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Saudi deposits \$5 billion in Turkey's central bank

A major boost as quake-hit Turkey grapples with inflation



KAHRAMANMARAS: A photo shows debris from collapsed buildings dumped on top of a hill in Kahramanmaras, one month after a massive earthquake struck south-east Turkey. — AFP

RIYADH: Saudi Arabia said Monday it was depositing \$5 billion in Turkey's central bank, a potentially major boost as the country grapples with inflation and damage from last month's earthquake ahead of presidential elections. Ahmed Al Khateeb, the Saudi tourism minister and board chairman of the Saudi Fund for Development, signed an agreement with Turkish central bank governor Sahap Kavcioglu "to make a significant \$5 billion deposit", the Saudi government said in a statement.

"This deposit is a testament to the close cooperation and historical ties that exist between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Republic of Turkey and its brotherly people," the statement said. The decision, which will shore up Turkey's foreign reserves and help it combat inflation, was made on the order of King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, it said.

Turkey was already suffering from skyrocketing inflation and a weakening currency before last month's massive 7.8-magnitude earthquake that rocked huge swathes of the country and parts of Syria, killing more than 50,000 people. With elec-

tions just a few months away, Erdogan must now absorb economic damage estimated at more than \$34 billion by the World Bank.

On Friday, United Arab Emirates and Turkey signed a free trade agreement – the latest step in improving ties long strained by regional disputes. For Turkey, the pact comes ahead of elections on May 14 as President Recep Tayyip Erdogan sticks with contested economic policies that have deterred many foreign investors. "The signing of the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement with my friend @RTERdogan strengthens the partnership between the UAE & Turkey," Emirati President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan said on Twitter.

The pact "builds on our longstanding ties to deliver further growth, opportunity & stability for our countries & our people," he said. Turkish Trade Minister Mehmet Mus attended the signing in Abu Dhabi during a video summit between Sheikh Mohammed and Erdogan. The pact aims to eliminate or reduce customs duties on 82 percent of goods and products, accounting for more than

Continued on Page 6

News in brief

MoI probes suspect's escape

KUWAIT: Interior Minister Sheikh Talal Al-Khaled Al-Sabah gave orders to launch an immediate investigation into an incident in which a person suspected of attempting to smuggle 18 kg of hashish through the Salmi land border has reportedly managed to escape before arrest. The minister questioned the circumstances which led to the suspect's escape. — Agencies

Police bust hacking network

FRANKFURT: German authorities said Monday they have uncovered a hacking network with links to Russia that targeted over 600 victims, including the British healthcare system, in an operation conducted with the FBI and Europe's policing agency. After a lengthy investigation, officials raided properties last week in Germany and Ukraine, according to police in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia, which led the probe. The network is accused of "digital blackmail" and "computer sabotage", and allegedly targeted its victims with ransomware, extorting large sums from them. — AFP

Iran sentences six men

TEHRAN: Iran has sentenced to death six men over attacks carried out by an ethnic Arab "terrorist group" active in a province bordering Iraq, the judiciary said Monday. A court "has sentenced six members of the Harakat Al-Nidal terrorist group to death" in Ahvaz, capital of southwestern Khuzestan province, said the judiciary's Mizan Online website. They were found guilty of "armed operations" between 2017 and 2019 that killed four people, including a soldier and two members of the Basij paramilitary force, the report said. — AFP

Prices of desert truffles drops

By Faten Omar

KUWAIT: Prices of the desert truffles (Faqa) dropped in the Kuwaiti market recently following a spurt in supply of the edible spores in the market. Kuwait Times spoke with several vendors selling imported desert truffles from several countries. "There is a decrease in the prices of truffles due to the large quantities that existed this year. At the beginning of the season, the price per kilo of Syrian truffle ranged between KD 30 to 50.

Now the prices dropped to KD 10 and KD 12 per kilo and the large-sized ones, which are called "sheikh," range from KD 15 to 12 and medium sizes around KD 8," Hussein Abu Adel, told Kuwait Times.

He added that the Syrian truffles are the ones available in the market. Suppliers are waiting for the Iranian truffles soon to be imported. Kazem Bu Jawad said that some types of Syrian truffle reach KD 5 and 6 per kilo.

Small numbers of Saudi and Iraqi truffles are also in the market. Prices of Iraqi truffles start from KD 9-10 for the medium size, said Bu Jawad. "There is a lot of demand for truffles now, and there will be a further decrease in prices in the upcoming days. — (See Page 2)



KUWAIT: People buy desert truffles, a delicacy unique to arid environments, at a market in Kuwait City of March 6, 2023. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

Municipal Council approves project

KUWAIT: The Municipal Council on Monday approved a request from the Public Institution for Social Security in Kuwait to allocate a piece of land for the development of an educational and entertainment project in Al-Jahra Governorate, reported KUNA. The educational and entertainment project was initially meant to be executed by the Public Authority for Agricultural Affairs and Fish Resources, according

to media reports, but ownership has now been transferred to the social security institution.

Early reports regarding the project said it was planned to become a landmark destination in Kuwait and the region. It would include a zoo, cultural and educational centers, restaurants, a resort, indoor and outdoor waterparks and areas for horseback riding and golf court.

The ambitious project, which has been reportedly under discussion for nearly 12 years, was expected to attract foreign investors and create many jobs for Kuwaitis. — (See Page 2)

MoE bans fast food in Kuwait's schools

KUWAIT: The Undersecretary for Educational Development and Activities Dr Ghanem Al-Sulaimani on Monday issued a public memo banning fast food products in schools. "This is for the interest of our students, and in order to implement the regulation for a healthy feeding standards set by the General Food Authority. Fast food products contain large amounts of fats and high calories - devoid of nutrients, which causes serious health damages," the memo stated.

The memo has been circulated to school principals

and kindergartens. Al-Sulaimani stressed the need to adhere to the rules and to prevent delivery companies from entering inside the schools. "We should avoid giving unhealthy food to students," Al-Sulaimani stressed in the memo.

In another development, Juveniles Care of the Social Affairs Ministry in coordination with the Social and Psychological Services Department at the Education Ministry organized awareness lectures for students on the dangers of drugs and the effects on the youths. Acting Assistant Undersecretary for Social Care, Director of Juveniles Care Department Dr Jassim Al-Kandary said it is necessary to make students aware of the dangers of illicit drugs and how to avoid them.

"We organized awareness lectures at various stages

in cooperation with Social and Psychological Services Department. Three education zones were designated for a start. The department formed a team of experts who explained the dangers of drugs to students in various stages," he said.

Meanwhile, Kuwait's Education Minister Hamad Al-Adwani said on Monday that students who possess "exceptional" prowess will be given full and unconditional support, underlining such backing as crucial to mold them into future leaders. The minister's remarks came as he praised Kuwaiti student Ibrahim Al-Soula, who recently won top honors in a pan-Arab contest. The student said he is proud to have garnered such an accolade, emphasizing that his desire is to represent his country on a bigger stage. — Agencies



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Supply glut sends truffle prices plunging in Kuwait

Prices range from KD 8 to 15, depending on country of origin and size



KUWAIT: Vendors display truffles at a market in Kuwait. — Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat



Customers at a truffle market as prices of the commodity tumbled following oversupply.



A customer checks truffles at a shop.



People visit a truffle market.



A vendor displays his merchandise.

By Faten Omar

KUWAIT: Prices of the desert truffles (Faqa) dropped in the Kuwaiti market recently following a spurt in supply of the edible spores in the market. Kuwait Times spoke with several vendors selling imported desert truffles from several countries.

“There is a decrease in the prices of truffles due to the large quantities that existed this year. At the beginning of the season, the price per kilo of Syrian truffle ranged between KD 30 to 50. Now the prices dropped to KD 10 and KD 12 per kilo and the large-sized ones, which are called “sheikh,” range from KD 15 to 12 and

medium sizes around KD 8,” Hussein Abu Adel, told Kuwait Times.

He added that the Syrian truffles are the ones available in the market. Suppliers are waiting for the Iranian truffles soon to be imported.

Kazem Bu Jawad said that some types of Syrian truffle reach KD 5 and 6 per kilo.

Small numbers of Saudi and Iraqi truffles are also in the market. Prices of Iraqi truffles start from KD 9-10 for the medium size, said Bu Jawad.

“There is a lot of demand for truffles now, and there will be a further decrease in prices in the upcoming days. The Saudi truffles used to be KD 50 and KD 60 per kilo. Luckily, this year is good

and the rain is heavy in Syria and Iraq.”

For Abdullah Abu Youssef, Iraqi truffles are selling out, leaving small amounts available in the market. The Syrian truffles, on the other hand, are selling at KD 20 per four-kilo basket. The season will continue until the end of April.

Gamal Al-Masry, another truffle vendor, said: “We started late this season. Usually, the season starts in December but we started in February. There are different types of truffles “Zubaidi”, “Shahba” and “Ekhlasi”. The prices differ depending on the size and from which country it was imported.”

Mohsen Al-Anan said: “I’ve just received fresh

Syrian truffles, and we are currently sorting them and removing impurities and dirt, then arranging them according to size. A single piece weighs more than a quarter of a kilo. The Syrian and Iraqi prices range from KD 13 to 15, while the Kuwaiti and Saudi ones are over KD 30 up to 100.”

The fungus, which can be white, brown, or black, grows close to tree roots following rain and soil irrigation. Its size ranges from three to 40 centimeters per plant and its weight ranges from 20 to 400 grams. There are four well-known varieties of truffles. “Al-Zubaidi”, which has a pleasant scent and is mostly white, is known for its large size and high nutritional value.



KUWAIT: Dr Sultan Al-Daihani and other officials during the inauguration of the Ishbiliya Public Library. — KUNA photos

NCCAL celebrates Ishbiliya Public Library opening

KUWAIT: Assistant Secretary-General of the National Council for Culture, Arts and Letters (NCCAL) Dr Sultan Al-Daihani inaugurated Monday, the Ishbiliya Public Library, in conjunction with the celebration of the 100th anniversary of the establishment of Al-Ahliya Library.

The library includes more than 15,000 different books and a special exhibition of rare manuscripts from the National Library of Kuwait. The event is part of the 28th Quran Cultural Festival, which was launched Sunday.

Founded by Sheikh Yusuf bin Issa Al-Qinai, Abdul Hamid Al-Sanea and Sultan Al-Kulaib, Al-Ahliya Library was first opened on Jan 23, 1923.

The library’s name has been changed to the “National Library of Kuwait” since 1994.

Daihani, who is also the Director General of the National Library of Kuwait, stressed the importance of Al-Ahliya Library as the starting point for the National Library of Kuwait and all public libraries in the country. He said an exhibition showcasing the history of public libraries in Kuwait will be held on the sidelines of the event, with the participation of a group of historians.

The event, said Daihani, is meant to highlight the importance of public libraries in the country as cultural centers that provide information and where people can attend lectures, seminars and cultural exhibitions that enrich their knowledge. — KUNA

Municipal Council decides fate of two entertainment projects

KUWAIT: The Municipal Council approved Monday a request from the Public Institution for Social Security in Kuwait to allocate a piece of land for the development of an educational and entertainment project in Al-Jahra Governorate, reported KUNA.

The educational and entertainment project was initially meant to be executed by the Public Authority for Agricultural Affairs and Fish Resources, according to media reports. But ownership has now been transferred to the social security institution. Early reports regarding the project said it was planned to become a landmark destination in Kuwait and the region. It would include a zoo, cultural and educational centers, restaurants, a resort, indoor and outdoor waterparks and areas for horseback riding and playing golf. The ambitious project, which has been reportedly under discussion for nearly 12 years, was expected to attract foreign investors and create many jobs for Kuwaitis.

Also on Monday, the council rejected the “Al-Jahra Corniche” development project, which would have designated more than 5 million square meters of land between the Doha western



station and Al-Jahra Nature Reserve for investment by the private sector.

The council’s technical committee had recommended the approval of the project at its meeting in early February. The project would have included governmental and residential buildings and amenities, including a tram station. There were also plans to build resorts, a soccer academy and a center for environmental research in the area. The project has been in discussion since at least July 2022 when the Council of Ministers recommended that relevant government bodies begin researching the project.

Kuwait Municipality had stipulated - as a condition for the final approval of the project - that the council would work with the finance ministry to remove the chalets already present in the area. —Agencies

Store selling product with Zionist entity name closed

KUWAIT: The commerce and industry ministry has issued a violation report against a store in the Avenues Mall that had displayed a product that contained the Zionist entity’s name.

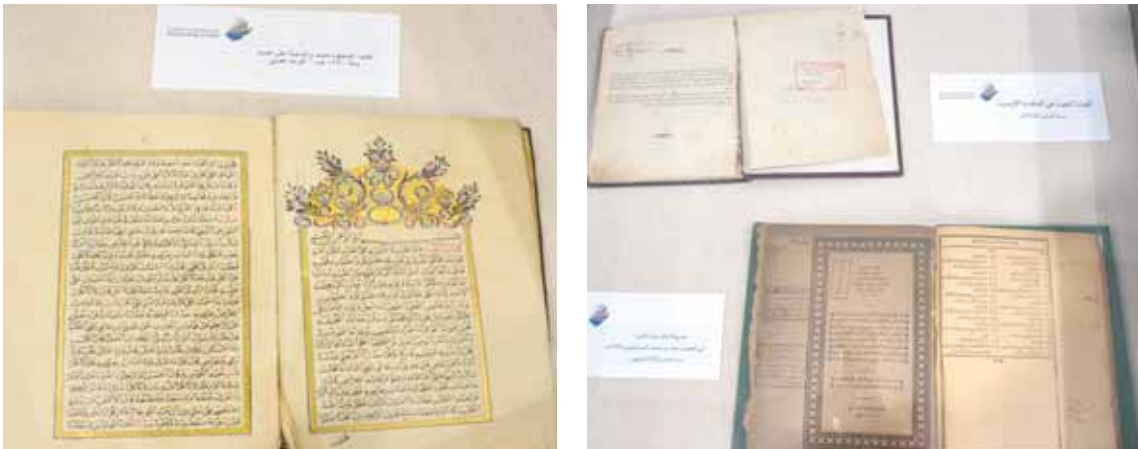
Investigations revealed that the product, a globe, was found to contain the name of the Zionist entity replacing Palestine. The emergency team has proceeded to take legal action against the store in question.

In other related news, Commerce and Industry Minister Mazen Al-Nahedh announced a decision to add 14 commercial activities to the commercial activity guide in the Gulf Cooperation Council, including the activity of organizing celebrations and private events.

The activities also included the design of precious jewelry, wholesale and retail of perfumes



and incense, fodder brokerage, in addition to the retail sale of chocolate and cocoa as well as the retail sale of spices.



A selection of old manuscripts from the National Library of Kuwait.

Local

Qurain Cultural Festival enriches artistic, cultural movement in Kuwait: Al-Mutairi

Education minister opens 28th Qurain Cultural Festival



KUWAIT: Attendees during the inauguration of the 28th edition of Qurain Cultural Festival on Sunday. —KUNA photos

KUWAIT: Minister of Information and Culture and Minister of State for Youth Affairs Abdulrahman Al-Mutairi said on Sunday Qurain Cultural Festival has helped Kuwait materialize its vision and genuine culture. Over its past 27 editions, the festival reflected Kuwait's strong belief in its cultural message and in effective contribution to communication and coexistence among peoples with different cultures, he said. Al-Mutairi, also president of the National Council for Culture, Arts and Letters (NCCAL), made the comments while inaugurating the 28th edition of Qurain Cultural Festival on behalf of His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Ahmad Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah.

The festival was held at Abdulhusain Abdulredha Theatre in Salmiya on Sunday evening. "The festival has enriched the artistic and cultural movement in Kuwait and contributed to the enlightenment in the Arab world," Al-Mutairi pointed out. "This year's festival, one of the major cultural events in the Arab region, takes place just a few days after Kuwait celebrated its 62nd National Day and 32nd Liberation Day, thus adding to our national pride," he added.

Regarding the agenda of the festival, he said it includes, inter alia, symposia, theatrical performances, literary events, and displays of audio-visual arts, which contribute to the cultural and socio-economic development. On NCCAL, the sponsor of the annual festival, the minister said it launched a cultural strategy (2023-2028) for fostering enlightenment, innovative thinking, encouraging creative talents and reaching out to intelligentsia across the Arab world.

NCCAL Acting Secretary-General Dr Mohammad Al-Jassar said the 11-day festival fea-

tures a host of cultural, literary, artistic, scientific and heritage events. The festival will honor three celebrities, namely Ahmad Al-Sharqawi - a Kuwaiti poet, Dr Saleh Al-Ojairi - late Kuwaiti astronomer and meteorologist, and Prince Badr bin Abdul Muhsin bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud - a Saudi poet. Al-Jassar noted that Prince Bader Al-Saud has been chosen as the personality of this year's festival in commemoration of his contributions to the modern Arabic poetry. "The agenda of the festival, including a symposium themed "national cultural projects - reading the reality and foreseeing the future," will conclude with honoring the winners of the state order of merit and incentive order on March 15," he added. — KUNA



National Council for Culture, Arts and Letters Acting Secretary-General Dr. Mohammad Al-Jassar.



Minister of Information and Culture, and Minister of State for Youth Affairs Abdulrahman Al-Mutairi



Singer Fahad Al-Salem



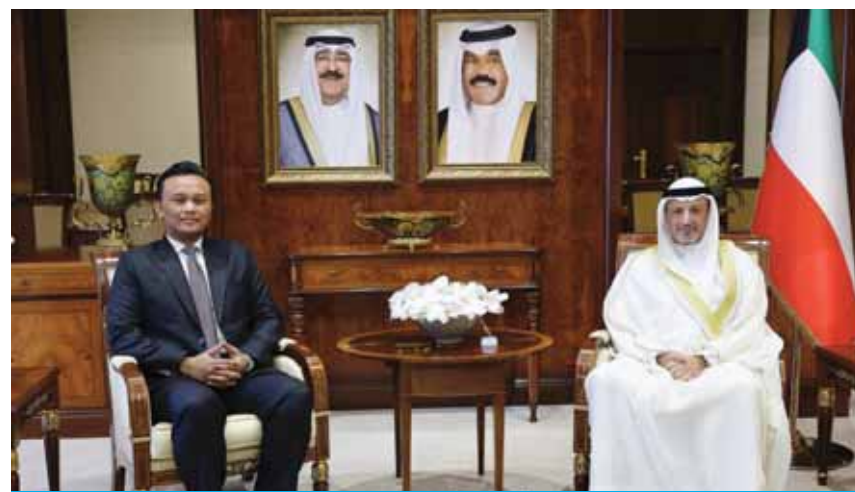
Singer Abdulrab Idris



Singer Fattoma



Audience attending the 28th edition of Qurain Cultural Festival.



Kuwait FM with Malaysia Ambassador. —KUNA

FM receives credentials of Malaysia envoy

KUWAIT: Kuwait Foreign Minister Sheikh Salem Abdullah Al-Jaber Al-

Sabah received a copy of the credentials of new Malaysian Ambassador to Kuwait Alaa Aldeen bin Mohammad Noor. During their meeting on Monday, Sheikh Salem wished the new ambassador success in his mission to strengthen the close ties and friendship, voicing hope for more prosperity and progress for both nations.— KUNA

Deputy FM receives Russian ambassador



Deputy FM receives Russia's Ambassador to Kuwait.

