn into a work of art and this is very true when comes to Abdulrahman Aouf. An expert in junk art, Aouf sees what others cannot, taking pieces of metal and items to make art out of discarded material. — KUNA



Original supermodel Tatjana Patitz dies aged 56

Tatjana Patitz, one of the original supermodels who dominated fashion in the 1980s and 90s commanding huge payouts for photoshoots, died Wednesday, her agent said. She was 56. The Germany-born Patitz was among a handful of women of the era whose looks and style catapulted them to a global fame that transcended modelling. Corinne Nicolas, founder of The Model CoOp, a Manhattan-based agency told AFP that Patitz died Wednesday morning in California.

Nicolas told media Patitz had been ill, but gave no further details. Along with Christy Turlington, Linda Evangelista, Naomi Campbell and Cindy Crawford, Patitz appeared in the smouldering video to George Michael's 1990 hit "Freedom!" That came after photographer Peter Lindbergh captured Turlington, Evangelista, Patitz and Estelle Lefebure, Karen Alexander and Rachel Williams in a picture titled "White

Shirts: Six Supermodels, Malibu."

Vogue magazine said despite the elite professional company she kept, Patitz had always seemed separate from other supermodels. "There was a certain element of mystery to Patitz's beauty, something in the gentle oval of her face and the shape of her eyes that spoke of self-possession and passion," the magazine wrote.



In this file photo taken on March 3, 2006 German model and actress Tatjana Patitz poses at Energetix at the 2006 Diamond Lounge By Nathalie Dubois in the Penthouse at Peterson Automotive Museum in Los Angeles, California. — AFP

"Patitz's allure was womanly and knowing, not that of the wide-eyed ingenue, and with her training as an actor, she was a force to be reckoned with," it said. Born in Hamburg, Patitz moved with her Estonian mother and German father to a small Swedish town at an early age. Her break in modeling came in 1983 when she won a trip to Paris and a limited term contract. She

later settled in California, where she was photographed in recent years around her ranch near Santa Barbara with her son, Jonah. The Twitter account for Lindbergh's foundation paid tribute to Patitz. "We would like to salute Tatjana's kindness, inner beauty and outstanding intelligence....She will be immensely missed." —AFP



In this file photo taken on September 20, 2016 photographer Peter Lindbergh and German model Tatjana Patitz attend Lindbergh's book signing for "A Different Vision On Fashion Photography" at the Taschen Gallery in Los Angeles, California. — AFP

Rock guitar master Jeff Beck dead at 78

Jeff Beck, the influential guitarist who rose to rock and roll stardom with 1960s supergroup the Yardbirds and later enjoyed a prolific solo career, has died, his official website said Wednesday. He was 78 years old. A guitar virtuoso and innovator who was also one of the world's great rhythm and blues interpreters, Beck died "peacefully" after being stricken by illness. "On behalf of his family, it is with deep and profound sadness that we share the news of Jeff Beck's passing. After suddenly contracting bacterial meningitis, he peacefully passed away yesterday," a statement on the English-born musician's website said.

"His family ask for privacy while they process this tremendous loss." Beck's death quickly reverberated around the music world, with tributes pouring in from rock icons like Ozzy Osbourne, with whom Beck once collaborated, and Kiss lead singer Gene Simmons, who called Beck's passing "heartbreaking."



This file photo shows British guitarist Jeff Beck performing at the Greek Theatre in Los Angeles, California. — AFP

"No one played guitar like Jeff," Simmons posted on Twitter. "Please get ahold of the first two Jeff Beck Group albums and behold greatness. RIP." Mick Jagger hailed Beck—an eight-time Grammy winner who was twice inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame—as "one of the greatest guitar players in the world." "He was quiet as moccasins feet, yet mercurial, innovative, impossible to categorize," wrote punk-poet laureate Patti Smith. "One of the masters of my generation...." "A guitarist in the highest sense."

'Limitless' imagination

Born Geoffrey Arnold Beck on June 24, 1944 in England, the self-taught artist began tinkering on a borrowed guitar and even tried building his own. He's cited guitarists from Les Paul to Ravi Shankar to Django Reinhardt as influences, and built a life off of experimenting with new sounds and fusions that pushed rock's boundaries. Beck played in a number of groups while in art school in London, and had already recorded pioneering rock sounds by the time the Yardbirds hired him in 1965.

He auditioned after the departure of one of the band's star guitarists, Eric Clapton, and helped propel the British avant-garde rock sound with multiple groundbreaking recordings, including the fuzz-filled guitar licks on "Heart Full of Soul." By 1966 he was paired in the Yardbirds with fellow guitar wizard Jimmy Page, who went on to found the British blues rock sensation Led Zeppelin.

"The six stringed Warrior is no longer here for us to admire the spell he could weave around our mortal emotions," Page posted upon Beck's death. "Jeff could channel music from the ethereal. His technique unique. His imaginations apparently limitless."

'Guitarists' guitarist'

A year later Beck formed his own band—the Jeff Beck Group, which included Rod Stewart on vocals and Ronnie Wood on bass and swiftly drew widespread praise. "The guitarists' guitarist," tweeted musician Paul Young of Beck, who said the virtuoso was "loved by everyone in the know."

Beck found solo success in 1975 with "Blow by Blow," a sleeper hit produced by George Martin of Beatles fame, who Beck later credited with saving his career. By the 1980s he'd discontinued regular use of a guitar pick, producing innovative sounds by plucking with his thumb.

"I don't care about the rules. In fact, if I don't break the rules at least 10 times in every song then I'm not doing my job properly," the Recording Academy quoted Beck as saying. He found regular success collaborating with his peers and throughout the 1980s was a regular feature, performing on albums from the likes of Tina Turner, Roger Waters and Jon Bon Jovi, who hailed Beck as a "legend." —AFP



Bahrain donkey races draw crowds and condemnation

Donkeys pulling wooden carts churn up the desert dust as they race down a track in Bahrain, the riders whipping their backs with sticks as an excited crowd looks on. The spectators erupt into a roar as one of the animals, nicknamed “The Million”, takes the lead and clinches first place in the 700-metre (760-yard) race. When it’s all over, the excited fans flock to take pictures with the winning donkey and the owner who is standing on its back, holding the trophy into the air.

