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# KUWAIT SHIMMERS IN COLORS



KUWAIT: Fireworks light up Kuwait Towers and Arabian Gulf Road on Feb 28, 2023. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat (See Page 2)

## Spectacular end to national celebrations as show lights up skyline

KUWAIT: Lighting up Kuwait's night skyline with myriad colors, a spectacular light and drone show accompanied by dazzling fireworks over Kuwait Towers marked a fitting finale to a month-long

celebration of the country's national days on Tuesday. Hundreds of thousands of spectators flocked to Arabian Gulf Road to watch the breathtaking hourlong show.

Authorities had made elaborate arrangements for people to watch the show. Buses were allocated to transport people from designated parking lots to celebration sites near Kuwait Towers from 2.30 pm

to 6.30 pm. The Arabian Gulf Road was partially closed from the Second Ring Road intersection to the British Embassy intersection from 5.30 pm until the end of the display.

### News in brief

#### Google Wallet active in Kuwait

KUWAIT: Google Wallet is now active in Kuwait, allowing people who use phones that run on Android OS other than Samsung devices to use the contactless payment feature. The new service comes after Apple Pay became available in the country late last year, while the Samsung Wallet feature has been active in Kuwait for years.

#### Quake killed more than 50,000

BEIRUT: A devastating earthquake that struck Turkey and Syria killed more than 50,000 people, in a toll revised by AFP that includes figures from both government and rebel-controlled parts of war-torn Syria. A total of 5,951 people were killed across Syria, while Turkey recorded 44,374 deaths after the Feb 6 earthquake. The new tally brings to 50,325 the total number of deaths caused by the disaster across both countries. — AFP

## Weight loss drug trend on TikTok worries doctors

PARIS: The diabetes drug Ozempic has become a social media phenomenon for its weight loss properties, but its soaring popularity has led to global shortages and doctors warn about the potential side effects. Videos under the hashtag #Ozempic have nearly 600 million views on TikTok, where many users regularly update followers about their weight loss. "Losing 40

kilograms in less than three months is possible" thanks to Ozempic, a French TikToker said in a typical post in December with nearly 50,000 views. "It's a miracle," he added. The injectable drug from Danish pharmaceutical firm Novo Nordisk was initially developed and approved in numerous nations to treat type 2 diabetes. The drug's active ingredient, semaglutide, binds itself to the receptors of a hormone which controls blood sugar, stimulating the release of insulin when glucose levels are high. It slows down how quickly food leaves a person's stomach, reducing their appetite.

Continued on Page 6

## Moroccans struggle to afford veggies

SALE, Morocco: Shoppers inspect vegetables at a huge market in Sale, near the Moroccan capital Rabat, but exploding prices mean they are keeping their eye on what they spend ahead of Ramadan. "Everything's more expensive," said Khadija El Asri, a resident of the down-at-heel neighborhood of Sidi Moussa. "These last three weeks, I've bought less vegeta-

bles and meat than usual." Dozens of handcarts and boxes of produce line the market street, where the buzz of mopeds mixes with the sound of heated negotiations between struggling shoppers and squeezed merchants. Inflation is adding extra pressure just as Morocco prepares for Ramadan, the Islamic fasting month which starts in late March. Night-time feasting means consumption tends to increase during the holy month. Inflation hit 8.3 percent on an annualized basis in late 2022, mainly due to global supply chain disruptions exacerbated by Russia's invasion of Ukraine and its impact on fuel and

Continued on Page 6



PARIS: This photograph taken on Feb 23, 2023 shows the anti-diabetic medication Ozempic. — AFP



SALE, Morocco: In this picture taken on Feb 23, 2023, shoppers buy fresh produce at the Sidi Moussa market. — AFP





## Local

## Dazzling show lights up Kuwait's skies



KUWAIT: Fireworks light up Kuwait Towers and Arabian Gulf Road on Feb 28, 2023. — Photos by Fouad Al-Shaikh

## Turkish Red Crescent chief praises Kuwait's humanitarian efforts

**ANKARA:** The Secretary-General of Turkish Red Crescent Yusuf Saygili praised Kuwait humanitarian efforts, represented by Kuwait Red Crescent Society (KRCS), during the recent earthquake that struck Turkey. On the sidelines of distribution of humanitarian aid to 2,400 family in Antakya, Saygili told KUNA how much he appreciated Kuwait's support to Turkey, pointing out that since the earthquake and its repercussions, food, tents, generators and daily meals have been distributed to the affected people in many affected Turkish areas.

In a similar statement, KRCS deputy chairman Anwar Al-Hasawi told KUNA that they, with their partners, continue to expand operations in other parts of the earthquake-affected areas, but the damaged areas are a top priority as thousands of people need shelter, food and medicine, praising the efforts of KRCS volunteers in delivering aid to those affected.

On Feb 6, an earthquake struck southern Turkey and northern Syria, with a magnitude of 7.7 degrees, followed by another one hours later with a magnitude of 7.6 degrees, which left huge losses of lives and property in the two countries. —KUNA

## Obesity and bullying: The complex link

By Faten Omar

**KUWAIT:** Being obese is not always a result of bad eating habits. In fact, there is a complex relationship between obesity, discrimination and bullying. Kuwait ranks among the top countries in the world in terms of obesity amongst its population. The rate of obesity among adults is 40 percent of the total population, while childhood obesity exceeds 35 percent.

It has been proven through numerous studies that bullying and discrimination contribute to mental and physical disorders including obesity, depression and addiction. Recently, a study by Biological Psychiatry found a link between discrimination and deregulated brain-gut microbiome (BGM). The study looked at the role of the BGM system in health problems related to discrimination.

Some teenagers explained to Kuwait Times that school nowadays causes them much stress, which at some point leads to stress eating. Hatan Fatafta pointed out that no one understands the struggle and blames her for overeating, even her family. "I am fat and suffer from bullying, not only from other students, but also by my brother. It went too far when he began to call me names of large ani-

mals in front of people. My mother sees obesity as something that I caused to myself and believes change is easy," she said.

"Teenagers are eating to numb or calm unpleasant feelings like tension, anger, anxiety, boredom and loneliness. The negative emotions can be sparked by significant daily events that we go through in school, like how teachers treat some students and how even students treat each other, which might prevent you from losing weight and cause emotional eating," she added.

Sama Abdulrahman affirmed that stress from being discriminated and bullying leads to not being accepted, noting stress will result in obesity, which makes obese children get caught in a cycle of bullying and victimization. "It is obvious that there is an uncomfortable cause and effect relationship between bullying and obesity among students. Bullying can sometimes cause obesity because eating becomes a soothing diversion from the abuse we undergo," she added.

As for Abdulwahab Awad, stress eating is something he is struggling to avoid. "I write everything I eat to realize what I'm doing to myself. I always try to tame my stress, which is the cause of where I have reached so far. The brain can be deceiving. You feel



hungry, but the hunger is not real. With the help of my family, I got the support to fight overthinking about food and take away temptation. I made sure to have interesting options of health snacks also," he explained.

The study found the brain and gut microbiome respond significantly to stressful experiences. Participants from all ethnic and racial backgrounds reported experiencing discrimination, although they cited a variety of reasons for discrimination, ranging from

race to gender to age.

The researchers collected the data to assess the relationship between discrimination and brain connectivity. The research indicates that for some individuals, discrimination leads them to changes that include increased systemic inflammation. Across all races, discrimination had an increase in emotional arousal and the limbic system in the brain, which is associated with the stress response which influences physical health.

## Third Kuwait-Arab sustainability forum kicks off

**KUWAIT:** The Kuwait and Arab Youth Forum launched on Tuesday its third edition, with a focus on the role of youth in sustainable development and water preservation. The forum, which concludes on March 2, is organized by the Youth Public Authority. It's also the result of cooperation between the Arab Planning Institute and the Kuwait Water Association.

"It's an opportunity for the organizers to explore the talents and capabilities of youth and support their creative initiatives, turning them into projects that preserve water and energy," said Director of the Center for Small and Medium Projects at the institute Ehab Muqabala.

This year's edition of the forum will include a number of workshops and panel discussions featuring success stories in the field of sustainability. It will also showcase a number of projects and inven-

tions created by Kuwaiti, Arab and GCC youth to tackle sustainability-related challenges.

The forum is especially important as the Arab world faces challenges due the ever-increasing demand on water and the scarce resources in the region, said Advisor with the Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic Development Tareq Al-Munayes. He said the fund has provided \$22.1 billion in soft loans to more than 100 developing countries, with more than 55 percent designated for Arab countries. Loans supporting water and wastewater infrastructure projects make up 16 per cent of total loans.

Kuwait Water Association Chairman Saleh Al-Muzaini said supporting youth interested in sustainability, especially water preservation, "is one of the association's most important goals." Kuwait's Youth Public Authority also places great importance on empowering youth and involving them in society.

"The authority considers youth as leaders, beneficiaries and partners, as they have a fundamental role in providing sustainable development efforts," said Acting Deputy Director of Youth Projects at the authority Nasser Al-Shaikh. Events such as the Kuwait and Arab Youth Forum are essential in highlighting the role of youth, he added.



KUWAIT: Attendees of the Kuwait and Arab Youth Forum. —KUNA

Other efforts are also underway to support youth in the sustainability sector. The Arab Planning Institute is currently designing a program, said Muqabala, aimed at preparing young leaders, which will be held during July and August of this year. The program will include workshops and panel discussions that will provide partici-

pants with the necessary leadership skills.

The institute is also developing an award for Arab entrepreneurs, with the purpose of nurturing the creativity of young people. The award, Muqabala said, will also encourage youth to turn their ideas into projects, eventually leading them to independence and self-employment. —KUNA



Local

# Cosmetic surgery: Will it help you build self-confidence, look better?

## Social media tends to set new standards on physical appearance and self-acceptance

By Ghadeer Ghloum

KUWAIT: Physical appearances are the first thing people see as soon as they approach one another. Therefore, people tend to pay a lot of attention to their appearances in hopes of being positively viewed and socially accepted. In societies all around the globe, the amount of attention given to one's physical appearance is far greater than one's manners, character, inner peace and beauty.

This happens due to several problems that stem out of people's lack of knowledge about the multiplicity of normal body types and different facial features, which results in negative views of themselves and prioritizing appearances over genuine personality and qualifications. Due to the great number of people who focuses their attention and efforts on their physical appearance, cosmetic surgeries have become popular and new looks started to trend. With exaggerated attention paid to physical appearances and trends that are supported by social media, many people have developed an obsession of undergoing cosmetic surgeries, believing their original features are unattractive and socially ill-favored.

According to psychiatrist Dr Hasan Al-Mosawi, undergoing unnecessary beautifying procedures stems from low self-esteem. "Many people suffer from low self-confidence nowadays and struggle with viewing themselves positively. They are always viewing themselves in a negative way according to their appearances without looking at their inner beauty and their valuable qualities and characteristics," he told Kuwait Times. People's obsession over



Dr Hasan Al-Mosawi



Noujoud Yassine

physical appearances has shifted their focus from what actually holds their real value and replaced inner peace with chaos and uncomfortableness. However, Dr Mosawi said not all motives behind a cosmetic procedure are due to low self-esteem, as he distinguished between necessary and unnecessary surgeries. "Necessary beautifying procedures occur in case of an accident that causes deformation of a certain part of the body; hence, a surgery is needed to fix that part and put it back in place and in its normal form," he said. Hence, undergoing cosmetic surgery for reasonable reasons does not count as an issue of low self-esteem or prioritizing outer beauty.

Due to society's preference of certain beauty standards, people who do not have such features in their appearances find it hard to accept themselves and their original beauty, especially in the presence of social media that continually expose users to popular figures who have a certain face



and body shape. Noujoud Yassine, who owns beauty clinic in Kuwait, said: "There are always trends that we notice a lot of people want to follow, such as nose jobs, the BBL, hourglass figure surgeries, cat eye procedure, etc. It all depends on what the client is seeking and who they are influenced with."

Thus, people who struggle with attracting social attention and acceptance try to compensate this gap by undergoing cosmetic surgery to copy the appearance of someone who is supposedly successful and socially accepted. "People usually head towards cosmetic surgeries because they want to copy the features of a popular personality. This delusion is due to continuous unacceptance of oneself, which results in developing an obsession for cosmetic surgeries," Dr Mosawi said. He added such people can become extremely vulnerable to any person's opinion and comments on their appearances. As soon as someone says something

about any part of their face or body, they undergo cosmetic surgery to change how they look, because they always seek people's approval of their physical appearance.

Advanced cosmetic dentistry consultant Dr Fatima Dashti, who works at a specialized dental center in Kuwait, highlighted people's attempt to fit into society's physical beauty standards. "Every once in a while, a new trend comes up, such as the Hollywood smile and bunny teeth. As soon as one trend fades away, another trend emerges," she said.

The concept of beauty is not fixed. There are multiple types of beauty that every human being has in their own way. Therefore, Dr Mosawi encourages people to accept themselves and focus on improving their inner beauty instead of seeking short-term social acceptance through physical attractiveness and following trends. "Accepting oneself as it is and being confident about one's original looks and not comparing oneself to other people is the best solution to such an obsession," he said.

As a matter of fact, Dr Mosawi said that despite people's exaggerated attention on physical appearances, its real value remains on the margins once compared to genuine human qualities and inner beauty. "Working on one's inner beauty is way more important and valuable than appearances, because outer beauty will sooner or later fade. It has to change because it is vulnerable to age and other natural factors, whereas inner beauty remains solid and can hardly change. Being obsessed with one's outer beauty is a shallow thing compared to the importance of inner beauty," he stressed.

## Omani minister praises Kflag over Guinness Record

KUWAIT: Omani Minister of Culture, Sports and Youth Theyazin Al-Said commended on Tuesday Kuwait's voluntary team Kflag for setting a new Guinness World Record by unfolding the largest flag at the Seventh Hole Cave, Salmah Plateau, Oman.

Welcoming the Kflag team, with Kuwaiti Ambassador to Oman Mohammad Al-Hajri attending, the Omani minister said Gulf voluntary teams always make achievements so young people's energies and talent should be capitalized on to disseminate sports culture. He underlined that his country was keen on cementing and beefing up relationships among in young people in all the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries in general and Kuwait and Oman in particular, to promote their countries' status in all fields.

Head of Kflag team Fuad Qabazard dedicated the Guinness Record accomplishment certificate to the Omani minister in appreciation of the efforts exerted by Omani officials to make it easy for the Kuwaiti team to accomplish their mission in a scene that unequivocally bespoke Gulf unity and solidarity. He elaborated that the flag-unfolding initiative was considered to have been a big chal-



Kuwait's voluntary team Kflag with Omani Minister of Culture. —KUNA

lenge for the 16-member voluntary team, noting that it took them six months to notch up this accomplishment. Kflag, a Kuwaiti voluntary team,

on Sunday set a new Guinness World Record by unfolding the largest flag at the Seventh Hole Cave, Salmah Plateau, Oman. —KUNA

## Public sector could soon lay off more expats

KUWAIT: Expats in several ministries could soon lose their jobs as Kuwait continues to move forward with its Kuwaitization policy, according to sources. The news comes following reports of the Education Ministry's proposed dismissal of about 2,000 expat employees. The policy is one of "the most important" plans on the social affairs ministry's agenda this year, Minister Mai Al-Baghli had said in early February.

In line with the policy, the health, social affairs, interior, electricity and commerce ministries are currently preparing lists of expat employees to be laid off and replaced by Kuwaitis, sources said. The lists are expected to be completed within the next two months. Independent government entities such as the Civil Service Commission, the Public Authority for Housing Welfare and Kuwait Municipality have joined the process, as well. "Dismissal procedures are going to be done in three phases, with each phase

taking from six months to a year at most," sources told Kuwait Times.

The demographics balancing committee will hold a meeting next week to identify the government bodies and labor sectors where a large number of expats are employed and put forward plans for their dismissal. The meeting comes on the heels of an early February decision to proceed with the Kuwaitization of senior and supervisory positions in the cooperative sector. The decision, which is expected to provide more than 2,500 jobs for Kuwaitis, is currently under execution by the Ministry of Social Affairs in coordination with the Public Authority for Manpower and the Federation of Cooperative Societies.

The committee is also proposing legislation where by the public sector will be prohibited from re-hiring expat employees who have been let go. The private sector could also become off limits for these employees, sources said. The legislation, if passed, would also ban the manpower authority from issuing work permits required for those employees to work in the sector. The proposal is intended to prevent expats from legally remaining the country after being dismissed.



## 10,562 new flags raised in February

KUWAIT: The Public Relations Department in Kuwait Municipality

revealed that the decoration work monitoring teams raised 10,562 new flags and installed 214 new masts during the month of February. Ahmed Al-Bakhit, an official with the decoration works team said in a press statement that all damaged flags were replaced with new ones on the main roads during the month of February on the occasion of the national day celebrations. —KUNA

## Kuwait, Pakistan mark 60 years of diplomatic ties

ISLAMABAD: Kuwait and Pakistan celebrated the 60th anniversary of establishing the Kuwait-Pakistan diplomatic relations through a photo exhibition in Islamabad on Tuesday. Addressing the event at the Pakistan Foreign Office, Kuwait Ambassador to Pakistan Nassar Abdulrahman Al-Mutairi conveyed greetings to Pakistan from the State of Kuwait, its leadership, government and people.

"The history of relations between the two countries goes back to a long time before these 60 years and I do not exaggerate if I say from the

beginning of the 19th century, through the port of Karachi city, which was a main hub of trade in the region," he said. He added that the two countries enjoyed stable and growing relations characterized by continuous support for one another. He recalled that Pakistan stood by the Kuwaiti right in 1990 during the Iraqi invasion.

Kuwait, on the other hand, supported Pakistan in the events of the 2005 earthquake, the 2010 floods and the recent floods, he said. Pakistan, Mutairi added, stood by the State of Kuwait during the COVID-19 pandemic by sending specialized medical teams. "We are looking forward to developing relations between our two countries, which are moving in the right direction, and there is a common will to develop these distinguished relations and cooperation to wider horizons," said Mutairi.

Pakistan's Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Hina Rabbani Khar said that Pakistan looks forward

to enhancing relations with Kuwait in all areas of mutual interest especially health, skilled manpower, IT, food and security. Cooperation in the medical field, she said, has been strengthened since Pakistan sent its medical teams to Kuwait during the pandemic. In the trade sector, the Pakistan Kuwait Investment Company has helped create opportunities and build connections.

The Pakistani community in Kuwait, said Khar, has played a pivotal role in further solidifying cooperation between the two countries. She said she hoped that the easing of visa requirements for the entry of Pakistani businesspeople and skilled workers to Kuwait would immensely boost Kuwait-Pakistan ties in the future. The Kuwaiti Ambassador presented the Pakistani Minister with a model of a ship on the occasion. The anniversary celebrations will also include number of high-level events and exchanges throughout the year. —KUNA

In my view

## Our muallaqat poems are extensions of glories

By Dr Nermin Al-Houti

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Poetry for 16 centuries has narrated stories and described major days and scenes that still exist in Saudi cities and deserts, pointing to the majestic civilization. — Excerpts from the prelude Prince Abdulrahman bin Musa'ed bin Abdulaziz wrote for the 'Our Poetry is an Extension of Glories'.

I was lucky to be at the poetic play and I was luckier, as on the same day was an occasion dear to us, the day of the founding of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. It was a pleasant trip not only from the start of the show; rather from the start of travel. I was longing to get many answers, including how will the muallaqat (long poems hung on walls in the pre-Islamic era) will be used in theater? What is the show's theme? And how will it be a theatrical poetry?

Many questions came to my mind, and I was looking forward for answers. Once I sat down, I saw not a theatrical poetic play, but I affirm that what I saw with my own eyes, touched with my heart and heard with my ears was a patriotic epic that narrated and is still narrating a nation's history - the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

The "Our Poetry is an Extension of Glories" theatrical was built on the idea of the "formula is difficult", but the lover of the homeland and poetry is able to implement and manipulate it and develop its events, and this is what took place as the play was built around the narrator's personality and those who are the "past, present and future".

Those whose dialogues and poetic verses were selected to be theatrically adapted sang about historical eras of the kings and rulers of Al Saud, may Allah bestow His mercy on those who have departed and may He protect the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Salman bin Abdulaziz and Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman from the founding day until now.