KUWAIT: Deputy Foreign Minister Ambassador Mansour Al-Otaibi received Monday Russia's Ambassador to Kuwait, Nikolai Makarov. During the meeting, both sides touched on bilateral ties between the two friendly countries and ways to boost cooperation at various levels. —KUNA

Workers deported for throwing waste on public property

KUWAIT: Supervision teams at Hawally governorate municipality has conducted a field campaign in residential areas of construction and ren-

ovation workers to inspect whether they adhere to the rules and regulations with regard to the general cleanliness and hygiene in the governorate.

According to KUNA, the municipality said that the General Director of the Municipality Ahmad Al-Manfouhi has taken strict legal actions against construction workers who had been caught throwing waste on public property in Sadeeq area before deporting them from the country.

"The campaign aims to raise the level of public hygiene and reduce negative phenomena and

everything that distorts the profile of the country," the municipality announced.

The officials inspected safety regulations and checked if a bin for construction waste has been placed near buildings. The inspection comes as part of the recent municipal campaign "Our country deserves it", which resulted in nabbing construction workers who violated the sanctity of public spaces by throwing construction waste in Sadeeq area. A violation charge has been issued against them.

The municipality reminded plot owners and contractors of the importance of adhering to the rules put in place by the municipality which have been enforced to ensure the safety of both construction workers and pedestrians on sites as well as to avoid violations.

The municipality launched the campaign in the beginning of March for a period of three months, in order to raise the level of hygiene in all governorates of the country.



Ahmad Al-Manfouhi



In my view

Cooperate with Soqya Al-Maa to save water



By Dr Khalid Al-Saleh

Local@kuwaittimes.com

We have a ministry of electricity and water that was established Jan 1962, and despite the sincere work by the ministry and its officials to provide excellent service to deliver water and electricity and ensure their continuity and maintenance, we wish that they increase their services in the field of awareness with regards to saving power and water.

Every year water is wasted during national day celebration, which makes us hope the concerned ministry launches awareness campaigns prior to the national days to show the dangers of water shortages, not only for us, but for the entire world.

In Kuwait we have a specialized society that knows the value of water. Soqya Al-Maa is very knowledgeable about people's need for water, and if the ministry had sought their help, it would have provided them with examples and important information to add to citizens' awareness and make them hesitate before using one liter of water without the need to do so.

Thousands are dying due to water shortages, while statistics indicate that around one billion individuals around the world are in need of drinking water, and 2.7 billion find it difficult to get water for one month every year at least. Water makes up around 60-70 percent of the human body, and the human being cannot stay without water for a few days, as Almighty Allah made everything alive out of water.

When I hear what officials of Soqya Al-Maa society are doing to rescue souls who do not have drinking water around the world, and when I see the crowds who line up on the pavements during our national days to squander huge amounts of water, I feel sad, as there are kind hands who are demanding rescuing souls and spreading happiness, who are met with larger numbers, with regret, who behave in the opposite way and waste water - water that may not be available for us in the future.

Let us keep water in front of us at all times, and let us demand cooperation from government entities to cooperate with Soqya Al-Maa society to raise awareness with all citizens to not only prevent wastage, but to help people around the world find clean water to drink.

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News in brief

Charity distributes food baskets in Jordan

KUWAIT: As part of its continued rescue role to help and assist Syrian families who are refugees in neighboring countries, as well as helping needy Jordanian families, Trahum Charity Foundation distributed 1,000 food baskets to refugee families in Jordan in the presence and supervision of Chairman of the Board Sheikh Dr. Hamad bin Mohammad Al-Hajiri. Al-Hajiri said in a statement that the aim behind the distribution of the baskets is to help refugee families that have difficulties in meeting their daily needs and are going through tragic conditions. He said that families were happy and thanked Kuwait people while praying for them for their generosity and assistance.

Kuwaiti Environmental Week launches Monday

KUWAIT: The Kuwait Environment Public Authority launched Kuwaiti Environmental Week Monday. The goal of the campaign, which is scheduled to continue until March 12, is to increase environmental awareness in society. Samira Al-Kandari, Acting Director General of the authority, said in a press statement Sunday, that the campaign will include many events and activities aimed at promoting sustainable initiatives and raising the level of environmental awareness in the country. Kandari added that this year's Environmental Week is consistent with another campaign the authority launched in February called "Let's Go Around and Change". The campaign, held in cooperation with the United Nations Environment Program's West Asia Office, aimed at reducing the consumption of single-use plastic products. — KUNA

Photo of the Day



KUWAIT: The iconic Kuwait Towers peek from the side of a bridge on the Arabian Gulf. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

Physiotherapy conference showcases Kuwaiti research

KUWAIT: Assistant Health Ministry Undersecretary for Dental Affairs Dr Mishal Al-Kandary said he is proud of Kuwait's doctors' contribution to research and the positive results they achieved using cutting-edge treatment methods.

Kandary made the remarks at the opening of the third Kuwait International Physiotherapy Conference, being held for three days under the patronage of health minister Dr. Ahmad Al-Awadhi. The conference includes seven workshops and is attended by international and local experts who will discuss 39 scientific papers and showcase 32 posters.

Kandary highlighted Kuwaiti doctors' efforts in the field of physiotherapy and the intensive research they carried out to find the most effective solutions to issues in the field. The research papers, he said, were published in the most prominent scientific journals.

He expressed confidence in the vision of physiotherapists at the conference and their ability to face all challenges in their field, including safeguarding the rights of patients and utilizing modern technology to develop therapy services.

Director of physiotherapy services at the ministry Abdallah Zaman said the department is keen on having its employees stay updated on the international developments in the field, adding that raising the level of service is a main goal of the department.

The department, he added, encourages its employees to enrich their knowledge and exchange experiences. He said the ministry ensures that all requirements of physiotherapy departments across the country, be it manpower or devices, are met. — KUNA



Mishal Al-Kandary



Ministry of Health official Mishal Al-Kandary kicks off the third Kuwait International Physiotherapy Conference Monday. — KUNA photos

Factory, classroom catch fire in Kabd, Shuwaikh

KUWAIT: The Kuwait Fire Force on the dawn of Monday extinguished a fire that erupted in an asphalt factory in Kabd area. The fire force controlled another fire Monday morning after it burst inside a classroom at the Public Authority for Applied Education and Training (PAAET).

The fire force's public relations department announced: "Teams from Kabd and Istiqlal stations rushed to the scene of the incident at the Kabd factory. Upon arrival, the fire turned out to have started in a storage. Squad members started to control the fire and extinguished it without any injuries."



The fire in the classroom was in Shuwaikh, said the department. The central command sent teams from Shuwaikh industrial and Sulaibikhat to the location of the incident. "Upon arrival the teams found the fire started from an air conditioning unit inside a classroom. The location was immediately evacuated. The fire was controlled and extinguished without any injuries."



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Afghan universities reopen but women still barred

UK to present new legislation to curb migrant boat arrivals



KRAMATORSK: People stand outside a destroyed school after a missile strike in Kramatorsk on March 6, 2023, amid Russian invasion of Ukraine. —AFP

Zelensky pays tribute to troops

Ukraine vows to bolster defences as enemy continues its attempts to encircle Bakhmut

KYIV: Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky on Sunday paid tribute to his soldiers fighting in the “painful and difficult” battle for the country’s frontline eastern Donbas region. He was speaking after Ukraine’s general staff reported that its forces had fought off “more than 130 enemy attacks” the previous day, including in Kupiansk, Lyman, Bakhmut and Avdiivka.

“The enemy continues its attempts to encircle the town of Bakhmut,” it said early on Sunday, of the eastern city that Moscow has been trying to capture for months. Ukraine has vowed to defend “fortress Bakhmut” which Russian troops seem determined to take. Analysts say the city, which has been virtually destroyed in the fighting, has little real strategic value.

But, as what has become the longest and bloodiest battle of the conflict drags on, its fate has acquired a symbolic importance, surpassing its military significance. “I would like to pay special tribute to the bravery, strength and resilience of the soldiers fighting in the Donbas,” Zelensky said in his daily address.

“This is one of the hardest battles. Painful and difficult.” The Donbas is made up of Donetsk and Lugansk,

which Russia claims to have annexed despite never fully having controlled it.

Ukraine’s troops, said Zelensky, had “repelled assaults, destroyed the occupier, undermined enemy positions and logistics, and protected our borders and cities”. But on Saturday, the US-based Institute for the Study of War (ISW) warned that Ukrainian supply routes to Bakhmut were narrowing. “The Russians may have intended to encircle Ukrainian forces in Bakhmut, but the Ukrainian command has signalled that it will likely withdraw rather than risk an encirclement,” it added.

Russian rivalries

Pro-Russian separatists in the Donetsk region posted a video purporting to show Wagner fighters in the suburbs north of Bakhmut, having taken control of the Stupki railway station. Wagner, a private army headed by Yevgeny Prigozhin, has taken centre stage in the fight for the city, which has exposed rivalries with Russia’s conventional forces.

Already on Friday, Prigozhin said his fighters had “practically encircled” Bakhmut and only one road

remained under Ukrainian control. Prigozhin, who has for weeks been publicising the advances of his men towards the eastern city, on Saturday posted on social media, standing to what he said were coffins containing bodies of Ukrainian soldiers being shipped to territory controlled by Kyiv.

Prigozhin regularly posts videos of himself alongside mercenaries, on the ground or even in a fighter jet, in contrast with Russian generals criticised for shirking the front line. In a rare exception, Russia on Saturday released a video of Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu inspecting troops in frontline regions in Ukraine.

The ministry said Shoigu inspected an advance command post in the South Donetsk direction without specifying exactly where or when. He was seen travelling in a helicopter and talking to a soldier in front of damaged buildings. The ISW think tank said Shoigu went there “likely to assess the extent of Russian losses around Vugledar and the possibility of a further offensive in this direction”.

Zaporizhzhia ‘hostage’

While the epicentre of the fighting is in the east, the

death toll from a strike this week on an apartment block in southern Zaporizhzhia rose to 13, Ukraine’s state emergency service said. Among the dead was a small child, the agency added. The Ukrainian presidency also said Russian shelling had killed five people on Saturday. Zaporizhzhia is one of the four regions-along with Donetsk, Lugansk and Kherson-that Russia claims to have annexed but has never fully controlled. But Moscow’s forces have held the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant since March 4, 2022. The plant has repeatedly made headlines and revived fears of nuclear catastrophes similar to the deadly Chernobyl disaster that shook Ukraine in 1986.

The exiled mayor of Enerгодар, which houses the station, told AFP that Russia uses the plant as a “nuclear shield” for its troops and equipment. After Kyiv and Moscow blamed each other for shelling around the plant, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) posted observers there.

Zelensky said on Saturday that Russia had taken the nuclear power plant “hostage” a year ago and “turned the territory of the (power plant) into a de facto military training ground”. —AFP

Stationmaster charged over Greek rail crash

ATHENS: The stationmaster implicated in Greece’s deadliest rail crash, which killed at least 57 people, was charged and taken into custody Sunday, hours after the prime minister asked for forgiveness for the disaster.

On the streets, public anger over the deaths exploded into violence at demonstrations to protest the longstanding neglect of rail safety and to mourn the victims. A legal source told AFP that the 59-year-old stationmaster, who has been named as Vassilis Samaras, was charged over his role in the “death of a large number of people” and taken into custody. Under Greek law, the offence carries a sentence of between 10 years and life.

Early on Sunday, ahead of a memorial service in Athens, Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis wrote a message addressed to the nation. “As prime minister, I owe it to everyone, but especially to the victims’ relatives, (to ask for) forgiveness,” he wrote.

“For the Greece of 2023, two trains heading in different directions cannot run on the same line and no one notice,” Mitsotakis wrote in the message posted on his Facebook page. In the coming days, the minister in charge will announce immediate measures to improve railway safety, he added.

Greece would also seek the help and advice of the European Commission-as well as funding-to upgrade and modernise the country’s rail system.

Grief and anger

At the small station of Rapsani, near the accident site, local people left red and white carnations and lit candles along the track on Sunday. Greek television showed harrowing images of weeping parents clamouring for information of children who had been aboard the train and berating authorities for what had happened.

The crash between a passenger and a freight train near the central city of Larissa on Tuesday night has sparked widespread outrage across Greece. Thousands of angry demonstrators-police estimated the number at 12,000 people-gathered by the large esplanade in front of the parliament to demand accountability for the disaster.

Some protesters held signs reading “Down



ATHENS: Protesters clash with riot police at the entrance of a metro station during a demonstration in Athens on March 5, 2023, following a deadly train accident late on February 28. —AFP

with killer governments”. AFP journalists saw violent clashes erupt between police and some of the demonstrators. Police said seven officers were hurt and five arrests were made after demonstrators set fire to rubbish bins and threw Molotov cocktails.

Police responded by firing tear gas and stun grenades to clear the square. Hellenic Train, the rail company that has become the focus of some of the anger expressed in the wake of the crash, defended its actions in a statement late Saturday.

Its staff were quick to reach the scene of the disaster and had been working closely with rescue teams and the authorities ever since, it said. Hundreds of people demonstrated during the week outside their Athens headquarters, and one legal source has said that investigators are looking at the possibility of bringing charges against senior members of the company.

Just as hard questions are also being asked of the government over its failure to pursue rail safety reforms, rail union officials have insisted they warned the company about the safety issues on the line. Many of the crash victims were students returning from a weekend break. At least nine young people studying at Thessaloniki’s Aristotle University were among those killed on the passenger train.

‘New elements’ in the case

In his message on Sunday, Mitsotakis addressed the question of responsibility, saying they did not wish to hide behind the issue of human error. Details have emerged in the Greek media of the stationmaster’s relative inexperience in the post and the fact that he was left unsupervised during a busy holiday weekend.

His lawyer, Stefanos Pantzartzidis, has insisted that while his client had admitted some responsibility, this was not the whole story. “In the case, there are important new elements that need to be examined,” he said Saturday.

Kostas Genidounias, head of the train drivers’ union OSE, has said they had already warned the authorities about safety failings on the line where the crash happened. Union leaders at Hellenic Train sounded the alarm just three weeks ago.

“We are not going to wait for the accident to happen to see those responsible shed crocodile tears,” they said at the time. In Vatican City Sunday, Pope Francis offered prayers for the victims of the crash. “I am praying for the deceased,” he said. “I am near the wounded and to their relatives. May Our Lady comfort them.” —AFP

Pakistan suicide bomber kills nine police officers

QUETTA: A suicide bomber killed nine police officers and wounded 16 others Monday in an attack on their truck in southwestern Pakistan, officials said. Security forces have been battling a years-long insurgency by militants in Balochistan demanding a bigger share of the province’s wealth, as well as attacks by the Pakistan Taliban (TTP).

“The suicide bomber was riding a motorbike and hit the truck from behind,” senior police official Abdul Hai Amir told AFP. The incident took place near Dhadar, the main town of Kachhi district, about 120 kilometres (75 miles) southeast of Quetta in Balochistan.

Photos of the aftermath showed the police truck upside down on the road with its windows shattered. Mehmood Notezai, police chief for Kachhi district, told AFP the officers were returning from a week-long cattle show where they had been providing security.

There has been no claim of responsibility for the attack. “Terrorism in Balochistan is part of a nefarious agenda to destabilise the country,” Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif said in a statement released by his office. The country is facing overlapping political, economic and environmental crises, as well as a worsening security situation.

Attacks have been on the rise in Pakistan since the Afghan Taliban seized control of Kabul in August 2021, emboldening militant groups along the border which have increasingly targeted security forces. Last month five people died when a TTP suicide squad stormed a police compound in the port city of Karachi. —AFP



KACHHI: Security officials examine the site after a suicide attack on a police truck near Dhadar, the main town of Kachhi district, about 120 kms southeast of Quetta in Balochistan province on March 6, 2023. —AFP

International

‘Nobody warned us’: Turkey struggles to rebuild month after earthquake

Tremor and its aftershocks claimed more than 45,000 lives in Turkey

BUYUKNACAR: Buyuknacar was a picturesque village perched high in the mountains of southern Turkey until it was effectively wiped off the map by a catastrophic earthquake that killed tens of thousands a month ago.

Little is still standing in the settlement that was home to 2,000 people before the 7.8-magnitude struck on February 6, its epicentre just 26 kilometres (16 miles) to the south. The tremor and its aftershocks claimed more than 45,000 lives in Turkey and 5,000 in neighbouring Syria. It killed 120 people in Buyuknacar, an agricultural village surrounded by rugged mountains and lush valleys filled with oak and pine trees. “Only four or five houses are still standing, but they are all damaged,” said Ziya Sutdelisi, 53, a former village administrator.

“We were always told that our ground was solid. Nobody warned us our village was in peril,” he said. Few know what will happen next. Turkey stretches across some of the world’s most active fault lines and is no stranger to big shakes.

But none has been as damaging or deadly since Turkey became a republic after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire 100 years ago. Ziya’s wife Kiymet said the villagers felt relatively safe at more than 1,000 metres above sea level. “Then everything crumbled in a few seconds,” she said, surrounded by the rubble of stone and concrete homes.

Survivors who stayed behind now live in tents, grieving and reliving the horrors of being woken in the pre-dawn hours by a jolt that upturned millions of lives. Sutdelisi is still haunted by the rumble of the moving ground, which swung buildings like pendulums in the dark.

“It was as if 10 trains were passing by simultaneously,” he said. The villagers said it took six days for help to reach them from neighbouring cities and towns, forcing families to claw their way through the rubble by hand in search of trapped loved ones.

They drove the injured to nearby hospitals on their own because ambulances could not reach them across damaged, snow-covered roads. “For six days, we were 40 people in a makeshift tent. It was cold and snowy,” Kiymet said.

Every family now has their own tent. A handful of container homes are arriving that villagers plan to assign to the elderly and most vulnerable. But nothing will be firmly decided or change for Buyuknacar’s survivors until officials conduct ground analyses to determine whether people will be allowed to stay here and rebuild.

The few remaining buildings could tip over from one of the thousands of aftershocks that have rumbled across Turkey in the past month. “We would not dare go inside the houses,” said villager Hulya Morgul. “They are like our enemies.”

‘Firm ground’

Facing a difficult re-election in May, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has vowed to rebuild the entire damaged region within a year. Like the Sutdelisis, Erdogan also called Turkey’s mountains “firm ground” that his government will focus on developing in the months to come.

“When planning new settlements, we steer our cities from the plains to the mountains as much as possible, to firm ground,” Erdogan said after the quake. Nurten Morgul, who is married with two chil-



KAHRAMANMARAS: An aerial view taken in the evening of March 5, 2023 shows a destroyed mosque in Kahramanmaraş, one month after a massive earthquake struck south-east Turkey. — AFP

dren, said it was hard for her family to simply pick up and leave. “The source of our income-our fields, our animals-are all here,” she said. Ziya Sutdelisi also struggles to focus on the future. “It has been a month but we cannot think with clear heads,” he said. “It will take a while to come to our senses.” United in grief and

perseverance, the villagers have formed new bonds, which offer a glimmer of hope. “We have all suffered, we are helping each other,” Sutdelisi said with a smile as a barber from nearby city of Gaziantep offered him and two others free outdoor haircuts. “Life has to go on for our kids,” he said. — AFP

Iran ready for prisoner swap with Belgium

TEHRAN: Iran on Monday expressed its readiness for a long-awaited prisoner swap with Belgium, days after the European country’s Constitutional Court gave the green light for such a move. Following the decision “by the Belgian Constitutional Court, we can now say that the way to implement the agreement has been opened, and the Islamic republic of Iran certainly welcomes this change,” foreign ministry spokesman Nasser Kanani told reporters in Tehran.