These informal races, held by the side of a busy highway, are condemned by animal rights activists, but they are a cherished tradition for local villagers. “We can’t wait for Fridays to come so we can take part in the races,” said Yasser Mahdi, a donkey-cart racer whose animal, like the others, was decorated with orange dye. “We see many



people flock to the track every week,” he said at the makeshift track in Saar village west of Manama, the capital of the tiny island-nation.

The races are popular during the cooler winter months. In Saar, they are free for both spectators and participants and

draw sponsorship from local businesses. Donkey racing, also popular in Pakistan and Morocco, is a traditional sport in the Gulf state of Bahrain, but it is a practice that appals animal rights groups. “It seems that donkey racing in Bahrain is a primitive race with no standards or rules

to protect these animals,” said the International Fund for Animal Welfare.

The group said in an emailed statement justifying the practice by claiming it was a long-standing tradition is “unacceptable”. “It’s illogical to consider anything being traditional as a reason for it to be acceptable.”

The races are not officially endorsed by Bahrain’s government, a signatory to the Gulf Cooperation Council’s animal welfare law which prohibits unlicensed races and the use of excessive force in competitions. The races are limited to 10 donkeys, and they are held at beginner, intermediate and levels. “The race is fun and we always make sure we attend or take part,” said Jaafar Saleh, a racer aged in his twenties. “We hope that these races will keep growing.” — AFP

French island plans mass rodent cull to save albatross eggs

Conservationists are working to rid a remote French southern Indian Ocean island of rodents and stray cats by the end of next year to protect prized albatrosses and other birds. We want “to eradicate all rats, cats and mice in the winter of 2024,” said Lorien Boujot, in charge of managing invasive mammals on the UNESCO-listed Ile Amsterdam. Roughly equidistant from Madagascar, Australia and Antarctica, the island is uninhabited except for a research station on its northern coastline.

But cats and rats introduced over the years by visiting ships “have been the main cause for the disappearance of around 10 species of nesting birds” from the cliffs and plateaus, Boujot said. “Rats tend to prey on eggs or even chicks, while cats can attack them even when they reach adulthood.” The mammals may also spread avian cholera, likely brought to the island when chickens were kept there in the past, Boujot said.

“Now each year it plays havoc with the breeding of yellow-nosed albatrosses” living on the cliffs in the south of the island. The French Austral Lands and Seas, including Amsterdam, have the largest population of yellow-nosed albatrosses in the world, according to UNESCO, which listed the reserve as a World Heritage site in 2019. Mice too are a menace for the isle’s flora.

They gobble up the flowers and seeds of indigenous plants such as Island Cape myrtle, a shrub that used to form a natural belt around the coast but is now struggling to survive. Conservationists have tried to replant it, but “rats tend to eat and break the young plants”, Boujout said.

No more cats?

The plan is to air-drop poison across the whole of the island’s 55 square kilometers (20 square miles) during the

Antarctic winter next year. Scientists have been studying which species to target since 2017, according to Boujot, and will deploy the poison in winter to avoid missing juveniles in their nests during the reproduction season. “The tricky thing is that if we miss one of the rodents’ home ranges, the whole operation fails,” he said.

Specialists Louis Gillardin and Brieuc Leballeur will this winter be on the lookout for stray cats and tasked with shooting or catching any in traps. “Last year, our predecessors eliminated seven and for a month and a half or two months now we haven’t seen any on the 40 or so camera traps” around the island, said Gillardin. “I’ve never killed a cat in my life and wouldn’t enjoy it. If they had in fact now disappeared, that would suit us.” His col-



league Leballeur claimed traps he had set near the albatross colony had led to a decrease in chick mortality there.

The team will have to wait two years to see if any of the targeted mammals reappear before they can call the operation a success, Boujot says. And only monitoring over a decade will be able to tell if lost bird species return to the island to nest. Jeremy Tornøes, a researcher at France’s CNRS institute who wrote his PhD on the island’s albatrosses, said he is looking forward to the results. “We have seen a drop in chick survival since the 1980s,” he said.

But after 2024, “We’ll be able to see the impact of the rat, both as a predator and pathogen source. “We don’t yet know

if rats carry avian cholera and transmit it to birds they bite, or whether they become carriers because they eat birds carrying it,” he explained. “A colony without rats will also allow us to test how efficient a vaccine really is” against the illness.

Huge budget

But the model is hard to replicate on nearby French islands such as Kerguelen, where rodents, cats, rabbits and reindeer are equally destructive. “Eradication on Amsterdam means a budget of more than two million euros (\$2 million) and years of work,” said Clement Quétel, an official at the environment department for the French overseas territory. On Kerguelen, “thinking about getting rid of mice-which are almost every-

where-would be impossible” logistically and financially, he said. The same goes for its cats, which environment workers instead try to shoot or trap.

Vigilance will be needed in future to prevent new invasive mammals from making their way to these islands. On a research ship travelling from island to island, Kevin Nory’s job is to make sure there are no unwelcome animal stowaways on board. Stepping deep into its bowels, he checked if rat poison he had laid out in about 30 traps had been eaten. He said he had not found a single rodent on the boat since mid-2021. “It’s rather positive,” he said. — AFP

Iconic Kobe Bryant jersey could fetch up to \$7m at auction: Sotheby’s

Sotheby’s estimates that a jersey worn by US basketball legend Kobe Bryant, who died almost three years ago in a tragic helicopter accident, will sell for up to \$7 million next month, the New York auction house said Thursday. If the early February sale reaches the upper end of Sotheby’s estimates, it will nearly double the previous high of \$3.7 million paid for a jersey worn by the Los Angeles Lakers titan, who won five NBA titles and two Olympic gold medals. It would not be enough, however, to surpass the world record for a game-worn jersey, set in September 2022 at \$10.1 million with the sale of Michael Jordan’s number 23 Chicago Bulls jersey, which he wore in 1998 during his last NBA title run.

The previous record was set earlier in 2022, with the sale of a jersey worn during the 1986 World Cup by football legend Diego Maradona. Bryant’s iconic yellow-and-purple number 24 jersey, put up for sale by an anonymous owner, was worn by the legendary Laker in 25 games during the 2007-2008 season, according to Sotheby’s. In one of those appearances-a post-season game against the Denver Nuggets on April 23, 2008 — photographers famously captured Bryant celebrating after a successful three-point shot, gripping his jersey and letting out a primal scream.