Each of the ten scenes spoke about a certain era the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia went through. The event began with speaking in poetic form from the start of founding, development and prosperity, until we reached not the end, but what the kingdom has reached so far and what it plans for the future. Ten scenes written in a dramatic and patriotic fashion with continuing events in a creative fashion, and the more beautiful thing is that it is a dramatic development written in classical Arabic language. The person who chose "Our Poetry is an Extension of Glories" was right.

Finally, I salute all members of the team of "Our Poetry is an Extension of Glories" for this patriotic epic and the creative artistic theatrical show. Thanks from the heart of Kuwait's daughter to the people of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Greetings and appreciation to the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Salman bin Abdulaziz and Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman for their care of the Arabic language



## Kuwait's crude exports to Japan jump 27% in Jan

**KUWAIT:** Kuwait's crude oil exports to Japan in January surged 26.8 percent from a year earlier to 8.45 million barrels, or 272,000 barrels per day (bpd), for the second straight monthly expansion, government data showed Tuesday. As Japan's third-biggest oil provider, Kuwait supplied 10 percent of the Asian nation's total crude imports, compared with 7.9 percent in the same month of last year, the Japanese Natural Resources and Energy Agency said in a preliminary report.

Japan's overall imports of crude oil in January edged up 0.3 percent year-on-year to 2.72 million bpd, up for the first time in three months. Shipments from the Middle East accounted for 94.4 percent of the total, up 2.6 percentage points from the year before. By country, Saudi Arabia remained in the top spot, with imports from the kingdom growing 6.4 percent from a year earlier to 1.20 million bpd, followed by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) with 931,000 bpd, up 13.2 percent. Qatar ranked fourth with 125,000 bpd and the US fifth with 71,000 bpd, respectively. Japan is the world's-third biggest oil consumer after China and the US.

Meanwhile, Kuwait's oil barrel went down 29 cents to settle \$83.11 per barrel in Monday's trading as opposed to \$83.40 pb last Friday, said Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) on Tuesday. In the global market, the Brent crude went down 71 cents to settle \$82.45 per barrel, the same with the West Texas Intermediate, which went down 64 cents to settle \$75.68 pb. —KUNA

# Kuwait calls for Arab customs union

**CAIRO:** Director-General of Kuwait Customs, Suleiman Al-Fahad, urged Arab countries to collaborate in the customs field on Tuesday. The remarks came following the 43rd meeting of chiefs of customs authorities in the Arab states. Fahad, who led the country's delegation, said the step was necessary to fully implement the Arab free zone agreement. He added that he envisioned Kuwait facilitating the establishment of an Arab customs union.

During his speech, Arab League Assistant Secretary General for Economic Affairs, Ali Al-Malki, said there should be further cooperation among Arab states in all fields. He specifically singled out the economic sector, as the Arab region is faced with an "unprecedented" global economic crisis.

The slow economic growth and potentially ensuing recession is the most dangerous threat Arab countries must prepare for, said Malki. He



Director-General of Kuwait Customs Suleiman Al-Fahad

warned that the global economy is expected to lose \$4 trillion by 2026 due to the recession. Customs authorities, he said, are the first line of defense tasked with protecting countries from such threat.



CAIRO: Arab League Assistant Secretary General for Economic Affairs Ali Al-Malki (center) speaks at the meeting. —KUNA photos

Fahad said the meeting focused on boosting customs cooperation between the Gulf and the Arab states and following up on the Arab free zone deal. He urged Arab countries to join the customs cooperation deal

which came into effect last August, with seven states as signatories. The meeting also discussed other topics such as the mechanism of unifying customs tariff and the Arab transit transport deal. —KUNA

## National holidays celebrated in GCC countries

**KUWAIT:** Kuwait Embassies in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Sultanate of Oman celebrated the 62nd National Day and 32nd Liberation Day. The Embassy in Riyadh hosted a reception at the Cultural Palace in the Diplomatic Quarter.

The celebration was attended by the Undersecretary of Riyadh Region's Principality Dr Faisal bin Abdulaziz Al-Sudairy and Secretary-General of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Jassem Al-Budaiwi. A number of economic, cultural, academic personalities and media celebrities were also in attendance. Budaiwi congratulated His Highness the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah as well as the people of Kuwait on the occasion.

He appreciated Kuwait's support of the efforts of the GCC Secretariat. Charge D'Affaires of Kuwait Embassy Minister Saud Al-Harbi sent his greetings to HH the Amir and HH the Crown Prince on the occasion. He noted that the national days are a reminder of the noble and heroic sacrifices offered by our fathers and ancestors, as well as the supportive stances of neighboring countries, on top of which is the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

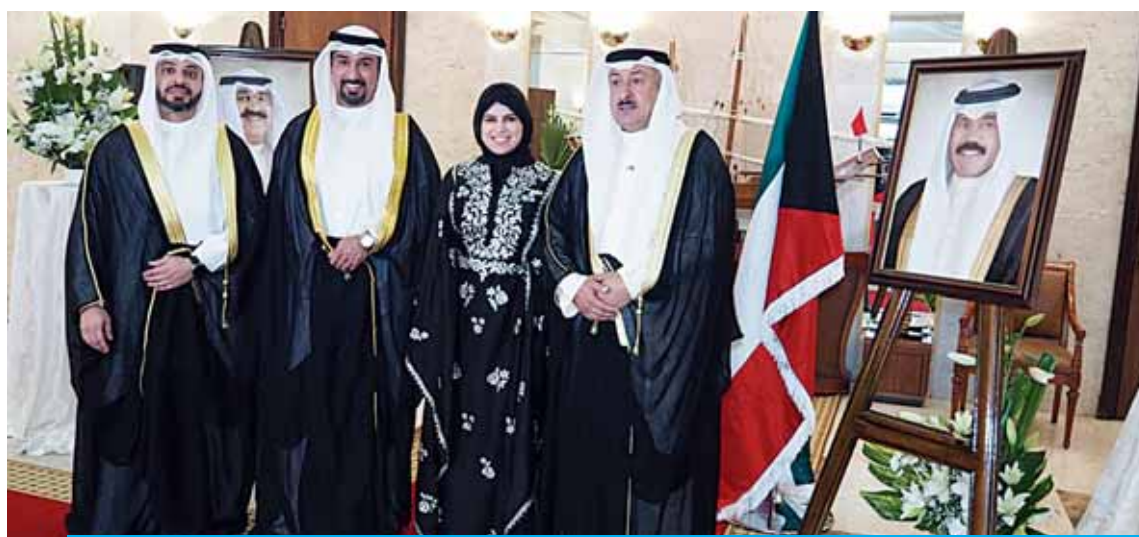
Harbi voiced hope for more progress and prosperity for both countries under their wise leaderships. In Muscat, Kuwait Ambassador to Oman Dr Mohammad Al-Hajeri hosted a reception at Al Bustan Palace. The event was attended by Taimur bin Assad bin Tariq al-Said as a guest of honor and a number of Omani officials and heads of diplomatic missions based in the Sultanate. —KUNA



Kuwait Embassy in Saudi Arabia celebrates national holidays. —KUNA photos



Kuwait Embassy in Oman celebrates the national holidays.



The Kuwait Embassy in Senegal celebrates the national holidays. —KUNA photos

## Embassies across the world mark national holidays

**KUWAIT:** Kuwait Embassies in Iran, Sudan, Mauritania, Senegal and Mongolia have celebrated the country's 62nd National Day and 32nd Liberation Day. A festive mood prevailed in Kuwait Embassy in Iran on the occasion of the holidays. The celebration saw a large gathering of local and international diplomats.

Attributing the large turnout to Kuwait's "amicable" relations with the international community, Kuwaiti Ambassador to Tehran Bader Al-Munaikh took the opportunity to highlight his country's "historic" ties with the Islamic Republic. Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister for Political Affairs Ali Baqri, who was among the attendees, congratulated Kuwaitis on the joyous occasion. He said bilateral ties continue to make palpable progress.

In Khartoum, Ambassador Dr Fahad Al-Thafeiry hosted a reception, which was attended by Sudanese Acting Minister of Education Mahmoud Siral-Khatim Al-Houri and dozens of representatives from the political, economic, cultural, academic and media sectors. He reaffirmed Kuwait's readiness to help Sudan overcome the difficulties the country is facing in its current transitional stage and reach a political settlement through dialogue.

Al-Houri appreciated Kuwait's contributions to the economic development in Sudan and its limitless support to the relief efforts during times of hardship. He expressed best wishes for Kuwait, congratulating



The Kuwait Embassy in Mongolia celebrates the national holidays.

the leadership, government and people on the country's national holidays.

In Nouakchott, Ambassador to Mauritania Ebdah Al-Dousary hosted a reception attended by a high-level government delegation, including Minister of Foreign Affairs Salem Ould Merzoug and Minister of Economic Affairs Ousmane Mamoudou Kane. Heads of diplomatic missions based in Nouakchott as well as leaders of the Mauritanian political parties and representatives of the civil society were also in attendance.

In Dakar, Ambassador to Senegal Adel Abdul-Karim Al-Amir hosted a reception. Similarly, Kuwait's Envoy to Mongolia Mohammad Faisal Al-Mutairi hosted a celebration attended by Mongolian government officials, parliamentarians and public figures. Both ambassadors congratulated the political leadership, the government and people of Kuwait on the dear national occasion, voicing hope for more progress and prosperity. —KUNA



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HK scraps one of world's last COVID face mask mandates

White House gives federal agencies 30 days to enforce TikTok ban

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UGLEDAR: A Ukrainian serviceman washes his hands on the frontline with Russian troops near Vugledar, Donetsk region. —AFP

## Ukraine troops under pressure in Bakhmut

Priority for Ukraine was to fight off Russia’s invasion with allies’ backing: NATO chief

**KYIV:** Ukraine said Tuesday its troops were under pressure in the near-destroyed frontline city of Bakhmut, where Russian forces were launching heavy assaults after months of fighting. The former eastern industrial hub has become largely a political objective since the longest battle in Russia's year-long invasion has already reduced it to rubble, causing high casualties on both sides.

As combat raged, NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg said the priority for Ukraine was to fight off Russia's invasion with allies' backing and that in the "long-term" the nation would join the alliance. AFP aerial footage shows almost all of Bakhmut's buildings in ruins and smoke rising over the city once known for its sparkling wine production and salt mines.

The governor of the eastern Donetsk region Pavlo Kyrylenko said mid-February that out of the 70,000 people who lived in the city before the war, less than 5,000 civilians including 140 children remained. "The situation around Bakhmut is extremely tense," the commander of

Ukraine's ground forces Oleksandr Syrskyi said on social media.

"Despite taking significant losses, the enemy has dispatched its best-trained Wagner assault units to try to break through the defences of our troops and surround the city," Syrskyi said, referring to the Russian paramilitary group.

**'Most likely fall'**

Ukrainian soldiers in Bakhmut told AFP that Russian soldiers were launching fierce assaults. "I think Bakhmut will most likely fall," said a Ukrainian soldier with the call sign "Fox", acknowledging that the opposing forces are making progress. "They say (Russians soldiers) are idiots, drug addicts," the 40-year-old said.

"But they have smart people there, people who know how to fight... They think, they learn, the same way we do." Ukraine has vowed to hold on, with President Volodymyr Zelensky visiting the devastated city in December. Zelensky has said

Ukraine would fight for the fortress city as long as it can, and has for months urged weapons deliveries from allies to help Ukraine take back territory lost in the Donetsk region.

The war is taking place on Ukraine's soil but on Tuesday Russia said its forces downed two Ukrainian drones that targeted civilian infrastructure in the nation's south, the latest in a series of drone incidents inside Russia that Moscow blamed on Kyiv.

**Wagner leading**

Ukraine has been faced by Russian troops determined to seize Bakhmut, whose symbolic importance now outstrips its military significance. In particular, the Wagner group, a once-shadowy force founded by Kremlin-linked businessman Yevgeny Prigozhin, has taken centre stage in the fight for Bakhmut.

Rivalry between Wagner and the regular Russian army has come to the surface, with Prigozhin last

week issuing an unprecedented call to Russians to take his side and urging the defence ministry to share ammunition with his fighters.

Prigozhin has maintained his fighters have been leading the offensive in the area and personally claimed the capture of several villages around Bakhmut in recent days. Prigozhin said Saturday that his fighters had seized Yagidne, north of Bakhmut, in a post on social media showing masked armed men holding a Wagner flag in front of the village's road sign.

This followed his announcement last week of capturing two villages north of Bakhmut, Berkhivka and Paraskoviivka. The US-based Institute for the Study of War (ISW) said Russian troops may be adapting its tactics to copy Wagner's strategy. "The tactics of the assault detachment additionally suggest that the Russian military may be attempting to institutionalise tactics used to marginal tactical effect by the Wagner Group in Bakhmut." —AFP

## Finland moves closer to joining NATO without Sweden

**HELSINKI:** Finland on Tuesday kicks off a parliamentary debate aimed at accelerating the country's NATO bid, increasing the likelihood it will leave neighbour and military partner Sweden behind. Finland, which has one of Europe's longest borders with Russia, and Sweden dropped their decades-long policies of military non-alignment and applied to join the alliance in May last year after Ukraine's invasion.

But facing fewer diplomatic hurdles than Stockholm, Helsinki appears set to move forward even before Finland's April general elections, as public opinion also supports membership. The two countries have the backing of all but two of NATO's 30 members, the holdouts being Hungary and particularly Turkey.

Many Finnish MPs have pushed for legislation affirming that Finland accepts the terms of the NATO treaty to be passed before the elections on April 2. Finland will debate the bill on Tuesday and a vote is expected by Wednesday.

Having the bill passed means that Finland can act

swiftly even if the ratifications come in before a new government has been formed. "The time is now to ratify and to fully welcome Finland and Sweden as members," NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg said Tuesday during a visit to Finland to meet with the political leadership.

"My message is that both Finland and Sweden have delivered on what they promised in the trilateral agreement they made with Turkey last June in Madrid," he said. Stoltenberg noted that Finland and Sweden are much more secure now than when they applied, citing security assurances by several members. "It's inconceivable that there will be any threat against Finland or Sweden without NATO reacting," he said.

**Complications?**

The legislation is expected to pass without much opposition, as the initial membership bid in May was supported by 188 of the 200 members in parliament. Helsinki has so far stressed its preference to join the alliance together with Sweden, but some have interpreted the bill as signalling that Finland is ready to move forward alone.

Turkey has meanwhile blocked the bids, accusing Sweden in particular of providing a safe haven for what it considers "terrorists", especially members of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). In contrast, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said on



HELSINKI: (L to R) NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, Finnish Prime Minister Sanna Marin and Norwegian Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Store attend the annual meeting of SAMAK, the Co-operation Committee of the Nordic Social Democratic parties and trade unions, in Helsinki, Finland, on February 28, 2023. —AFP

Monday that Turkey looked favourably on Finland's bid. "We may separate Sweden and Finland's membership process," he said. While Sweden sympathises with Finland's position, Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson has said Finland's joining alone could "complicate" the close military cooperation between the Nordic countries as Sweden is left alone outside of NATO protection. —AFP

## US waits on Biden reelection bid announcement

**WASHINGTON:** If President Joe Biden's 2024 reelection campaign were an airliner, he'd have finished fueling, received clearance from air traffic control-and, to the frustration of his passengers, still be sitting on the ground. For months, the White House has been teasing an announcement that Biden will run again in 2024. Also for months, the White House has refused to confirm that he will.

The latest strong hint that Biden is ready for lift off-yet as usual leaving wiggle room-came from First Lady Jill Biden in a series of interviews with US media during a visit to Namibia and Kenya last week. Asked by CNN if anything could now prevent Biden from running, she said: "Not in my book."

Asked by the Associated Press if everything was set, she replied: "Pretty much." But she also told CNN-in keeping with the Biden camp's keep-them-on-their-toes strategy-"nothing's been planned as yet."

Usually there is little drama around the question of whether an incumbent president seeks a second term. Politicians aren't exactly known for stepping aside voluntarily and all the less so when it comes to giving up the awesome power-and opportunity-of the Oval Office.

In Biden's case, the one real X-factor is age. At 80, the Democrat is already the oldest person ever to be president. He'd be 82 by the start of a second term and 86 at the end. By contrast, Ronald Reagan was 77 when he left at the end of two terms.

Biden has long had the reputation of favoring deliberations over spur-of-the-moment gestures. His silence on the reelection bid has been interpreted by some as personal indecisiveness and by others as the result of agonizing among aides and family over the age issue. But judging by statements from Biden, the delay instead reflects a desire to work through a sort of checklist-clearing the decks for action. —AFP

## Blinken backs Kazakhstan sovereignty

**ASTANA:** Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Tuesday vowed US support for Kazakhstan's independence as he sought greater engagement in Central Asia, where traditional alliances with Russia have been rattled by the Ukraine invasion.

Blinken will also visit Uzbekistan and meet foreign ministers of all five former Soviet republics of Central Asia on his first trip to the region where neighbouring China also plays a key role. "As you know well, the United States strongly supports Kazakhstan's sovereignty, its independence, its territorial integrity," Blinken said in talks at the foreign ministry in Kazakhstan's capital Astana.

"Sometimes we just say those words and they actually have no meaning. And of course, in this particular time, they have even more resonance than

usual," Blinken said, referring to Russia's assault on Ukraine a year ago.

Blinken later headed to the imposing palace in the capital to meet President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev who voiced "appreciation" for US support for Kazakhstan's sovereignty. Tokayev said, without explanation before the press, that he had received three personal messages from President Joe Biden.

"We have built very good and reliable long-term partnerships in so many strategically important areas" with the United States, Tokayev said. Blinken told him that the United States has made "important strides" for greater ties with Kazakhstan in recent years and would look for practical ways to do more with Central Asian nations-which also include Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan.

The trip is the most senior to Central Asia by an official in the Biden administration and comes days after the anniversary of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which has received billions of dollars in Western support. Central Asian nations have longstanding security and economic relationships with Russia that have come under greater scrutiny since the war.

A recent study by the European Bank for



ASTANA: US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Kazakhstan's Foreign Minister Mukhtar Tleuberdi arrive at the US-Central Asia (C5+1) foreign ministerial meeting at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Astana on February 28, 2023. —AFP

Reconstruction and Development found a spike in EU and British exports to Kazakhstan, Armenia and Kyrgyzstan-part of a customs union with Russia-and suggested that the flow was meant to evade the sweeping Western sanctions on Russia. —AFP



International

# White House gives govt bodies 30 days to enforce TikTok ban

## Recently introduced bill in Congress would ‘effectively ban TikTok’ in US

**WASHINGTON:** The White House on Monday gave federal agencies 30 days to purge Chinese-owned video-snippet sharing app TikTok from all government-issued devices, setting a deadline to comply with a ban ordered by the US Congress. Office of Management and Budget director Shalanda Young in a memorandum called on government agencies within 30 days to “remove and disallow installations” of the application on agency-owned or operated IT devices, and to “prohibit internet traffic” from such devices to the app.

The ban does not apply to businesses in the United States not associated with the federal government, or to the millions of private citizens who use the hugely popular app. However, a recently introduced bill in Congress would “effectively ban TikTok” in this country, according to the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). “Congress must not censor entire platforms and strip Americans of their constitutional right to freedom of speech and expression,” ACLU senior policy counsel Jenna Leventoff said in a release. “We have a right to use TikTok and other platforms to exchange our thoughts, ideas, and opinions with people around the country and around the world.”

Owned by Chinese tech giant ByteDance, TikTok has become a political target due to concerns the app can be circumvented for spying or propaganda by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The company did not immediately respond to the White

House guidance. China’s foreign ministry slammed the ban. “We firmly oppose the wrong practice of the United States to generalize the concept of national security, abuse state power, and unreasonably suppress firms from other countries,” spokeswoman Mao Ning said Tuesday.

The law signed by US President Joe Biden last month bans the use of TikTok on government-issued devices. It also bans TikTok use in the US House of Representatives and Senate. National security concerns over alleged Chinese spying have grown over the past month after a Chinese balloon traversed US airspace and was eventually shot down.