The move would see Belgian aid worker Olivier Vandecasteele-jailed in Iran for 40 years for several charges including spying-swapped for Iranian official Assadollah Assadi who was convicted in Belgium for masterminding a plot to blow up a 2018 opposition event outside Paris.

Under a treaty Belgium and Iran signed in 2022, Vandecasteele would have been eligible to be swapped for Assadi but in December Belgium’s constitutional court suspended the implementation of the treaty.

On Friday, however, the Belgian

Constitutional Court cleared the way for a swap by rejecting a legal challenge to a law allowing prisoner exchanges with Iran. Assadi, an Iranian diplomat who was stationed in Austria, was arrested in 2018 after Belgian, French and German security officers foiled a plot to set off a bomb at a rally outside Paris by an Iranian exiled opposition group.

After three years in detention, Assadi was sentenced in Belgium to 20 years in prison in May 2021. “We have stated that he (Assadi) must be released unconditionally, compensation must be paid, and a commitment should be given not to repeat such actions,” Kanani said, adding that “with the recent change, we hope to see an opening regarding the diplomat’s case.”

Vandecasteele, 42, was handed multiple sentences totalling 40 years on a range of charges on January 10, but with the sentences to run concurrently he would need to only serve 12.5 years behind bars, Iran’s judiciary said noting that his verdict could be appealed.

Iran arrested Vandecasteele in February 2022, and he has since been held in conditions that Belgium’s government has described as “inhumane”. Belgium insists Vandecasteele is innocent and is being held as a hostage as Tehran attempts to force Brussels to release Assadi. — AFP

UK to present new legislation to curb migrant arrivals

LONDON: Britain’s Conservative government is expected to present on Tuesday a new bill providing for the detention and swift deportation of asylum seekers who illegally enter the country via small boats, according to media reports. Despite Brexit-related promises to tighten control of its borders, Britain has seen a considerable uptick in such arrivals, logging a record 45,000 last year, and pressure has mounted on Prime Minister Rishi Sunak to tackle the situation.

The bill to be unveiled Tuesday includes measures facilitating the detention and deportation “as soon as reasonably practicable” of asylum seekers arriving in the country illegally, the Daily Mail reported on Monday. According to the Mail, the legislation contains a “rights brake”, making asylum claims by those arriving on small boats inadmissible. The government intends to send at least some deportees to Rwanda under a deal that was struck last year but which had never been applied after running into legal challenges.

People who arrived illegally would also be barred from returning to the UK for life. Home Secretary Suella Braverman on Sunday defended the new legislation, say-



DOVER: Migrants are escorted ashore from the UK Border Force vessel ‘BF Ranger’ in Dover, southeast England, on March 6, 2023, after having been picked up at sea while attempting to cross the English Channel. — AFP

ing in the Sun that Britain “must stop the boats”. “It has to be that if you come here illegally you will be detained and swiftly removed,” she said.

“Our laws will be simple in their intention and practice-the only route to the UK will be a safe and legal route.” Secretary for Northern Ireland Chris Heaton-Harris, meanwhile, said stemming the flow of

migrants across the English Channel also “involves proper conversations that are ongoing” with European countries to ensure would-be asylum seekers “are upheld in the first safe country that they come to”. Sunak has made stopping the boats a flagship promise ahead of general elections, for which the opposition Labour Party currently leads in the polls. — AFP

Hezbollah backs pro-Syria politician for president

BEIRUT: Lebanon’s powerful Hezbollah group endorsed Monday a presidential candidate, in a move unlikely to resolve a deadlock that has left the crisis-hit country for months without a head of state. “The candidate we support... is Sleiman Frangieh,” Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah said during a televised speech.

The Iran-backed Shiite movement holds huge sway over political life in Lebanon, but opposition from the country’s two main Christian parties means pro-Syrian Frangieh lacks a clear path to majority backing in the divided parliament. Lebanon has been mired for three years in a spiraling economic crisis dubbed by the World Bank as one of the worst in recent global history, and has been without a president since Michel Aoun’s term expired at the end of October.

Politically rudderless, it has been run by a caretaker government with limited powers since May. Frangieh, 57, a personal friend of Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad, has long been considered among Hezbollah’s preferred choices for president. The former lawmaker and minister heads the Christian Marada movement, and like many of Lebanon’s prominent political figures, hails from a storied dynasty.

Lebanon’s sectarian political elite is widely blamed for the country’s current woes. Lawmakers have held 11 rounds of voting to name a successor to Aoun, but no candidate has garnered enough ballots. Hezbollah and its allies have cast blank votes, with some lawmakers accusing the group of



Hassan Nasrallah

obstructing the ballot. The Shiite group’s Christian ally, the Free Patriotic Movement, has opposed Frangieh’s candidacy as its leader, Gebran Bassil, is also vying for the presidency.

The Shiite Amal movement, another Hezbollah ally, has voiced support for Frangieh. But with no single party or parliamentary bloc holding a majority, electing a new president can drag on for months of even years. Before Hezbollah-backed Aoun was finally elected in 2016, the group had adopted a similar boycotting tactic, contributing to more than two years of presidential vacancy. Frangieh’s grandfather and namesake was president when Lebanon’s 1975-1990 civil war broke out.

The presidential candidate’s father, politician Tony Frangieh, was murdered in 1978 along with the rest of his immediate family - apart from Sleiman, who had been away - by rival Christian fighters. Lawmaker Michel Moawad had received the most ballots in the failed presidential votes in recent months, but remained far from clinching a majority. Moawad has good ties with Washington and has repeatedly asked for Hezbollah - the only faction to keep its weapons after the end of the civil war - to disarm. — AFP

between the two countries reached \$19 billion last year, up 40 percent on the previous year and 112 percent from 2020, WAM said. “It is expected that the agreement will contribute to increasing non-oil bilateral trade to \$40 billion annually within five years, while also creating 25,000 new job opportunities by 2031,” the news agency added. — AFP

Iran to evade fresh censure by watchdog

VIENNA: Iran will evade fresh censure by the UN nuclear watchdog after making “concrete” commitments at the weekend to be transparent following the discovery of particles enriched to near weapons-grade, diplomats told AFP on Monday. The development comes after International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) head Rafael Grossi received assurances from Iran that surveillance cameras at several nuclear sites would be reconnected and the pace of inspections increased.

On Saturday, Grossi returned from a two-day visit to Tehran, which sought greater cooperation over its atomic activities, following the discovery of uranium particles enriched to near weapons-grade level. Three Western diplomats told AFP on the first day of the Board of Governors meeting of the Vienna-based IAEA that no new resolution criticizing Iran over its nuclear program was planned. “But it remains to be seen whether anything agreed in Tehran results in real progress,” a Western diplomat cautioned.

In November, Iran was censured over its lack of cooperation with the agency. On Monday, Grossi dismissed the perception that he had merely obtained empty promises from Iran over the weekend. These are “not promises, we do have certain agreements which are concrete,” he told reporters in Vienna. “I have been as frustrated as many other people, perhaps the most frustrated, when there is lack of results,” he added.

“We seem to be moving into more firm ground,” he said, adding that the agency would “of course walk with caution”. Grossi hailed “a marked improvement” in his discussions with the Iranian government last week. He said the measures he agreed with Iran should be in place “very soon” following a technical meeting due to travel to Tehran. In



VIENNA: Rafael Grossi, Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), speaks to journalists after the IAEA’s Board of Governors’ meeting at the agency’s headquarters in Vienna on March 6, 2023. —AFP

his series of meetings with Iranian officials, Grossi met President Ebrahim Raisi.

Tehran also indicated it had agreed to more inspections at the Fordo underground plant, where uranium particles enriched to near weapons-grade were found. A confidential IAEA report seen by AFP detailed that uranium particles enriched up to 83.7 percent - just under the 90 percent needed to produce an atomic bomb - had been detected. Iran denies wanting to acquire atomic weapons, and says it had made no attempt to enrich uranium beyond 60-percent purity.

In January, the IAEA’s Grossi said Iran had “amassed enough nuclear material for several nuclear weapons”. On-off talks between Tehran and world powers to revive a 2015 landmark deal that sought to curb Iran’s nuclear program in exchange for sanctions relief had stalled since last year. The deal Iran reached with Britain, China, France, Germany, Russia and the United States collapsed after Washington’s unilateral withdrawal in 2018 under then president Donald Trump. — AFP

Saudi deposits \$5 billion...

Continued from Page 1

93 percent of non-oil trade, the official WAM news agency reported. Non-oil exchanges

International

Seoul to compensate Japan wartime forced labour victims

Seoul, Tokyo ramp up security cooperation in the face of growing threats from North

SEOUL: South Korea announced plans Monday to compensate victims of Japan's forced wartime labour, aiming to end a "vicious cycle" in the Asian powers' relations and boost ties to counter the nuclear-armed North. Japan and the United States immediately welcomed the announcement, but victims' groups said it fell far short of their demand for a full apology from Tokyo and direct compensation from the Japanese companies involved.

Seoul and Tokyo have ramped up security cooperation in the face of growing threats from Kim Jong Un's North Korea, which is expanding its nuclear weapons programme in defiance of UN sanctions. But Seoul-Tokyo ties have long been strained over Tokyo's brutal 1910-45 colonial rule of the Korean peninsula, when around 780,000 Koreans were conscripted into forced labour by Japan, according to data from Seoul.

This does not include the Korean women forced into sexual slavery by Japanese troops. Seoul's plan is to take money from major South Korean companies that benefited from a 1965 reparations deal with Tokyo and use it to compensate victims and their families, Foreign Minister Park Jin said.

The hope is that Japan will "positively respond to our major decision today with Japanese companies' voluntary contributions and a comprehensive apology", he added. "I believe that the vicious cycle should be broken for the sake of national interest," Park added. Japanese Foreign Minister Yoshimasa Hayashi welcomed the new plan, telling reporters it would help to restore "healthy" ties. The plan does not include a fresh apology, although Hayashi said Tokyo stands by a 1998 declaration that included an apology.

The two sides quickly moved to ease trade disputes linked to a raft of tit-for-tat economic measures imposed as relations soured after a 2018 South Korean Supreme Court ruling ordered some Japanese companies to pay compensation.

And Japanese media have reported that South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol could soon visit Tokyo, possibly even for a Japan-South Korea baseball game this week. But it remained unclear whether Japanese companies, including those such as Nippon Steel which were named in the 2018 court ruling, would make voluntary contributions to the new fund.

Nippon Steel said it had no comment on the ruling, adding that "our company's understanding is that this issue has been resolved by the 1965 Agreement".

'What Japan does next'

US President Joe Biden hailed "a groundbreaking new chapter of cooperation and partnership between two of the United States' closest allies". "President Yoon and Prime Minister Kishida are taking a critical step to forge a future for the Korean and Japanese people that is safer, more secure, and more prosperous," he said in a White House statement.

But analysts were more cautious. "The significance of today's announcement will be measured in large part by what Japan does next," Benjamin A. Engel, research professor at the Institute of International Affairs at Seoul National University, told AFP.

At a minimum, some kind of apology from Tokyo and donations from two Japanese companies which have been ruled liable by South Korea's Supreme Court would help ensure the public accepts the deal, he said. "Without these steps by the Japanese side, the announcement by the Korean government will not amount to much," he said. The move to resolve the forced-labour issue follows years of disputes over World War II sex slaves, which had soured Japan-South Korea ties.

Seoul and Tokyo reached a deal in 2015 aimed at "finally and irreversibly" resolving that issue, with a Japanese apology and the formation of a one-billion-



SEOUL: South Korean protesters hold placards (top) reading "Negotiations of betrayal" during a rally against South Korea's announcement of plans to compensate victims of Japan's forced wartime labour, outside the Foreign Ministry in Seoul on March 6, 2023. — AFP

yen (\$7.4 million) fund for survivors. But South Korea later effectively nullified that deal, citing a lack of victims' consent, which led to a bitter diplomatic dispute that spread to affect trade and security ties.

North Korean threat

South Korean foreign minister Park said the plan announced Monday had the support of many victims' families, adding Seoul would "see them one by one and consult with them and seek their understanding sincerely". But the plan had already drawn strong protests from victims' groups. "It is as if the bonds of

the victims of forced labour are being dissolved through South Korean companies' money," Lim Jaesung, a lawyer for several victims, said in a Facebook post on Sunday.

"It is a complete victory for Japan, which can't spare even one yen on the issue of forced labour."

After the plan was announced, victim Yang Geum-deok also immediately denounced it. "I won't take money that seems like the result of begging," Yang said, according to the Yonhap news agency. "You must apologise first and then work through everything else." — AFP

Afghan universities reopen but women still barred

KABUL: Afghan universities reopened on Monday after a winter break, but only men returned to class with a "heartbreaking" ban by the Taliban authorities on women in higher education still in force. The university ban is one of several restrictions imposed on women since the Taliban stormed back to power in August 2021 and has sparked global outrage-including across the Muslim world.

"It's heartbreaking to see boys going to the university while we have to stay at home," said Rahela, 22, from the central province of Ghor. "This is gender discrimination against girls, because Islam allows us to pursue higher education. Nobody should stop us from learning."

The Taliban government imposed the ban after accusing women students of ignoring a strict dress code and a requirement to be accompanied by a male relative to and from campus. Most universities had already introduced gender-segregated entrances and classrooms, as well as allowing women to be taught only by female professors or elderly men.

Ejatullah Nejadi, an engineering student at Kabul University, Afghanistan's largest, said it was a fundamental right of women to study. "Even if they attend classes on separate days, it's not a problem. They have a right to education and that right should be given to them," he said as he entered the university campus.

Waheeda Durrani, a journalism student in Herat until she was barred from university last year, said the Taliban government wanted women to remain uneducated. "If Afghan girls and women get educated, they will never accept a government that exploits Islam and the Quran," she said. "They will stand for their rights. That's the fear the government has."



KABUL: Male students attend their computer science class after the universities were reopened in Kabul on March 6, 2023. Male students trickled back to their classes on March 6 after Afghan universities reopened following a winter break. — AFP

Taiwan alarmed by Chinese defence spending hike

TAIPEI: Taiwan's defence minister on Monday said a sharp increase in Chinese military spending for 2023 indicated Beijing was "preparing for the use of force if necessary" to potentially retake the self-ruled island.

China said on Sunday it was increasing military spending by 7.2 percent—the fastest pace in four years—to 1.55 trillion yuan (\$225 billion), at a key meeting of its rubber-stamp parliament. Speaking to lawmakers, Taiwanese Defence Minister Chiu Kuo-cheng said: "It seems the other side is preparing for the use of force if necessary in the future."

Taiwan lives under constant threat of an invasion by China, which views the democratically ruled island as part of its territory to be seized one day, by force if necessary. Beijing has ramped up pressure in the last year, staging huge military drills around Taiwan in August after then US

Divorced Afghan women back to abusive ex-husbands

KABUL: Abused for years by her ex-husband who broke all of her teeth, Marwa has retreated into hiding with her eight children after Taliban commanders tore up her divorce. Marwa was one of a small number of women who, under the previous US-backed government, were granted a legal separation in Afghanistan, where women have next to no rights and domestic abuse is endemic. When Taliban forces swept into power in 2021, her husband claimed he had been forced into the divorce and commanders ordered her back to his clutches. "My daughters and I cried a lot that day," Marwa, 40, whose name has been changed for her own protection, told AFP.

"I said to myself, 'Oh God, the devil has returned'." The Taliban government adheres to an austere interpretation of Islam and has imposed severe restrictions on women's lives that the United Nations called "gender-based apartheid". Lawyers told AFP that several women have reported being dragged back into abusive marriages after Taliban commanders annulled their divorces. For months Marwa endured a new round of beatings, locked away in the house, with her hands broken and fingers cracked. "There were days when I was unconscious, and my daughters would feed me," she said. "He used to pull my hair so hard that I became partly bald. He beat me so much that all my teeth have broken."

Gathering the strength to leave, she fled hundreds of kilometres (miles) to a relative's house with her six daughters and two sons, who have all assumed fictitious names. "My children say, 'Mother, it's okay if we are starving. At least we have got rid of the abuse,'" said Marwa, sitting on the cracked floor of her bare home, clasping a string of prayer beads. "Nobody knows us here, not even our neighbours," she said, fearing her husband would discover her.

'Islam permits divorce'

In Afghanistan nine in 10 women will experience physical, sexual or psychological violence from their partner, according to the UN's mission in the country. Divorce, however, is often more taboo than the abuse itself and the culture remains unforgiving to women who part with their husbands.

Under the previous US-backed government, divorce rates were steadily rising in some cities, where the small gains in women's rights were largely limited to education and employment. Women once blamed their fate for whatever happened to them, said Nazifa, a lawyer who successfully handled around 100 divorce cases for abused women but is no longer permitted to work in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan.

As awareness grew, women realised that separating from abusive husbands was possible. "When there is no harmony left in a husband and wife relationship, even Islam permits a divorce," explained Nazifa, who only wanted to give her first name. Under the ousted regime, special family courts with women judges and lawyers were established to hear such cases, but the Taliban authorities have made their new justice system an all-male affair. Nazifa told AFP that five of her former clients have reported being in the same situation as Marwa. Another lawyer, who did not want to be identified, told

AFP she recently witnessed a court case where a woman was fighting against being forcefully reunited with her ex-husband. She added that divorces under the Taliban government are limited to when a husband was a classified drug addict or has left the country. "But in cases of domestic violence or when a husband does not agree to a divorce, then the court is not granting them," she said.

A nationwide network of shelters and services that once supported women has almost entirely collapsed, while the Ministry of Women's Affairs and the Human Rights Commission have been erased.



KABUL: File photo shows, Sana, a divorced woman, speaks during an interview with AFP in a house in an undisclosed location in Afghanistan. — AFP

'Knock on the door'

Sana was 15 when she married her cousin, 10 years older than her. "He would beat me if our baby cried or the food was not good," she said as she prepared tea on a gas stove at a home where she has been living in secret. "He used to say that a woman does not have the right to talk." With the help of a free legal service project she won a divorce from her husband in court—but her relief was shattered when Taliban commanders came knocking. Threatened with losing custody of her four daughters, she returned to her ex-husband who by then had also married another woman.

She escaped after he announced the engagement of her daughters to Taliban members. "My daughters said, 'Mother, we will commit suicide'," Sana said. She was able to gather some money and escape with her children, and with the help of a relative found a one-room house, furnished only with a gas stove and some cushions for sleeping. "Whenever there's a knock on the door, I fear that he's found me and come to take the kids away."