The image has since been plastered on walls around the world by street artists, especially in Los Angeles, where Bryant played his entire professional career. The last time this jersey was put up for auction, in 2013, it only fetched \$18,678. Sotheby’s says that small sum can be explained by the context of the time: the jersey had not yet been “photomatched,” which the auction house describes as being “one of the most sought-after forms of authentication for sports memorabilia.”

It was also years before Bryant’s fatal helicopter crash, after which his April

2008 celebration became “the image that galvanized the public,” Sotheby’s said. Throughout the 2007-2008 season-Bryant’s only as the NBA’s Most Valuable Player-“this jersey was worn 25 times, and he scored 645 points in this jersey,” Brahm Wachter, head of streetwear and modern collectibles at Sotheby’s, told AFP. The item will be on display in New York starting February 1, and is part of a larger online sale of collectible sports memorabilia lasting from February 2 to 9. — AFP



Kobe Bryant

Dinklage, Hathaway from-com to open Berlin film fest

A romantic comedy featuring “Game of Thrones” star Peter Dinklage and Oscar winners Marisa Tomei and Anne Hathaway will open next month’s Berlin film festival, organisers said Wednesday. “She Came to Me”, set in New York City by director and screenwriter Rebecca Miller, will screen on the 11-day festival’s opening night on February 16.



Peter Dinklage

The Berlinale, as the event is known, called the movie a “delightful comedy about love in all its forms”. Dinklage plays a composer struck with writer’s block whose wife (Hathaway), who was formerly his therapist, encourages him to seek out new inspiration. “We are very pleased to open this festival edition with an irresistible comedy that builds upon the everyday conflicts of western society,” Berlinale directors Mariette Rissenbeek and Carlo Chatrian said in a statement, calling it “a magical ode to the freedom of expression”.

The picture will screen out of competition for the Golden Bear top prize, to be awarded on February 25 by a jury led by US actor Kristen Stewart. The Berlinale, now in its 73rd year, ranks with Cannes and Venice among Europe’s top three film festivals and serves as an early annual launchpad for the industry. Three-time Oscar winner Steven Spielberg, 76, is slated to attend the event to pick up an Honorary Golden Bear prize for lifetime achievement. Spanish director Carla Simon won the Golden Bear for best film last year for “Alcarras”, a Catalan drama about peach farmers. — AFP

Sports

Brown leads Celtics over Pelicans, Bucks sink Hawks

LOS ANGELES: Jaylen Brown scored 41 points as the Boston Celtics underscored their status as the NBA's form team with a 125-114 win over the New Orleans Pelicans on Wednesday. The Eastern Conference leaders warmed up for Thursday's crunch clash against Brooklyn with a composed performance to overpower the Pelicans, the third-ranked team in the Western Conference this season. Brown, averaging just under 27 points per game this season, once again delivered for the Celtics, shooting 15-of-21 from the field with 12 rebounds.

"It's a long season, it's a lot of basketball, day-in, day-out - you've just got to come in ready to do your job," Brown said after his season-high points tally. "I was able to come out and get something going." Boston's balanced offense proved too much for New Orleans, with Jayson Tatum also chipping in with 31 points and Malcolm Brogdon adding 20 from the bench. Al Horford added 14 points for Boston, who were missing starters Marcus Smart and Robert Williams III.

C J McCollum excelled for New Orleans with 38 points while Naji Marshall added 18 for a Pelicans team missing the injured Zion Williamson (hamstring) and Brandon Ingram (toe). Boston lead the Eastern Conference with a 30-12 record heading into Thursday's game against the second-placed Nets.

The third-placed Milwaukee Bucks meanwhile kept up the pursuit of the Eastern Conference leaders with a 114-105 win over the Hawks in Atlanta, with Jrue Holiday leading the scoring with 27 points. Bucks star Giannis Antetokounmpo was restricted to a season-low seven points but still influenced proceedings with 18 rebounds and 10 assists

Holiday was one of five Milwaukee players in double figures, with Brook Lopez adding 20 points and Bobby Portis and Jevon Carter each scoring 13. Pat Connaughton finished with 10 points. Milwaukee looked to be in total control early in the second half, jumping into a 24-point third-quarter lead and seemingly poised for a routine win.

'We're resilient'

However, Atlanta chipped away at the Bucks total and eventually grabbed their first lead of the game late in the fourth quarter when Bogdan Bogdanovic's pullup jump shot made it 103-101. Lopez restored the Bucks' advantage with a three-pointer to make it 104-103 and Milwaukee reasserted their control to close out the win. "We're resilient, we don't like to lose," Holiday said after the Bucks win. "Close games like that are teaching moments, where we're able to close out games and use all that in the future."

Elsewhere Wednesday, Ja Morant returned from a two-game injury absence to score 38 points as the Memphis Grizzlies claimed a 135-129 win over the San Antonio Spurs. Memphis's eighth straight victory saw them improve to 28-13, leaving them level with the Denver Nuggets at the top of the Western Conference.

The Nuggets, meanwhile, kept pace with the Grizzlies after destroying the under-powered Phoenix Suns 126-97. Denver's two-time NBA Most Valuable Player Nikola Jokic just missed out on his 12th triple double of the season, finishing with 21 points, 18 rebounds and nine assists at the Ball Arena. Denver were out of sight by half-time, pouring in 70 points in the first half to lead by 16 at the break.



BOSTON: Jaylen Brown of the Boston Celtics dives after a loose ball in front of Dyson Daniels of the New Orleans Pelicans at TD Garden on Jan 11, 2023. — AFP

The Nuggets kept up the scoring frenzy in the third quarter, stretching the lead to 32 points at one stage in the third quarter as they cruised to victory. In other games on Wednesday, the Detroit Pistons moved off the bottom of the Eastern Conference

with a 135-118 blowout over the Minnesota Timberwolves. Saddiq Bey led the scoring for Detroit with 31 points as the Pistons snapped a three-game losing streak to climb above the Charlotte Hornets at the foot of the table. — AFP

Australia dump Afghan series

SYDNEY: Australia pulled out of an upcoming series against Afghanistan in the United Arab Emirates on Thursday, citing Taleban moves to further restrict women's rights. The men's team were due to face their Afghan counterparts in three ODI games in March following a tour to India. The Afghanistan Cricket Board (ACB) in Kabul described Australia's decision as "pathetic".