### Canada, EU bans

The Canadian government on Monday banned TikTok from all of its phones and other devices, citing fears about how much access Beijing has to user data. Effective Tuesday, “the TikTok application will be removed from government-issued mobile devices. Users of these devices will also be blocked from downloading the application in the future,” the government said in a statement. The European Commission banned the app from its equipment too.

TikTok has repeatedly rejected accusations it shares data or cedes control to the Chinese government. TikTok’s breakneck rise from a niche video-sharing app to global social media behemoth has brought plenty of scrutiny, particularly over its links to China. The company was forced to admit



ByteDance employees in China had accessed Americans’ data but it has always denied turning over personal information to the Chinese authorities. TikTok has moved to soothe US fears, announcing in June 2022 that it would store all data on American users on US-based servers.

Bans have not halted TikTok’s growth. With

more than one billion active users it is the sixth-most used social platform in the world, according to the We Are Social marketing agency. Although it lags behind the likes of Meta’s long-dominant trio of Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram, its growth among young people far outstrips its competitors. — AFP

## Children’s coffins mark tragedy of migrant shipwreck

**STECCATO, Italy:** The coffins of 64 victims of a devastating migrant shipwreck off Italy’s southern coast were laid out Tuesday in a local sports hall, five of them small and white, containing the bodies of the youngest children that died. Flower bouquets adorned each coffin in the building in Crotona, while a toy blue car had been laid on the smallest, ready for mourners to pay their respects.

Earlier, the coffins had been opened to allow the identification of the dead, with relatives having flown in from countries including Germany and Austria. One woman let out a scream which shattered the silence of the

sports hall. A German-speaking man told reporters he was the nephew of an Afghan man who survived but lost his wife and three children aged 5, 8 and 12, after paying \$30,000 for the family to cross. A 14-year-old child survived.

Fourteen children were among the 64 people confirmed to have died when their overcrowded boat shattered in a storm on Sunday morning, the interior ministry said. Another 80 survived, while several more are believed still to be missing. It was one of the most tragic incidents in the Central Mediterranean, which tens of thousands of migrants and asylum seekers cross each year hoping to find a new life in Europe. Three men – two Pakistanis and a Turkish national – have been detained for alleged people smuggling over the incident, a police spokesman told AFP.

Bodies, shoes and debris have been

washing up along the shoreline for the past three days, with the most recent body found on the beach at Steccato on Tuesday morning, the fire service said. Divers are still searching for potentially up to 20 missing people, although it is not yet clear how many were on the boat. Up to 200 people had been on board, from Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan, also Somalia and Syria, according to charities working with survivors.

The overcrowded wooden boat was called Summer Love and it set off last Thursday from Izmir in Turkey, survivors told Red Cross charity workers. Many of those on board were seated below deck and had difficulty breathing, they reportedly said. Survivors said they paid smugglers between five and eight thousand euros (\$5,300 to \$8,500), according to the Corriere della Sera daily. — AFP



**STECCATO, Italy:** A photograph taken on Feb 28, 2023 shows the coffins of migrants who died two days before after their boat sank at the Crotona Palasport, converted to a temporary funeral home. — AFP

## IAEA: Iran uranium particles enriched to nearly bomb grade

**VIENNA:** The UN nuclear watchdog confirmed on Tuesday it had detected particles of uranium enriched to 83.7 percent in Iran, just under the 90 percent needed to produce an atomic bomb. “Discussions are still ongoing” to determine the origin of these particles, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) said in a report seen by AFP. Asked about the particles found in Iran, the government in Tehran said “unintended fluctuations” during the enrichment process “may have occurred”.

In 2015, Iran reached a deal with world powers to limit the enrichment of uranium and allow IAEA inspectors to visit its nuclear sites, in return for the lifting of economic sanctions. But the deal stalled in 2018. Iran has been enriching uranium well over the limits laid down in the deal and the IAEA believes its estimated stockpile is more than 18 times the limit set out in that accord.

The IAEA report said that during an inspection “on 22 January 2023, the agency took environmental samples... at the Fordow (sic) plant, the analyti-

cal results of which showed the presence of high enriched uranium particles containing up to 83.7 percent U-235”. “These events clearly indicate the capability of the agency to detect and report in a timely manner changes in the operation of nuclear facilities in Iran,” it continued.

In the report, the United Nations’ nuclear watchdog also said that Iran’s estimated stockpile of enriched uranium had reached more than 18 times the limit set out in the 2015 accord between Tehran and world powers. The IAEA estimated Iran’s total enriched uranium stockpile was 3,760.8 kg as of Feb 12, an increase of 87.1 kg compared to the last report in November. The limit in the 2015 deal was set at 202.8 kg of uranium.

The IAEA has also repeatedly warned it has lost its ability to fully monitor Iran’s program since the Islamic republic started to restrict its access in February 2021. Iran has been enriching uranium well over the limits laid down in the landmark accord, which started to unravel when the United States withdrew from it in 2018. Talks between Tehran and world powers have stalled to revive the deal, which gave Iran much-needed sanctions relief in return for curbs on its atomic program.

Iran’s stockpile of uranium enriched to 60 percent is now at 87.5 kg, up from 62.3 kg, the report said. Iran now also has 434.7 kg of uranium enriched up to 20 percent, up from 386.4 kg in the November report. — AFP

## Dozens of Iran girls hospitalised in new school poisoning

**TEHRAN:** Dozens of schoolgirls in Iran were hospitalised on Tuesday after a mysterious poisoning, an Iranian news agency reported, the latest in a spate of suspected attacks in the Islamic republic. Hundreds of cases of respiratory distress have been reported in the past three months among Iranian schoolgirls mainly in the holy city of Qom, south of Tehran, with some needing hospitalisation.

A government official said on Sunday that the attacks were believed to be a deliberate attempt to force the closure of girls’ schools. “Today at noon, a number of students were poisoned at the Khayyam Girls’ School in the city of Pardis, Tehran province,” Tasnim news agency reported.

Thirty-five students had been transferred to hospital so far, Tasnim said, adding to the hundreds of cases of poisoning since November in at least two other cities including Qom. The poisonings come more than five months into protests that spread across Iran after death in custody of 22-year-old Iranian Kurd Mahsa Amini after her arrest for an alleged violation of the country’s strict dress code

for women. On Sunday, students at a girls’ school in Borujerd were rushed to hospital after a similar incident, the fourth in the western city within the past week. Iran’s parliament held a meeting on Tuesday to discuss the suspected attacks in the presence of Health Minister Bahram Eynollahi, the official IRNA news agency reported.

It quoted speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf as saying that both Qom and Borujerd were “dealing with student poisonings”. On Sunday, Iran’s deputy health minister, Younes Panahi, said some people had been poisoned at a girls’ school in Qom, with the aim of shutting down education for girls.

“After the poisoning of several students in Qom schools, it was found that some people wanted all schools, especially girls’ schools, to be closed,” IRNA quoted him as saying at the time. He did not elaborate. So far, there have been no arrests linked to the poisonings.

Activists have compared those responsible for the attacks on schools to the Taliban in Afghanistan and the Boko Haram in the Sahel, who oppose girls’ education. On February 14, parents of students who had been ill had gathered outside Qom’s governorate to “demand an explanation” from the authorities, IRNA reported.

The following day, government spokesman Ali Bahadori Jahromi said the intelligence and education ministries were trying to find the cause of the poisonings. — AFP

## Weight loss drug trend on TikTok...

Continued from Page 1

In early 2021, peer-reviewed research found that almost three quarters of people who used the drug lost more than 10 percent of their body weight. Novo Nordisk has since developed a semaglutide drug with a higher dosage called Wegovy specifically to treat obesity, which was approved for use in the United States in 2021, and in Europe and the UK last year. Wegovy is not yet on the market in the UK, France or several other countries, but Ozempic is available with a normal prescription.

This has led to a rise in people without diabetes obtaining prescriptions for Ozempic, as well as “falsified prescriptions”, said Jean-Luc Faillie, a pharmacology specialist at France’s Montpellier University. Douglas Twenefour, head of care at Diabetes UK, said on the charity’s website that Ozempic “is not a medication for people who do not have diabetes or are at risk of type 2 diabetes”.

France’s medicines regulator ANSM has urged doctors to only prescribe Ozempic for diabetes. There has not been a particularly “sudden increase in consumption in recent months,” the ANSM said, adding that there had been “supply tensions” worldwide. Novo Nordisk told AFP that “stronger than anticipated demand” for Ozempic had resulted

in “intermittent availability and period stock-outs” around the world. The company’s global manufacturing facilities “are now operating 24 hours, seven days a week” to bridge the gap, it added.

Doctors have expressed concern that people with diabetes may not be able to get hold of semaglutide because of the soaring demand from people seeking to lose weight. Karine Clement, an obesity specialist at France’s INSERM medical research institute, said that when Wegovy does become available, it is important that people closely follow their prescription. “It is not a magic drug,” she said. “As is always the case with obesity, it must be accompanied with a comprehensive treatment plan.”

Doctors have also expressed concerns about the side effects of semaglutide, which Faillie said have gone under-discussed. “Neither patients nor prescribers are motivated to report” the side effects, he said. Nausea is the most common side effect of the drug. But Faillie said “there are also rarer and more serious risks such as acute pancreatitis - which can occur even at lower doses - biliary disorders, and rare cases of severe constipation which can lead to bowel obstruction.”

He also pointed to an “increased risk of thyroid cancer” following several years of treatment. While the risks were reasonable considering the benefits for people with diabetes, “there are still uncertainties, particularly in obese patients over the long term,” he said. “If it is used to lose a few kilograms, then the therapeutic benefit is zero,” Faillie added. “That would just be cosmetic, while the risks remain.” — AFP

## Moroccans struggle to...

Continued from Page 1

transportation costs, according to the World Bank. In January, the country’s consumer price index hit 8.9 percent, fueled by a 16.8 percent spike in food prices.

At the market in Sale, one full-throated stallholder hawks his potatoes at eight dirhams a kilogram – almost \$1. But Abdessalam El Mahdaoui, a retired 63-year-old, said prices were out of control. “We used to be able to buy a whole basket of veg for 100 dirhams,” he said. “Today, even 300 dirhams won’t buy you that - people’s buying power has been cut by half.”

That is in a country where the minimum monthly salary comes to just 2,770 dirhams (around \$265). One stallholder said prices were fluctuating by the day. “Tomatoes are going at eight dirhams a kilo today, down from 12 dirhams two days ago,” he said, adding that he couldn’t explain why. But overall, prices are surging upwards, accompanied by bitter criticism from the opposition, trade unions and even some media outlets.

Several large cities have seen protests, albeit limited and often cut short by the authorities. The government has blamed the price rises on fraud, speculators and “price manipulation”. Government spokesman Mustapha Baitas says

authorities have carried out over 64,000 checks and found 3,000 offences from price-fixing to fiddling with the quality of food.

The situation has been made worse by a crisis facing the agricultural sector, which makes up 14 percent of gross domestic product. The worst drought in four decades has been compounded in recent weeks by a snap of unusually cold weather. “The drought has forced farmers to give up on cultivating their land this season,” not to mention the high cost of seeds and fertilizers, said agricultural policy expert Abderrahim Handouf.

Morocco’s Independent Economic, Social and Environmental Council has called for reforms to how agricultural products reach the market, saying current supply chains suffer from “excessive and poorly controlled intermediaries, encouraging speculation”. The government has boosted subsidies on some basic products such as sugar, flour and cooking gas, as well as doling out support to struggling transport sector workers. Authorities have also temporarily banned exports of vegetables to West Africa.

But the World Bank says these moves have done little to help the poorest families. “Despite these measures, it is low-income and vulnerable households that continue to suffer the most from the impact of the inflationary surge in food prices,” it said. Fouzi Lekjaa, an ex-football administrator now in charge of Morocco’s budget, said in October authorities planned to gradually replace subsidies with direct cash payouts to the poorest households. — AFP



## International

# Hong Kong scraps one of world's last COVID face mask mandates

## End of masking restrictions comes as government tries to woo back tourists

**HONG KONG:** Hongkongers will finally be able to leave home without a face mask from Wednesday, nearly 1,000 days after the pandemic mandate was imposed. Face coverings will no longer be required indoors, outdoors or on public transport, the government announced, ending a measure that has become a relic globally as the world adjusts to living alongside the coronavirus.

Hong Kong was one of the last places on Earth to enforce mask-wearing outside, with violators facing hefty fines. "I'm ready to get rid of this," Tiffany, a finance industry employee in her 20s, told AFP. "It costs money to buy masks, and I have had COVID myself." The end of masking restrictions comes as the government tries to woo back tourists and overseas talent to revive the recession-hit economy. "With the masking requirement removed, we are starting (to resume) normalcy... And that will be very beneficial to economic development," Chief Executive John Lee said at a Tuesday morning press conference.

Speaking at the same event, Health Secretary Lo Chung-mau said starting March 1, "everyone can show their smiling faces". Many in the city were increasingly chafing under the mandate. Lawmakers called it harmful to schoolchildren. Tourism experts and business groups warned it was undercutting the city's global image. And public health experts questioned the necessity against an endemic virus.

"We have got a high level of hybrid immunity and a relatively low case fatality rate—the latter at a level similar to flu," said Kwok Kin-on, an associate profes-

sor of public health at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, calling masking unnecessary.

The policy also appeared at odds with Lee's recently announced "Hello, Hong Kong" campaign to welcome travellers with "no isolation, no quarantine and no restrictions". Maskless dancers in the campaign's promotional video attracted criticism online for distorting the reality of a city where face coverings were ubiquitous and enforced with fines of up to HK\$10,000 (\$1,275). Official data shows that by the end of 2022, Hong Kong had issued more than 22,000 tickets for mask violations and collected HK\$111.56 million in fines.

### Holdout

Hong Kong was one of the world's last masking holdouts. By last year, most European countries that had imposed mask rules had scaled them back everywhere except on planes and some metros. Hong Kong's Asian rival Singapore scrapped indoor face coverings in August, while South Korea did the same in January this year.

In Taiwan, people could breathe unfiltered air again in most areas as of February 20, and Macau became the most recent addition after dropping its mandate on Monday. Lee said he would leave high-risk venues like hospitals and elderly care homes to make their own masking policies.

Shortly after his announcement, the public hospitals operator said patients, visitors and staff would still need to don surgical masks before entering



**HONG KONG:** People wear masks on the Mass Transit Railway (MTR) system in Hong Kong as health experts in the territory backed the extension of its mask mandate to March 8 leaving Hong Kong as one of the only places left in the world with such rules. — AFP

government-run health facilities. Until the end of last year, Hong Kong had one of the world's strictest pandemic approaches. It hewed to a version of China's zero-COVID model until Beijing's abrupt pivot from the hallmark containment policy in December. In Hong Kong, the nearly three-year pandemic isolation and virus restrictions further dented an economy already reeling from massive democracy protests in 2019 followed by a crackdown on the opposition.

Still, not everyone in the city is ready to rip off their masks. "Despite the mask mandate being lifted, I'll continue wearing it in the short term," said Chan, a retiree. He said he would wait to make sure there was no rebound of infections after Hong Kong restored travel across its border with mainland China this month. "The mask is like a part of my body," he said. "If I stop wearing it, it'll take a bit of getting used to." — AFP

## Surgeon, scientist named Japan's new astronauts in 13 years

**TOKYO:** Japan's space agency JAXA named its first new astronaut candidates in over 13 years on Tuesday, with a surgeon and a climate scientist chosen from more than 4,000 applicants. Ayu Yoneda, a 28-year-old surgeon for Tokyo's Japanese Red Cross Medical Center, will become just the third woman ever to join the space training programme. Japan's six current astronauts are all men. She will be joined by Makoto Suwa, 46, a senior disaster risk management specialist at the World Bank, who made the cut after an unsuccessful first application more than a decade ago. Yoneda said she was "elated and surprised" to learn she had been chosen.

"I felt a sense of responsibility and mission," she told reporters. Suwa, speaking by video from the United States, said he was "so excited that I haven't been able to sleep". The pair, chosen from 4,127 applicants, will now begin a two-year training programme and, if successful, could join International Space Station missions and become the first Japanese astronauts to reach the Moon. Japan and the United States announced last year that they would cooperate on a plan to put a Japanese astronaut on the lunar surface by the end of the decade. Suwa grew up in Tsukuba, a city that hosts several research institutes and JAXA facilities.

An expert in ancient climates, he hopes to learn about how the climate of Mars evolved. "By learning about the Moon, by learning about Mars, we not only learn about those celestial bodies themselves but also we learn about our planet," he said. Yoneda's dreams of becoming an astronaut were fuelled by a manga comic about Japan's first woman astronaut, Chiaki Mukai, who was also a surgeon. She hopes to study how space travel impacts human health. "We will see an era where many people will go to space. The duration and distance of those stays will become extended," she said. "As a physician, I believe I can do my part to learn about what happens to human bodies in space." In 2021, JAXA lifted its requirement for astronaut candidates to have advanced scientific or engineering degrees, and recent applicants included sales agents and consultants. JAXA President Hiroshi Yamakawa said he hoped to do another round of recruitment in around five years and to find astronauts who can bring space programmes closer to the public.—AFP



**TOKYO:** Astronaut candidates for the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA), Ayu Yoneda (L), a surgeon at the Japanese Red Cross Medical Center, and Makoto Suwa (on screen), a disaster prevention specialist at the World Bank, pose after a press conference in Tokyo on February 28, 2023. — AFP

## Belarus president arrives in Beijing for talks

**BEIJING:** Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko arrived in Beijing on Tuesday, kicking off a three-day trip in which he will meet Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping. The state visit by Lukashenko—a key ally of Russian President Vladimir Putin—comes after Beijing released a position paper on Moscow's war in Ukraine insisting it is a neutral party and calling for dialogue.



**ABUJA:** A security officer stands guard under an All Progressives Congress (APC) presidential candidate Bola Ahmed Tinubu campaign poster after a press conference at the party's campaign headquarters in Abuja. — AFP

## Nigeria ruling party candidate takes lead

**LAGOS:** Ruling party candidate Bola Tinubu led the race for Nigeria's presidency on Tuesday, according to partial official tallies issued after a tight election marred by frustration over long delays, technical hitches and opposition charges that results have been manipulated. With President Muhammadu Buhari stepping down, many Nigerians hoped Saturday's vote would open the door to a leader able to tackle insecurity, ease economic malaise and root out poverty in Africa's most populous country. Tinubu, 70, a former Lagos governor from the ruling All Progressives Congress (APC) party faced another veteran from main opposition Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), Atiku Abubakar, 76, making his sixth tilt at the presidency.

But a surprise third candidate, Labour Party's Peter Obi, appealed to younger voters with a message of change. He has tested the dominance of the APC and PDP for the first time since military rule ended in 1999. Counting continued early Tuesday, with 14 out of 36 states officially tallied.

The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) said Tinubu had won six states, Abubakar five and Obi three. Tinubu led with more than four million votes, while Abubakar had three million and Obi 1.6 million, according to national INEC figures.

INEC was expected to resume announcing results at 1300 GMT. The winning candidate has to garner the most votes nationally and score at least 25 percent in two-thirds of the states—a measure reflecting a country split between a mostly Muslim north and widely Christian south, and with three main ethnic groups.

Saturday's election was mostly peaceful, but many polling stations opened late, angering voters, and delays or technical failures slowed uploading of results to an official INEC website meant to promote transparency. PDP and other party officials stormed out of the counting centre on Monday night claiming tallies were manipulated. They said vote counts were not uploaded or did not match manual counts at local election stations.

It also follows allegations by the United States and NATO that Beijing could be mulling sending arms to Russia as the conflict enters its second year. China has strenuously denied those claims. "President Alexander Lukashenko has arrived on a state visit to China," the Belarusian state-run Belta news agency reported.

Ahead of the trip, Beijing hailed its "all-weather and comprehensive" strategic partnership with Minsk. In an interview with China's state-run Xinhua news agency, the Belarusian leader said he was looking forward to meeting with his "old friend" Xi.

He also praised Beijing's position paper as "a testimony to its peaceful foreign policy as well as a new and original step that will have a far-reaching impact all over the world", Xinhua added. "Today, not a single issue in the world can be resolved without China,"

"This sham exercise should be cancelled," Labour party spokeswoman Ndi Kato told Arise News channel. Nigeria has a long history of vote rigging and ballot buying, although INEC had said new technology would help curtail malpractice. "Elections in the past have been very discouraging so many of us have not been engaged, but this time, we thought it would be different," said frustrated voter Osaki Briggs in southern Port Harcourt.