Ordeal for children

A Taliban official told AFP the authorities would look into such cases where previously divorced women were being forced to return to their ex-husbands. "If we receive such complaints, we will investigate them according to sharia," said Inayatullah, spokesman for the Taliban supreme court, who like many Afghans goes by one name. When asked whether the Taliban regime would acknowledge divorces granted under the previous government, he said: "This is an important and complex issue." "The Dar al-Ifa is looking into it. When it arrives at a uniform decision, then we will see," he said, referring to a court-affiliated institution that issues rulings on sharia. For Marwa and her daughters, who survive by sewing clothes, the trauma has left deep psychological wounds. "I'm afraid I won't be able to get them married," said Marwa, looking at her daughters. — AFP

defence minister," said Mao Ning. "Both sides of the Taiwan Strait are Chinese territory. China will take firm measures to safeguard its sovereignty and territorial integrity." At the National People's Congress in Beijing on Sunday, outgoing Chinese Premier Li Keqiang reiterated the mainland's opposition to Taiwanese independence, calling for "peaceful reunification." On Monday, Taiwanese Premier Chen Chien-jen asked China to "respect" Taiwan.

"Cross-strait relations should be conducted under the principles of rationality, equality and mutual respect so that the relations can develop positively in a healthy and sustainable manner," he said. — AFP

Business

TUESDAY, MARCH 7, 2023

Lebanon to quiz embattled CB chief

Dollarization likely to push more people into poverty

BEIRUT: A Lebanese judge has summoned central bank governor Riad Salameh for questioning next week, a judicial official said Monday, as the crisis-hit country advances an embezzlement probe parallel to European investigations. Salameh's brother Raja and former assistant Marianne Hoayek have also been summoned in the domestic probe launched in 2021, the official told AFP on condition of anonymity as they were not authorized to discuss the matter with the media.

They were charged in Lebanon last month with embezzlement and money laundering, illicit enrichment and tax evasion, which the Salameh brothers have denied. The official said judge Charbel Abu Samra "has set the date of March 15 to question" the three suspects.

Lebanon opened its probe following a request for assistance from Switzerland's public prosecutor probing more than \$300 million in fund movements by Riad Salameh and his brother.

The 72-year-old central bank governor is the subject of several domestic and international investigations over suspicions of money laundering and illicit enrichment. He denies all accusations against him and has rarely appeared before the judiciary, despite numerous complaints and summonses. Last month, Swiss media reported that 12 banks in the European country had received a large part of the money Salameh is alleged to have embezzled-estimated at up to \$500 million.

In January, investigators from France, Germany and Luxembourg interviewed banking officials in Beirut about the transfer of funds to countries where Salameh has significant assets. They also examined the central bank's ties to Forry Associates Ltd, a British Virgin Islands-registered company that listed Raja Salameh as its beneficiary. Forry is suspected of having brokered Lebanese treasury bonds and Eurobonds at a commission, which was then allegedly transferred to his bank accounts abroad.

European investigators, who are set to return to Lebanon this month, have been looking into private accounts in Raja Salameh's name, as well as the transfer of funds to accounts belonging to the two brothers abroad. But a separate Lebanese judicial



BEIRUT: This file photo shows a banner during a protest organized by the "Depositors' Outcry" association outside the Central Bank in Beirut to ask for deposits blocked in Lebanese banks. — AFP

source told AFP the European investigators' work might be limited in Lebanon since local charges have been leveled against the bank chief in the same case. Salameh, who has headed the central bank since 1993, is part of the Lebanese political class widely blamed for a crushing economic crisis in Lebanon that began in late 2019.

With the Lebanese economy in shambles and its currency in free fall, people spend much of their time trying to keep up with a fluctuating exchange rate. Businesses are increasingly leaning on one of the world's most reliable assets - the US dollar - as a way to cope with the worst financial crisis in its modern history.

The Lebanese pound has lost 95 per cent in value since late 2019, and now most restaurants and many stores are demanding to be paid in dollars.

While this "dollarization" aims to ease inflation and stabilize the economy, it also threatens to push more people into poverty and deepen the crisis.

That's because few in Lebanon have access to dollars to pay for food and other essentials priced that way. But endemic corruption means political and financial leaders are resisting the alternative to dollarization: long-term reforms to banks and government agencies that would end wasteful spending and jump-start the economy.

Other countries like Zimbabwe and Ecuador have turned to the dollar to beat back hyperinflation and other economic woes, with mixed success. Pakistan and Egypt also are struggling with crashing currencies but their economic crises are largely tied to an outside event - Russia's war in Ukraine, which has caused food and energy prices to soar. —AFP

President Xi vows to boost manufacturing

BEIJING: President Xi Jinping vowed to boost the country's manufacturing capacity and not rely on overseas markets, state media reported Monday. Speaking at the annual gathering of the parliament in Beijing on Sunday, Xi said China should be able to fend for itself.

"I've always said there are two critical areas for China: one is to safeguard our rice bowl, and the other is to build up a strong manufacturing sector," Xi said, according to the state-run People's Daily.

"As a great nation of 1.4 billion people, we must rely on ourselves," Xi added. "We can't depend on international markets to save us." The comments, during a meeting with delegates representing China's economically advanced Jiangsu province, belie concerns in Beijing over an increas-

ingly hostile international environment and lagging growth at home.

As China's technology ambitions have been hit with a raft of restrictions by the United States and its Western allies, Beijing has doubled down on the need to build a self-reliant industry and shift away from imports for sectors perceived as vital to national security, such as semiconductors and artificial intelligence. Washington has in recent months tightened sanctions on Chinese chip-makers, citing national security concerns and the ability for the technology to be used by China's military.

The National Party Congress (NPC) kicked off with outgoing Premier Li Keqiang announcing an increase in military spending and modest economic growth. The 2023 GDP growth goal of "about five percent" fell slightly short of market expectations and comes as Chinese authorities are grappling with how to stem the recent reorientation of global manufacturing chains to countries such as India and Vietnam.

Xi, who will start his third presidential term after securing a prece-



BEIJING: China's President Xi Jinping (right) speaks with National People's Congress Chairman Li Zhanshu during the opening session of the National People's Congress (NPC) at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing on March 5, 2023. —AFP

dent-breaking third stint as party chairman last October, spoke during the Sunday meeting about the need to ensure high-quality manufacturing that is "innovative, coordinated, green, open and shared".

China's state news agency Xinhua published other comments from Xi saying that development in these key areas will propel China forward in its bid to become a "great modern socialist country in all respects". —AFP

ILO: Gender gap at work far worse than expected

GENEVA: Women have a harder time accessing work globally than previously thought, while the gender gap in working conditions and pay has barely budged in two decades, the United Nations said Monday. The UN's International Labour Organization said it had developed a new indicator that does a better job than official unemployment rates at capturing all people without employment that are interested in finding work.

"It paints a much bleaker picture of the situation of women in the world of work than the more commonly-used unemployment rate," the ILO said in a statement, two days before International Women's Day. "The new data shows that women still have a much harder time finding a job than men." According to new ILO data, 15 percent of working-age women globally would like to work, but do not have a job, compared to 10.5 percent of men.

"This gender gap has remained almost unchanged for two decades," it said. By contrast, official unemployment rates for women and men are very similar. This, ILO said, is because the criteria used to determine if someone should officially be considered unemployed tend to dispropor-



tionately exclude women.

It pointed out that personal and family responsibilities, including unpaid care work, disproportionately affects women. Such activities, it said, not only often prevent women from working, but also from actively searching for employment or being available to work on short notice, which are criteria for being considered unemployed.

The UN labor organization found that the jobs gap was particularly severe in low-income coun-

tries, where nearly a quarter of women were unable to find a job. For men, the corresponding rate was below 17 percent, ILO said.

Access to employment is not the only problem. ILO highlighted that women tend to be overrepresented in certain types of vulnerable jobs, including helping out in relatives' businesses rather than being in own-account work. "This vulnerability, together with lower employment rates, takes a toll on women's earnings," ILO said. —AFP

KNCC to hold AGM on March 30

KUWAIT: The Ordinary and Extraordinary General Assembly of the Kuwait National Cinema Company (KNCC) will be held on March 30. The meeting will discuss cash distribution proposal and amended Articles of Association and the Memorandum of Association. According to a statement by the Boursa Kuwait on Monday, April 6 has been set as a backup date for the general meeting in the event that the first date does not meet the legal quorum.

The General Assembly of the "Cinema" is discussing the Board of Directors' recommendation to distribute 60 percent of the paid-up capital as cash dividends of 60 fils per share for the past year after deducting treasury shares, and to pay a bonus to the Board of Directors at a value of KD 35,000.

The General Assembly will also consider approving the reports of the Board of Directors and the auditor for the previous year, the governance report, stopping deduction from net profits in favor of the compulsory reserve to increase it over half of the company's issued capital, and deducting 10 percent in favor of the optional reserve in the amount of KD 789,870 to strengthen the company's financial position.

As for the Extraordinary General Assembly, it will consider amending Article 5 of the Memorandum of Association and Article 4 of the Articles of Association, so that the activity, instead of establishing and operating cinemas in Kuwait and abroad, becomes the retail sale of gifts and luxuries, activity code 477367, based on the approval of the Activities Classification Committee.

It will also consider amending Article 12 of the Memorandum of Association and Articles of Association relating to members of the Board of Directors, and Article 24 of the Memorandum of Association and Articles of Association related to the Companies Law to be replaced from Law No 25 of 2012 to Law No 1 of 2016. Article 50 of the Memorandum of Association and Articles of Association will also be amended. It is noteworthy that the "Cinema" achieved a profit of KD 7.63 million in 2022 compared to KD 4.39 million in the previous year, an increase of 74 percent.

Consumer groups upset as WhatsApp addresses EU concerns

BRUSSELS: Consumer organizations on Monday complained that WhatsApp's promises to be more transparent about privacy policy changes were insufficient, after the EU hailed commitments by the messaging service. The EU began talks with WhatsApp, owned by Facebook parent Meta, after a 2021 complaint by European Consumer Organization (BEUC) about changes to its terms of use and privacy policy.

The European Commission, the EU's executive arm, on Monday said WhatsApp agreed to make it easier for users to reject updates when they disagree with them and to ensure it is clear about when rejecting an update would mean users can no longer use the app.

WhatsApp also promised users' personal data are not shared with third-parties or other Meta-owned companies, including Facebook, for advertising purposes. The BEUC, which represents 46 independent consumer organizations in 32 countries, slammed the commitments as "a disappointment for consumers". The BEUC pointed to the fact that WhatsApp's promises only apply to future changes and do not offer a solution to users who accepted the app's policy updates in 2021.

"With this weak reaction, consumer authorities are sending a very worrying signal accepting that a tech giant like WhatsApp can breach consumer rights and then get away with just a promise to do better in the future," said BEUC deputy director general Ursula Pachl.

The BEUC also said the EU did not address its complaint's main point, WhatsApp's "aggressive" practices and the lack of remedy for consumers who were under pressure. The commission said the Consumer Protection Cooperation Network (CPC) will monitor how WhatsApp implements the commitments when making any future policy updates. The CPC will, "where necessary, enforce compliance" including the possibility of fines. "Consumers have a right to understand what they agree to and what that choice entails concretely, so that they can decide whether they want to continue using the platform," EU justice commissioner Didier Reynders said. Meta did not comment on the commission's announcement. — AFP

Business

Oil prices and non-oil activity push Angolan economic recovery: IMF

IMF executive board holds consultations with Angolan officials

WASHINGTON: Angola's economy continued to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic in 2022, supported by higher oil prices, improved oil production, and resilient non-oil activity, International Monetary Fund said in a report on Saturday.

Non-oil growth was broad-based despite a challenging external environment. Growth is estimated at 3.5 percent for 2023. Headline inflation declined significantly to 13.8 percent y/y at end-December 2022, driven by lower global food prices, a stronger kwanza, and previous efforts by the central bank to tighten monetary policy, the report said which was prepared after consultation with Angolan officials.

The non-oil primary deficit increased in 2022 following higher-than-budgeted capital expenditure and higher-than-expected fuel subsidy costs. Nonetheless, the public debt-to-GDP ratio fell by an estimated 17.5 percentage points of GDP to an estimated 66.1 percent of GDP, aided by a stronger exchange rate.

The current account is estimated to have remained in a large surplus in 2022, while foreign currency reserve coverage remained adequate. Overall growth is expected to continue in 2023 and reach about 4 percent in the medium term, as the authorities' structural reform agenda supports the non-oil sector. Inflation should continue its gradually declining path, reaching single digits in 2024.

The 2023 budget envisions a resumption of fiscal adjustment, which is necessary to approach the authorities' twin medium-term fiscal and debt targets and guard against debt vulnerabilities. Downside risks to the near-term outlook include a larger-than-expected decline in global oil prices and renewed global food price pressures, as well as adverse weather conditions that impact the agriculture sector.



LUANDA: Angola's economy continued to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic in 2022, supported by higher oil prices, improved oil production, and resilient non-oil activity, International Monetary Fund said in a report on Saturday.

Under Article IV of the IMF's articles of agreement, the IMF holds bilateral discussions with members, usually every year. A staff team visits the country, collects economic and financial information, and discusses with officials the country's economic developments and policies.

Given continued vulnerabilities and elevated global uncertainty, directors encouraged the authorities to maintain the reform momentum and diversify the economy to safeguard the hard-won macroeconomic stability and to ensure an inclusive and sustainable growth.

Directors welcomed the authorities' commitment to their medium term fiscal and debt targets and called for ambitious, growth friendly adjustments to achieve those

targets. In that context, they recommended further mobilization of non-oil revenue, strengthening revenue administration and public financial management, and reforming state owned enterprises. Such efforts, together with spending rationalization, would create the necessary fiscal space for public investment and targeted social spending.

Directors also welcomed the authorities' commitment to fuel subsidy reforms when conditions allow, and encouraged faster implementation of the cash transfer program. Continued sound debt management is also crucial. Directors commended the Banco Nacional de Angola's (BNA) decisive actions that resulted in a large disinflation in 2022. Noting that

inflation remains elevated and risks to price stability persist, Directors recommended a wait and see approach to monetary policy actions to support the disinflationary path. Directors also supported the BNA's efforts to strengthen its policy effectiveness, including by aligning the interbank rate with the policy rate and transitioning toward an inflation targeting framework. They also welcomed the authorities' commitment to exchange rate flexibility and their plan to eliminate the remaining exchange restrictions. Directors encouraged the authorities to continue their efforts to strengthen financial stability, building on strong previous progress. They noted, in particular, the need to implement the remaining secondary legislation needed to fully implement the Financial Institutions Law, including for bank recovery and resolution planning.

Directors also emphasized the importance of adopting a more comprehensive approach to dealing with problem banks. Efforts to address nonperforming loans should continue. Directors highlighted the need to continue the strong reform momentum, since structural reforms would be essential to diversify Angola's economy and achieve inclusive and sustainable growth. They emphasized the need to bolster human and physical capital and access to private credit. Directors also noted the need to make further progress on strengthening governance, transparency, and the AML/CFT regime, to improve the business environment and promote private investment. In this context, they encouraged publication of the audited COVID expenditure reports. Completing the anti-corruption strategy is also important. Directors also commended the authorities' focus on building climate resilience and on fostering gender equality.



Pakistan needs to give assurance on BoP gap to secure IMF aid: Report

KARACHI: Pakistan will be required to give an assurance that its balance of payments (BoP) deficit is fully financed for the fiscal year ending in June to unlock the next tranche of IMF funding, the fund's resident representative said on Monday. According to reports, Pakistan is seeking Saudi Arabia's confirmation for securing additional deposits of \$2 billion and a \$950 million loan from the World Bank and the AIIB for signing a Staff-Level Agreement (SLA) with the IMF, media reports said on Monday. Pakistan is eagerly waiting for the \$1.1 billion tranche of funding from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which the global lender is refusing unless crucial decisions are made by the government and implemented.

A top government official dealing with the IMF said, "We are hopeful," when asked about the possibility of getting assurance on deposits from Saudi Arabia and a loan from the World Bank. The News International newspaper reported. The linked \$950 million loans from World Bank's Resilient Institution for Sustainable Economy (RISE-II) and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) will be approved only if Pakistan secures the IMF bailout. Geo News reported. The cash-starved country is expecting to strike the much-needed agreement with the global lender within the next few days, another top official said, adding that the Fund was reluctant to give any time frame for the signing of the agreement. "Pakistan is facing difficulty in its talks with the IMF due to the increased hostility between China and the United States as they have to secure the staff-level agreement (SLA) in a delicate balancing act to steer the economy and diplomacy in such a way that suits Islamabad's larger interest," the report said. Islamabad will receive \$1.3 billion from China, its all-weather ally, to shore up its fast-depleting forex reserves, Finance Minister Ishaq Dar said last week after Beijing transferred \$700 to the cash-strapped country in February.

Pakistan is taking various steps on the Fund's behest for the release of a \$1.1 billion tranche under the \$7 billion loan facility, including unveiling a mini-budget for fetching additional tax revenues of Rs170 billion by raising the GST rate from 17 per cent to 18 per cent.

The government has also raised the power tariff by over Rs 7 per unit, another imposition of power surcharge of Rs 3.82 per unit, increased the gas tariff, allowing massive adjustments in the exchange rate, increased the petroleum development levy and hiked the policy rate by 300 basis points, jacking it up from 17 per cent to 20 per cent, the report said.

Pakistan and the IMF have been holding virtual talks after the two sides held 10 days of intensive negotiations with an IMF delegation in Islamabad from January 31 to February 9, which failed to reach an agreement on the \$1.1 billion tranche of funding from the global lender. — Agencies

Climate change could cost Germany almost 1 trillion euros by 2050

BERLIN: More frequent extreme weather events as a result of climate change could cost Germany close to one trillion euros by 2050, according to a government-commissioned study published Monday. The consequences of increasing global temperatures, such as severe floods or heat, could cost Europe's largest economy up to 910 billion euros (\$979 billion) in a "strong" scenario without any adaptation measures, according to the report. The figure was a "lower-bound" estimate, the economy ministry said, with the analytical model unable to take account of all the potential impacts of climate change.

Extra deaths, falling quality of life and the extinction of animal and plant species were not included "despite their high significance", the ministry said.

The total costs were therefore likely to be "significantly higher" than those in the modeled scenarios.

A "weak climate change" outcome would see the costs come to 280 billion euros were no adaptation made to the impact of rising temperatures. Mitigation measures considered included investment in climate change resistant plant varieties, better irrigation and public research funding.

Together, the steps could "completely" compensate for the costs of climate change in the mildest scenario,

while reducing the costs by 60 percent in the most severe situation. The study underlined the need for "ambitious" climate policies now in order to spare future generations the cost, junior minister Stefan Wenzel said in a statement. "Climate change is already having serious economic consequences, which can increase massively," Wenzel said.

According to the study, Germany had already reg-



BERLIN: The consequences of increasing global temperatures, such as severe floods or heat, could cost German economy up to 910 billion euros (\$979 billion) in a "strong" scenario without any adaptation measures, according to the report.

UN takes step towards new way of tracking greenhouse gases

GENEVA: The United Nations announced Monday that it had taken a significant step towards trying to fill a key gap in the fight against climate change: standardized, real-time tracking of greenhouse gases.