"The decision to withdraw... is unfair and unexpected and will have a negative impact," the ACB said in a statement, which did not mention the shrinking of women's rights in Afghanistan nor the Taleban's ban on female sport. The ACB said it would contact the International Cricket Council and was considering withdrawing its players from Australia's domestic Big Bash League in retaliation.

Cricket Australia (CA) said their decision was taken after talks with concerned parties that included the Australian government. "This decision follows the recent announcement by the Taleban of further restrictions on women's and girls' education and employment opportunities and their ability to access parks and gyms," it said in a statement.

"CA is committed to supporting growing the game for women and men around the world, including in Afghanistan. (We) will continue to engage with the Afghanistan Cricket Board in anticipation of improved conditions for women and girls in the country," it said. The games against Afghanistan were part of the ICC Super League. Australia will forfeit 30 competition points for the series, which go towards World Cup qualification. However, they have already secured automatic qualification for the 50-over tournament in India later this year.

'Only reason of happiness'

Pace bowler Naveen-ul-Haq has already suggested on Twitter he would pull out of the Big Bash League where he plays for the Sydney Sixers. "When a country is going through so much in place (of) being supportive you want to take the only reason of happiness from them," he tweeted. The Taleban regained control of Kabul in August 2021 and quickly began placing restrictions on women's participation in sport.

The headline Islamists initially promised a softer approach than their first stint in power from 1996 to 2001, a period notorious for rights abuses that included public executions and floggings. They have gradually reintroduced an extreme interpretation of Islamic law, or sharia, and women have seen rights evaporate as they were squeezed out of public life.

The Taleban barred teenage girls from attending secondary schools and then last month banned women from attending universities, prompting global outrage and protests in some Afghan cities. They then decreed at the end of last month that Afghan women could no longer work for NGOs, at a time when Afghanistan faces one of the world's worst humanitarian crises, with its population of 38 million hungry and three million children at risk of malnutrition.

Most women government workers have lost their jobs. Women are also barred from travelling without a male relative and have been told they must cover up with a burqa or hijab when outside the home. In November, women were also banned from entering parks, funfairs, gyms and public baths. — AFP

No. 1 Swiatek leads Australian Open charge

MELBOURNE: World number one Iga Swiatek is the woman to beat when the Australian Open begins on Monday without retired great Serena Williams and last year's champion Ashleigh Barty. With two-time Melbourne winner Naomi Osaka also missing, it is almost certain that there will be a new name on the Daphne Akhurst trophy. The only former titleholders left in the draw are out-of-sorts Sofia Kenin, who won in 2020, and Victoria Azarenka, the Belarusian whose second Australian Open triumph was a decade ago.

Poland's Swiatek is clear favorite, having dominated women's tennis following the retirement in March last year of the Australian Barty. Swiatek secured eight WTA titles in 2022 and became the first woman in six years to win two Grand Slams in the same season - at Roland Garros and New York - to cement her place at the top of the rankings. Now she has her sights on a maiden title at Melbourne Park, which would leave the 21-year-old needing only a Wimbledon championship to complete a career slam.

Conway hits 101 as New Zealand thump Pakistan

KARACHI: Opener Devon Conway hit a sparkling hundred to help New Zealand achieve a convincing 79-run win over Pakistan in the second one-day international in Karachi on Wednesday. The left-hander scored 101 and captain Kane Williamson made 85 before a collapse which saw New Zealand lose nine wickets for 78 runs and restricted them to 261 all out in 49.5 overs. Pakistan lost wickets at regular intervals and despite a fighting 79 from skipper Babar Azam, the home team were dismissed for 182 to leave the three-match series tied at 1-1.

"Even though we had a good partnership, maybe 300 wasn't realistic but we got to a par total in the end," said Williamson. "We knew it would be a tough chase. We knew we had to get a little bit out of the surface, and the two seamers set the tone for us." Pakistan won the first match by six wickets while the third and final match is

French Top 14 abuzz as sacked Wasps stars shine

TOULOUSE: Wasps' financial meltdown left the club in tatters and booted out of the English Premiership, but some players have rebounded in fine form in the Top 14, where life has proved to be different from that in Coventry. Vincent Koch ran out for South Africa against Italy in Genoa on November 19. The next day he was on a plane back to his homeland to finalize his visa for France having bagged a contract with Stade Francais.

No time was lost as the prop touched down in Paris to make his Top 14 debut three days later in a narrow defeat by Toulon. It was a true baptism of fire for the South African after just a handful of training sessions and unable to converse in the language of Moliere. "I could just say 'hello' pretty much," Koch admitted to AFP. "Everything came so quick" after Wasps were put into administration in mid-October, Koch said. "When you start playing professional rug-

"I'm going to try to kind of cut off everything that happened last year and just focus on the future because I feel like I can take a lot of experience from these tournaments last year," she said earlier this month. Swiatek has not had it all her own way though. A 6-2, 6-2 capitulation to American world number three Jessica Pegula in the recent semi-final of the United Cup in Sydney left the Pole in tears. She complained that she felt "helpless" and unable to show up "physically and mentally", but that was her only early season blip after three straight-sets wins.

Red-hot Pegula

Pegula was outclassed by Barty in the quarter-finals at Melbourne last year, but with the Australian out of the picture, the American will fancy her chances of a maiden Slam. The 28-year-old played a central role for the victorious USA team at the United Cup to continue her red-hot form from the end of the 2022 season. That included lifting a second singles trophy at the WTA 1000 in Guadalajara.

Ons Jabeur, the world number two, also enjoyed a breakthrough season in 2022, reaching two Grand Slam finals, and her first major cannot be far away. Jabeur was stunned though by rising Czech teenager Linda Noskova in the semi-finals at Adelaide last week and the Tunisian needed treatment on a back problem during the first set. Caroline Garcia rounded off 2022 by winning the



MELBOURNE: Poland's Iga Swiatek hits a return during a practice session ahead of the Australian Open tennis tournament on Jan 11, 2023. — AFP

WTA Tour Finals to reach a career-high ranking of four and carried that form into the United Cup, winning both her singles matches.