### Fraud fears

Whoever replaces Buhari must quickly get to grips with Africa's largest economy and top oil producer, which is beset by problems including a grinding jihadist war in the northeast and double-digit inflation. Buhari, a former army general first elected in 2015, will step down after two terms in office. His critics say he failed in his key promises to make Nigeria safer.

For the 2023 election, INEC introduced biometric voter identification technology for the first time at national level and the IReV central database for results to improve transparency. Votes were tallied by hand at local polling stations, with images of result sheets uploaded online to INEC's IReV.

But long delays in voting getting underway and the slow pace of uploading state-by-state counting fuelled accusations of manipulation. Some photographs of the result counts on the IReV system were blurry, smudged and illegible. By Tuesday 1100 GMT, IReV had only uploaded results from 81,867 polling stations or less than half the 176,800 nationwide.

INEC said Sunday that problems with uploading results were due to "technical hitches" and there was no risk of tampering. But international observers, including from the European Union (EU), noted major logistical problems, disenfranchised voters and a lack of transparency by INEC.

The EU observer mission said the INEC "lacked efficient planning and transparency during critical stages" and reduced public trust with delays in voting and results. Local observer group Yiaga said it conducted a parallel vote tabulation for the presidential election and would hold a press conference after official results were released.

"If the official results are manipulated at any point in the process we will be able to expose it," it said. In 2019, INEC was forced to delay the election by a week just hours before voting started. PDP's Abubakar claimed fraud when Buhari beat him, but the supreme court later tossed out his claim.—AFP

Lukashenko said. Xi has spoken to Putin several times since the war began, but has not done so with his Ukrainian counterpart Volodymyr Zelensky. Lukashenko is a close ally of Putin and has backed Moscow's invasion of Ukraine.

Belarus shares a border with both Ukraine and Russia, but is financially and politically dependent on the Putin administration. A year after allowing Russia to use Belarus as a launchpad for its Ukraine offensive, Lukashenko said he was ready to do so again if Minsk felt threatened.

Kyiv has also expressed concerns that Belarus could again support Moscow in its war effort. In September last year, Xi and Lukashenko met in the Uzbek city of Samarkand, where they again hailed their "all-weather" partnership.—AFP

## Protesters storm stage at Taiwan massacre memorial

**TAIPEI:** Around a dozen demonstrators stormed a stage where Taipei's new mayor was speaking on Tuesday, calling him a murderer and demanding he apologise for the blood shed during a 1947 massacre in Taiwan. Protesters were furious that Mayor Chiang Wan-an was hosting the memorial service because his purported great-grandfather, president Chiang Kai-shek, oversaw the violent suppression nearly eight decades ago.

Carrying a white banner with the words, "kneel and apologise", the protesters rushed towards Chiang, who turned his back on them while security guards swooped in and ushered the crowd away from the stage. Known as the "228 Incident", the crackdown eventually killed up to an estimated 28,000 people. It started after an inspector beat a woman selling untaxed cigarettes in Taipei, prompting an island-wide uprising on February 28.

On Tuesday, Chiang acknowledged the "historical pain" and said he would "work hard... so all residents can face each other more honestly, embrace each other and remember the 228 (Incident)". To quell the 1947 protests, Chinese nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek—whose Kuomintang (KMT) party governed the island as part of China at the time—called in troops from the mainland.

The violence was also a prelude to the "White Terror", the purges and executions under martial law imposed by Chiang, who had fled to Taiwan after losing a civil war in 1949 to communists. The legacy of the massacre still lingers in Taiwan, which the Kuomintang ruled as a one-party authoritarian state until martial law was lifted in 1987. In 1995, president Lee Teng-hui officially apologised for 228. Today, just blocks away from the Presidential Office Building, a museum and park commemorate the victims. Some descendants of the victims boycotted Tuesday's ceremony over Mayor Chiang's presence.

"It's unacceptable for us to stand side by side with Chiang Wan-an, who is the descendent of butchers," said Amy Lee, whose grandfather and another relative were killed in the massacre. The Chiang family have not recognised Chiang Wan-an or his father John Chiang, who says he is the born-out-of-wedlock son of former president Chiang Ching-kuo.

At the memorial service on Tuesday, former president Ma Ying-jeou advocated for reconciliation. "Historical mistakes perhaps can be forgiven but historical facts can't be forgotten," he said. Around 200 boycotters of the official event gathered at a ceremony organised by victims' families outside a memorial hall named after Chiang Kai-shek.

"Taiwan's 'transitional justice' cannot be completed because Chiang Wan-an and the KMT are unwilling to admit the mistakes," said Kenneth Wang, whose father was killed in the 228 Incident. "Chiang Kai-shek is the culprit but he still sits over there laughing at us," Wang said, referring to a 6.3-metre (20-foot) statue of the late leader inside the hall. — AFP



**TAIPEI:** Taipei Mayor Chiang Wan-an (C) speaks to relatives during a ceremony marking the 76th anniversary of "228 incident" at the 228 Peace Park in Taipei on February 28, 2023. — AFP



WEDNESDAY, MARCH 1, 2023

## Business

## Sunak in Northern Ireland to sell breakthrough Brexit deal

## Windsor Framework creates a 'green' largely check-free lane for goods from UK

LONDON: British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak visited Northern Ireland on Tuesday to convince pro-UK unionists to back his breakthrough deal with the European Union that overhauls post-Brexit trading rules in the province. Sunak and European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen proclaimed Monday a "new chapter" in relations after years of Brexit tensions as they agreed the new pact.

It follows more than a year of tense talks over the "Northern Ireland Protocol", which has unsettled the province 25 years on from a historic peace deal that ended three decades of armed conflict.

Agreed in 2020 as part of Britain's EU divorce, the original pact kept the province in the European single market for physical goods and subject to different customs rules than the rest of the United Kingdom, angering pro-UK unionists there and euroskeptics in London. While the new framework has been generally well received, it has yet to secure the backing of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), Northern Ireland's largest pro-UK party, which is needed to resume power-sharing in the province.

The DUP has been refusing to re-enter the devolved government in Belfast for a year, mainly in protest at the protocol, which it said cut Northern Ireland adrift from the rest of the UK. DUP leader Jeffrey Donaldson said the party would assess whether the agreement met its tests for returning to the Stormont assembly. Sunak told BBC radio that his deal "will make a hugely positive difference".

"And that's what I'll be talking to people about today, listening to them and explaining how this agreement is going to make that positive differ-

ence." On a later visit to a Coca-Cola factory in Lisburn, the prime minister said the deal would create "the world's most exciting economic zone" with access to EU and UK markets. "Nobody else has that. No one. Only you guys: only here, and that is the prize," he said.

## 'Delicate balance'

The new so-called Windsor Framework creates a "green" largely check-free lane for goods coming from the rest of the UK that are intended to stay in Northern Ireland, without heading into Ireland and the EU's single market. UK-approved food and medicines will be fully available in Northern Ireland, and the deal would also limit, but not scrap, oversight of the arrangements by the EU's European Court of Justice (ECJ).

Donaldson told Sky News on Monday that a key issue would be the extent of EU law applicable to Northern Ireland. "The ECJ applies where EU law applies. A key focus for us in examining this agreement will be to determine which EU laws apply, in what circumstances do they apply and why do they apply," he said.

"We don't want a situation where EU law cuts across our ability to trade with the rest of the UK."

Sunak appears to have the backing of most Brexiteer MPs in his own party, though his predecessor Boris Johnson has yet to react. The deal also has the support of international partners, with French President Emmanuel Macron calling it an "important decision" and US President Joe Biden highlighting the economic opportunities that would be "created by this stability and certainty."

Arnault. The Tesla and Twitter and CEO held the title until last December, when his net worth fell by over \$200 billion as Tesla stocks started to fall. Bernard Arnault, CEO of the French luxury brand Louis Vuitton, rose to the top at that time.

However, the billionaire's fortunes have turned for the better again, with Tesla stock rallying to push the company's chief back on to his throne. According to Bloomberg, Musk's net worth was around \$187.1 billion at the time of markets closing on Monday. Arnault's, meanwhile, was at \$185.3 billion.

While Tesla stock declined steeply last year amid Musk's problem-plagued acquisition of Twitter and a broader market downturn in tech, shares for the electric vehicle maker have since surged in 2023. Musk might hold the current title of the richest person in the world, but he also holds a record for the biggest fortune ever lost by anyone in history. Late last year, Musk became the first

The Commission, in a statement, now says only that Apple restricts iPhone and iPad users from seeing other music subscription options at lower prices outside of the app. These policies are, it added, "neither necessary nor proportionate for the provision of the App Store on iPhones and iPads and are detrimental to users of music streaming services on Apple's mobile devices who may end up paying more."

Apple said it was "pleased" the Commission narrowed the case. "Apple will continue to work with the European Commission to understand and respond to their concerns, all the while promoting competition and choice for European consumers," a spokesperson said in a statement.

The company has firmly opposed the case and said it hoped the "Commission will end its pursuit of a complaint that has no merit". In its app review guidelines, Apple says "developers can send communications outside of the app to their user base about purchasing methods other than in-app purchase". Apple faces scrutiny in the United States and Europe to relax its hold on the App Store, which has been bashed by others including Fortnite maker Epic Games, and Twitter owner Elon Musk.

pandemic. Rick Henderson, head of the charity Homeless Link, called last year's increase "shocking" and urged the government to boost funding in its budget due March 15. "The 26-percent rise is evidence of how the cost-of-living crisis has exacerbated long-standing drivers of homelessness, such as a shortage of affordable housing, an often punitive welfare system and increasingly stretched health services," he said.

"At the same time continuing financial pressures mean hundreds of homelessness services across the country are on the brink of closing down, risking leaving people experiencing homelessness with nowhere to turn." Homelessness was seen across all regions of England but was most acute in London, where 858 people were found sleeping rough during the census. London Mayor Sadiq Khan urged the government to "urgently increase support" for the homeless. The survey counted the number of homeless people sleeping or about to sleep in locations such as tents and make-shift shelters.

Meanwhile, UK food price inflation has soared to a record peak as Britons suffer under a cost-of-living crisis, according to a survey Tuesday. Prices accel-



LISBURN, United Kingdom: Britain's Prime Minister Rishi Sunak holds a Q&A session with local business leaders during a visit to Coca-Cola HBC in Lisburn, Co Antrim in Northern Ireland on February 28, 2023. —AFP

A key plank of the agreement is the "Stormont brake", which gives the Northern Ireland assembly power to initiate a block on any new laws passed by the EU taking effect in the province. "At the heart of the Belfast Good Friday Agreement is the delicate balance that needs to exist in Northern Ireland and that's about respect for the aspirations and identities of all communities," Sunak told the BBC, referring to the landmark 1998 peace accord. —AFP



Elon Musk

person ever to lose \$200 billion in wealth - after his net worth slid from some \$340 billion in Nov 2021 to \$137 billion in Dec 2022. — Agencies



Spotify on Tuesday welcomed the Commission's announcement and its general counsel, Eve Konstan, called on the Commission to reach a "swift decision". "Today, the European Commission sent a clear message that Apple's anti-competitive behavior and unfair practices have harmed consumers and disadvantaged developers for far too long," she said in a statement. —AFP



LONDON: The number of homeless people in England soared by more than a quarter last year on fallout from the cost-of-living crisis triggered by soaring inflation, official data showed Tuesday.

ated 17.1 percent in the four weeks to February 19 compared with a year earlier, data provider Kantar said after tracking the cost of more than 75,000 products. That was the highest increase recorded by Kantar, which began its survey in 2008. — AFP

## India's growth slows to 4.4% on weak demand

NEW DELHI: India's quarterly economic growth slowed to 4.4 percent in the last three months of 2022, official estimates showed Tuesday, as weaker global demand and high inflation weigh on the world's fifth-largest economy. Quarterly data showed GDP growth down from 6.3 percent in the September quarter after consumption weakened following India's festive season.

But the National Statistics Office's full-year forecast for the year ending March 31 remained unchanged at 7.0 percent, ranking India's economic outlook above every other major country. "GDP at 4.4 percent is very much on the expected lines," said Nish Bhatt, founder and CEO at investment consulting firm Millwood Kane International. "The growth rate has slowed down due to higher inflation and lower consumption," he added.

India bounced back strongly from the coronavirus pandemic but is still grappling with the same headwinds buffeting the global economy. The country of 1.4 billion people imports more than 80 percent of its crude oil needs and rising petrol costs since Russia's invasion of Ukraine have had a ripple effect on prices. The Reserve Bank of India has hiked rates by 2.50 percentage points since May last year in an aggressive response to rising consumer inflation, which hit a three-month high of 6.52 percent in January. — AFP

## Sri Lanka outlaws strikes as anti-tax protests spread

COLOMBO: Sri Lanka's government said Tuesday it was banning strikes in several key sectors, a day ahead of a planned one-day national stoppage called by unions to protest against painfully high taxes and utility bills. Anger towards President Ranil Wickremesinghe is growing as his government slashes spending and hikes taxes to secure an IMF bailout after more than a year of economic and political upheaval.

Wickremesinghe's office said he used his executive power to invoke an "essential services" order that effectively outlawed the planned trade union action. He declared "public transports, delivery of food or drink, or coal, oil, fuel, the maintenance of facilities for transport by road, rail or air... airports, ports and railway lines, as essential services with immediate effect," a statement said.

Anyone defying the essential services order risks losing their job. More than 40 trade unions, including bank employees and government hospital staff, had said they would not carry out work on Wednesday as a token protest against the doubling of taxes since January. The government has raised energy costs threefold in line with demands by the International Monetary Fund to reduce losses of state utilities in order to qualify for a \$2.9-billion rescue.

Sri Lanka sought help from the IMF after defaulting on the country's \$46 billion in external debts in April. The IMF is yet to unlock the funds pending financial assurances from China, the largest single bilateral creditor of Sri Lanka, that it is willing to take a haircut on loans to the South Asian nation. —AFP

## Elon Musk regains title as richest man in the world

SAN FRANCISCO: Elon Musk has reclaimed the title of the richest person in the world. The Tesla CEO was unseated from the top spot by Bernard Arnault, CEO of French luxury brand LVMH in December of last year, making Musk No 2 on the list for more than two months. As of Monday, however, Bloomberg reports that a rally in Tesla stock has lifted Musk back to the top of its real-time Billionaires Index.

Musk's net worth was some \$187.1 billion as of Monday after markets closed, according to Bloomberg, just topping the \$185.3 billion fortune of

## EU narrows probe into Apple's curbs on apps

BRUSSELS: The EU on Tuesday narrowed its landmark antitrust case against Apple to focus on how the iPhone-maker prevents apps from giving users information about rival music subscription options. The European Union's executive arm, the European Commission, launched the original case against Apple over alleged anti-competitive behavior in 2021.

It had been based on a 2019 complaint brought by Sweden-based Spotify and others that accused Apple of making unfair use of the App Store to promote its own Apple Music. With the latest announcement, the Commission has withdrawn a charge against Apple over in-app purchase rules that force developers to use the company's own payment technology.

## Homelessness in England soars by 26%: Official

LONDON: The number of homeless people in England soared by more than a quarter last year on fallout from the cost-of-living crisis triggered by soaring inflation, official data showed Tuesday. A total 3,069 people were recorded as sleeping "rough" on a single night in autumn 2022, according to an annual count undertaken by local authorities and published by the government.

It marked the first increase since 2017 and a 26-percent jump from 2021, the department for housing said in a statement. The total is over three quarters greater than in 2010, when the first government homelessness census was launched.

There were fewer people sleeping on the streets in 2020 and 2021 thanks to temporary measures to house the homeless during the height of the COVID



## Business

# Twitter cuts more staff as Musk turmoil grows

## Racism row pushing advertisers further away from online platform

**SAN FRANCISCO:** Reports of more layoffs at Twitter landed on Monday as owner Elon Musk waded into a racism controversy that risked pushing advertisers further away from the struggling platform.

Musk called US media “racist” on Sunday after multiple American newspapers announced they would stop publishing a popular comic strip whose creator called Black people a hate group. Musk, chief of electric car company Tesla and Twitter, made his comment in regard to backlash to a rant by Scott Adams, creator of the long-running “Dilbert” comic strip—a satirical take on office life.

Adams, like Musk, has increasingly stoked controversy with his views on social issues. “For a ‘very’ long time, US media was racist against non-white people, now they’re racist against whites & Asians,” Musk wrote in a post on Twitter, where he has reinstated thousands of users banned for hate speech.

“Same thing happened with elite colleges & high schools in America. Maybe they can try not being racist.” Under Musk’s leadership, Tesla has been hit with multiple lawsuits alleging racism and researchers say hate speech has flourished at Twitter since his takeover.

“It’s as though Elon Musk is on a whirlwind tour to try to put Twitter out of business,” said independent tech analyst Rob Enderle of Enderle Group. “All he has to do is keep quiet, but he has to constantly spout stuff that alienates advertisers.”

### No ‘mistake’

The controversy came as the New York Times reported that Twitter had laid off at least 200

employees, or 10 percent of its already decimated workforce. The fresh round of layoffs included product managers, big data experts and engineers working on machine learning and platform reliability.

Twitter did not immediately confirm the reports when contacted by AFP. Esther Crawford, in charge of the social network’s product development, confirmed on Twitter that she was one of the employees let go. Crawford was among the few remaining Twitter executives from before its October acquisition by Musk who had not resigned or been fired. Head of the new Twitter Blue verification program, she had been a staunch supporter of Musk and the company, going so far as to retweet a photo of herself sleeping in a sleeping bag at her workplace. “The worst take you could have from watching me go all-in on Twitter 2.0 is that my optimism or hard work was a mistake,” she wrote on Twitter.

Another senior employee, Martijn de Kuiper, tweeted on Saturday that it “looks like I’m let go” after he could no longer access his emails from a French Alps ski holiday. Since Musk took ownership of Twitter, the platform has been riven by chaos, with mass layoffs, the return of thousands of banned accounts and major advertisers fleeing. The app has also seen a string of technical snafus, including an incident where tweets by Musk suddenly dominated the feeds of millions of users, even those not following the tycoon.

Meanwhile, Musk has encouraged users to communicate more freely on Twitter and said the site would impose the least amount of censorship allowed by law. “Right now, you would have to be an idiot to advertise on Twitter,” analyst Enderle said



**SAN FRANCISCO:** In this file photo taken on January 24, 2023, Tesla CEO Elon Musk leaves the Phillip Burton Federal Building in San Francisco, California. Reports of more layoffs at Twitter landed on February 27, 2023, as owner Elon Musk waded into a racism controversy that risked pushing advertisers further away from the struggling platform. —AFP

of the potential for marketing messages to appear near vile or harmful tweets. “There is just too much downside risk of damaging your brand and alienating your customers.”

With Twitter now a private company, internal data is not readily available, but analysis by firm Pathmatics by Sensor Tower found that more than half of Twitter’s top 1,000 advertisers in September were no longer spending on the plat-

form in January. Musk has tried to wean Twitter from advertising and promote subscriptions as a new way to bring in cash—an idea that Facebook-owner Meta is testing as well—but so far the results have been disappointing.

According to industry website The Information, around 180,000 people in the US were paying for Twitter as of mid-January, which counted for less than 0.2 percent of monthly active users. —AFP



**BEAUMONTOIS-EN-PERIGORD, France:** A French farmer stands beside a tractor powered by biomethane near the farm of the Guerin family, which produces biomethane, also known as renewable natural gas, in Beaumontois-en-Perigord, southwestern France. — AFP photos

## Cow manure fuels French tractors

**PARIS:** A French farmer steps away from his barn and fills up a tractor with fuel made from the manure of his cows, an attempt to put their climate-damaging methane to good use. Anchored by a stone farmhouse, much has changed on the Guerin family farm in the southern Dordogne region since its founding in 1926. The cow barn is largely automated, and features two huge, partially buried tanks covered with rounded domes that capture the methane emitted from the cow dung.