The UN's World Meteorological Organization has come up with a new Global Greenhouse Gas Monitoring Infrastructure that aims to provide better ways of measuring planet-warming pollution and help inform policy choices. The WMO's new platform will integrate space-based and surface-based observing systems, and seek to clarify uncertainties about where greenhouse gas emissions end up.

It should result in much faster and sharper data on how the planet's atmosphere is changing. "We know from our measurements that greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere are at record high," WMO chief Petteri Taalas said. The three major greenhouse gases are carbon dioxide, methane and nitrous oxide. Of those, CO2 accounts for around 66 percent of the warming effect on the climate. "The increase in CO2 levels from 2020 to 2021 was higher than the average growth rate over the past decade, and methane saw

the biggest year-on-year jump since measurements started," Taalas said.

The 2015 Paris Agreement on climate change saw countries agree to cap global warming at "well below" two degrees Celsius (3.6 degrees Fahrenheit) above levels measured between 1850 and 1900 — and 1.5C if possible. The WMO said there needed to be stronger scientific underpinnings of climate change mitigation actions taken under the agreement.

"There are still uncertainties, especially regarding the role in the carbon cycle of the ocean, the land biosphere and the permafrost areas," Taalas said. "We therefore need to undertake greenhouse gas monitoring within an integrated... framework in order to be able to account for natural sources and sinks. "This will provide vital information and support for implementation of the Paris Agreement."

The WMO held a symposium in late January that brought together experts from a wide range of fields to start fitting the jigsaw pieces together.

During a meeting last week, the agency's executive council endorsed the plans they came up with, it said Monday. Further approval will be needed from the World Meteorological Congress—the WMO's top decision-making body—in May.

The decision to tie together WMO's expertise in weather prediction and climate analysis "will be seen as a historic step", said Lars Peter Riishojgaard, deputy director of the organization's infrastructure department. — AFP



Positive regional factors help push GCC stocks higher

KUWAIT: Positive local factors helped push GCC stock markets to the upside, drumming up sentiment in the region. At the same time, energy volatility and new hints around US monetary policy could have a strong impact. Concerns surrounding demand from China could impact oil prices to the downside after the country set lower-than-expected growth targets as the economy emerges from sanitary restrictions. Traders have hoped that a Chinese-led recovery could help drive oil prices higher this year and could eventually revise their estimates in particular while the Federal Reserve and the ECB could adopt more stringent monetary policies. Strong fundamentals in the local economy in general and solid development perspectives for the real estate sector could drive increases in stock prices in Dubai. However, some doubts could arise this week before the publication of economic data in the US and the intervention of the Federal Reserve's president.

Traders responded positively to the announcement of a new IPO from Presight after ADNOC Gas successfully drew investors' attention which largely oversubscribed. Other expected listings this year could help drive the main index to the upside, reversing the current trend even if uncertainty in oil markets and monetary policy could fuel some caution. The large drop in natural gas prices could weigh on the Qatari stock market's rebound but could also fuel some more demand as some price-sensitive buyers could return to energy markets. At the same time, expectations of tighter monetary policy could support banking stocks. The Saudi stock market surge could be tainted by the uncertainty surrounding oil markets which could push traders toward caution. Meanwhile, the market continues to find support in solid local economic fundamentals which could help maintain healthy growth.

Business

Poll: Most French people support strikes against pension reform

Strikes set to hit transport, energy and oil refining sectors

PARIS: A majority of French people support rolling strikes announced against President Emmanuel Macron's pension reform, a poll showed Monday, underlining the unpopularity of changes the government views as essential. Massive strikes are expected from Tuesday, with unions promising to bring the country "to a standstill" and strikes set to hit many sectors such as transport, energy and oil refining.

A total of 56 percent of respondents said they supported rolling strikes and 59 percent said they backed the call to bring the country to a standstill, a poll by the Elabe survey group for the BFM news channel showed on Monday. Two in three people (64 percent) support the protest movement in general, which is seeking to force the government to abandon its plans to raise the retirement age to 64 from its current level of 62. "We don't want French people to be, quote, unquote, 'victims' of a long-term blockade," government spokesman Olivier Veran told France 2 on Monday after warning last week that the strikes could lead to an "ecological, agricultural and health catastrophe."

"The history of protest movements in France shows that you don't have to block the whole country and cause such major inconveniences for people in their daily lives," he added. Only one in five regional and high-speed trains are expected to run

on Tuesday while a leading trade unionist representing refinery workers has vowed to bring the French economy "to its knees."

More than 260 demonstrations are expected nationwide, with between 1.1-1.4 million people expected to hit the streets, a police source told AFP on condition of anonymity.

The upper limit of that range would represent the biggest day of protests in decades, higher than the 1.27 million who took part in demonstrations on January 31, and bigger than previous pension reform protests in 2010. Macron's plan to raise the age of retirement to 64 is a flagship policy of his second term in office, which he proposed in his manifesto for re-election last April when he defeated far-right leader Marine Le Pen.

The 45-year-old has called the change "essential" because of deficits forecast for the system for most of the next 25 years according to analysis by the independent Pensions Advisory Council.

France lags behind its neighbors and other major European economies where the retirement age has already been hiked to 65 or above to reflect higher life expectancy. The poll also contained some encouraging news for the government: 64 percent of people thought the reform would be enacted despite the protests, with the Senate currently debating the draft legislation. —AFP



LESQUIN, France: French Trade Unionists (right) give out flyers to drivers next to members of the French Gendarmerie's Surveillance and intervention platoon (left) during a "filtering operation" to announce actions for a nationwide strike planned for March 7, 2023, at the Regional Transport Centre of Lesquin, near Lille, on March 6, 2023. —AFP

Seoul says will halt WTO dispute over Japan export curbs

SEOUL: South Korea said Monday it would halt its World Trade Organization complaint over Japanese export curbs, after announcing plans to compensate the victims of Japan's forced wartime labor.

In 2019, Japan imposed export controls on key industrial materials needed for semiconductors and displays and removed South Korea from its "preferred trading nations" list. At the time, experts said the moves were likely retaliation for a 2018 South Korean court ruling that Japanese companies should pay restitution to Korean forced laborers during World War II.

"The two governments have decided to swiftly carry out bilateral consultations related to the current issues on export regulations to return to the way things were before July 2019," Seoul's trade ministry said in a statement. "The Korean government has decided to halt the WTO dispute process during the consultation," the statement added.

The moves came shortly after South Korea announced plans on Monday to compensate victims of Japan's forced wartime labor, aiming to end a "vicious cycle" in the Asian powers' relations and boost ties to counter the nuclear-armed North. South Korea's trade ministry said it was not withdrawing the WTO complaint, which it said would depend on how the bilateral consultations progress.

In its complaint to the WTO, South Korea has said Tokyo's export restrictions were a discriminatory act that violated WTO trade rules. —AFP

Norway earns record oil, gas revenue after Ukraine war

OSLO: The Norwegian state raked in record oil and gas revenues last year after the war in Ukraine sent energy prices soaring, official figures showed Monday. Norway earned 1.5 trillion kroner (\$140 billion) in revenues from oil and gas, according to estimates by Statistics Norway (SSB).

It was "by far the highest ever recorded in the statistics" and almost three times the 498 billion kroner earned in 2021, according to SSB. Norway became Europe's largest supplier of natural gas in 2022 as Russia cut deliveries and the Scandinavian country increased its own exports.

Oslo's income was buoyed by record high European gas prices over the summer which have since subsided. The exceptional revenues have sometimes earned Norway the label of "war profiteer", a label that Oslo rejects. Norway has pledged 75 billion kroner in civil and military aid to Ukraine over the next five years (2023-2027), or 15 billion kroner per year. The Norwegian state earns revenues from the country's oil and gas reserves through taxes imposed on oil companies, its direct holdings in oil and gas fields and infrastructure and dividends paid by the energy giant Equinor, in which it holds a 67 percent stake. —AFP

Gulf Bank announces 10 winners of Al-Danah monthly draw

KUWAIT: As part of its ongoing commitment to reward its customers and account holders, Gulf Bank has announced the 10 monthly winners of the Al-Danah account draw for the month of February 2023. The lucky winners who will be taking home a prize of KD 1,000 each are:

- Dalal Khaled Hamad Al-Rejeeb
- Bahaa Mahmoud Abdulsalam Al-Shareef
- Khaleedah Jaafar Abul Abdulraheem
- Maryam Salem Abdullah Najem Abdullah (Minor)
- Nawaf Ahmad Hussain Arti
- Zamzam Hmaidan Marzouq Mohammad
- Ahmed Abdullah Sarhan Abdullah
- Amal Abdullah Akkari
- Salem Hmuod Mohsin Batah
- Sabah Zayed Obaid Shahier

The last opportunity to deposit and qualify for the semi-annual Al-Danah millionaire draw prize of KD 1 million, is March 31, 2023, which will be held on July 13, 2023, in the presence of representatives from both the Ministry of Commerce and Industry and Ernst & Young.

The Al-Danah account is one of the most rewarding savings accounts in Kuwait, with its periodic draws that award valuable prizes and

multiple benefits for account holders. Gulf Bank's Al-Danah account offers monthly opportunities to win KD 1,000 to ten lucky winners, in addition to two quarterly draws with KD 100,000 prizes each, a semi-annual draw prize of KD 1,000,000 and a grand draw prize of KD 1,500,000. Gulf Bank is the only bank in Kuwait that proudly creates two millionaires a year. Al-Danah customers stand to win the semi-annual draw prize of KD 1 million, whose winner Gulf Bank announced last July, and an upcoming grand draw prize of KD 1.5 million. The annual grand draw is currently scheduled to take place next year on January 18, 2024, in the presence of representatives from both the Ministry of Commerce and Ernst & Young.

The Al-Danah account is the only account in Kuwait that transfers the customers' chances of winning from the previous year to the next year, as part of a program that rewards customers for their loyalty to Gulf Bank. In order to increase one's chances of winning, customers must maintain a minimum of KD 200 in their accounts, or deposit continuously to increase their chances of winning. Al-Danah account holders are eligible to win Gulf Bank's upcoming monthly, quarterly, and annual Al-Danah draws.

Gulf Bank's vision is to be the leading Kuwaiti Bank of the Future. The Bank is constantly engaging and empowering its employees as part of an inclusive and diversified workplace in recognition of every employee's role in delivering customer excellence and serving the community at large. With its



extensive network of branches and innovative digital services, Gulf Bank is able to give its customers the choice of how and where to conduct their banking transactions, all while ensuring a simple and seamless banking experience.

Gulf Bank is committed to maintaining robust developments in sustainability at environmental, social and governance levels through diverse sustainability initiatives, strategically selected to benefit the Bank both internally and externally. Gulf Bank supports Kuwait Vision 2035 "New Kuwait" and works with various parties to achieve it.

Stocks gain as rate hike hopes offset muted China outlook

LONDON: Major stock markets mostly rose Monday, with Paris briefly reaching a fresh record, as traders reacted to indications the Federal Reserve could soon end a policy of hiking interest rates. The Paris CAC 40 went back above 7,400 points, having breached the level for the first time last month. That came amid a record-high for London's FTSE 100 also in February as investors bet on the eurozone and Britain swerving recession this year.

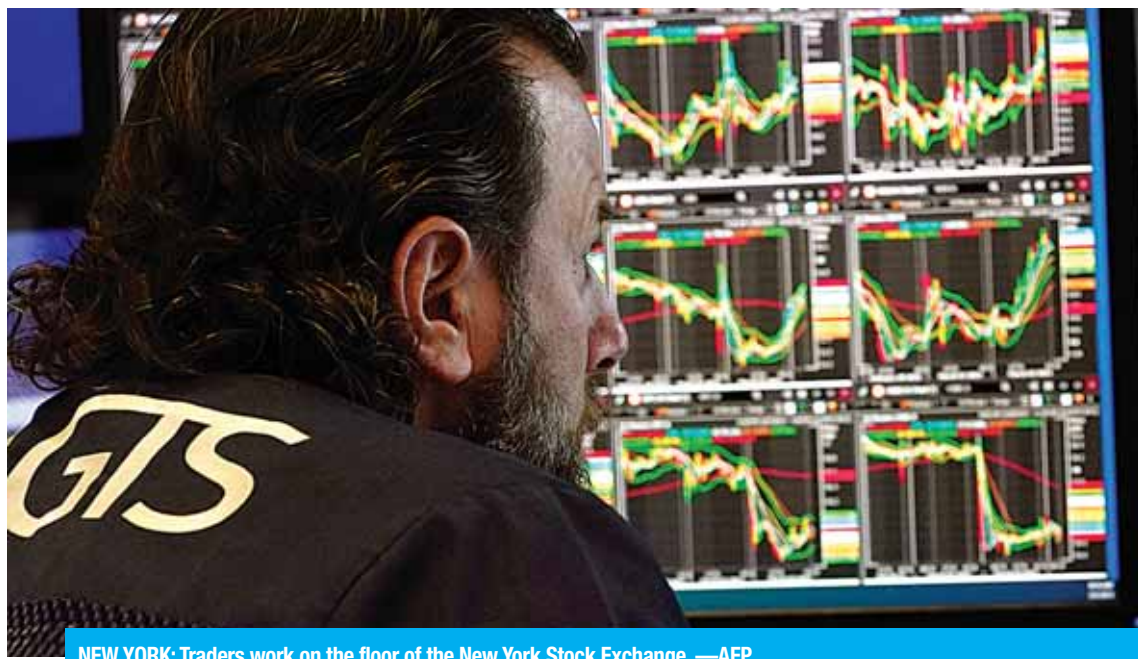
However, lingering fears about high interest rates aimed at cooling elevated inflation have dampened equities in recent sessions. Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell is set to discuss monetary policy before the House and Senate committees on Tuesday, proceedings that will be scrutinized by investors seeking rate outlook clues.

That comes ahead of US payroll data on Friday and the Bank of Japan's two-day policy meeting from Thursday, which will be the last for governor Haruhiko Kuroda. China's outgoing Premier Li Keqiang on Sunday said the country's economy would expand "around five percent" this year, slightly below what analysts had predicted. The world's second-largest economy grew three percent last year, missing its target of around 5.5 percent under the impact of strict

MNCs relocating HQs to Saudi may get tax exemption

RIYADH: Minister of Investment Khalid Al-Falih has stated that multinationals relocating their regional headquarters to Saudi Arabia this year are more likely to get tax exemption. Al-Falih made these remarks to the British newspaper Financial Times, where he noted that the multinational companies that will be included in the exemption are those who relocated their regional headquarters to the Kingdom this year with the aim of securing lucrative government contracts.

An announcement will be soon issued to clarify the regulations for the multinational companies, he said. "Business is going on as usual for us here inside and outside Saudi Arabia" Al-Falih confirmed, while adding that the operations outside Saudi Arabia will be taxed in those entities' country of operations, and will not be intermingled or mixed with the regional headquarters in the Kingdom.



NEW YORK: Traders work on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange. —AFP

COVID-19 containment policies and a property crisis.

China lifted its pandemic restrictions in December. "China set itself one of the lowest gross domestic product target in many years, hinting to investors that the big reopening boom may not be as positive for the global economy as hoped," noted Neil Wilson, chief market analyst at Finalto trading group.

"Oil and other industrial commodities slipped on the news, whilst basic resources stocks in London were hit, dragging the FTSE 100 marginally into the red." Oil prices slid on expectations Chinese demand wouldn't be as strong as forecast, while the dollar largely steadied against main rivals. —AFP

The Regional Headquarters Program (RHQ) is a joint initiative between the Ministry of Investments and the Royal Commission for Riyadh City, which invites global companies to move their regional headquarters to Saudi Arabia. They will be taxed, only for limited profits, Al-Falih said, adding that, most likely those companies will be granted tax relief.

Saudi Arabia does not want to incur additional costs for companies, he said. Al-Falih pointed out that they have realized that they have to do everything they can through policy and regulation to ensure that companies do not incur additional risks or costs from alternative jurisdictions for managing their regional operations, and the biggest one of course is taxation. Saudi Arabia is the biggest economy MENA, and also ranks 18th in the ranking of the largest economies in the world.

Thus the regional headquarters scheme, and invest in Saudi initiative comes as part of an ambitious plan to make the Kingdom less dependent on oil revenues by transforming Saudi Arabia into a hub for trade and finance. Major Saudi companies are set to spend hundreds of billions of dollars on new projects during the upcoming decade, which would attract multinationals to the Kingdom.

About 80 companies, including Unilever and



Khalid Al-Falih

Siemens, have already been granted licenses to move their regional headquarters to Saudi Arabia, the British Financial Times said, adding many of which are expected to be based in Riyadh's King Abdullah Financial District.

It is worth mentioning that PepsiCo had announced earlier that it had relocated its Middle East chief executive's office to the Kingdom. Saudi Arabia, which imposes a 20 percent corporate income tax, has promised its own incentives, including exemptions on visa limits and recruitment quotas for Saudi nationals for 10 years. —Agencies

Lifestyle | Features



Iranian pastry chef Shahrzad Shokouhivand, poses for a picture with members of her team in front of her luxury pastry shop in Tehran. — AFP photos



Iranian pastry chef Shahrzad Shokouhivand (left), works behind the counter at her luxury pastry shop in Tehran.

Last original Lynyrd Skynyrd member Gary Rossington dies at 71

Guitarist Gary Rossington, the last remaining original member of US rock band Lynyrd Skynyrd, died on Sunday, the band said. He was 71. Rossington was a founding member of the Southern rock group best known for the 1974 song "Sweet Home Alabama." "It is with our deepest sympathy and sadness that we have to advise, that we lost our brother, friend, family member, songwriter and guitarist, Gary Rossington, today," the band wrote on Facebook.

"Gary is now with his Skynyrd brothers and family in heaven and playing it pretty, like he always does," it added. The band did not announce a cause of death, but Rossington had suffered a series of heart problems, including undergoing emergency heart surgery in 2021, according to a post from the group at the time.

Rossington was born in 1951 in the southern state of Florida, founding the first iteration of Lynyrd Skynyrd in 1964 with drummer Bob Burns and bassist Larry Junstrom.

He contributed the distinct slide guitar leads that helped make the band's 1973 nearly 10-minute-long "Free Bird" a lasting hit. The guitarist survived several brutal accidents in the 1970s, including a serious car accident in 1976 and the infamous plane crash in 1977 that killed three members of the band.

The group broke up after the deaths of lead singer Ronnie Van Zant, guitarist Steve Gaines and backing vocalist Cassie Gaines in the crash, but reformed in 1987 with new members, including Van Zant's younger brother, Johnny, on lead vocals. Rossington was the only original member still with the band, which has continued to perform, with a festival date set for this month. The right-leaning rockers were among bands that took to the stage on the sidelines of the 2016 Republican convention. — AFP



In this file photo musician Gary Rossington of Lynyrd Skynyrd performs during KAABOO Texas at the AT&T Stadium in Arlington, Texas. — AFP

'CHANGE' FOR IRAN WOMEN: PASTRY CHEF RISES TO THE OCCASION

She could have left Iran, as many of her contemporaries did, but Paris-trained pastry chef Shahrzad Shokouhivand decided to stay and work to make women's lives better inside the country. And the icing on the cake? She and her husband now employ 70 people — mostly women. "It's only by working here that we'll change things in Iran," said the 36-year-old, speaking to AFP in one of her two chic cafe-pastry shops in Tehran.