Should Swiatek falter, the Frenchwoman will be in the hunt, as will revitalized Belarusian Aryna Sabalenka and American teenager Coco Gauff. Both fired Australian Open warning shots with warm-up tournament wins. The powerful 24-year-old Sabalenka said she was ready for a "big fight" in Melbourne after winning her first title since 2021 at the Adelaide International. — AFP

on Friday, also in Karachi.

Pakistan lost openers Fakhar Zaman (nought) and Imam-ul-Haq (six) by the fourth over. Azam and Mohammad Rizwan (28) added 55 for the third wicket but it was not enough. Agha Salman scored 25 before he was run out in a mix-up with Azam while none of Mohammad Nawaz, Usama Mir or Mohammad Wasim stuck around for long. Azam hit eight fours and a six in an innings spanning 114 balls before he was finally stumped off spinner Ish Sodhi in the 43rd over. "We came back well with the bat," said Azam. "But when the spinners came on, it was turning sharply. Credit to them."

Tim Southee claimed 2-33 for New Zealand while Sodhi took 2-38. Earlier, left-arm spinner Nawaz picked up four wickets to slow New Zealand after the visitors won the toss and batted first. Nawaz finished with 4-38 as New Zealand slumped from a strong position at 183-1 to 206-6, losing five wickets for 23 runs in the space of 40 deliveries.

New Zealand were lifted by a second-wicket stand of 181 between Conway and Williamson before fast bowler Naseem Shah (3-58) broke the stand when he dismissed Conway off the last ball of the 30th over. Conway hit 13 fours and a six off 92 balls in his second ODI hundred. Nawaz then took



KARACHI: New Zealand's Devon Conway celebrates after scoring a century at the National Stadium on Jan 11, 2023. — AFP

three wickets, dismissing both Daryl Mitchell and Tom Latham cheaply in one over before clean bowling Williamson in his next. Williamson, dropped on 53 and 54 off Wasim, struck 10 boundaries in his 100-ball knock. Mitchell Santner, one of just three New Zealand batters to reach double figures, was the last man out for 37. — AFP

The England flanker also landed in the French elite, at Toulouse, not so far from his younger brother Tom, who is turning out in the back-row for Top 14 rivals Bordeaux-Begles until the end of the season when he heads home to Saracens in a bid to play for England. Among 10 Wasps players to have crossed the Channel, with others having joined Super Rugby and United Rugby Championship clubs, are scrum-half Dan Robson (Pau), prop Biyi Alo (Racing 92) and flanker Brad Shields (Perpignan).

"There are a lot of us who have found stuff now, which is brilliant, but there are also a lot of guys who haven't found jobs," Willis added. "It's been a bit of a roller-coaster couple of months." Turning to Toulouse, Willis said: "It does feel a bit crazy, but it is also really exciting. "I think if I had stayed locally to another (English) team that was close it would have felt really weird day to day. Whereas this is such a big change that it just feels like an exciting adventure." Bok prop Koch also opted to highlight the positive over the negative from a situation out of the players' control, calling it an "unbelievable journey" for him, his partner and young child. "It's definitely better than Coventry so we'll definitely make good memories here," Koch said of his new life in the French capital. — AFP

by, you never think that's something that could ever happen to you."

After six seasons at Saracens, the 32-year-old front-rower was laid off by Wasps without having even played a single game in the colors of his new club. "It put a lot of pressure on myself, on my family," Koch said. "I had two weeks to try to sort things out before I joined up with the Springboks. "In that two weeks I had to look for a new contract, try to figure out what the future held for me and then as well move everything from my house because I couldn't stay there. "I had to get someone to move my house, stop all my debit orders, TV, the Wi-Fi... Trying to get out of my housing lease as well."

'Exciting adventure'

Jack Willis had spent his entire professional career at Wasps until the call came on October 17 for a meeting at the training ground. "We were just expecting to be told that we were going into administration," Willis said. "We weren't expecting to be told that we're all losing our jobs. When we were told we were made redundant, the room just went into complete silence and everyone was shocked. There were quite a few tears from everyone afterwards, it was a very emotional day," Willis told AFP.

Sports

Southampton stun Man City to reach League Cup semis

LONDON: Pep Guardiola admitted Manchester City were “not prepared” as they suffered a shock 2-0 defeat against struggling Southampton in the League Cup quarterfinals on Wednesday. Guardiola’s side paid the price for a limp display and never recovered after first half goals from Sekou Mara and Moussa Djenepo at St Mary’s. City sit second in the Premier League, while Southampton are languishing at the bottom of the table.

But that huge gap wasn’t evident on a wet and windy night on the south coast that Guardiola will want to forget in a hurry. For the first time in 16 domestic cup quarterfinals, Guardiola had finished as a loser and he had no complaints about the result. “The better team won. We didn’t play good. There are many games you can start not good and overcome but we didn’t do it,” he said. “When you are not prepared to play this game you arrive one inch late and don’t score a goal. When you are prepared you score the goal. “Today was a bad night, the opponent was better so we have to congratulate them. We didn’t deserve to win.”

City’s surprise exit continued a worrying trend of lackluster performances this season in games Guardiola would expect them to win, a failing that has left the champions trailing five points behind leaders Arsenal in the Premier League. Guardiola will demand an immediate response in Saturday’s crucial Premier League derby against Manchester United. He made four changes from Sunday’s 4-0 FA Cup third round rout of Chelsea, with Kalvin Phillips handed his first City start since his £42 million

(£51 million) move from Leeds last year.

Phillips was labelled overweight by Guardiola after he returned from England duty at the World Cup and the midfielder hardly made the Spaniard eat his words with a largely anonymous display that ended with his substitution after 63 minutes. Phillips’ flop was in keeping with City’s unusually limp display, with their lack of poise and purpose visible right from the start.

Sloppy City

Southampton went ahead in the 23rd minute when Lyanco cut out a loose pass from Sergio Gomez and delivered a low cross that France Under-21 international Mara swept home for his first goal for the club. Five minutes later, Mali international Djenepo was allowed to advance unchecked before curling a superb 30-yard strike over Stefan Ortega, who was caught too far off his line. Guardiola sent on Kevin De Bruyne at the interval and Erling Haaland after 56 minutes, but his lethargic team finished without a shot on target.