A dark green filling station with a pump and bank card payment terminal is connected to the facilities—but it isn’t diesel that comes out of the nozzle. Instead it is bioNGV—renewable natural gas for vehicles—produced on the farm, a substance that is essentially methane. Cleaner than diesel, it is also cheaper and now powers all the farm’s cars and a new tractor—the first to run on bioNGV that its manufacturer, the Italian-American firm New Holland, began selling last year.

The farm’s owner, Bertrand Guerin, hopes the truck he uses to collect milk will also soon be filling up at his site. The 59-year-old is also seeking to attract the visitors to the region from Britain and the Netherlands, where cars that run on natural gas are more common. The filling station is part of a new chain, Biogaz de France, created by an association of farmers producing methane in which Guerin serves as vice president.

### Mix and ferment

His concern is that market giants such as Engie



**BEAUMONTOIS-EN-PERIGORD:** French farmer Bertrand Guerin (center) uses a biomethane refueling station on the farm of the Guerin family.

and TotalEnergies, which are themselves looking to diversify away from fossil fuels, decide to move into and dominate the market for methane derived from agriculture. “Let the farmers develop this sector,” Guerin said. In the vast barn a Montbeliarde cow ambles over to the milking machine.

After giving up several liters of milk—all without any human intervention—she enjoys a spot of massage from a rotating brush. She calmly steps over the automatic scraper that removes the manure of the farm’s hundred cows from the barn without giving it a thought. The manure, urine and any hay on the floor is pumped into the domes before any methane is released.

Methane has a much greater climate-warming power than carbon dioxide, and accounts for a huge share of the climate impact from livestock farming. Methane, whether it comes from cow burps or their manure, accounts for almost half of French agriculture’s emissions. “On all livestock farms we have methane which escapes,” Guerin said. — AFP

as quickly as hoped have spooked traders this month as they bet on more US interest rate hikes, wiping out most of January’s equities rally.

“It hasn’t been the most thrilling start to the week but that didn’t stop investors from piling back into stocks on Monday in the hope that January data proves to be an anomaly,” said Oanda analyst Craig Erlam. “That enthusiasm didn’t flow through” to Twitter, he added.

Principal Asset Management analyst Seema Shah cautioned that it was “increasingly clear” that the Federal Reserve “is not yet finished with rate hikes”. “Relentless monetary tightening will eventually weigh on both the economy and earnings—a headwind that will, inevitably, renew and extend the equity market drawdown,” she cautioned. London stocks were weighed down Tuesday also by poor results from online supermarket Ocado.

Ocado shares slumped 7.6 percent to 577.20 pence in midday trade, topping London’s fallers after revealing it doubled losses last year as customers cut spending in response to rising prices. Elsewhere, Frankfurt and Paris edged higher in early afternoon deals. — AFP

## Saudi develops a global integrated logistics park

**RIYADH:** Saudi Arabia aims to develop a global integrated logistics park in the Al-Khumrah region, west of the Kingdom. The Saudi Ports Authority (Mawani) and Jeddah Chamber of Commerce signed an agreement to set up a \$267.6 million integrated logistics park at Al-Khumrah, south of Jeddah, to boost economic development, national investments, and partnership with the private sector.

Two weeks ago, Mawani and Maersk began construction on Saudi Arabia’s largest Integrated Logistics Park at Jeddah Islamic Port, with investments amounting to \$346.6 million, providing more than 2,500 direct and indirect job opportunities.

The new region directly achieves Mawani’s strategic objectives as the main link in the system, in line with the goals of the National Transport and Logistics Strategy, by establishing the Kingdom’s position as a global logistics hub. The park is also linked to the National Industrial Development and Logistics Program (NIDLP), and Al-Khumra is one of the pioneering areas targeted for development as a global logistics region. It aims to increase the optimal utilization of Mawani’s assets and achieve diversification by providing more than 10,000 new direct and indirect jobs in the logistics sector through business and investments.

The 3-km logistics park comprises three zones: shared warehouses, medium-sized storage yards and single warehouses, and large storage yards and on-demand warehouses. The various zones will meet the requirements of importers and exporters of stocking multipurpose cargo, chilled and frozen goods, food commodities, and fragile

goods. The park offers move-in-ready warehouses, storage yards, re-export zones, custom storage, logistics amenities, commercial units, residential units, staff accommodation, state-of-the-art infrastructure like roads and green spaces, and other essential services.

Meanwhile, Cruise Saudi, wholly owned by the Public Investment Fund (PIF), welcomed nearly 9,000 tourists from five European countries to celebrate Saudi Founding Day.

The 8,800 tourists visited key Saudi destinations through three cruise ship calls in Jeddah Islamic Port and King Abdulaziz Port in Dammam. Tourists were welcomed at the passengers’ terminal with Founding Day traditional activities, including cultural gifts, Saudi coffee, dates, and folklore dances, in collaboration with all relevant authorities and local partners.

The tourists, representing different nationalities, namely English, Spanish, Italian, French, and Russian, witnessed and engaged in the vibrant Saudi Founding Day festivities in their various expeditions in both Jeddah and the Eastern Province through Dammam Port.

The activities included a flight to visit Al-Ula, Saudi’s first UNESCO World Heritage site, an enjoyable walk at Jeddah’s Waterfront, and a journey back in time through centuries of culture and traditions by visiting the UNESCO World Heritage site of Jeddah Historical District, filled with vibrant artwork, exotic scents, traditional markets, and authentic Hijazi architecture unique to the region.

They could also tour Al-Ahsa Oasis, Saudi’s third UNESCO World Heritage site accessible via cruising, exploring the Qara Mountain, Princes’ School, and Al-Qaisariyah Souq. The ongoing cruising season of Cruise Saudi, from November 2022 until May 2023, is set to welcome over 75 scheduled calls by ships from several global cruise lines sailing the Red Sea and Arabian Gulf. — Agencies



**OSLO:** Sweden’s Greta Thunberg (rear, third right) and other young climate activists from the “Nature and Youth” and “Norwegian Samirs Riksförbund Nuorat” groups block the entrance of Norway’s Energy ministry as they protest against wind turbines built on land traditionally used to herd reindeer, in Oslo, on February 27, 2023. — AFP

## Thunberg, activists expand Norway wind farm protest

**OSLO:** Climate activist Greta Thunberg and dozens of indigenous Sami activists expanded a protest Tuesday against contested wind turbines in Norway by blocking entrances to several government ministries. They were challenging the turbines in the Fosen region of western Norway which were still in operation on reindeer herding land despite a landmark court ruling more than a year ago.

Climate activists expanded their protest blocking access to the energy ministry to include the finance

ministry. “Today, we are shutting down the state,” said Ella Marie Haetta Isaksen, a Sami musician and activist. An indigenous minority of around 100,000 people spread over the northern parts of Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia, the Sami have traditionally lived off reindeer herding and fishing.

On Tuesday morning, Norwegian police forcibly removed a dozen activists from one of the ministry’s entrances. The protests came over a year after Norway’s highest court unanimously ruled that the expropriation and operating permits for the construction of the 151 turbines were invalid.

However, they gave no guidance on what should be done with the turbines, which were already in operation. The Norwegian authorities have so far held off taking action and ordered further assessments, hoping to find a way that the turbines and Sami people can coexist. —AFP

## Stocks scatter as traders mull US rates outlook

**NEW YORK:** Stock markets diverged Tuesday as dealers mulled fears the Federal Reserve would push interest rates higher than expected and for longer as it battles stubbornly-high inflation. Oil prices rebounded, while the pound extended gains won on Brexit deal alterations aimed at smoothing some trading obstacles between the UK and the European Union.

Prime Minister Rishi Sunak and European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen on Monday agreed a sweeping overhaul of trade rules in Northern Ireland, which borders EU member Ireland. Asia and Europe struggled to track overnight advances on Wall Street ahead of further US economic data due this week. Recent figures showing a robust US jobs market and inflation not coming down



## Business

# Finland enters recession in Q4 while Swedish GDP dips

## French inflation picks up pace in February

**HELSINKI:** Finland entered a recession in the final quarter of 2022, while the Swedish economy shrank more than initially estimated, official statistics showed Tuesday. The 0.6-percent drop in Finnish GDP was the second consecutive quarter of negative growth-the technical definition of a recession.

Finland's economy has suffered from accelerating inflation-which reached 8.4 percent in January-as well as the economic consequences of the war in Ukraine, Statistics Finland said. Both consumers and businesses have less confidence in the future and these "weakened expectations began to be realized in the latter half of the year," the office said.

From October to December, the volume of Finnish exports decreased by 2.9 percent from the level in the previous quarter, while imports dipped by 2.4 percent. For the year as a whole, however, the Finnish economy grew last year by two percent compared to 2021.

While Sweden has not seen two consecutive declines in GDP, its economy shrank more than initially estimated in the last quarter of 2022, the national statistics office SCB said. Swedish GDP fell by 0.9 percent in the fourth quarter, more than the 0.6 percent published in preliminary estimates in early February. "The decline is being felt in many parts of the economy, with broad declines in business investment and household consumption," Jessica Engdahl from SCB said in a statement.

For the full year of 2022, the Swedish economy is set to grow by 2.4 percent, SCB said. The Swedish central bank expects GDP to fall by 1.1 percent this year, in line with the European average, according to its latest forecast published in early February. In Finland, the government and the central bank forecast a small decline in GDP in 2023, of around 0.2 percent, before growth returns in 2024 and 2025, according to their latest forecast in December.

Meanwhile, French inflation accelerated for the second month in a row in February after an end-of-year pause, the official statistics authority said Tuesday, reaching 6.2 percent year-on-year. Coming after a 6.0-percent annual increase last month, "this slight increase in inflation is down to acceleration of prices for food and services," Insee said in its preliminary report on the February data.

Insee found that the cost of food added 14.5 percent this month compared with a year before, up from 13.3 percent in January. Service prices also grew faster than in January, while manufactured goods picked up as well as winter sales ended.

Price growth for energy however slowed down, to 14 percent from 16.3, driven by falling oil-based products. France's inflation rates have reached levels not seen since the 1980s after consumer prices began surging last year.

Price growth nevertheless remains lower than many of its eurozone neighbors-in part thanks to government support. Measured



STOCKHOLM: Shoppers walk past a fashion store of H&M in Stockholm, Sweden. —AFP

using the Harmonized Index of Consumer Prices-the preferred measure of the European Central Bank, in charge of controlling euro-

zone price growth-France's February inflation rate was 7.2 percent year-on-year, 0.2 points faster than in January. —AFP

## UK-EU Brexit fix: What's at stake?

**LONDON:** An agreement between Britain and the European Union over post-Brexit trade rules in Northern Ireland appears imminent. Here are three areas at stake in the compromise:

Fixing the so-called Northern Ireland protocol is seen as crucial by political leaders in Belfast and London, as well as Brussels and even Washington. Brexit has stoked tensions within the UK province, which shares the only land border with the EU and has a troubled history.

The protocol aimed to prevent any customs procedures occurring on that border with Ireland, a flashpoint during three decades of conflict in Northern Ireland over British rule. It keeps the province in the EU's single market and customs union, requiring oversight from European courts and mandating checks on goods arriving from mainland Britain.

But pro-British unionists argue that weakens Northern Ireland's place within the UK, and as part of their vehement opposition to it, have collapsed devolved power-sharing. The Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) has vowed not to return until the protocol is scrapped or radically overhauled, leaving Northern Ireland without a devolved government for the past year. The political instability follows more than a week of rioting over the pact in 2021, largely in unionist areas, which injured 88 police officers.

There have also been several violent incidents in recent months blamed on dissident republicans seeking reunification with Ireland. In the latest last week, a senior off-duty officer was gunned down in what police said was a "terrorist-related" attack by splinter group, the New IRA.

The situation is unnerving locals and those further afield, with the United States-which played a key role in securing a 1998 peace deal-in particular urging a compromise over post-Brexit trade.

However, it is unclear if the DUP will accept the expected deal and agree to resume power-sharing. Pro-Irish Sinn Fein, which became the biggest party in the assembly after winning elections last May, cannot form an executive without DUP participation.

Arguments over the protocol have dogged relations between Britain and the EU since Brexit and are seen as hindering broader cooperation between the two sides. The UK government has introduced legislation which, if passed, would allow it to unilaterally override parts of the pact.

That has angered the EU and is seen as risking a wider trade war, which could prove damaging on either side of the Channel but particularly in recession-threatened Britain. Progress on issues such as London accessing billions of pounds of funding from the bloc's Horizon Europe research program has remained stalled while the protocol talks were ongoing. The UK hopes a deal could now unlock that much-needed money.

With the war in Ukraine renewing focus on defense and security cooperation within Europe, both sides are seen as keen to put the recent Brexit acrimony aside and collaborate more closely in these areas. The rising threat posed by China and shared challenges of climate change are also seen as ripe for closer ties if the protocol squabble can be resolved.

Britain has been wracked by political and economic instability since the 2016 EU referendum, with the country sharply divided for several years between "Leave" and "Remain" camps. Former prime minister Boris Johnson used fatigue at domestic political gridlock over Brexit to help win an 80-seat majority in December 2019, vowing to "get Brexit done". But rather than conclude matters around the UK's divorce, the deal he agreed-in particular the protocol-has left plenty of unfinished business for his eventual successor, Rishi Sunak. —AFP

## Gulf Bank: Mar 31 deadline to enter KD 1m Al-Danah draw

**KUWAIT:** Gulf Bank has announced that there is only one month left to take part in the semiannual Al-Danah millionaire draw - as the last day to deposit and qualify for KD 1 million prize is March 13, 2023. The semiannual draw is scheduled to take place on July 13, 2023, in the presence of representatives from both the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, and Ernst & Young.

In addition to the KD 1 million draw, Gulf Bank's Al-Danah account offers account holders multiple services and features that are designed to encourage and reward clients for saving, with periodic draws worth valuable prizes. Gulf Bank's Al-Danah account offers monthly opportunities to win KD 1,000 to ten lucky winners, in addition to quarterly draws with KD 100,000 prizes each, as well as a grand draw prize of KD 1,500,000.

To enter the upcoming draws, Gulf Bank customers can open an Al-Danah account at any time and to increase their chances of winning, account holders must either maintain the minimum deposit amount of KD 200 or increase their Al-Danah sav-

ings. The higher the balance in an account, the more chances are accumulated over time. Opening an Al-Danah account is also easier than ever, with customers able to open their accounts online through Gulf Bank's online and mobile banking services.

In a big ceremony that took place on January 19, following the premiere of the play "A Successful Deposit", Gulf Bank had announced the winner of the grand Al-Danah millionaire account draw prize of KD 1,500,000. The Al-Danah Millionaire account is one of the most rewarding and prestigious savings accounts in Kuwait, with periodic draws that have been creating millionaires since its launch in 1998. It was designed to encourage a culture of savings in society, and to reward customers for their commitment to saving on regular basis.

### Many advantages and a unique loyalty program

Among the many advantages enjoyed by Al-Danah millionaire account, is that it is the only account in Kuwait that provides its customers with loyalty chances. Loyalty chances are the total chances gained in the previous year, which are then transferred to the current year to reward customers for their loyalty to the Bank. Hence, all the winning chances for existing Al-Danah customers from the year 2022, in accordance with the terms and conditions, have been added into this year's draws.

The Al-Danah account provides a multitude of

valuable services to its customers, including access to an exclusive Al-Danah ATM card that is ideal for depositing money into their accounts at any time. Account holders can also calculate their chances of winning the monthly, quarterly, and annual draws using the Al-Danah Calculator, available on Gulf Bank's Online and Mobile Banking App.

### Participation conditions

Gulf Bank's Al-Danah account is open to both Kuwaiti and non-Kuwaiti residents in Kuwait. A minimum of KD 200 is required to open an account, and the same amount must be maintained for customers to be eligible for the upcoming Al-Danah draws. If the customer's account balance falls below KD 200 at any given time, a KD 2 monthly fee will be charged to the account, until the minimum balance is met. Customers who open an account and/or deposit more will enter the daily draw within two days.

Customers can visit one of Gulf Bank's branches or transfer directly through Gulf Bank's Online/Mobile Banking services. They can also direct their queries via WhatsApp on 1805805 for round-the-clock assistance from Gulf Bank representatives or call the Customer Contact Center on the same number. In addition, customers can visit the dedicated Al-Danah account website to learn more about the account and its winners.

## Al-Muzaini Exchange awarded 'Best Foreign Exchange Provider Kuwait'

**KUWAIT:** Al-Muzaini Exchange Company was honored with the award for the Best Foreign Exchange Provider Kuwait by Business Tabloid for the year 2022 for its distinguished services and advanced achievements in the field of foreign exchange as Al-Muzaini is considered the best exchange company in Kuwait and has proven its leadership in the field of transferring funds abroad and currency conversion. The company has more than 126 branches and more than 25 self-service machines all over Kuwait. It also has close relations with foreign banks and financial institutions and the company was able to build a solid base of clients, both individuals and companies, by providing high quality services, which led to gaining its customers' trust.

Commenting on winning this prestigious award, General Manager Hugh Fernandes said: "This award reflects the ability of Al-Muzaini Company to maintain its position as the number one exchange com-

pany in Kuwait since 1942, which represents recognition of the success of the quality of services that we provide to our customers." Fernandes added that innovation and development in the field of financial services is one of the most important pillars of the company's strategy in order to maintain our leading position in the field and stressed that Al-Muzaini always seeks to be proactive in developing services that meet the needs of customers.

Through this honor, Al-Muzaini Company was able to highlight its dedicated and tireless efforts in providing the latest, most distinguished and reliable services in the region. It is noteworthy that the award aims to shed light on the institution that provides the best service to its customers in terms of meeting their foreign currency needs, especially with the rapid technological developments and changes in economic conditions.

Al-Muzaini has recently launched a foreign currency delivery service, which enables the customer to request foreign currencies through the Al-Muzaini application, using the foreign currency delivery service easily, and the order is delivered to any place in Kuwait within a few hours. Al-Muzaini also provides facilities for foreign currency



exchange through self-service machines in Kuwait, which makes exchanging foreign currency banknotes an easy process with the possibility of exchanging foreign currencies by visiting any of Al-Muzaini branches.

## Higher prices for herbicides boost Bayer profits in 2022

**MUNICH:** German chemicals giant Bayer said Tuesday it quadrupled its net profit in 2022, in part thanks to higher prices and strong demand for its glyphosate-based weedkillers. The Leverkusen-based group warned however that it expected prices to come down again, leading to lower earnings in 2023. Net profit climbed to 4.15 billion euros (\$4.3 billion) in 2022, Bayer said in a statement, up from 1.0 billion a year earlier. Group sales rose by 8.7 percent to 50.7 billion euros, in line with analyst expectations.

"2022 was a very successful year for Bayer despite the challenging environment," said outgoing CEO Werner Baumann. The results were boosted by record sales in the company's agricultural division, up more than 15 percent year-on-year to 25 billion euros. Bayer said this was "in particular thanks to higher prices" for herbicides in all regions, at a time when "supply for glyphosate-based products was tight".

But with supply chain constraints easing, those prices are likely to fall this year, Bayer added.

Sales at the group's pharmaceuticals arm meanwhile grew just one percent in 2022. The unit faces pressure to launch new products to compensate for the expiration of patents on several blockbuster drugs in the coming years. The best-selling blood thinner Xarelto has already lost patent protection in Brazil. Eye medicine Eylea is also nearing patent expiration.

The group's consumer health division, which sells over-the-counter drugs, saw sales grow by 8.4 percent on the back of strong demand for allergy and cold medicine. Baumann said group sales were forecast to grow by a modest "two to three percent" in 2023 as the company braces for declining prices for herbicides as well as some pharma products. Bayer expects pre-tax earnings (EBITDA) of between 12.5 and 13.0 billion euros, down from 13.5 billion in 2022.

### New CEO

Baumann will be replaced from June by former Roche executive Bill Anderson, following calls from activist investors for a change in direction at the German conglomerate. The new investors, including Bluebird Capital Partners, want to go further still by splitting the company into an agricultural and a pharmaceutical group.

The proposal is controversial, with some experts saying a separate Bayer pharma company could become a takeover target. During his



LEVERKUSEN: In this file photo, the logo of German chemical giant Bayer is pictured during the company's annual results press conference on flags in Leverkusen, western Germany. —AFP

tenure, Baumann oversaw the troubled 2018 takeover of US firm Monsanto for \$63 billion. Bayer inherited Monsanto's legal woes around its Roundup weedkiller, which contains the active ingredient glyphosate.