Iranian pastry chef Shahrzad Shokouhivand, poses for a picture inside her luxury pastry shop in Tehran.

She and her husband do admit that at one stage they thought of leaving the Islamic republic, choosing the path of exile. "Most of our friends have gone to Canada, the United States or Australia," said her husband Babak Mehrabani. "But we decided not to emigrate."

For many young graduates, economic considerations influence the decision to stay in their sanction-hit home country or move abroad. Such concerns may be

bolstered by the protest movement that has swept the country since the September death in custody of Iranian Kurd Mahsa Amini, following her arrest for an alleged breach of strict Islamic dress rules for women.

Their decision to stay in Iran has paid off, Shokouhivand and her husband believe. Like many other residents of Tehran she fervently wants to hope that "things are changing". "Despite everything, I remain optimistic for women in Iran," she said. That belief is shared by 27-year-old Minoo, also a chef, who notes fewer women than before wear obligatory headscarves in public places in the teeming capital.

'Respect the law'

The requirement for women to wear the headscarf in public was enshrined in law shortly after the Islamic revolution of 1979. "What I see on the faces of women today is very different from six months ago" before the protests erupted, Minoo said.

Not all women feel the same way. Homeira, a retired 58-year-old teacher, said she "grew up with the veil". "Wearing the hijab is the law of our country and we must respect the law," she said. "Unfortunately, our young people do not accept it and criticize the religion," Homeira added, while also defending the right of people to choose.

Shokouhivand believes that as a woman, "you have to work a lot harder if you're to succeed in business, at home and also in your social life". But experiencing such obstacles "also means that you progress". It was her childhood dream to become a pastry chef, and in 2017 she went to Paris for three months to the renowned Le Cordon Bleu cook-



Iranian pastry chef Shahrzad Shokouhivand, poses for a picture with a cake in the kitchen of her luxury pastry shop in Tehran.

ing school. On her return she opened a pastry shop in the city center on the site of a store that used to sell handbags. She kept its name, Femme Chic. Now the well-off of Tehran flock to sample her tarte Tatin, baba — without the rum — and even a version of the Breton kouign amann cake.

'Uncertainty'

Now, five years later, she and her husband have two shops and a 70-strong workforce of mostly women. The business is also profitable, despite them having to reduce their margins because of the rampant inflation sweeping the country. But "despite the uncertainty, we remain ambitious".

Now she and her husband are thinking of opening pastry shops in other cities such as Shiraz in the south and Mashhad in the east. And maybe also abroad — Dubai or Doha if they can find local part-

ners. They even have the "slightly crazy" desire to open one in Paris.

But back to the present, Shokouhivand hopes to see the lifting of the severe, mostly US, sanctions over Tehran's nuclear policy that are squeezing the country. Because of the sanctions, she says, "it is very difficult to find quality chocolate, good butter and vanilla" among other essential baking ingredients.

But even this drawback has a plus side. "It forces us to be creative" and make more use of Iran's own abundant resources of fruits, nuts and spices, like pistachios, hazelnuts and saffron. With alcohol banned in Iran, her take on the famous baba is the baba Tabrizi — named for the northwestern Tabriz region — in which a syrup of cardamom and saffron replaces the rum. Delicious. — AFP

French island restaurant wins 3-star Michelin ranking

A restaurant tucked away in the corner of a French island won the coveted three-star ranking in the latest edition of the Michelin Guide unveiled on Monday. La Marine is headed by 47-year-old chef Alexandre Couillon, who has not been held back by the fact that his surname means "half-wit" in French. Tasting his exquisite seafood and vegetables means travelling to the small island of Noirmoutier in the Bay of Biscay and then out to its farthest point.

"It is the perfect illustration of a meal that is worth the trip," the head of the guide, Gwendal Poullennec, told AFP. Along with his wife Celine, who handles front-of-house duties, Couillon has created an experience that is "sincere and radiant", he added. La Marine becomes one of only 29 restaurants in France to hold Michelin's top three-star ranking in the latest guide, which was unveiled in a



Alexandre Couillon celebrates after being awarded a third Michelin star.

ceremony in the eastern city of Strasbourg. "This is a star for both of us," a highly emotional Couillon told the crowd as he accepted the award along-

side his wife. Last week, Michelin made the shock announcement that Guy Savoy, repeatedly named the best chef in the world by global review aggregator

La Liste, had been downgraded to two stars for his Monnaie de Paris restaurant.

The new guide saw 39 restaurants awarded a star for the first time, while four others earned a second star. France's restaurant scene has been spreading around the country in recent years, away from its traditional hubs in Paris and Lyon.

Only seven of the newly promoted restaurants were in the greater Paris region. The Pays de la Loire had five new winners, while the northern Hauts-de-France region once something of a gastronomic backwater-picked up four. Like many of the most celebrated eateries of the moment, La Marine has a stripped-back vibe and menus that are guided by the seasons and local ingredients, much of it coming directly from the fishing boats of the port it overlooks. Couillon took over the family restaurant in 1999. He received his first and sec-



Belgian chef Mallory Gabasi (right) is awarded Young Chef of the Year by chairman of Michelin group Florent Menegaux.

ond Michelin stars in 2007 and 2013, respectively, and was named cook of the year by a rival guide, Le Gault et Millau, in 2016. — AFP



Chefs gather on stage during the 2023 edition of the Michelin guide awards ceremony in Strasbourg, eastern France. — AFP photos

Lifestyle | Features



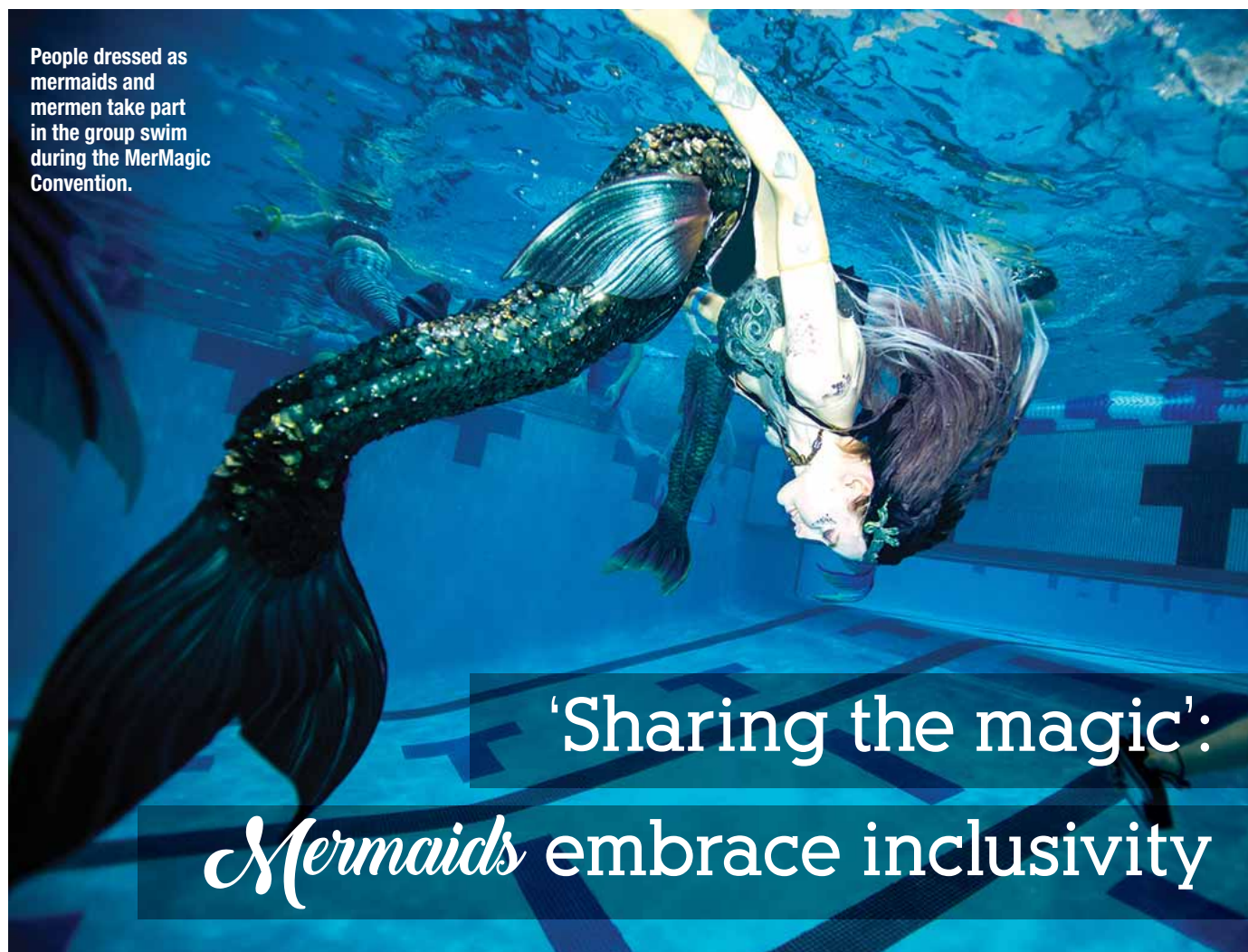
Helena McLeod (right), 33, meets with Alice Doyle (left), 26, in the red carpet room for the mermaid gala at the Marriott Dulles Airport. — AFP photos



A silicone tale sits on the side of the pool during the MerMagic Convention at the Freedom Aquatic & Fitness Center in Manassas.



A person who goes by the mermaid name Merlot prepares for a group photo and group swim during the MerMagic Convention at the Freedom Aquatic & Fitness Center in Manassas, Virginia.



People dressed as mermaids and mermen take part in the group swim during the MerMagic Convention.

'Sharing the magic': Mermaids embrace inclusivity

Like mythical creatures from an animation classic brought to life, hundreds of people donned finned outfits and took to Virginia's indoor waters to celebrate the magic of mermaids, a glittering spectacle hailed by participants embracing diversity and inclusion.

The MerMagic Convention held at an aquatic center in Manassas, in the eastern United States, is billed as the world's largest dedicated to mermaids, and attracts enthusiasts from all walks — or swims — of life. Among those diving deep into the glimmer and glam is Helena McLeod, who lives with Charcot-Marie-Tooth, a nerve disease that has left the 33-year-old redhead unable to fully swim as a mermaid.

She still gets into her elaborate ridged silicone fin, with the help of her husband Darren, and splashes at the pool's edge when she isn't navigating the convention booths, her wheelchair fashioned into a purple-and-gold clamshell. "Sharing the magic and making kids smile" is her passion at conventions, she told AFP. "I love it when they go 'Ah, a mermaid!'"

When she started playing the role, the number of mermaids with disabilities was small, "but there's a lot more now," said McLeod, who carries with her a sign bearing her "helenathemermaid" Instagram address and the hashtag #merabled.

With multiple ages, orientations, ethnicities and abilities represented in and out of the pool — which can get crowded, with dozens of mermaids and mermen

diving, flipping and swimming at once — organizers have embraced the inclusivity of their mission.

In addition to programs on fin treatment and water safety, the convention hosted workshops this weekend on "Diversity in Mermaiding" and "MerMakeup for All Shades of the Lagoon" — not to mention a panel boldly titled "Fat Mermaids Make Waves."

For 19-year-old Merlot, being a mermaid is about participants expressing their creative selves. "Anybody — any age, race, body type, disabled people, anyone — can be a mermaid," she said after squeezing into her red-and-white glittery suit much as a teenager would lie on the floor to wriggle into a pair of too-tight jeans. "There is no limitations," she added. "It's whatever you think it should be."

A woman who calls herself Chobo said she has been part of the mermaid world for six or seven years. Herself disabled, the beaming 27-year-old with pink, purple and aquamarine hair plunged into the pool, propelling herself by kicking her fluke-like monofin.

"Mermaiding has been really great for me to be inclusive and be able to do... sport, but also be able to express myself," she said. Coral Koi, 32, said the conventions allow attendees to "unwind and let go." "It's just fun self-care," she said. "Where else can you find so much magic?" — AFP

Amitabh Bachchan injured while filming action scene

Amitabh Bachchan, one of India's most famous actors, has said he was injured on set, resulting in "painful" movement and breathing, reports CNN. Bachchan, 80, said he tore a muscle and cartilage in his ribs during the filming of an action scene for his upcoming movie "Project K" in the southern Indian city of Hyderabad.

Writing on his official blog on Sunday, the veteran actor said he is resting at home in Mumbai and it will take some weeks until he is recovered. "It shall be difficult or let me say... I shall be unable to meet, the well-wishers at Jalsa Gate this evening," Bachchan wrote, referring to his weekly ritual of meeting fans outside his home in the city's Juhu suburb. "So do not come... and do inform as much as you can to those that intend [on] coming."



Bollywood actor Amitabh Bachchan speaks during the launch of Sony Entertainment Television's upcoming season 14 of Indian Hindi-language quiz show 'Kaun Banega Crorepati' in Mumbai. — AFP

With about 200 movies under his belt during a career spanning more than five decades, Bachchan is idolized by millions across the globe. After he suffered a life-threatening injury on set in 1982, many of his fans went on a hunger strike - and one even walked 482 kilometers (300 miles) backwards to pray for his recovery. In 2015, he was forced to clear Egyptian immigration in his hotel room because of the frenzy he caused at Cairo airport.

"So uncontrollable was the mobbed situation at the airport, that I had to be whisked away," Bachchan wrote on his blog at the time. "For the first time in the history of any airline traveler, my immigration and customs and passport were conducted in my hotel room." Bachchan made his debut in India's Hindi film industry, known as Bollywood, in 1969 with the movie "Saath Hindustani," which translates to Seven Indians. He achieved superstar status playing the titular role in the 1978 blockbuster "Don." — Agencies

'Herstory' trend brings women's lives out of shadows in Britain

From the opera star who went on stage smothered in diamonds to a young widow left penniless with a small child in 19th-century Britain, a new wave of "herstories" are spotlighting female voices ignored or even erased by history.

The UK's Royal Opera House and the National Trust heritage charity are among those delving back into the past to tell the story of previously forgotten lives. At London's Covent Garden opera venue, visitors can now discover the theatre's own "herstory" on a tour celebrating the many forgotten women who helped shape it.

Nineteenth-century composer Ethel Smyth had to threaten to run away from home to persuade her family to allow her to study music. After winning them over and attending the Leipzig Conservatory in Germany, she had a huge success with her "Mass in D".

"People absolutely loved it but she had to fight tooth and nail both against critics and also some of the musicians themselves who refused to work with a woman," said Royal Opera House tour guide Amandine Riche.

Despite the acclaim, Smyth found herself accused of being "out of her depth" if she pursued typically masculine pieces such as "Mass in D", or "light and frivolous" if she restricted herself to chamber music, she said.



A visitor looks at ballet tutu made for "The Sleeping Beauty" (1994) on display at the Royal Opera House in Covent Garden, central London.

Forgotten star

Composer Giuseppe Verdi paid tribute to another long-forgotten female performer, Adelina Patti, as the greatest singer he had ever heard. A huge international star of her day, she charged the present day equivalent of \$100,000 a performance and once arrived wearing a dress covered in 3,700 diamonds that was worth \$23 million.

Officers from the nearby now-closed Bow Street police station had to be dressed up as extras and go on stage to keep an eye on it during the show. But it is not just the lives of rich and famous women who have been sidelined by a male-led narrative. For this year's International

Women's Day on Wednesday, Britain's National Trust is telling the story of some of the ordinary working women whose lives have slipped into obscurity. The Trust, Europe's biggest conservation body, has drawn on research into women who lived in a cluster of 19th-century homes, now preserved and restored, in the heart of Birmingham, central England.

The houses are the only ones to survive the mass redevelopment of the city center in the 1960s. "It's an opportunity to shine a light on people we don't hear about very often but these were real people who lived in these houses which is fascinating," said National Trust spokeswoman Sophie Flynn.

Visitors can walk through the cobblestone courtyard where the women would have hung out their washing and peer into the rooms where they lived and slept.

Real lives

"You get a real sense of what their lives might have been like," said Flynn. One of the women who lived there was widow Eliza Wheeler, who ran a market stall, and her daughter Sarah. "Being widowed and left with children in the Victorian era... that would have been challenging but somehow she managed," Flynn added.

Maria Beadell, founder of London's Herstory Tours, said there was a growing appetite for history from a female perspective. Her first historical re-enactment tour, launched in 2021, focused on London's witches and was so popular that last year she added a second telling the story of the capital's 18th-century sex workers.

Beadell said that unlike monarchs or other noble females, ordinary London women's stories had largely been "erased from history". Her tours tell the stories of Marjery Jourdemayne, a midwife accused of witchcraft who was burned at the stake in 1441, and Sally Salisbury, an 18th-century courtesan jailed for stabbing one of her lovers. "It's just the way the world's been for over 2,000 years, the male voice has been dominant... but these were actual people who lived," she said. — AFP



A photograph shows a general view of the main stage at the Royal Opera House in Covent Garden, central London. — AFP photos



Performance posters are displayed at the Royal Opera House in Covent Garden, central London.



This picture shows copies of "Cyberpunk: Peach John", Japan's first fully AI-drawn manga, at the office of comic book publisher Shinchosha in Tokyo.



These photo illustrations show an artificial intelligence (AI) manga artist, who goes by the name "Rootport", demonstrating how he produces AI manga during an interview with AFP in Tokyo.



Machine magic or art menace? Japan's first AI manga

The author of a sci-fi manga about to hit shelves in Japan admits he has "absolutely zero" drawing talent, so turned to artificial intelligence to create the dystopian saga. All the futuristic contraptions and creatures in "Cyberpunk: Peach John" were intricately rendered by Midjourney, a viral AI tool that has sent the art world into a spin, along with others such as Stable Diffusion and DALL-E 2.

As Japan's first fully AI-drawn manga, the work has raised questions over the threat technology could pose to jobs and copyright in the nation's multi-billion-dollar comic book industry. It took the author, who goes by the pen name Rootport, just six weeks to finish the over-100-page manga, which would

He then laid out the best frames in comic-book format to produce the book, which has already sparked a buzz online ahead of its March 9 release by Shinchosha, a major publishing house. Unlike traditional black-and-white manga, his brainchild is fully colored, although the faces of the same character sometimes appear in markedly different forms.

Still, AI image generators have "paved the way for people without artistic talent to make inroads" into the manga industry-provided they have good stories to tell, the author said.

Rootport said he felt a sense of fulfillment when his text instructions, which he describes as magic "spells", created an image that chimed with



This picture shows the acting chief Masakado Kunisawa checking copies of "Cyberpunk: Peach John", Japan's first fully AI-drawn manga, at the office of comic book publisher Shinchosha in Tokyo. — AFP photos

creepy inventions can be strikingly sophisticated, provoking soul-searching among artists. The tools have also run into legal difficulties, with the London-based start-up behind Stable Diffusion facing lawsuits alleging the software scraped large amounts of copyrighted material from the web without permis-

ated short in January using AI-generated backgrounds, it was lambasted online for not hiring human animators.