Southampton have never won the League Cup, losing the 1979 and 2017 finals, and they will face Newcastle in a two-legged semi-final later in January. Saints boss Nathan Jones will hope this surprise success can be the springboard to silverware and, more importantly, Premier League survival. “We’ve gone through a lot recently, people questioning a lot of things. That goes a little way to justifying why we’re here and what team we’re trying to create,” Jones said.

Nottingham Forest earned a last four tie against



SOUTHAMPTON: Manchester City’s Dutch defender Nathan Ake clashes with Southampton’s English midfielder Che Adams at St Mary’s Stadium on Jan 11, 2023. — AFP

Manchester United after beating Wolves 4-3 on penalties following a 1-1 draw at the City Ground.

After last weekend’s embarrassing FA Cup loss against second tier Blackpool, Forest are back on the Wembley trail as they reached the League Cup semi-finals for the first time since 1992. They took

the lead through a close-range finish from former Wolves centre-back Willy Boly in the 18th minute. Raul Jimenez grabbed Wolves’ 64th minute equalizer, but Dean Henderson was Forest’s shoot-out star as he saved penalties from Joe Hodge and Ruben Neves. — AFP

Messi guides PSG to victory on return

PARIS: Lionel Messi scored in Paris Saint-Germain’s 2-0 win over Angers in Ligue 1 on Wednesday on his first appearance since leading Argentina to victory in the World Cup in Qatar. Messi had been rested for PSG’s first three matches following the long break in the season caused by the World Cup but he returned to training in Paris a week ago and was back in the starting line-up for this game against Ligue 1’s bottom side.

The win, which came three and a half weeks after he captained Argentina to their World Cup final triumph on penalties against France in Qatar, saw PSG move six points clear at the top of the French table. Neymar also started, having missed his team’s last two matches due to suspension and to undergo treatment on the ankle injury he suffered playing for Brazil at the World Cup. Meanwhile Kylian Mbappe was rested for a second straight game having been afforded time off for a holiday in New York in the wake of his own World Cup campaign, which saw him score a hat-trick in the final but come out on the losing side. Mbappe and Messi are expected to be reunited this weekend in Sunday’s match away to Rennes.

In the meantime the absence of the France star meant young striker Hugo Ekitike again started in the home attack at the Parc des Princes and he opened the scoring in the fifth minute from a Nordi Mukiele cross at the end of a move in which Messi also featured. PSG were not at their sparkling best but Messi



PARIS: Paris Saint-Germain’s Argentine forward Lionel Messi fights for the ball with Angers’ Ivorian defender Abdoulaye Bamba and Beninese defender Cedric Hountondji at The Parc des Princes Stadium on Jan 11, 2023. — AFP

swept in his 13th club goal of the season to make it 2-0 with 17 minutes left.

Ekitike and Mukiele were again involved before Messi applied the finish. The goal was initially disallowed for offside but a VAR check allowed it to stand. “Messi has recovered well. He is relaxed and in great shape physically, and with Leo the team looks different,” said coach Christophe Galtier. Speaking to

broadcaster Canal Plus, Galtier, who said he had come down with a fever during the game, added: “We are coming back off the World Cup so it is difficult for the players to find their reference points again. We are all just getting used to playing together again and you could see at times that we lacked some of the connections between the players that we had more often before the World Cup.” — AFP

Felix needs Chelsea rebirth after struggles

BARCELONA: Joao Felix is aiming to reignite his career at Chelsea on loan after underwhelming at Atletico Madrid, whom he joined for an eye-watering 126 million euros (\$135 million) in 2019. The Portugal international arrived from Benfica as one of the most expensive signings of all time, despite having played just 26 top-flight games. Atletico hoped coach Diego Simeone could mold the talented forward into the club’s next Antoine Griezmann, whom he was signed to replace.

Desperate to fill the void left by the French forward’s departure to Barcelona, Atletico overpaid for Felix and his hefty price tag burdened the striker. The silky Portuguese forward and his coach never seemed an ideal pairing, with their different ways of viewing the game, with Atletico CEO Miguel Angel Gil Marin acknowledging the tensions between them in December.

“(Felix) is the biggest bet this club has made in its history,” Gil Marin said. “I think he has world-class talent, as a player and a person. But for reasons it’s not worth getting into now – the relationship between the coach and him, the minutes he’s played and his motivation right now-make us think the reasonable thing to do, if a good option appears for him and the club, is at least analyze it.”

Felix’s first campaign saw him take Griezmann’s No 7 shirt, but he struggled to match his predecessor’s work ethic off the ball, an important tenet of Simeone’s game. Even though the coach’s football became less defensive and more expansive in the 2020-21 campaign, which saw them lift the title, Felix flitted in and out of favor. The striker excelled in short periods at Atletico, displaying flair and exquisite technical qualities, but without the consistency to match. — AFP



RIYADH: Valencia’s Spanish defender Toni Lato challenges Real Madrid’s Belgian goalkeeper Thibaut Courtois at the King Fahd International Stadium on Jan 11, 2023. — AFP

Courtois helps Madrid reach Super Cup final

RIYADH: Thibaut Courtois was the star for Real Madrid as they beat Valencia 4-3 on penalties after a 1-1 draw in Riyadh on Wednesday to reach the Spanish Super Cup final. The reigning Super Cup champions were below their best again amid a difficult start to 2023, but Courtois excelled, making crucial saves and then decisively denying Jose Gaya in the shootout after extra-time. Madrid will go on to play either Barcelona or Real Betis, who play Thursday, in Sunday’s final.

La Liga champions Madrid, facing the Spanish Cup runners-up, had chances to win the game within 90 minutes but needed Courtois to make a stunning reflex save from Fran Perez in extra-time. Karim Benzema had sent Madrid ahead from the penalty spot but Gennaro Gattuso’s side levelled at the start of the second half through Samuel Lino.

Valencia goalkeeper Giorgi Mamardashvili also made some excellent stops, including one from

Vinicius Junior in stoppage time, forcing the additional period. “Courtois is one of the best four or five goalkeepers in the world, (but) my goalkeeper made four or five very good saves,” said Gattuso. “We didn’t have luck on our side, that’s football. You have to have luck and today we didn’t have it. We missed two penalties.”