Bayer has since faced a wave of lawsuits in the United States over claims that Roundup causes cancer, which the group denies. The litigation has cost Bayer billions of euros and badly hurt its share price. Shares in Bayer were trading nearly four percent lower by mid-day in Frankfurt, at 56.20 euros. —AFP



Lifestyle | Features

Taiwan cancels concert by Russian soprano Anna Netrebko

Taiwan's National Symphony Orchestra on Tuesday cancelled a concert featuring Russian superstar soprano Anna Netrebko, whose past support for President Vladimir Putin has seen her performances axed from global stages. The orchestra did not give a specific reason for the cancellation, but said it had held discussions with the singer's representatives due to "concerns in the society".

Netrebko withdrew from New York's Metropolitan Opera in March last year after the premier opera house announced it would not work with artists who supported Putin after he launched the war on Ukraine a month earlier. She subsequently condemned the war, but her upcoming concert in Taipei still drew criticism in Taiwan, where residents have voiced support for Ukraine.



Russian soprano Anna Netrebko

Taiwan lives under constant threat of an invasion by China, which claims the self-ruled island as part of its territory to be seized one day, by force if necessary. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has stoked fears that Beijing might move similarly towards the island. Taiwan's culture ministry indicated support for the orchestra's cancellation, telling semi-official Central News Agency "there is no room for vagueness about Taiwan's attitude on the war".—AFP

Eats, snorts and bereaves: Killer ‘Cocaine Bear’ grips Hollywood

If you go down to the movie theater Friday, you're sure of a big, angry, drug-fueled surprise. "Cocaine Bear," the new comedy-horror from Universal Pictures, hopes to shake up Hollywood with its very loosely based-on-a-true-story tale of a giant, wild bear who overdosed on narcotics. "We like to take insane ideas really seriously," joked co-producer Aditya Sood, at the film's Los Angeles premiere this week. "So 'Cocaine Bear'-it's hard to beat that one."

The movie is inspired by a real-life incident in 1985, when packages of cocaine were airdropped by smugglers in a southern US forest and later consumed by a 175-pound black bear. The real bear, quickly dubbed "Pablo Escobear" by the press, sadly died from an overdose-but the movie imagines what might have happened if it had instead developed a taste for cocaine and gone on a wild killing spree to procure more.

Writer Jimmy Warden took his idea to Phil Lord and Christopher Miller, the acclaimed producing duo behind hits like "The Lego Movie" and "Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse," who in turn took it to Universal. One of Hollywood's biggest and oldest studios, Universal is known for its broad, diverse slate, ranging from last Christmas's R-rated hit "Violent Night" to the upcoming, prestigious Christopher Nolan drama "Oppenheimer."

Two-time Palme winner Ruben Ostlund to head Cannes jury

Swedish director Ruben Ostlund, a two-time winner of the Palme d'Or, will be jury president at this year's Cannes Film Festival in May, organizers announced Tuesday. Ostlund, 48, won the festival's top prize last year for "Triangle of Sadness", which left audiences squirming over its biting exploration of class divisions on a cruise ship, and extended display of extreme sea sickness. The film, which stars Woody Harrelson as a drunken Marxist captain, has also earned him three nominations at next month's Oscars - for best picture, best director and best original screenplay.

Ostlund also won the Palme five years earlier for "The Square", with a similarly cringe-inducing look at the art world. In a statement, Ostlund said he was "happy, proud and humbled to be entrusted with the honor" of leading the jury, which comes exactly 50 years after fellow Swede Ingrid Bergman had the role. It is the third time a two-time Palme winner has led the jury in Cannes, fol-

lowing Francis Ford Coppola and Emir Kusturica, and the first time it has gone to someone the year after they won.

The selection of films is due to be announced next month, along with the other members of the jury. Ostlund has become known for his scathing insights into the embarrassing foibles of Western middle classes. He first gained international attention with 2014's "Force Majeure" about a father on a ski trip who rescues his mobile phone before his children during an avalanche.

It won the runner-up Jury Prize in the secondary Un Certain Regard section at Cannes. Three years later, he went straight to the top, winning the Palme d'Or for "The Square", still set in Sweden but featuring US actor Elisabeth Moss and Britain's Dominic West. After his victory last year, Ostlund said his goal with audiences was "to entertain them, to (make them) ask themselves questions, to go out after the screening and have something to talk about."— AFP



In this file photo Swedish film director Ruben Ostlund reacts on stage after he won the Palme d'Or for the film 'Triangle of Sadness'. — AFP

‘Best chef in the world’ Guy Savoy stripped of Michelin star

The Michelin Guide announced Monday the shock decision to knock a star off the Paris restaurant of Guy Savoy, frequently named the best chef in the world. The 69-year-old has held Michelin's top three-star status since 2002 for his Monnaie de Paris restaurant overlooking the Seine, which has a sister version in Caesars Palace, Las Vegas.

In November he was named best chef in the world for the sixth year running by La Liste, which aggregates thousands of reviews from around the world. Savoy's fame goes beyond the kitchen as an ambassador for the French "art de vivre"-he has pointedly rejected the fad for non-alcoholic drinks, for instance-and he lent his voice to the French version of Pixar film "Ratatouille".

But that has not stopped Michelin downgrading his establishment to two stars in its latest edition, published next Monday. It did the same for the upmarket seafood eatery of Christopher Coutanceau in La Rochelle.



In this file photo French chef Guy Savoy poses during a photo session in his restaurant in Paris. — AFP

"These are exceptional restaurants, so you can imagine that these decisions are carefully considered, supported by numerous visits from our inspectors throughout the year," Gwendal Poullennec, head of the guide, told AFP. The reasons are not made public, and communicated only to the chefs involved.

"For such important decisions, we include not just French inspectors but also some from other countries," said Poullennec. The move to downgrade restaurants is always hugely controversial, especially since the suicide 20 years ago of Bernard Loiseau-a close friend of Savoy-after his restaurant lost a star.

One chef, Marc Veyrat, unsuccessfully took the guide to court in 2019 after being stripped of a star, and said he never again wanted to see a Michelin inspector in his restaurants. Around 20 French restaurants have also been downgraded from two to one star in the latest edition of the guide. It had not downgraded anyone since 2019, conscious of the difficulties caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Those difficulties have continued with restaurants facing staffing shortages and, in the last year, soaring prices. But the guide says downgrades are now necessary if it is to stay relevant. "Yes, there are challenges, but they are challenges for everyone," said Poullennec. Created in 1900 by tyre manufacturers Andre and Edouard Michelin as a guide for motorists, it now has editions across Europe, Asia, North and South America. — AFP



US actress Margo Martindale arrives for Universal Pictures premiere of "Cocaine Bear".



US actor Jesse Tyler Ferguson arrives for Universal Pictures premiere of "Cocaine Bear".



Actress/director/producer Elizabeth Banks (right) and actress Keri Russell (left) arrive for Universal Pictures premiere of "Cocaine Bear" at Regal LA Live theatre in Los Angeles. — AFP photos

Analysts say the studio is banking on its provocative, unorthodox premise to stand out from the typical fare on offer at theaters, where superhero films reign supreme and comedies have tended to flop in recent years. "They're not going for the mainstream audiences-they are going for people who like edgy, out-there movies, who want to have some fun at the movie theatre," said Comscore analyst Paul Dergarabedian.

"Just on the face of it, when you look at the name of the movie... the tagline 'Get In Line'... it has a very independent, edgy spirit to it." The movie's trailer has been watched 16 million times on YouTube, and the bear protagonist has its own Twitter account with viral posts such as: "I'm the bear who ate cocaine. This is my story."

'Complete escape'

Unsurprisingly, the film has provoked some controversy. Marty Makary, a prominent US public health expert and author, said he was "disap-

pointed" to see Hollywood "once again sensationalize cocaine" by "portraying cocaine use as fun and funny." "We should all be offended by entertainment that makes light of drugs that are ripping apart our country," he said on Twitter. Elizabeth Banks, the "Hunger Games" actress who has previously gone behind the camera for "Pitch Perfect 2" and the 2019 "Charlie's Angels" reboot, directs the film.

She told AFP she had been inspired to make the film after reading the script at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, a time she described as "the most chaotic human history moment in hundreds of years." "I felt like there was no greater metaphor for the chaos that we were all feeling in 2020 than a bear high on cocaine." "It was so crazy and so fun and so wild that I just thought, why shouldn't we do this movie right now?" added star Keri Russell. "It's like, complete escape."— AFP

ELEGANCE AND SENSUALITY  
GRACE MILAN FASHION WEEK

Women's Fashion Week ended in Milan on Monday. Here are some of the trends that emerged for autumn-winter 2023-2024 — a return to elegance underscored by cut and quality, chic sensuality, and restrained classicism with a smattering of eccentric spice.

Elegant suits

Italian fashion houses have ditched sporty designs and streetwear for elegant, classically cut suits in refined fabrics. Trousers are long and shoe-covering. Oversized power-shoulder jackets have made way for classic cuts-waisted, belted or gathered at the back. Dolce & Gabbana showed suits with jackets that are cropped, matador style, or long but structured with wasp waists. Fendi opted for slimline jackets with a single row of buttons, discrete lapel collars and a

deconstructed men's waistcoat. Ferragamo was all cinched-waisted silhouettes, reminiscent of 1950s Hollywood divas. Max Mara's coats are gathered at the back, Tod's jackets waisted or belted, while Moschino went for suits with houndstooth and gold buttons a la Chanel.

Yeti coats

All-enveloping Yeti-style coats in furry or feathery textiles also took to the podium-a necessary addition to the skimpy underwear for those keen not to catch their deaths of cold. Gucci offered up Cruella Deville and blue fake fur. Roberto Cavalli's fake furs are an object lesson in art imitating nature. There were red feathers at Dolce & Gabbana, multicoloured plumes at Moschino. Max Mara's signature teddy bear coats are ultra snugly. MSGM varied the theme

in mauve, lemon and white boucle, with fringes or long fur. Ferragamo's iterations come in pearly grey or flaming red.

Red and black

While black was everywhere, there was still a thread of red to jive it up, in all shades from scarlet to bordeaux. Ferrari, which has launched a ready-to-wear collection, stuck to its iconic red but kept it discreet, in the lining of sombre-hued coats or in black-bordered swatches on dressing gown coats.

Dolce & Gabbana went for head-to-toe scarlet-sheer red tights, red patent sandals, red dresses, red bags, red gloves, red lipstick. Ferragamo added vermilion to minidresses and used it in splashes on black, on bakelite button to light up a black dress and in stitching on a black suit. MSGM selected raspberry red for a dress embracing the rounded

contours of a pregnant model. Prada's leather suit skirts are scarlet, while Fendi demonstrated yet again how well red marries with electric pink.

Uniforms and utility garments

Prada led the way with this trend, transforming the white of nurses' uniforms into long shirts with short trapes and the severe, old-fashioned capes of World War Two operators. The collection's officers' trousers, worn with cravats, are tight-fitted and its slimline slacks high-waisted to give them a feminine touch. There were aviators' jackets at Tod's and leather officers' belts with little pockets. Fendi's take on utility garments involved adding aprons to trousers or deconstructing blue workman's overalls. — AFP



US model Kendall Jenner presents a creation for Prada



Models present creations for Fendi. — AFP photos



## Lifestyle | Features



Contestants Jo Jin-hyeong (second left) and Jang Eun-sil (center) of Netflix reality competition series Physical: 100 attend a fan event in Seoul. — AFP photos



Contestants of Netflix reality competition series Physical: 100 attend a fan event in Seoul.



A man participates in an endurance game as he attends a fan event of Netflix reality competition series Physical: 100.

# ‘WHOLESOME’ SOUTH KOREAN REALITY TV PROVES A GLOBAL HIT

The challenge is straight from Greek mythology: hold a boulder aloft as long as possible. Korean car dealer Jo Jin-hyeong lasted over two hours, captivating global audiences in a reality show that could signal a new K-culture export success. After films such as Oscar-winning “Parasite” and TV series including Golden Globe-bedecked “Squid Game” helped popularize K-content overseas, industry figures have said South Korea’s high-quality reality shows may be next in line for domination.



Contestants of Netflix reality competition series Physical: 100 attend a fan event.

“Physical: 100”, the new Netflix show that gym buff Jo competed in, featured 100 men and women in prime physical condition, including South Korea’s ex-Olympians and former special forces soldiers, performing absurdly difficult challenges. It is the first unscripted series to top the streaming giant’s non-English chart, building on the popularity of “Singles Inferno”, a Korean dating show that became a sleeper hit worldwide last year.

Part of the charm of such shows is the contestants: Jo, who started hitting the gym as a weedy teenager and has never been a professional athlete, found he could hold his own against some of South Korea’s strongest people. The 41-year-old won one of the show’s most brutal contests, the Greek myth-inspired

“Punishment of Atlas” challenge, where contestants had to lift and hold a boulder that bodybuilder contestant Kim Kang-min estimated was at least 50 kilograms (110 pounds). Jo managed two hours and 14 minutes.

“When I lifted it I thought it was going to end in about 30 minutes,” he told AFP, saying he kept telling himself: “hang in there for just 10 more minutes, then 10 more minutes...” He came fourth overall in the show—an achievement he said was once unthinkable. “I started exercising in middle school because I was too puny. I wanted to be stronger,” he said, getting emotional when he thought of his younger self, who he thanked “for not giving up”.

## Wholesome and authentic

Over the last few years, South Korean content has taken the world by storm, with over 60 percent of Netflix viewers watching a show from the East Asian country in 2022, company data showed. Netflix, which spent more than 1 trillion won (\$759 million) developing Korean content from 2015 to 2021, said it was expanding its South Korean reality show output this year.

“Korean nonfiction shows didn’t travel before Netflix started taking them global,” said Don Kang, the company’s vice president of Korean content. “There are some things we did to make shows more easily understandable to the global audience,” he said, such as simplifying subtitles.

Car dealer Jo said he thought the show was proving a hit abroad due to the genuine sense of camaraderie in South Korea’s sports community. “We cheered each other on in every contest, comforted each other when someone lost,” he told AFP. The “relative wholesomeness” of South Korean reality shows is a core part of their appeal to foreign audiences, said Regina Kim, an entertainment writer and expert on K-content based in New York City.

“It’s like a breath of fresh air for American viewers who might be tired of watching reality stars hook up or fight all the time,” she told AFP. “There could definitely be more Korean reality shows that become popular overseas, including in the US,” she said, pointing to suc-

## Global fans

“Physical: 100” caused some controversy by pitting contestants of different genders against each other, prompting questions about whether it was fair. Ultimately, the top five contestants were men. But Jang Eun-sil, one of 23

ship she demonstrated on the show. Although she didn’t win, she said competing allowed her to bring her beloved sport to a broader audience.

“To be honest, wrestling is an unpopular sport in South Korea,” she said, adding it was a “huge honor” that, thanks to her,



Contestants of Netflix reality competition series Physical: 100 attend a fan event in Seoul.

cessful Korean reality formats that have become global franchises. “There are US remakes of Korean reality shows like ‘The Masked Singer’ and ‘I Can See Your Voice’ that have been super popular here,” she said, referring to the hit South Korean music shows later produced in English by Fox.

women competing in the show, told AFP she found the format “original and fresh”, and that it helped to motivate her throughout the challenges.

“I just gave my best every moment, so I have no regrets and never thought it was unfair,” said the 32-year-old wrestler, who was widely praised for the leader-

more South Koreans had become aware that women wrestlers existed. She’s also seen an influx of global fans flooding her social media accounts. “I now plan to add English subtitles (to my YouTube channel),” she said. — AFP

## Elation and fear: Everest pioneer recounts historic climb

He’s over 80, but the Austrian climber Peter Habeler—one half of the duo that was first to scale Everest without supplemental oxygen—is still fantastically fit and scaling mountain peaks, which he calls his “fountain of youth”. Many thought it impossible when he and Reinhold Messner of Italy—both Tyroleans—set out to conquer the world’s highest peak in 1978 without additional oxygen. When they reached the summit, “I was beside myself,” the mountaineer told AFP at his home in western Austria, feeling “happiness and also sadness and fear”. “The higher we got, the slower our steps became. But the more certain we became that we would reach the summit,” he said.

As soon as he and Messner—who is from just over the Zillertal Alps in Italy—took their “obligatory” summit photo, “I thought, ‘How do I get down?’” Climbers who go above 8,000 meters enter what

is considered the “death zone” due to the lack of sufficient oxygen to sustain human life for long periods. At 8,848 meters (29,032 feet), Everest was deep in that danger area. Habeler still recalls his “jitters”, wanting to return safely to his family. “We didn’t know what would happen with the brain, what would happen with the muscles,” he said.

Since then, numerous climbers have summited the world’s highest mountain without carrying oxygen, even though more than 300 have lost their lives on the Nepalese peak since 1950. Habeler, who has lost none of his wiry, electric energy, said he feels “privileged” to have been able to go up the Himalayan giant before it was overrun by climbing tourism.

## Peaks are ‘friends’

Even into his ninth decade, he continues to climb, describing mountains as “friends” which have brought him experiences as precious as “splinters of diamonds”. Climate change, however, is posing “a huge problem”, he said, including in his native Alps, with entire routes expected to disappear as warmer temperatures melt permafrost, raising the risk of rock falls. A champion of sustainable tourism, Habeler started out as a mountain guide, and one of his sons still runs the ski school he set up in his native Mayrhofen. The veteran insisted that he was “never a mountain collector” chasing records, but instead wanted to “open the door” for himself and others—to show that it could be done.

## I’m a minimalist

A few years after Everest, and spending time in his native valley, “the eight-thousander fever got me a bit again,” and he did several more big climbs—though never again with Messner. Messner, now 78, went on to become the first to climb all the world’s 14 highest peaks, the so-

called eight-thousanders. “You could do anything with Reinhold,” said Habeler, thanking Messner for helping him to overcome his jitters on Everest. For his part, Messner wrote a tribute to the

avalanche in Canada’s Banff National Park still brings tears to Habeler’s eyes. The accident made Habeler more cautious, though he still continues to climb mountains with as little material and out-



Peter Habeler poses for a picture at his home.— AFP photos

“ingenious” Austrian in Habeler’s latest book. “I experienced it as a sure instinct. He can simply climb mountains: in any terrain, at any height, under any circumstances,” Messner wrote.

Indeed, at the ripe old age of 74, Habeler set another record, becoming the oldest mountaineer to climb the north face of the Eiger in Switzerland with his former student David Lama, then aged 26. Lama’s death two years later in an

side help as possible. “I am a minimalist. When I’m mountaineering, I always have the minimum. I don’t want to have too much in my backpack,” he said. While Habeler’s parents were not mountaineers, he credited the mountain guides and others “who bring out the best in you” for helping him get to the roof of the world. — AFP

## Japan inn sorry for changing communal bathwater twice a year

The head of an upscale Japanese inn apologized on Tuesday for only changing the water in its hot-spring bath every six months, allowing bacteria to breed 3,700 times over the standard limit. Local ordinances stipulate a weekly replacement of the water in which guests traditionally soak naked together after taking showers, with men and women bathing separately. Makoto Yamada, president of the company that operates the nearly 160-year-old inn, said the facility had neglected to keep the water hygienic by using enough chlorine. He “didn’t like the smell” of the chemical, he said at a press conference.

“It was a selfish reason,” Yamada added, describing the lapse as a “wrongdoing that completely disregarded the health of our customers”. The lax measures at Daimaru Besso inn—where Japan’s emperor Hirohito once stayed—began around December 2019. Since then, staff at the facility in the southwestern Fukuoka region grew even more complacent as the number of guests dropped during the pandemic, Yamada said.

Even before the scandal made headlines, there had been red flags. An inspection last year by authorities found double the permissible amount of legionella bacteria in the inn’s bathwater. At the time, the inn “falsified documents to claim that the chlorine had been properly added,” Yamada admitted. A subsequent probe by health authorities detected a whopping 3,700 times the standard limit of legionella. The germ reportedly caused an individual who had visited multiple hotels including Daimaru Besso to fall sick. Legionella bacteria can cause lung infections.—AFP



Peter Habeler, Austrian extreme mountaineer and mountain guide who, together with Reinhold Messner, scaled Mount Everest in 1978 for the first time without supplemental oxygen, shows Zillertal mountain at his home in Mayrhofen im Zillertal, Austria.