"The possibility that manga artists' assistants will be replaced (by AI) isn't zero," Keio University professor Satoshi Kurihara told AFP. In 2020, Kurihara and his team published an AI-aided

rather, I think it can be a great companion," Madoka Kobayashi, whose career spans over 30 years, told AFP. Artificial intelligence can "help me visualize what I have in mind, and suggest rough ideas, which I then challenge myself to improve," she said. The author, who also trains aspiring manga artists at a Tokyo academy, argues that manga isn't just built on aesthetics, but also on cleverly devised plots. In that arena, "I'm confident humans still dominate."

Even so, she recoils at copying directly from computer-generated images, because "I don't know whose artwork they're based on". At Tokyo Design Academy, Kobayashi uses figurines to help improve the students' pencil drawings, including details ranging from muscles to creases in clothes and hair whorls.

"AI art is great... but I find human drawings more appealing, precisely because they are 'messy'," said 18-year-old student Ginjiro Uchida. Computer programs don't always capture the deliberately exaggerated hands or faces of a real manga artist, and "humans still have a better sense of humor," he said. Three major publishers declined to comment when asked whether they thought AI could disrupt Japan's human-driven manga production process. Rootport doubts fully AI-drawn manga will ever become mainstream, because real artists are better at making sure their illustrations fit the context. But, "I also don't think manga completely unaided by AI will remain dominant forever." — AFP



Students attending a manga art design class at the Tokyo Design Academy in the Harajuku area of Tokyo.



A student drawing during a manga art design class at the Tokyo Design Academy in the Harajuku area of Tokyo.

have taken a skilled artist a year to complete, he said.

"It was a fun process, it reminded me of playing the lottery," the 37-year-old told AFP. Rootport, a writer who has previously worked on manga plots, entered combinations of text prompts such as "pink hair", "Asian boy" and "stadium jacket" to conjure up images of the story's hero in around a minute.

what he had imagined. "But is it the same satisfaction you'd feel when you've drawn something by hand from scratch? Probably not."

Soul-searching

Midjourney was developed in the United States and soared to popularity worldwide after its launch last year. Like other AI text-to-image generators, its fantastical, absurd and sometimes

sion. Some Japanese lawmakers have raised concerns over artists' rights, although experts say copyright infringements are unlikely if AI art is made using simple text prompts, with little human creativity.

Other people have warned that the technology could steal jobs from junior manga artists, who painstakingly paint background images for each scene. When Netflix released a Japanese ani-

comic in the style of late manga pioneer Osamu Tezuka. For that project, humans drew almost everything, but since then AI art has become "top notch" and is "bound to" influence the manga industry's future, he said.

'Humans still dominate'

Some manga artists welcome the new possibilities offered by the technology. "I don't really see AI as a threat-

'Creed III' punches its way to top of North America box office

GM's boxing drama "Creed III" scored an opening-round knock-out this weekend, taking in an estimated \$58.7 million to top North America's box office in one of the biggest debuts ever for a sports film.

That made first-time director Michael B. Jordan—who again plays rock-hard boxer Apollo Creed—the "undefeated box office champion," said industry analyst Exhibitor Relations. "This opening is sensational," said analyst David A. Gross of Franchise Entertainment Research. "Weekends like this are good news for the industry."



Michael B. Jordan attends the "Creed III" & Hennessy gym pop-up in Los Angeles, CA.



In this file photo (from left to right) actor Jonathan Majors, actress Tessa Thompson, and actor-director-producer Michael B. Jordan arrive for the Los Angeles premiere of Creed III at the TCL Chinese Theater in Hollywood, California. — AFP photos

In this ninth film in the "Rocky" franchise—the first without Sylvester Stallone in the Rocky Balboa role he created—Creed comes out of retirement for a dramatic showdown against an old friend played by Jonathan Majors.

That makes this a pretty good weekend for Majors, the villain in Marvel and Disney's "Ant-Man and the Wasp: Quantumania," which placed second for the Friday-through-Sunday period at \$12.5 million. Paul Rudd stars as the title ant; Evangeline Lilly is the Wasp.

In third place was Universal's "Cocaine Bear" at \$11 million. The horror comedy is based loosely on the true story of a black bear that wreaks havoc in the Tennessee woods after consuming a cache of lost cocaine. Keri Russell plays one of the locals caught up in the crazy.

"Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba—To the Swordsmith Village," an anime sequel from Crunchyroll, placed fourth at \$10.1 million. The previous "Demon Slayer" film in 2021 had a record debut for a non-English language feature, taking in \$19.5 million, Variety reported. And in fifth was Lionsgate's Christian drama "Jesus Revolution," a story of a 1960s religious movement in California. It took in \$8.7 million.

Rounding out the top 10 were: "Avatar: The Way of Water" (\$3.6 million), "Operation Fortune: Ruse de Guerre" (\$3.2 million), "Puss in Boots: The Last Wish" (\$2.7 million), "Magic Mike's Last Dance" (\$1.2 million), "80 for Brady" (\$845,000). — AFP

Accor co-founder, who brought France US-style hotels, dies at 91

Gerard Pelisson, who co-founded Accor and turned the hotel group into a world leader, has died at 91 after a long illness, his family told AFP on Monday. Pelisson created the Accor company together with business partner Paul Dubrule and grew it into the world's sixth-biggest hotel group with 5,400 hotels in 100 countries under the Novotel, Ibis, Sofitel, Mercure and Pullman brands.

Pelisson's studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and first job at IBM gave him valuable insights into US-style entrepreneurship. He left IBM after developing a fascination with America's standardised model of hotel businesses, to start something similar in France.

"He was the prototype of an entrepreneur," said Accor's current CEO, Sebastien Bazin, crediting Pelisson and Dubrule with "reinventing the rules" of France's hotel sector and "putting it on a new course of international influence".

The Holiday Inn brand, in particular, got the two men's attention, with its hotels located on the edges of cities all with near-identical rooms — at a time when the hospitality business in France was still far from being an industry.



In this file photo taken on July 1, 1993, French hotel group Accor President Gerard Pelisson speaks. — AFP

Pelisson and Dubrule opened their first Novotel in 1967, built on a former beetroot field close to a motorway on the outskirts of Lille, in northern France, which became an instant success. Within two years, they started two more, in the eastern city of Colmar and Marseille in the south. An Ibis hotel followed in 1974 in Bordeaux, in France's southwest, the starting point for a network of budget hotels first in France, and then across Europe.

Their company, SIEH, invested in Africa, the Middle East and the Americas, and became Accor in 1983. Their disruptive marketing methods included campaigns such as "A room for 99 francs" (15 euros) at the low cost Formule1 chain, now known as hotelF1. "We managed to create all the great projects because we were in agreement," Pelisson once said about the business couple. Their biographer, Henry Lang, said the two men enjoyed "a great complicity and extraordinary mutual respect". — AFP

Sports

Durant produces a 37-point masterpiece; Suns sink Mavs

Curry tastes defeat on return

LOS ANGELES: Kevin Durant produced a 37-point masterpiece as the Phoenix Suns defeated the Dallas Mavericks while Steph Curry's return from injury was not enough to prevent Golden State falling to the Los Angeles Lakers in the NBA on Sunday. In the Eastern Conference, the New York Knicks made it nine straight wins with a thrilling victory in double overtime against the second-placed Boston Celtics. A packed slate of NBA games featured two heavyweight fixtures in the Western Conference, with Durant going up against former Brooklyn team-mate Kyrie Irving as the Suns traveled to Dallas, where they claimed a nail-biting 130-126 victory.

In Los Angeles, Curry's return was a further boost to the in-form Warriors but it was the Lakers who claimed a precious 113-105 win to keep their playoff hopes on track. Phoenix's clash with Dallas lived up to the hype, with 13 lead changes in a contest that went down to the wire. Durant, traded to Phoenix in a blockbuster move from the Nets last month, delivered a signature clutch performance to guide the Suns to victory. The 34-year-old scored the go-ahead basket with less than 12 seconds remaining before adding two late free throws to ice the game.

Durant received support from Devin Booker, who added 36 points, 10 assists and five rebounds, while Chris Paul added 11 points. "We dug down deep," Durant said. "Just tried to do my best and finish the shot. Guys were moving the ball all night - it was a good win." Durant said he had not been distracted by playing against former Nets team-mate Irving. "I've played more of my career against him than with him so it didn't feel any different," Durant said. "We just want to keep building." Dallas star Luka Doncic finished with 34

points, with Irving contributing 30 points and Tim Hardaway Jr adding 21 off the bench.

Davis leads Lakers

Tempers flared in the dying seconds with Doncic and Booker going nose-to-nose after the Slovenian squandered a relatively straightforward chance to tie the game with six seconds remaining. Doncic confronted Booker after the Phoenix star appeared to taunt the Dallas talisman, triggering a confrontation between players from both teams.

"It's a competitive game. It's all good," Doncic said of his spat with Booker. "Next time, just don't wait until there's three seconds left to talk." Booker laughed off the verbal dust-up. "It was just two competitors going at it," he said afterwards. "I've no problem with Luka on or off the court - but when we're competing, we're competing." Phoenix improved to 36-29 to stay in fourth spot in the West while Dallas fell to 33-32. The Mavs are in seventh, just outside the automatic postseason places.

In Los Angeles, Anthony Davis once again came up big for the Lakers in the absence of the injured LeBron James to help secure victory over the Warriors. Davis finished with 39 points, eight rebounds and six assists as six Lakers players finished in double figures. The Lakers sprinted into a 20-point lead in the first quarter and then held off a second-half rally from the NBA champions. The returning Curry led the Golden State scoring with 27 points while Klay Thompson added 22.

The Warriors fell to 34-31 with the loss and are fifth in the Western Conference. The Lakers improved to 31-34, and are just outside the play-in places. The Knicks were without star point guard Jalen Brunson for the trip to Boston but his replacement Immanuel



DALLAS: Kevin Durant #35 of the Phoenix Suns slam dunks in the second half of the game against the Dallas Mavericks at American Airlines Center on March 5, 2023. —AFP

Quickley put up a career-high 38 points in a 131-129 win after double overtime. The Knicks went on a 21-2 run at the end of the third and into the fourth quarter but Boston, who trailed by seven with 1:25 left in the game, were able to take the contest into overtime.

With the last play of the game, Al Horford had a chance to win it for Boston but his three-point attempt from the corner bounced out off the rim.

Jayson Tatum top-scored for Boston with 40 points while RJ Barrett had 29 points and Julius Randle scored 30 for the on-fire Knicks. Eastern Conference leaders the Milwaukee Bucks bounced back from their loss to the Philadelphia 76ers, beating the Washington Wizards 117-111. Giannis Antetokounmpo claimed his fourth triple double of the campaign with 23 points, 13 assists and 10 rebounds. —AFP

Kitayama seals maiden PGA Tour victory

MIAMI: Kurt Kitayama kept his cool in a nerve-shredding final round to clinch the first PGA Tour victory of his much-traveled career at the Arnold Palmer Invitational in Orlando on Sunday. The 30-year-old journeyman, who led by one at the start of the final round, held off a ferocious challenge from some of the biggest names in world golf to card an even-par 72 and complete a one-shot victory. Kitayama's hopes of a maiden win appeared to have faded after a disastrous end to the front nine, when he took a triple-bogey seven to relinquish the lead.

But the 46th-ranked California steadied the ship to stay in the hunt down the stretch, reeling off seven straight pars before sinking a 13-foot birdie putt at the 17th to reclaim top spot on the leaderboard on nine under. Until that point, it looked as if the tournament was destined for a playoff, with big guns Rory McIlroy and Scottie Scheffler both firmly in the hunt for the title. No fewer than five players shared the lead at one stage with just a few holes remaining.

There was to be no denying victory to Kitayama however, who approached the 18th knowing that a par would be enough to hang on to his slender advantage-and pocket a winner's cheque of \$3.6 million. His tee shot flew into the thick rough down the left hand side of the fairway on 18, but he blasted a second safely onto the green to leave himself two putts for victory. He almost sealed it with his first putt, rolling a 47-footer to the very lip of the cup to roars from the packed galleries, before eventually tapping in for par.

Sweet dreams

"It was really hard. I'm going to sleep really well tonight. It's everything I kind of mentally prepared myself for," said Kitayama. "I've always dreamed of winning on the Tour and to finally do it, it's pretty amazing." The win was especially sweet for Kitayama, who finished as a runner-up three times in 2022. Kitayama arrived on the PGA Tour after a challenging start to his career, playing on the developmental Web.com Tour with little success after turning professional in 2015 before moving to the Asian Tour in 2018.

He switched to the European Tour in 2019, where he has two won twice, before finally earning a PGA Tour card in 2021. For long periods on Sunday it looked as if it was going to be another near-miss for the Californian, as other players began building up a head of steam down the stretch. But as the tension mounted, player after player squandered opportunities to take the lead as putts refused to drop.

Northern Ireland star McIlroy just missed a birdie putt on the 18th that would have put him on nine under, while Scheffler missed a birdie putt on the 17th that could have put him in the leading pack. McIlroy carded a two-under-par 70 to close, finishing tied for second on eight under alongside Harris English, who also shot a 70. McIlroy looked to be ready to swoop to victory after starting the back nine with three birdies in his first four holes to move into the lead, before back-to-back bogeys on the 14th and 15th checked his progress. —AFP



Kuwait shooters win bronze in Asia Cup

By Abdellatif Sharaa

KUWAIT: Kuwait 10meters Air Rifle mixed team of Ali Farhan Al-Mutairi and Mariam Mohammad Erzouqi won the Bronze medal in the Asia Cup

for Pistol and Rifle Championship being held in Jakarta, Indonesia, following a strong competition with the Indonesians and Koreans who ended first and second respectively.

Secretary General of Kuwait and Arab Shooting Federations Obaid Munahi Al-Osaimi dedicated this achievement to HH the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and HH the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah on behalf of the entire shooting community, adding that the support of HH the Amir and

HH Crown Prince gives shooters more determination to make achievements. Al-Osaimi said he is proud with the results Kuwait shooters made so far.

Al-Osaimi also lauded the role of President of Asian Shooting Confederation Sheikh Salman Sabah Al-Salem Al-Sabah, Honorary President of Kuwait Shooting Sport Club for his support of Kuwait shooting. He also thanked Information Minister, State Minister for Youth Affairs Abdelrahman Al-Mutairi and Public Authority for Sport.

Ericsson wins IndyCar opener as Grosjean crashes out

MIAMI: Sweden's Marcus Ericsson won IndyCar's season-opening Grand Prix of St. Petersburg in Florida on Sunday, prevailing after a chaotic race that saw pole-winner Romain Grosjean crash out after a controversial collision with Team Penske driver Scott McLaughlin. Chip Ganassi's Ericsson snatched victory in dramatic circumstances, darting past Mexico's Pato O'Ward with two laps to go after the Arrow McLaren driver's car momentarily lost power.

O'Ward was forced to settle for second while Ericsson's Chip Ganassi team-mate Scott Dixon took third in the 180-mile 100-lap race. Ericsson admitted that his victory had an element of good fortune. "It was our day I think," Ericsson said. "That's racing. I feel bad for Pato having an issue but that's racing. "We were hunting him down all the way through, putting the pressure on and that's when things can happen...really proud of the team. That's a hell of a start to the season."

O'Ward was disconsolate after agonizingly missing out on victory. "We did everything right today. It's just, there's always something," O'Ward said. "The boys deserved that. But we gave that one away. We can't have that happen any more." Ericsson's last-gasp victory was the final twist of an incident-packed race that erupted in chaos on the first lap. Contact between Dixon and Felix Rosenqvist triggered a spectacular pile-up that took out Santino Ferrucci, Sting Ray Robb, Devlin DeFrancesco, Helio Castroneves, Simon Pagenaud and Benjamin Pedersen.

DeFrancesco's Andretti Steinbrenner was sent hurtling into the air after Pedersen's AJ Foyt Enterprises car slammed into his side. Remarkably, DeFrancesco avoided serious injury while Dixon, Rosenqvist and Robb limped back to the pits and were eventually able to continue racing. Arguably the most controversial moment came on lap 72, when pole-winner Grosjean of Andretti Autosport crashed out after a collision with Team Penske's McLaughlin as the two men surged into turn three. —AFP



Kuwait International Jet Ski Championship

KUWAIT: Kuwait International Jet Ski Championship, organized by the Marine Sports Club in Marina Crescent has concluded its activities with more than 40 participants competing in seven categories. The competitor Youssef Al-Abdraszaq won first place in the category (Senior Professional Sitting), while Rashid Al-Dawas came in the second place, and the Emirati Amer Al-Huwair came in the third place.

The first place in the category (professional sitting) was won by competitor Rashid Al-Dawas, while the Emirati Abdullah Al-Hammadi came in the second place, and his compatriot Rashid Al-Huwair came in the third place. In the category (Standing Professionals), Emirati Saeed Al-Awadi won the first place, while his compatriot Abdullah Al-Hammadi came in the second place, and his compatriot Sultan Al-Hammadi came third. In the (Amateur Sitting) category, Fares Ramadan took first place, while Emirati Ahmed Al-Hammadi came in second place, and Ahmed Al Khodari third. —KUNA



Sports

MLS clubs spread their wings in Champions League action

Orlando face 7-times Mexican champions Tigres

MIAMI: Two American clubs will do battle on foreign fields for the first time when the CONCACAF Champions League gets under way on Tuesday. Major League Soccer's Orlando City and Austin FC will both make their debuts in the 16-club tournament for clubs from North and Central America and the Caribbean. Orlando face a daunting test south of the border in Monterrey, Mexico where they will face seven-times Mexican champions Tigres.

Tigres won the competition in 2020, were runners-up three times and their international experience also includes an appearance in the final of South America's Copa Libertadores and the FIFA Club World Cup. Whereas Tigres were formed 62 years ago, Orlando only joined MLS in 2015 and qualified thanks to their win in the US Open Cup last season-the only trophy in their history.

It is a sign of the importance of the challenge for the Florida team that Orlando coach Oscar Pareja

rested several regular starters for Saturday's 0-0 draw with FC Cincinnati. "There were a lot of positive things, especially the players that are new with the team and making us better. We are proud," Pareja said. "Now we will get ready for our travel to represent our city and our club in an international competition on Tuesday."

Colombian Pareja has experience against Mexican opposition having worked in Liga MX as coach of Tijuana and also took MLS's FC Dallas to the semi-finals in 2017. Pareja will be well aware of the threat posed by Tigres' veteran French international forward Andre-Pierre Gignac. The 37-year-old former Marseille striker has 14 career goals in the Champions League including six on the road to the 2020 triumph. Austin will make their first appearance outside of North America when they take on Haitian club Violette AC in Santiago in the Dominican Republic.

Austin eye rotation

The Texan team are only in their third season of play and qualified after reaching the semi-finals of the MLS playoffs. Violette, Caribbean club champions, are also making their first appearance in the competition but they did win the tournament's fore-runner, the Champions Cup, in 1984. Austin beat Montreal 1-0 in MLS on Saturday with an 88th minute goal from Maxi Urruti and coach Josh Wolff says he is likely to freshen up his starting line-up for the game which will be played on an artificial surface. "We'll have to rotate the squad a bit. We're going down there, it's turf, it will be warm and it's a four, five-hour flight," he said, noting the challenge is over two games. "We'll put the best team out there to get the result that we need on the road, knowing that we come back home in a week".