The first was fired over by Eray Comert, who also gave away the penalty converted by Benzema, and the second parried by Courtois, who read Gaya’s intention to shoot down the middle. “Obviously as a goalkeeper you have to study penalties,” Courtois told Movistar. “Gaya missed his last one against Sevilla on the left, and scored his last one down the middle against Betis, so we knew he was going to shoot there.” The Spanish Super Cup was first held in Saudi Arabia in 2020 in the current “final four” format and will remain in the country until at least 2029, despite criticism over the hosts’ human rights record.

Los Blancos started strongly, with Benzema producing a glorious dribble, but Cenk Ozkacar did well to cut him off. Courtois kept out Edinson Cavani’s header and then did enough to put off Toni Lato, who burst in from the right and appealed in vain for a penalty when he slipped. Madrid took the lead shortly before half-time, when Eder Militao played a fine ball over the top to send Benzema through. — AFP

Juve title credentials under microscope

MILAN: Juventus’ unexpected entry into the Serie A title discussion will undergo its toughest test yet on Friday when the league’s form team travel to runaway leaders Napoli. Seven points back in second, Juve have bounced back from an atrocious start to the campaign to emerge as one of the two leading candidates to stop Napoli’s charge to their first Scudetto since the days of Diego Maradona.

Dumped out of the Champions League in humiliating fashion and embroiled in a serious financial scandal, coach Massimiliano Allegri has led his often stodgy team to eight straight league wins either side of the World Cup. That improbable run of victories has come while prosecutors breathe down the club’s neck over alleged false accounting and player transfers irregularities.

Even more impressively Juve haven’t conceded a single goal during their winning streak, and are now beginning to get key players back. Star striker Dusan Vlahovic is still out injured but both Arkadiusz Milik and Moise Kean have proven more than capable replacements and whoever starts up front could be flanked by flying wing-men Federico Chiesa and Angel Di Maria.

Chiesa came off the bench and set up Danilo’s winner against Udinese on Saturday which eventually secured Juve second place on goal difference ahead of champions AC Milan – the last team to score against the Old Lady back in October. Juve have conceded just seven goals in 17 matches but on Friday come up against the league’s most powerful attack in Napoli and Victor Osimhen, top scorer with 10 goals, in front of a packed and rowdy Stadio Maradona.

Napoli have won all but one of their home games this season, a draw with Lecce the only blot on their record, scoring in all 11 matches in Serie A and the Champions League. Luciano Spalletti also has a full squad to pick from, and knows his team are guaranteed top spot come the season’s halfway mark the following weekend thanks to their win at Sampdoria and Milan letting slip a two-goal against Roma in the space of five mad minutes on Sunday. — AFP

Ten-man Torino knock AC Milan out of Italian Cup

MILAN: Michel Adopo dumped AC Milan out of the Italian Cup at the last 16 stage on Wednesday with the only goal in 10-man Torino’s 1-0 win at the San Siro after extra time. France’s Adopo tapped home the winner from compatriot Brian Bayeye’s low cross in the 114th minute of an engaging match in which Koffi Djidji was sent off with 21 minutes remaining of normal time.

In the next month’s quarterfinals Torino will face either Sampdoria or Fiorentina who face off on Thursday. Roma host Genoa in Thursday’s late match while the remaining four ties are scheduled for next week. Defeat for Milan, who started with a second-string line-up, comes after they threw away a two-goal lead to draw 2-2 with Roma on Sunday. That draw allowed Napoli to extend their lead on the Italian champions at the top of Serie A to seven points.

Stefano Pioli’s tired-looking side rattled off 32 shots over the course of the match but only eight of those were on target, of which just three taking from inside the area. Milan travel to Lecce in Serie A on Saturday after Napoli host Juventus, who are level on points with Milan, on Friday night. Also through to the next round are Inter Milan after they squeezed past Serie B side Parma 2-1 on Tuesday, also after extra time at the San Siro. — AFP

Iraq and Oman qualify for semis

Kuwait ready for match against Bahrain, coach eyes performance



BASRA: Oman and Saudi players vie for the ball on Jan 12, 2023.

KUWAIT: Iraq and Oman qualified on Thursday for the semifinals of the Arabian Gulf Cup (Khaleeji Zain 25) after beating Yemen 5-0 and Saudi Arabia 2-1 respectively in Group A matches. At Basra International Stadium, Iraq swept Yemen with five clean goals by Mustafa Nazim in the 40th minute, Amjad Atwan in the 64th minute and Ayman Hussein in the 74th and 75th minutes, while Hussein Ali concluded the goal spree in the 88th minute.

In the other match, which was held at the same time, Oman clinched the second qualification spot after defeating Saudi Arabia with goals scored by Al-Mundhir Al-Alawi in the 34th minute and Hareb Al-Saadi in the 84th minute, while Turki Al-Ammar scored for Saudi Arabia in the 41st minute. Iraq and Oman qualified for the semifinals from Group A after bagging seven points each.

Iraq is in first place on goal difference with Oman, while Saudi Arabia is in third place with three points and Yemen in last place without any points. The semifinal lineup will be completed on Friday after final round of Group B matches between Kuwait and Bahrain, while Qatar will face the United Arab Emirates.