# ‘Rest your best!’: Pokemon Sleep game coming this year

Pokemon's last major smartphone hit, "Pokemon Go", had fans on the move hunting the lovable characters, but its next release will focus on a more relaxing activity: sleep. The Pokemon Company has revealed it will release "Pokemon Sleep" across most of the world in summer 2023, four years after it first announced plans for the game.

"Turn your sleep into entertainment," the company said in a press release late Monday. Trailers for the new game suggest it combines a smartphone sleep

tracker with gaming. "Your adventure takes place on a small island where you'll carry out research on how Pokemon sleep. You'll work with a large Snorlax who lives on the island and Neroli, a professor who's studying Pokemon sleep styles."

"The longer you sleep, the higher your score in the morning, and the more Pokemon you'll see appear around Snorlax," the company said, urging players to "rest your very best!" Fans will also be able to buy a "Pokemon GO Plus +"-a

Pokeball-shaped gadget that users can place by their pillow, with Pikachu's voice offering "cute prompts when it's time to wake up or go to sleep".

The company's "Pokemon Go" game, which saw players track down the "pocket monsters" using their phones, was an international phenomenon. The free game uses satellite locations, graphics and camera capabilities to overlay cartoon characters on real-world settings, challenging players to capture and train the creatures.

But players were blamed for traffic accidents and other violations as they roamed the streets, buried in their phones. Pokemon has been a global hit since it was launched as a role-playing game in 1996 for Nintendo's Game Boy console. The franchise, whose slogan is "Gotta Catch 'Em All", also includes movies and a hugely popular animated TV show. — AFP



## ‘Ant-Man’ stumbles but still tops N America box office

Disney's "Ant-Man and the Wasp: Quantumania" fell off a cliff but managed to land on all six feet this weekend, topping the North American box office with an estimated \$32.2 million in ticket sales. Industry analyst Exhibitor Relations said the latest Marvel superhero film was down a sharp 70 percent from its strong opening weekend but still topped



In this file photo US actor Paul Rudd and his wife, writer Julie Yaeger, arrive for the World Premiere of Marvel's "Ant-Man and the Wasp: Quantumania" at the Regency Village Theatre in Los Angeles, California. — AFP

the field. Paul Rudd plays the size-changing title ant and alter ego Scott Lang, while Evangeline Lilly is heiress Hope van Dyne and the Wasp.

In second, at \$23.1 million, was a new horror comedy with a different sort of star: a drug-crazed bear. Universal's "Cocaine Bear" is based, if loosely, on the true story of a black bear that finds a large cache of lost cocaine in the Tennessee woods-and eats it. Chaos, gore and wackiness ensue in a movie that also stars Keri Russell of "Felicity" fame. Exhibitor Relations playfully calls the film "Jaws in the Woods on Crack."

In third place was another new release, Lionsgate's "Jesus Revolution," at \$15.5 million. Joel Courtney and Kelsey Grammer star in the story of the Jesus movement in California in the 1960s. "This is a very good opening for a Christian drama," said David A. Gross of Franchise Entertainment Research. "Critics are generally lukewarm about these movies, but when they work, audiences are enthusiastic, and 'Jesus Revolution' is working."

Fourth spot went to 20th Century's blockbuster "Avatar: The Way of Water," adding a respectable \$4.7 million in its 11th week to a global total now over \$2.26 billion. And in fifth, also showing durability in its 10th week in theaters, was Universal's family-oriented "Puss in Boots: The Last Wish," at \$4.1 million. Rounding out the top 10 were:

"Magic Mike's Last Dance" (\$3 million)  
 "Knock at the Cabin" (\$1.9 million)  
 "80 for Brady" (\$1.8 million)  
 "Missing" (\$1 million)  
 "A Man Called Otto" (\$850,000)—AFP

## Fourth season of ‘Succession’ to be last for megahit show

Fans of HBO juggernaut "Succession" will soon bid a final farewell to the family business drama which will end after its upcoming fourth season, according to the show's creator. "I've never thought this could go on forever," Jesse Armstrong told The

New Yorker magazine in an interview published. "The end has always been kind of present in my mind," added the show's screenwriter and producer.

"I got together with a few of my fellow writers before we started the writing of Season 4, in about November, December, 2021, and I sort of said, 'Look, I think this maybe should be it. But what do you think?'" Armstrong recalled. Riding high on both popular success and critical acclaim, "Succession," produced by HBO, is a dark and gritty chronicle of patriarch Logan Roy and his children, a powerful family tearing itself apart to gain

control of a media conglomerate. The first episode aired in 2018.

The show has won a slew of awards, including Outstanding Drama Series at the 2022 Emmy Awards, television's equivalent of the Oscars. The series is fiction, but was inspired by media moguls Summer Redstone and Rupert Murdoch. Murdoch's News Corp is one of the world's largest media empires and includes the Fox network as well as The Times and The Sun newspapers in Britain. — AFP



# ‘A Thousand Splendid Suns’ opera spotlights Afghan women

Minutes before Afghan filmmaker Roya Sadat entered her first Seattle Opera production meeting for an adaptation of the novel "A Thousand Splendid Suns," she learned that her hometown of Herat had fallen to the Taliban. The celebrated director's first foray into opera started out as a look back at a painful chapter in her country's history through Khaled Hosseini's story of two women whose lives are marked by the Taliban's brutal and repressive rule in the 1990s.

But the surge back to power of the hard-line Islamists in August 2021 brought the story roaring back to the present for Afghan women. And it added new weight to the production, as the Taliban again placed an ever-tightening vice on women's liberties, despite vowing a departure from their infamous first reign. For Sadat, the Taliban return changed both her world and the one she wanted to create on stage.

"When I started I thought, let's try to have more symbolic elements and move between surreal expression and realities," she told AFP ahead of the opera's premiere on February 25 in Seattle, Washington. "It wasn't just something that changed emotionally for me. There was a change to what I was thinking for the structure of the opera and I decided I should use more realism and bring out the reality of the situation," in everything from colors, to costumes and set design.

It's a reality Sadat is intimately familiar with, having pushed boundaries to create under the first Taliban rule when arts

were harshly controlled, before becoming one of the country's first women filmmakers after their ouster in 2001. Her most successful films-including "A Letter to the President" and "Three Dots"-focus on women and their perseverance in the face of extreme odds.

It's a theme that courses through "A Thousand Splendid Suns" for Sadat, who said the opera is a narrative of the resilience of women, who are "always the



Performers Maureen McKay (left) and Karin Mushegain during a dress rehearsal for "A Thousand Splendid Suns" in the Marion Oliver McCaw Hall at Seattle Center.

first to suffer" from conflict and political violence. "Right now the only strong dissidence is from women in Afghanistan," she said. "Even if the Taliban tortures them, even if they ban them... they have their voices." With the opera, "We're asking to please listen to this voice."

### Weaving musical traditions

Voices take center stage in more ways than one in this iteration of Hosseini's 2007

bestseller. Composer Sheila Silver was first drawn to the story as rich material for opera nearly 15 years ago, because of the characters of Laila and Mariam and the bond they form as their lives are upended by familial and political turmoil.

"Opera is larger than life and they're larger than life," Silver said. "Their resilience and their love for one another sustains them and they survive through the power of their love." Drawing inspira-



Performers Maureen McKay (right) and Karin Mushegain during a dress rehearsal for "A Thousand Splendid Suns" in the Marion Oliver McCaw Hall.

tion from the story's setting as she went to work with librettist Stephen Kitsakos, she wove Western operatic tradition with music at home in Afghanistan.

Silver studied Hindustani music traditions-which she described as "the classical music of Afghanistan" associated with the country since the 16th century-and incorporated its melodic and harmonic structures. The opera opens with one of the tradition's foundational drones under intertwined cello

and bansuri-an ancient bamboo flute and one of the instruments added to the orchestra that create a sense of place even without sets or costumes.

### ‘Intersection of cultures’

Creating an experience true to the story's context was a priority, with Afghan cultural consultant Humaira Ghilzai brought on board in 2016. In a medium where performers' voices are paramount, she consulted on elements including body language so as not to have "a bunch of people in Afghan dress walking and talking like Westerners" and to help draw the audience into "a different world."

Along with contributing to a slate of Seattle Opera events highlighting Afghan art and culture alongside the production, she has worked to bring the Afghan community into what-as it was for her-may be the unfamiliar territory of the opera house and encourage further "intersection of cultures." She said with Sadat's involvement, the work of imbuing the production with authenticity was shared.

But with a heavy sense of responsibility, she wanted to draw attention to the "heartbreaking" situation in the country her family fled in 1979 during yet another violent chapter in its uneasy history, she added. "I feel the weight of the world on my shoulders with this production because the world has turned its gaze away from Afghanistan." — AFP

## Uzbek singer handed stage ban after ‘immoral’ video

Authoritarian Uzbekistan has temporarily barred a popular singer from performing after videos circulated online of her singing in high-heeled boots, nude leggings and an oversized shirt. Artists in the Central Asian Republic of Uzbekistan can only perform with a license from the government, which is accused of trampling basic freedoms despite also undertaking some reforms.

"The singer Kaniza has recently published videos on social media in which she behaves obscenely, contradicting behavioral ethics, promoting immoral ideas and offending viewers," said Uzbekconcert, the government institution responsible for licensing, said Monday.

Kaniza's agent told AFP the singer had "simply sang two songs at a restaurant opening." Her suspension is a "one-month warning so she has time to reflect and draw the right conclusions," the culture ministry told AFP.

"If in one month she says she has understood and promises not to post such videos again, then her (license) application will be considered," it added. President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, who came to power in 2016, has promoted reforms unthinkable under his predecessor, an infamous rights abuser in the ex-Soviet region. His government however remains authoritarian and restricts freedom of expression. — AFP



Uzbek singer Kaniza



Performers Maureen McKay (left), John Moore and Karin Mushegain during a dress rehearsal for 'A Thousand Splendid Suns' in the Marion Oliver McCaw Hall at Seattle Center in Seattle, Washington. — AFP photos



Performers Maureen McKay (left), John Moore and Karin Mushegain during a dress rehearsal for "A Thousand Splendid Suns" in the Marion Oliver McCaw Hall at Seattle Center in Seattle.



## Sports

# Wounded Barca face Madrid in Copa semi at critical moment

**BARCELONA:** A wounded Barcelona face Real Madrid in the Copa del Rey semifinal first leg on Thursday hunting for a Clasico win to make coach Xavi Hernandez's gamble at a critical moment of the season pay off. Despite missing injured duo Pedri and Ousmane Dembele, Xavi rested other important players in the 1-0 defeat by Almeria on Sunday, prioritizing the Clasico cup clash and spurning the chance to stretch their league lead to 10 points on Madrid.

Adding to Barca's unease ahead of the Clasico, top scorer Robert Lewandowski has suffered a hamstring strain and is set to miss out, although Ansu Fati is poised to return. Delivering what Xavi described as the "worst performance of the season" at Almeria, Barcelona suffered their second consecutive defeat after they were knocked out of the Europa League by Manchester United at Old Trafford.

A third defeat at the Santiago Bernabeu could send the team into a spiral, with their seven-point La Liga lead strong but not unassailable. The Catalans visit the Santiago Bernabeu a day after Osasuna welcome Athletic Bilbao to El Sadar in the

other Copa del Rey semifinal first leg. "We have to change our mindset if we want to win the league and the cup," warned Xavi after El Bilal Toure's goal inflicted only their second Liga defeat of the season.

"We have no excuse, we didn't show the desire to play, intensity, that is what worries me the most. You can slip up, but you have to show passion and desire and in the first half we lacked that." Anything other than a good result in the capital will raise further questions about the coach's decision to rest Ronald Araujo, Jules Kounde, Raphinha and Alejandro Balde against Almeria.

## Instant results

Xavi has said if his team win La Liga but not the Copa del Rey it would still count as a good season, with the Spanish Super Cup already in the bag. However, losing this double-header against their arch-rivals would allow further doubts about the project to creep in, fueling Xavi's detractors after spending big last summer. Barcelona brought in several players, including striker Robert Lewandowski from Bayern Munich as well as Kounde and Raphinha, and the outlay they made

and the financial manoeuvring they did to get the transfers through demands instant results.

Real Madrid saw their disappointing derby draw against Atletico on Saturday transformed into a better result by Barcelona's stumble. With one foot in the Champions League quarterfinals after an emphatic 5-2 win over Liverpool at Anfield, Carlo Ancelotti's side can turn their attention to getting revenge after their Spanish Super Cup humbling.

Barcelona ran out emphatic 3-1 winners in Saudi Arabia in January as they won the first trophy of the Xavi era. On that day, the Catalans, desperate to end their silverware drought, seemed far more up for the fight than Madrid but the Copa del Rey is a different story. The last time Madrid lifted the trophy was a 3-1 win over Barcelona in the 2014 final at Mestalla, when Gareth Bale scored a magnificent solo goal.

Los Blancos are without injured trio David Alaba, Rodrygo and Ferland Mendy. "Now the Cup is the most important thing because it's the next game and we are very close to a title," said Carlo Ancelotti after Madrid's derby draw. "We're 270 minutes away from winning a title." — AFP

## Ko not 'cocky' as she chases Singapore title

**SINGAPORE:** Lydia Ko said Tuesday she cannot afford to become "too cocky" even though she is world number one and among the favorites at this week's Women's World Championship in Singapore. The 25-year-old New Zealander, who got married in December, enjoyed a blissful start to the year when she won in Saudi Arabia a fortnight ago. But while she has been in red-hot form and is the reigning LPGA player of the year, the Women's World Championship has so far eluded her.

"You can never get too cocky about what ranked player you are because it's so tight at the top," Ko said ahead of the tournament, which starts on Thursday at Sentosa Golf Club. "Everyone is playing really well and you can't say, 'I'm going to be there forever,'" said the Kiwi, who finished tied sixth last week in Thailand.

"When I was younger, I felt like being number one meant that I had to be winning or contending week in, week out, but that's not necessarily true," she added. "Everybody is going to have their ups and downs but you have to manage that by making sure those lows aren't super-low and you don't get too high from the highs."

Ko's best result in Singapore came in the 2015 edition where she finished second, and knows acing her short game will be the formula to success this week. "Putting well is obviously going to be important here, especially when you have those birdie opportunities or when you need to make those ups-and-downs," she said. "So having to put together four rounds where there's going to be a little bit more consistency in putting is going to be a big key for me," she said.

Like Ko, Brooke Henderson has also got her campaign off to a winning start, triumphing at the LPGA's season-opening event in Orlando, Florida. The Canadian has now captured at least one title in eight of her nine seasons on the LPGA and is looking forward to continuing that winning run in Singapore. "It was a dream start. I'm trying to make small improvements all the time and trying to get a little bit better," said the 25-year-old.

Also among the contenders will be South Korea's Ko Jin-young. She hopes her mental training will pay off as she seeks to become the first player to successfully defend her title at the tournament. "I know there's going to be pressure but I don't want to think too much about it," she said. "I just need to meditate as that has worked well for me in the past and has allowed me to focus more on my swing and golf shots." — AFP

## Kuwaiti shooters shine at Amir Grand Prix

By Abdellatif Sharaa

**KUWAIT:** Wednesday marks the end of HH the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah Annual Shooting Grand Prix in which 40 countries participated, while the Asian Shotgun Championship 2023 was held alongside it. The final day of the competitions will see the mixed trap event as well as juniors singles. Kuwait shooters had a firm grip on top places as the trap team of Nasser Al-Miqled, Talal Al-Rashidi and Khalid Al-Mudhaf won gold, followed by Lebanon and Kazakhstan.

Meanwhile, President of Kuwait and Arab Shooting Federations and Secretary General of the Asian Shooting Confederation Duaij Al-Otaibi said he is happy with HH the Amir Grand Prix reaching its last day with great success, as expressed by the international shooting community. "We were keen on organizing important activities such as specialized courses for referees and those in the technical department to improve their abilities for this and future tournaments."

"There were also important meetings on the sidelines of HH the Amir Grand Prix, such as the meeting of the Asian Confederation board and the Arab Federation in the presence of ISSF president and secretary general," Otaibi said. He said HH the Amir tournament is highly important as it has



Duaij Al-Otaibi



important elements and particular events for shooting, besides the participation of many shooters representing many countries.

Otaibi said achievements of Kuwait Shooting Federation and the success of HH the Amir Grand Prix could not take place without the major support of HH the Amir, HH the Crown Prince and HH the Prime Minister, which removed all obstacles and provided a good environment to achieve successes for Kuwait. He said the board of directors prepared a comprehensive plan for local tournaments, besides



plans to prepare shooters for foreign events, including training camps before official tournaments so Kuwaiti shooters will be highly ready for the tournaments that qualify for the 2024 Paris Olympics.

Otaibi said Kuwait will participate in the Azerbaijan tournament, followed by South Korea, then a tournament in Kuwait, as all those tournaments are qualifiers for the 2024 Paris Olympics. He wished Kuwait shooters success in these tournaments and "to win first place as we are accustomed to, go to the Olympics and compete for more medals".



## More wins for Kuwait athletes

**KUWAIT:** Kuwait national disabled team continued their winning ways at the 14th Fazza Para Athletics Championship being held in Dubai, with 700 athletes representing 66 countries. Paralympic champion Faisal Suroor broke the Asian and world record in the shotput and won the first gold medal for Kuwait, followed by Malak Hadi Al-Enezi winning second place in the women's shotput in the F54 category. Runner Abdallah Al-Enezi won silver medal in the 100m wheelchair race in the F53 category in the second day of competition.



Shafi Al-Hajeri



onship. President of Kuwait Disabled Sports Club Shafi Al-Hajeri lauded the support of the government through the youth ministry and Public Authority for Sport, which enabled Kuwait athletes to break the world and Asian record in the UAE.

## Japan's biggest ad agency indicted in Olympic scandal

**TOKYO:** Japan's biggest advertising agency and five other companies were indicted on Tuesday for allegedly violating an anti-monopoly law, in a corruption scandal over bid-rigging during the Tokyo Olympics. The indictment followed the arrest this month of a senior Tokyo 2020 organizing committee official and three others who were accused of rigging a string of Olympic Games-related tenders.

Dentsu Group president Hiroshi Igarashi has admitted to Tokyo prosecutors that his firm is liable, according to local media. Prosecutors unveiled charges against the company as well as leading advertising firms Hakuhodo and Tokyu Agency, and events operators Same Two, Cerespo and Fuji Creative Corp. Seven company executives and officials were also named in the indictment, which did not specify who worked for which firm.

The firms and executives "colluded to restrict each other's business activity with regard to the awarding of contracts" for Olympic test events, a statement from prosecutors said. Their actions "went against the public interest and effectively restricted competition". Dentsu Group said it took "the situation very seriously, and we sincerely apologize for the trouble" caused by the scandal.

The company added that it has established an external committee of experts to probe the case and requested salary returns from five of its current and former officials. Tokyo prosecutors arrested former 2020 Games official Yasuo Mori this month for allegedly violating the anti-monopoly law, along with three other businessmen.

The four allegedly rigged a string of open competitive bids and limited tender contracts for Olympic events, reportedly worth a total of 40 billion yen (\$300 million). Prosecutors are also investigating claims a former Tokyo 2020 board member took money from companies in exchange for Olympic partnership deals. Haruyuki Takahashi was arrested for allegedly pocketing bribes that reportedly amounted to nearly 200 million yen.

Companies implicated in the bribery cases include a suit retailer, a publishing firm and a merchandise company licensed to sell soft toys of the Games' mascots. The former president of ADK Holdings, Japan's third-largest advertising



TOKYO: The headquarters of Japan's biggest advertising agency Dentsu is seen on Feb 28, 2023. — AFP

agency, has pleaded guilty to offering Takahashi at least 14 million yen. In December, a former executive from major clothing company Aoki Holdings also admitted in court that he offered money to secure sponsorship rights, according to national broadcaster NHK.