MLS champions Los Angeles FC, beaten in the 2020 final by Tigres, have a tough tie on Thursday

when they travel to 30-times Costa Rican champions Alajuelense. Mexican clubs have traditionally dominated the competition with the win for Seattle Sounders last season the first for a non-Liga MX club since the creation of the current format in 2009. Club Leon take on Panama's Tauro, while Atlas travel to San Pedro Sula to face Honduras's Olimpia on Wednesday. On Thursday, Pachuca also travel to Honduras to face Motagua.

The winners of this year's tournament will qualify for the 2024 FIFA Club World Cup where they will have the chance to take on the continental champions from Europe, Asia, South America and Africa. In addition, next year will see the launch of a money-spinning four-team tournament between the top two teams from South America and the best pair from the CONCACAF region, with those clubs likely to be the finalists from this year's Champions League. —AFP

Bellingham the key for high-flying Dortmund

BERLIN: If Borussia Dortmund's remarkable 2023 run is to continue at Chelsea on Tuesday, midfield master Jude Bellingham, 19, will need to be front and centre. Dortmund travel to London as European football's most in-form team, having chalked up ten wins from ten games to start 2023. Nine points behind leaders Bayern Munich at Christmas, Dortmund have closed the gap and now sit second on goal difference. A hard-fought 1-0 win in the opening tie means Dortmund will make it through to the Champions League quarter finals if they avoid defeat on Tuesday evening. While Marco Reus' likely inclusion means Bellingham, captain in Dortmund's first leg victory, may not wear the armband at Stamford Bridge, the English teenager will unquestionably be one of the side's on-field leaders.

In what has been a breakout season for the English teenager bookending an impressive Qatar World Cup showing, Bellingham has saved his best performances for the biggest stage. In six Champions League games this season - two of which as captain - Bellingham, has scored four goals and laid on an assist. A starring performance in his Champions League debut in London, and just his third club match on English soil since arriving in Dortmund, will be the next milestone in an astonishing run for the policeman's son from Stourbridge.



SURREY: Chelsea's English defender Ben Chilwell (2nd left) kicks a ball as he attends a team training session at Chelsea's Cobham training facility in Stoke D'Abernon, southwest of London on March 6, 2023 on the eve of their UEFA Champions League round of 16 second-leg football match against Borussia Dortmund. —AFP

Reus and World Cup-winning defender Mats Hummels, has frequently described the Birmingham City junior as "the oldest 19-year-old player in the world." In previous seasons, Dortmund have been criticized for placing too much responsibility in the hands of young players at a club frequently criticized for a fragile mentality.

Bellingham has established himself as a nexus between Dortmund's experienced core and the club's troupe of talented youngsters. His maturity and leadership has helped the club keep the focus on the pitch. Unlike last season, when the Erling Haaland transfer saga pushed Dortmund to the brink of distraction, whispers surrounding a possible summer exit for Bellingham - and a potential 150 million euro fee - have not destabilized the club.

While the Norwegian publicly complained that Dortmund were "putting pressure on me to make a decision about my future", Bellingham has frequently shut down speculation. After October's 0-0 home draw with Haaland's Man City which saw Dortmund through to the Champions League knockout rounds, a smiling Bellingham told reporters who asked about a possible

move: "I'm not going to write your headlines for you."

Homecoming for Bynoe-Gittens

Even with a one-goal advantage, Dortmund's hopes against Chelsea have been dealt a blow by the absence of lightning-fast forward Karim Adeyemi, who scored the only goal in the first leg. In Adeyemi's place is another English teenage sensation, Jamie Bynoe-Gittens, who has made a habit of scoring crucial goals for Dortmund this season. The London-born winger, who rejected the Chelsea academy to move north to join the Manchester City U15s, moved to Dortmund in September 2020.

Bynoe-Gittens' first 18 months in Dortmund were interrupted by injury, but the 18-year-old has become an important part of manager Edin Terzic's rotation this season. His performances off the bench, coming on late to score in wins over Freiburg, Augsburg and Werder Bremen, have earned him first dibs at Adeyemi's spot in the starting XI. A strong performance from Bynoe-Gittens, along with a good showing from Bellingham, will go a long way to ensuring Dortmund's high-flying run continues. —AFP

Marseille strengthen grip on second place

PARIS: Marseille strengthened their grip on second place in Ligue 1 with a 1-0 win at Rennes on Sunday. Sead Kolasinac tapped in at the far post in the 56th minute after Marseille caught the home side napping by taking a free kick while players were still in discussion with the referee. Jordan Veretout's sharp free kick found Cengiz Under racing alone into space on the right edge of the Rennes box. Under drove a low cross into the goalmouth where Kolasinac stepped forward to score as four Rennes defenders stood and watched.

Marseille held on to win an often frantic game and rebound from a week in which they lost to leaders Paris-Saint Germain in the league and then suffered a midweek French Cup upset against second-division Annecy. "Playing for Marseille is always demanding," said coach Igor Tudor. "There is a particular pressure. Players are not machines, they feel things and it was hard. It was important

to respond tonight. So this win here is very valuable. When you take these blows, you have two options: react or stop and cry. So today, I am very proud of my players."

It was a 10th win in 13 away league matches for Marseille who have the best record on the road in Ligue 1. Rennes, who were third before Christmas, stayed in fifth, but are five points behind Lens who drew on Saturday. Marseille are eight points behind PSG but pulled four points ahead of Monaco who drew 2-2 at Troyes earlier in the day. Monaco captain Wissam Ben Yedder scored two late goals but the home team snatched a stoppage-time equaliser.

Rominigue Kouame fired in from the edge of the area on the half-hour for Troyes, but Ben Yedder's quick-fire double in the final 10 minutes seemed to have won the game for Monaco. Substitute Ike Ugbo snapped Troyes' five-match losing streak though with a header in the first minute of added time. Monaco, who were knocked out of the Europa League by Bayer Leverkusen last month, missed the chance to go second but did reclaim third place from Lens on goals scored. Troyes remain in the relegation zone and have picked up just two points from their past nine matches. —AFP



RENNES: Rennes' French midfielder Baptiste Santamaria (left) fights for the ball with Marseille's French midfielder Valentin Rongier during the French L1 football match between Stade Rennais and Olympique de Marseille on March 5, 2023. —AFP

Argentina grab Sevens crown

VANCOUVER: Argentina defended their Canada Sevens title in Vancouver on Sunday, defeating France 33-21 in the final to close the gap on New Zealand at the top of the World Rugby Sevens Series standings. The Argentineans, beaten in the final of the Los Angeles Sevens last week, prevailed in a hard-fought final with late tries from Tobias Wade and Agustin Fraga to finally break French hearts.

France, aiming to win their first tournament on the world sevens circuit since the 2005 Paris Sevens, got off to a disastrous start when playmaker Stephen Perez threw a loose pass that was intercepted by Marcos Moneta for an Argentina try under the posts. But the French responded superbly with a flowing 28-pass move that ended with Jean Pascal Barraque feeding Theo Forner who scored under the posts to level the final at 7-7. Argentina responded swiftly though with a well-worked converted try from Rodrigo Isagro that made it 14-7. Again however France hit back on the stroke of half-time with Varian Pasquet diving over in the corner.

Barraque slotted a brilliant conversion from the



VANCOUVER: Men's Gold medalists Argentina's players (left) and Women's Gold medalists New Zealand's players pose on the podium during the annual HSBC Canada Rugby Sevens tournament at BC Place in Vancouver, Canada, on March 5, 2023. —AFP

touchline to make it 14-14 at the break. France then took the lead for the first time with another clever try, this time Perez getting on the end of a sweeping move to take the score to 21-14. Argentina however responded ruthlessly with tries from Matias

Osadczuk, Wade and Fraga to seal victory. Argentina's victory sees them move to within 12 points of New Zealand at the top of the World Rugby Sevens Series standings as the circuit heads to Asia for the Hong Kong Sevens on March 31. —AFP



Shohei Ohtani

Star-studded US and Ohtani eye Baseball Classic crown

LOS ANGELES: The battle to find baseball's global champions gets under way this week when the pandemic-delayed World Baseball Classic returns after a six-year absence with Shohei Ohtani hoping to inspire Japan to a record third title. Teams from 20 countries are participating in the fifth edition of the tournament, with the four first round groups hosted at venues in Taiwan, Tokyo, Arizona and Florida before the bulk of the knock-out rounds get under way in the United States.

The tournament was last staged in 2017, with the United States finally winning the title for the first time with victory over Puerto Rico at Dodger Stadium in Los Angeles. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic forced the postponement of the tournament in 2021, meaning the United States are only now launching their title defense with a team bristling with stars from Major League Baseball. The American roster includes some of the biggest names in the MLB, with Los Angeles Angels slugger Mike Trout joining the likes of the Philadelphia Phillies' Kyle Schwarber and Trea Turner, the Los Angeles Dodgers' Mookie Betts and the Colorado Rockies' Nolan Arenado. Team USA manager Mark DeRosa believes the American line-up is conceivably the "greatest USA team ever assembled" and is relishing the fact that the defending champions will head into the tournament as the team everyone wants to beat.

"We'll be hunted," DeRosa acknowledged in a recent interview, adding that he is hoping to build an atmosphere of excitement amongst the US squad as they get the rare opportunity to join forces in an international setting. "I want there to be a buzz," DeRosa said. "This is an opportunity to grow, and be great, and to represent your country and get to meet some guys you may never be in a batting practice group with."

Ohtani leads Japan challenge

The US will face Mexico, Colombia, Canada and Great Britain in Pool C, with all games taking place at Chase Field in Phoenix, the home of the Arizona Diamondbacks. Yet the star-studded US roster is by no means the only one in the tournament with box office appeal. Japan, who won the inaugural classic in 2006 and successfully defended the title three years later, will be chasing a record third world crown with all eyes on two-way star Ohtani.

Los Angeles Angels ace Ohtani, the 2021 American League Most Valuable Player, leads a Japan team that will play all of its first round games at the Tokyo Dome, which is hosting Pool B. Ohtani says playing in the classic for Japan had been a dream ever since watching the tournament as a fan in 2006. "Just watching the best players in Japan playing together as a team against the best in the world was so exciting," he said earlier this year. "Now that I'm in that position, I want to show people what I can do."

Other teams in the group include South Korea, Australia, China and the Czech Republic. Ohtani, who is expected to command a record-breaking contract when he enters free agency after this season, will be playing in front of Japanese fans for the first time in more than five years. The 28-year-old was originally due to play in the 2017 World Baseball Classic but was ruled out with an ankle injury. The Dominican Republic meanwhile, the 2013 champions, are also looming large as one of the favorites for the title.

The Dominicans' largely MLB-based squad boasts the likes of San Diego Padres duo Manny Machado and Juan Soto although Toronto Blue Jays slugger Vladimir Guerrero Jr has withdrawn from the roster. Guerrero pulled out on Saturday citing knee soreness. —AFP

Barcelona move 9 points clear

Madrid stumble; Barca beat Valencia 1-0



BARCELONA: Barcelona's Brazilian forward Raphinha (left) vies with Valencia's Spanish midfielder Hugo Guillamon during the Spanish League football match between FC Barcelona and Valencia CF on March 5, 2023. — AFP

BARCELONA: Barcelona clung on with 10 men to beat Valencia 1-0 and move nine points clear of Real Madrid at the top of La Liga on Sunday, thanks to Raphinha's early header. The champions could not find a way through against Real Betis in an entertaining 0-0 draw later on at the Benito Villamarin. Brazilian winger Raphinha nodded Barca in front in the 16th minute. But after Ferran Torres missed a penalty and Ronald Araujo was sent off, the hosts were left fighting tooth and nail for the three points.

They retreated in the final half hour following Araujo's 59th minute red card but survived to beat Ruben Baraja's Valencia, who are 19th and two points from safety. "We suffered too much, we had many chances to score the second," Xavi told reporters. "It can't be that we have to finish games like that when we have chances. We have to learn how to close out games."

Barcelona's 1-0 Copa del Rey semi-final first-leg triumph over Madrid on Thursday followed two consecutive defeats, and this narrow victory felt like a significant step towards a first league title since 2019. Without top scorer Robert Lewandowski, midfield

maestros Pedri and Gavi and winger Ousmane Dembele, the Catalans did just enough to win. Valencia resisted early Barcelona pressure but came undone when Sergio Busquets lofted a pass into the area for Raphinha to meet with a cunning run and a header over Giorgi Mamardashvili.

Samuel Lino missed a big chance for Valencia in the first half, and early in the second Barcelona should have moved two ahead when Hugo Guillamon was penalized for handball. Torres grabbed the ball to take the penalty, although Ansu Fati also wanted it and the pair exchanged words, increasing the pressure on the Spaniard, who hit the post. Fati hit the woodwork himself moments later, before a mistake from Jules Kounde left Barcelona with 10 men.

The French defender's header back towards his own goal sent Hugo Duro through. Araujo dragged down the striker and saw red. Valencia put pressure on Barcelona without troubling Marc-Andre ter Stegen, who kept his 18th La Liga clean sheet of the season. The visitors might have been awarded a late penalty when Franck Kessie tangled with Fran Perez, but the

referee waved away their desperate - and not unfounded - appeals. "I thought the referee was going to blow for (the penalty), he steps on him and there's contact," said Valencia's Hugo Guillamon.

Madrid stumble

Reigning champions Madrid forged the better openings against Betis but could not find the goal they needed to stay as close as possible on Barcelona's tail. Karim Benzema had a free-kick strike disallowed while Betis goalkeeper Claudio Bravo made fine saves to deny the French forward and Vinicius Junior. Thibaut Courtois was also forced into two superb stops by Betis who showed why they are in contention for a Champions League place next season with a hearty performance. "It's quite evident what we're lacking, we have to be more efficient," Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti told Movistar.

"Sometimes opponents close up at the back, but we have the quality and we have to do it better." The coach did not think his team's title defense was over, despite the setback. "It's not impossible. It's very

difficult, but we have no doubt we will try until the end," added Ancelotti. Madrid winger Vinicius, as has become customary in La Liga, was engaged in a running battle with the Betis defense. Vinicius has not scored away from home in the top flight since August, but brilliantly set up Benzema at the start of the second half with former Barcelona stopper Bravo parrying the effort.

It was Madrid's first shot on target since last weekend's 1-1 draw against Atletico Madrid. Los Blancos have scored just once in their last three games - from a corner. "I'm more upset than angry," said Ancelotti. "I'm upset that this team, with this quality, can't score a goal in three games (from open play)." Courtois made a stunning save to thwart Borja Iglesias at the other end, when the striker seemed poised to score. "We had moments in which we had clear openings, my chance with Thibaut," Iglesias told Movistar. "That's why this guy wins what he wins - he saves a lot." Real Valladolid climbed to 14th with a 2-1 over Espanyol, while Rayo Vallecano and Athletic Bilbao shared a 0-0 draw. — AFP

Mancini fires Roma into top four; Inter retake Serie A 2nd

MILAN: Gianluca Mancini fired Roma into Serie A's Champions League places with the only goal in Sunday's 1-0 win over Juventus, while Inter beat Lecce to regain second place. Italy defender Mancini let rip with a perfectly-struck shot six minutes after half-time of a tight contest in Rome, lifting Roma up to fourth with his first



goal of the season. Jose Mourinho's team are 12 points ahead of eighth-placed Juve who played the final minutes a man down following a moment of madness from substitute Moise Kean, who booted Mancini to the ground just 40 seconds after being brought on as a late substitute.

Roma moved above AC Milan on goal difference thanks to the champions' defeat at Fiorentina on Saturday night and are three points behind Inter. "We won because the players gave everything... it was the players' attitude which won the match

tonight," said Mourinho to DAZN. "We're a team that when we're on it, we're on it, but we need to be aware of our limitations. When you know them you play to hide them and you get results."

Champions League football looks increasingly unlikely for Juve, who hit the woodwork three times on a frustrating night, unless their 15-point penalty for illicit transfer activity is overturned on appeal. Mourinho was in the Roma dugout after his two-match ban for a row with officials at Cremonese was suspended. The Portuguese coach is not famed for expansive football and the teams served up a dour spectacle in the opening half, which would have ended with Juve ahead had Rui Patricio not pulled off a magnificent save to tip Adrien Rabiot's close-range header

onto the post. All the hosts had mustered up to that point was a speculative shot from former Juve star Paulo Dybala, playing up front on his own, which was easily saved by Wojciech Szczesny. But Mancini clattered Roma ahead just as Juve looked to be gaining a foothold. — AFP

ROME: AS Roma's Italian defender Gianluca Mancini celebrates after opening the scoring during the Italian Serie A football match between AS Roma and Juventus on March 5, 2023. — AFP

United try to reset after a brutal defeat

LONDON: Manchester United's embarrassing 7-0 mauling by Liverpool was a brutal reality check for Erik ten Hag's improving side but the manager has urged his men to bounce back this week. Just a week after winning their first silverware for six years, United were put to the sword by Jurgen Klopp's revitalized side on Sunday, collapsing as Liverpool smashed in six goals in the second half at Anfield.

Ten Hag's men had travelled to the home of their biggest rivals with a spring in their step after just one defeat in 22 games and still on a high after beating Newcastle to win the League Cup at Wembley. Their impressive run also included a landmark win against Barcelona in the Europa League as they chased success on four fronts. But they came away from Anfield with their tails between their legs after the joint-heaviest defeat in the storied history of the 20-time English champions.

The humiliation ends fanciful talk of a potential quadruple, leaving third-placed United 14 points behind leaders Arsenal and well adrift of second-placed Manchester City. Ten Hag was scathing in his assessment of his team, accusing the players of an "unprofessional" and "unacceptable" performance. The wretched display shows how much work the Dutchman still has to do to rebuild a club that have not won the Premier League since 2013, despite unmistakable signs of progress this season.

United had already endured an embarrassing 6-3 defeat at Manchester City this season, as well as a 4-0 loss at Brentford. The debacle at Anfield was a new low but Ten Hag urged his team to use it as motivation for the rest of the season, starting in Thursday's Europa League last-16 first leg at home to Real Betis. "We have seen in the past we can bounce back-after



LIVERPOOL: Manchester United's Dutch manager Erik ten Hag (center) consoles Manchester United's Brazilian midfielder Fred (left) as he is substituted during the English Premier League football match between Liverpool and Manchester United on March 5, 2023. — AFP

Brentford, after Manchester City," he told the BBC. "This is definitely a strong setback and is unacceptable. I'm really disappointed and angry about it. "It is a reality check. We have to take this strong."

After an evenly matched first half, United were torn to shreds by a Liverpool team who themselves suffered the humiliation of a 5-2 Champions League defeat by Real Madrid last month. The much-vaunted Casemiro was a bystander as the visitors were overrun in midfield and United's defending was shambolic as the home team seemingly scored at will. United skipper Bruno Fernandes came in for particularly harsh criticism from former United captains Roy Keane and Gary Neville. Speaking after the final whistle, Keane told Sky Sports: "Fernandes' body language today was nothing short of a disgrace, for me. — AFP