Meanwhile, Kuwait Coach Rui Bento said on Thursday the team is ready to face Bahrain. Speaking at a news conference in Basra, the coach advised the players "to focus more" on the forthcoming match, affirming that the team "is continuously evolving and players' performance is also improving", vowing harmony in the team formation. Bahrain is leading the group with six points, followed by Qatar with three, ahead of Kuwait on goal difference, while the UAE have no points. — KUNA



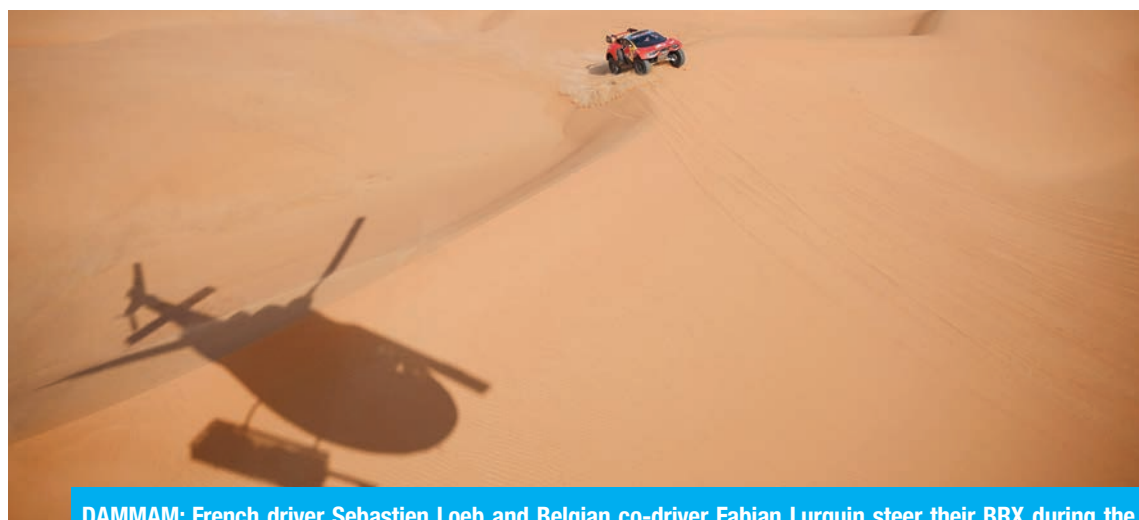
BASRA: Iraq and Yemen players vie for the ball.

Four-in-a-row for Loeb, Attiyah enjoys 'amazing' day

DAMMAM: Sebastien Loeb reeled off his fourth stage win in a row at the Dakar Rally on Thursday as runaway leader Nasser Al-Attiyah hailed "an amazing stage" with the Qatari closing in on his fifth title. Attiyah avoided disaster as motorsport's toughest endurance challenge entered Saudi Arabia's daunting Empty Quarter - an immense desert expanse for the 274 kilometre 11th stage. Finishing fifth in his Toyota to Loeb tightened Attiyah's grip on the overall car standings.

With just three days to go before the finish on the shores of the Arabian Gulf in Dammam Attiyah is one hour 21 minutes clear of the chasing pack led by Brazilian Lucas Moraes. "Today we did an amazing stage with no mistakes," beamed Attiyah. "It looked a little bit easy because we didn't really push a lot, just to finish without problems so we don't need to work on our car all night. We need to control because there is no point really going crazy."

Bahrain Raid Extreme driver Loeb is third overall, nine minutes further back. France's nine-time rally world champion will be ruing a costly first week marred by a series of punctures and a rollover that knocked him out of contention for the overall win. His win Thursday was his fifth stage of this year's race but his shot at taking the coveted crown has gone.



DAMMAM: French driver Sebastien Loeb and Belgian co-driver Fabian Lurquin steer their BRX during the Stage 11 of the Dakar 2023 between Shaybah and the Empty Quarter on Jan 12, 2023. — AFP

Loeb completed the drive over two minutes up on Guerlain Chicherit but it wasn't all plain sailing in the Saudi sand. "We had to change one wheel in the dunes, so it was a bit tricky to find a good place to do it and we lost a bit of time for it," the 48-year-old said. "For the rest, I had a good rhythm. I pushed hard. The dunes were not so complicated overall, except some parts that were really tricky, but in the end we had a good day," he added.

While Attiyah looks to have the car crown wrapped up it is a different story among the two-wheelers. Argentine Luciano Benavides took the stage 11 bike honors but there was a change at the top of the overall

standings. Luciano's brother Kevin, a winner in 2021, had led into the stage but ended the day's action in 10th, more than six minutes behind his younger sibling.

American Skyler Howes was fourth and now leads the rankings by 28 seconds over Toby Price, with Kevin Benavides more than two minutes further back in third. "The stage was really fast, also with lots of dunes - really big dunes too," said Howes. "I know the times were super close out there today. All it's going to do is to be tight going all the way in to the finish, which is super exciting". Friday's 12th stage is a 185km special from the Empty Quarter Marathon to Shaybah. — AFP

Osaka announces pregnancy, vows to return in 2024

MIAMI: Former world number one Naomi Osaka announced on Wednesday that she is pregnant and will be taking a break from tennis until 2024. "I know that I have so much to look forward to in the future, one thing I'm looking forward to is for my kid to watch my matches and tell someone, 'That's my mom' haha," she wrote on Twitter, accompanied by an ultrasound picture of a pregnancy scan. "2023 will be a year full of lessons for me, and I hope I'll see you guys at the start of the next one cause I will be back at the Australian Open 2024. Love you all infinitely," she added.

The 25-year-old Osaka has not played a tennis match since September and her withdrawal from the Australian Open, which starts next week, had puzzled many observers. Her social media posts in recent months had shown her travelling in Europe with her boyfriend, American rapper Cordae. The two have been together since 2019. Osaka had not explained her absence until Wednesday, when she posted what she called "a little life update for 2023".

Osaka's last tournament appearance was at the Pan Pacific Open in Tokyo in September, where the home favorite withdrew before her second-round match, complaining of abdominal pain. The top ranked player in the world in 2019, the Japanese star - who grew up in the United States - is now ranked 47th in the world. Osaka has won four Grand Slam singles titles with triumphs in the Australian Open in 2019 and 2021 and the US Open in 2018 and 2020.

She had been open about her struggles with mental health and depression in the past and took a break from the sport after the French Open in 2021 before returning to compete at the Tokyo Olympics later that year. With a string of lucrative endorsement deals across the globe, including with several top Japanese brands, she was named the world's top-earning female athlete for 2022 by Forbes, with reported earnings of \$51.1 million. Her commercial success was not reflected on the court last year however as she suffered first-round defeats at both the French and US Opens and withdrew from Wimbledon with an Achilles injury.

Osaka has also been vocal in support of various causes and in 2020 she said she wouldn't play in her semifinal at the Cincinnati Open in response to the shooting of black man Jacob Blake in Wisconsin. Following her statement the tournament paused for a day. Osaka's recent absence from the tour had promoted speculation over her future in the game, but on Wednesday she said her break has given her a new perspective on the sport. — AFP