The cases have cast a shadow over Sapporo's bid for the 2030 Winter Games, prompting the northern city to halt its campaign and organize a nationwide poll to assess support. "It would be truly regrettable if there were unfair activities in bidding linked to the Tokyo Games," top government spokesman Hirokazu Matsuno told reporters on Tuesday as reports of the new indictments emerged.

Questions had been raised over impropriety around the Tokyo Games even before the Covid-disrupted event took place in summer 2021. The former head of Japan's Olympic Committee, Tsunekazu Takeda, stepped down in 2019 after French prosecutors launched an investigation into corruption allegations linked to Tokyo's Olympic bid. — AFP



Sports

# New Zealand beat England by one run in ‘crazy’ second Test

**WELLINGTON:** New Zealand beat England by just one run in a second-Test thriller on Tuesday to draw the series in the most dramatic fashion in Wellington. The hosts made a slice of history in becoming only the fourth team in 146 years of Test cricket to win after being asked to follow on. Neil Wagner took the decisive wicket of James Anderson when New Zealand wicketkeeper Tom Blundell pulled off a diving catch at the Basin Reserve to seal a memorable, nail-biting triumph.

The home side had fought back to set an attacking England a target of 258 runs to win, but the visitors were all out for 256 as a gripping two-Test series finished 1-1. It was only the second time in Test cricket that a side has won by one run, matching the West Indies team who beat Australia by the same wafer-thin margin at Adelaide in 1993.

“Amazing achievement, hats off to everyone, everyone kept fighting,” said left-arm pace bowler Wagner, who finished with 4-62 including the key wickets of Ben Stokes and Joe Root. England skipper Stokes was disappointed to have lost, as the attacking “Bazball” cricket under head coach Brendon McCullum hit the buffers, but happy to have played his part in the drama.

“That game is what Test cricket is about - the emotions we were going through and the Kiwi boys as well,” said Stokes, who was born in New Zealand. “Everyone’s got their money’s worth today. “What a game. After I got out, I went to watch and what unfolded was massively up and down,” added Stokes. “It was crazy.”

It was the first time New Zealand have won after

being forced to follow on. England had managed it twice, against Australia in 1894 and 1981, while India beat Australia in 2001. A topsy-turvy Test match had swung back to New Zealand during the final two days. Captain Tim Southee praised the visitors’ contribution to a pulsating Test match that will live long in the memory.

“What England have done for Test cricket over the last year or so has been amazing,” said Southee, after New Zealand halted England’s run of six straight wins. “I don’t know why there always seems to be such close encounters between us, but these games bring out the best in both sides. We just never gave up, it was about hanging in there and trusting we would do it.”

### Knockout blow

England won the first Test by a resounding 267 runs and were on course for another victory after declaring their first innings on 435-8, then bowling out New Zealand for 209. But former skipper Kane Williamson dragged New Zealand back into the Test with a superb 132 in their second-innings 483, leaving England 258 to win. Having resumed at 48-1, England wobbled on Tuesday morning by losing four wickets for just 27 runs before Root steadied the ship by steering his team to 168-5 at lunch.

As England chipped away at their target, Root’s vital partnership with Stokes ended on 121 when England’s captain was caught at square leg off Wagner. The pressure on England intensified dramatically after Root went for 95, also to a Wagner short ball, with England still 57 runs short.



WELLINGTON: New Zealand’s Neil Wagner celebrates taking the final wicket of England’s James Anderson to win during day five of the second cricket test match between New Zealand and England at the Basin Reserve on Feb 28, 2023. — AFP

Wicketkeeper Ben Foakes kept England in the fight with a cavalier 35, surviving a dropped catch by Michael Bracewell before clubbing three fours to the boundary.

But just when it looked like Foakes might bring England heroically home, he was caught by key man Wagner in the deep off Southee. That left last pair Anderson and Jack Leach still needing seven runs for victory - and the tension went up another notch.

## Golden wicket: Laborer’s daughter scores payday

**FIROZABAD, India:** Cricketer Sonam Yadav could not afford sports shoes when she was younger but now the 15-year-old is set to play in India’s Women’s Premier League and says the money will transform life for her family. Sonam was the youngest player drafted for the inaugural edition of the Twenty20 tournament when she joined Mumbai Indians at auction and took home a cheque for one million rupees (\$12,000).

News of her signing sparked celebrations in her village, where blackouts are a daily occurrence and piped water only a recent arrival. Her contract is dwarfed by the standards of the men’s Indian Premier League, but it is 100 times her father’s monthly wage from shift work at a glass factory. “It’s very difficult to make ends meet with my father’s salary. We have to face a lot of money problems,” Sonam, the youngest of six siblings, told AFP.

“I have many dreams, I want to take my family out for dinner and give a big car to my father,” the left-arm spinner said.

Her family home on the outskirts of Firozabad, an hour’s drive from the Taj Mahal, sits next to a fetid open sewage drain and battles occasional intrusions from rodents and stray dogs. The ramshackle home has peeling plaster and constant power cuts, but it is lit up by a row of glittering gold trophies and mementoes won by the household’s star bowler, who started playing cricket aged 10.

“We could not afford expensive cricket gear. She did not even have proper shoes and had to borrow a pair before going to trials for a tournament,” said father Mukesh Kumar, 53. “I started working double shifts and my son dropped out of school and took up a private job to support her dreams.” The WPL begins on Saturday and could transform women’s cricket globally in the same way that the lucrative IPL did the men’s game.

The Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) auctioned off franchise rights for five inaugural teams in January for \$572.5 million, while media rights for the first five seasons were sold for \$116.7 million. The two deals made it the second most valuable women’s sporting league after the WNBA bas-

inning games took an average of 3 hours 3 minutes and 44 seconds to complete. But in the opening days of the 2023 pre-season, games have routinely finished well under the three-hour mark, averaging at around 2hrs 37mins.

“I think it definitely speeds up the game,” New York Yankees slugger Aaron Judge said. “I think this pitch clock is going to be a good thing for everybody.” There have been hiccups, however. Baseball purists grimaced at the ending to Saturday’s game between Atlanta and Boston when Braves slugger Cal Conley was called out for failing to get into the batter’s box on time in the bottom of the ninth inning with bases loaded. The anti-climactic ending - akin to a tennis match being settled by a foot fault - drew boos from fans and general bafflement from Conley, who initially thought he had drawn a walk to win the game until being informed of his strikeout.

Yet, so far, the innovation has been broadly welcomed by coaches and players across baseball as the sport bids to arrest long-term declines in attendance and television viewership. “The whole purpose is to speed up the game and it was good,” said Boston manager Alex Cora, who believes players will swiftly adapt to the faster pace. “As players, you’re going to get used to it. I watched a lot of bullpen in the first few weeks with the clock. At the beginning, it felt rushed but then after that, I was like, ‘It’s okay.’



FIROZABAD, India: In this photograph taken on Feb 20, 2023, Indian cricketer Sonam Yadav bowls during net practice at a ground in Uttar Pradesh state. — AFP

ketball in the United States, according to media reports. “The WPL will change the face of women’s cricket drastically,” said Sonam’s local coach Ravi Yadav, no relation to the young athlete. “The BCCI has also introduced equal pay for men and women so it will also have a huge impact.” — AFP



Cal Conley

Minnesota Twins manager Rocco Baldelli also signaled his approval. “The goal is to keep things flowing,” Baldelli said. “Just keep the game going. I think it’s probably the pace and the time you’re hoping for when you’re playing a Major League Baseball game.” San Diego Padres shortstop Manny Machado meanwhile - who became the first player in pre-season to incur a strike for a pitch clock violation - believes the new rules could lead to “crazy sh\*t”. “You’re going to have some players who are going to be freakin’ angry and pissed off,” Machado USA Today. — AFP

## Baseball changes divide opinion as season looms

**LOS ANGELES:** After nearly 150 years of ploughing its own unapologetically somnolent furrow in an increasingly frenetic US sporting landscape, baseball is finally hitting the accelerator. But new rules designed to make “America’s pastime” a faster, more fan-friendly spectacle have divided opinion after being rolled out in pre-season games which got under way last week. The biggest talking point has been the introduction of a pitch clock that sets fixed time limits for pitchers and batters.

Under the new rules, pitchers have 15 seconds to begin their throwing motion if the bases are empty, and 20 seconds when runners are on base. Pitchers will be charged a ball if they are unable to get a pitch off before the clock runs out. Batters, meanwhile, must be ready to receive a pitch by the time eight seconds are left on the countdown clock. Failure to do so will incur an automatic strike.

The pitch clock is aimed at reducing the length of a typical MLB game - and early signs are that the innovation is working. In the 2022 season, nine-

# Classifieds

### Change of Name

**I have changed my name from (old name) SHAB HABIB IRFAN HABIB AMAR to (new name) IRFAN HABIB AMAR BIN-SHAHAB. (C#3174) — 1-03-2023**

**I, Ajith,** holder of Indian Passport number Z3828192 having permanent address Vazhappilly House, behind Holy Cross Church, Arthar P.O, Thrissur - Dist, Kerala, India - 680521, residing in Kuwait at present hereby declare that henceforth my name will be read as Ajith (Given name) and Vazhappilly Ittoop (Surname). (C#3173) 24-02-2023

**I, Syed Mahaboob** Basha holder of Indian Passport number T2417304 S/o Shaik Khasimsab resident of Dno. 2-361, Sastrinagar Akkayapalli, Kadapa City YSR. District. Have changed my name as Given Name MAHABOOB BASHA surname Shaik. (C#3169)

**I, Rayamarakkar** Salma Muhamed Hashim father of Abdul Razak rayamarakkar Muhamed hashim Passport no. T4486251 Rayamarakkar house Elavally, Kakkassery po, Thrissur, pin:680511, Kerala have changed my son’s name to Salmaan hashim Abdul Razak for all purposes. (C#3170)

**I, AMATULLAH** holder of Passport No. M5451208 do hereby change my name to AMATULLAH (as Given name) BURHAN VOHRA (as Surname) for all purposes. I will henceforth be known in the name AMATULLAH BURHAN VOHRA and I also undertake to carry out this name change in all my documents. (C#3171)

**I, BABUDIN,** holder of Indian Passport No. P3551947 having permanent address Uttar Pradesh, India, pin code - 245206 residing in Kuwait at present hereby declare that henceforth my name will be read as under Given name BABUDIN and Surname SHABUDIN. (C#3172) - 23-02-2023

### Hospitals & Clinics

Sabah Hospital	24812000	Khaldiya	24848075
Amiri Hospital	22450005	Kaifan	24849807
Maternity Hospital	24843100	Shamiya	24848913
Mubarak Al-Kabir Hospital	25312700	Shuwaikh	24814507
Chest Hospital	24849400	Abdullah Salem	22549134
Farwaniya Hospital	24892010	Nuzha	22526804
Adan Hospital	23940620	Industrial Shuwaikh	24814764
Ibn Sina Hospital	24840300	Qadsiya	22515088
Al-Razi Hospital	24846000	Dasmah	22532265
Physiotherapy Hospital	24874330/9	Bneid Al-Gar	22531908

### Clinics

Kaizen center	25716707	Mirqab	22456536
Rawda	22517733	Sharq	22465401
Adaliya	22517144	Salmiya	25746401

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## Messi wins FIFA Best prize

Putellas retains women's award • Scaloni claims men's coach honor

**PARIS:** Lionel Messi won The Best FIFA men's player prize for 2022 on Monday on the back of his World Cup triumph with Argentina and Spain's Alexia Putellas retained the women's award at a ceremony in Paris. Messi beat his Paris Saint-Germain teammate, and World Cup final rival, Kylian Mbappe to the men's gong with Ballon d'Or winner Karim Benzema having been the other contender to claim the prize.

It is the second time that Messi has won the honor inaugurated by FIFA in 2016 after football's world governing body split from Ballon d'Or organizers France Football. The award, which is voted for by national team coaches and captains, journalists and also fans, recognizes a year in which the former Barcelona star crowned his glorious career by leading Argentina to victory at the World Cup.

Messi scored twice in an epic final in Doha as Argentina beat France on penalties despite Mbappe netting a hat-trick for Les Bleus in a remarkable 3-3 draw. He also claimed the Golden Ball for the best player at the tournament, although Mbappe was the top scorer with eight goals, one more than Messi. "This year was just mad for me, to be able to achieve my dream that I had fought so hard for. In the end I got it and it was the most beautiful thing that has happened in my career," Messi said of his World Cup win as he collected his award.

"It is a dream for every footballer but something that very few can make come true," added Messi,



**PARIS:** (Left) Spain and Barcelona forward Alexia Putellas poses on stage after receiving the Best FIFA Women's Player award during the Best FIFA Football Awards 2022 ceremony on Feb 27, 2023. (Right), Argentina and Paris Saint-Germain forward Lionel Messi poses on stage after receiving the Best FIFA Men's Player award — AFP

who was sat in the Paris theatre in between Mbappe and his wife Antonella Rocuzzo. He took the prize just 24 hours after combining with Mbappe to lead PSG to a 3-0 win against Marseille in Ligue 1.

**Putellas pips Mead and Morgan**

The 35-year-old, a seven-time Ballon d'Or winner, succeeds Polish star Robert Lewandowski on the FIFA honors list, while Putellas retained the women's prize despite spending the second half of last year out injured. The 29-year-old beat England's European Championship-winning striker Beth Mead and United States star Alex Morgan to add the FIFA crown to the Ballon d'Or, which she has also won two years running.

Putellas is currently recovering from a serious knee injury suffered last July which ruled her out of the Euro in England with Spain. Prior to that she had scored 11 goals on Barcelona's run to the Champions League final, which they lost to Lyon. Putellas has previously said she hopes to return from injury in time to play again this season, but it remains to be seen whether she will feature for Spain at the World Cup in Australia and New Zealand in July and August. Argentina's World Cup win in Qatar was also recognized as Lionel Scaloni claimed the men's coach's honor and Emiliano Martinez was named the best male goalkeeper.

Meanwhile, England's European Championship victory helped their Dutch manager Sarina Wiegman win the prize for best women's coach, while Mary Earps was named the women's goalkeeper of the year. Polish amputee player Marcin Oleksy took the Puskas Award for best goal, named after Hungary great Ferenc Puskas. — AFP



Philippe Diallo

## Scandal-hit French football chief Noel Le Graet quits

**PARIS:** French Football Federation president Noel Le Graet resigned on Tuesday following accusations of sexual and psychological harassment, bringing to an end more than a decade in charge. The 81-year-old's time at the helm had coincided with the revival of the French men's national team as a force, with their victory at the 2018 World Cup followed by a run to last year's final in Qatar, which they lost on penalties to Argentina.

But Le Graet's resignation comes 13 days after the publication of a damning report into management practices at the Paris-based FFF which had been commissioned by the sports ministry. "Considering his conduct towards women, his public comments and the governance failings of the FFF, Mr Le Graet no longer has the necessary legitimacy to run and represent French football," the report said.

Le Graet had already agreed in January to step down pending the outcome of the audit, which concluded that he should not return to the role because his "behavioral excesses are incompatible with the carrying out of his functions". It was revealed last month that Le Graet, whose mandate was due to run until 2024, was being investigated for sexual and psychological harassment following allegations made by a female football agent, Sonia Souid.

He was already under pressure after making dismissive remarks in a radio interview in early January about France legend Zinedine Zidane's potential interest in coaching the national team. That was after long-serving coach Didier Deschamps had his contract extended until 2026. "I wouldn't even have taken his call," Le Graet told RMC radio when asked about Zidane.

Le Graet announced his departure at an executive committee meeting of the federation on Tuesday, with members of the committee telling



Noel Le Graet

AFP that Philippe Diallo would remain in the role of interim president. Diallo, a federation vice-president who had initially moved up to fill in for Le Graet when he first stepped aside in January, is expected to remain in charge at least until a permanent successor is voted for in June.

"The FFF recognizes the remarkable sporting and economic performance of Noel Le Graet," the federation said in a statement, before hitting out at the authors of the audit. "The report does not mention any systematic failing," it added. "The FFF nevertheless notes that the report is based less on objective facts than on comments that have sometimes led to exaggerated bad-mouthing of the body."

**Pressure on women's coach Diacre**

Le Graet, a former socialist mayor of the small Brittany town of Guingamp, oversaw the rise of the local football team that became a top-flight force during his time as club president. He then became president of the FFF in 2011, at a time when the French game was reeling in the wake of the national team's disastrous showing at the 2010 World Cup, when the players went on strike. Le Graet oversaw the appointment of Deschamps as coach in 2012, and France reached the Euro 2016 final as hosts before their back-to-back World Cup final appearances.

He also oversaw France's successful hosting of the 2019 Women's World Cup. "He is a great leader. This federation is one of the best-run federations," insisted the veteran Lyon president Jean-Michel Aulas, an influential member of the FFF executive committee, on Tuesday. However, Le Graet's departure also comes amid a deepening crisis within the French women's team.

Several star players, led by captain Wendie Renard, last week announced that they would no longer play for France under the current set-up, with just five months to go until the Women's World Cup in Australia and New Zealand. That has placed the future of coach Corinne Diacre, who had the backing of Le Graet, in serious doubt. Speaking on Tuesday, the federation's interim chief Diallo said a decision on Diacre's future would be taken "very soon". — AFP

## Randle, Quickley shine as Knicks sink Celtics

**NEW YORK:** Julius Randle and Immanuel Quickley combined for 46 points as the in-form New York Knicks upset the Boston Celtics 109-94 in the NBA on Monday. Randle and Quickley finished with 23 points each as the impressive Knicks extended their winning streak to six games at Madison Square Garden. The New York victory bumped the Celtics out of the top spot in the Eastern Conference standings, lifting the Milwaukee Bucks into first place.

Six Knicks players finished the game in double figures after New York took control of the contest early on to lead almost from start to finish. The Knicks moved up to fifth place in the East after the win. New York pulled 20 points clear midway through the second quarter and retained a comfortable advantage throughout. A miserable night for Boston ended with Jayson Tatum being ejected with four minutes remaining for a second technical foul. Tatum - the hero of Boston's pulsating victory over Philadelphia on Saturday - endured a frustrating outing, making just six-of-18 from the field. Malcolm Brogdon led the Boston scorers with 22 points.

Elsewhere on Monday, Jimmy Butler scored 23 points as the Miami Heat sent the Philadelphia 76ers spinning to a second straight defeat with a 101-99 victory on the road. A superb defensive effort from Miami saw the potent Sixers offense - which has been averaging 114 points this season - restricted to fewer than 100 points.

At the other end, Butler provided offensive guile and came up clutch in the final two minutes, giving

Miami a 100-99 lead with a remarkable driving reverse layup shortly before drawing a foul and two free throws that put the Heat into a winning position. In addition to his 23 points, Butler finished with 11 rebounds, nine assists and four steals.

**Taking a stand**

Four other Miami players finished in double figures, with Gabe Vincent adding 14 points while Max Strus and Bam Adebayo chipped in with 13 points apiece. The victory was a welcome return to form for Miami, who were beaten by the lowly Charlotte Hornets on Saturday after being routed by Milwaukee on Friday. "Things don't always go your way in this league and it's about how you respond collectively when you have some disappointments," Heat coach Erik Spoelstra said. "We were all disappointed about the last two games, and at some point you just have to take a stand, figure it out and gut out a win."

The Sixers meanwhile were left rueing a lackluster first-half display that left them chasing the game throughout. Joel Embiid led the Philadelphia scorers with 27 points while Tyrese Maxey scored 23 and James Harden 20. Sixers coach Doc Rivers said his team had shown signs of weariness after roller coaster games against Boston and Memphis last week. "We were flat in the first half," Rivers said. "We had two games with a lot of energy and you could just feel it really. The way we looked at it early on was 'Let's just try and get to half-time.' I just thought we were really sloppy tonight, sluggish. It happens. But in those close games, you've still got to find a way to win. And tonight we didn't."

Miami improved to 33-29 with the victory while the third-placed Sixers slipped to 39-21. In other games on Monday, the Charlotte Hornets defeated the Detroit Pistons 117-106 in a battle of the bottom two clubs in the Eastern Conference. Charlotte's victory was overshadowed by an injury to star guard LaMelo Ball, who left the game after suffering a fractured right ankle. — AFP



**NEW YORK:** Julius Randle of the New York Knicks goes to the basket as Mike Muscala of the Boston Celtics at Madison Square Garden on Feb 27, 2023. — AFP