

Kuwait underlines anti-terror efforts at coalition meeting

Gathering aims at reintegrating foreign fighters after rehabilitation

By Faten Omar

KUWAIT: Kuwait exerts great efforts to fight terrorism and dry out its sources and plays an effective role as a member of the Global Coalition against Daesh during its co-leadership of the coalition's Foreign Terrorist Fighters Working Group, in addition to Turkey and the Netherlands, a Kuwaiti official said.

Addressing a meeting of the group held in Kuwait on Tuesday, Kuwaiti Deputy Foreign Minister Ambassador Mansour Al-Otaibi said the gathering aimed at finding a clear-cut mechanism to reintegrate foreign fighters into their societies after putting them under rehabilitation programs following fair trials pursuant to human rights principles.

Otaibi stressed the country's support for international efforts to combat terrorist groups, adding this is the second consecutive meeting Kuwait has hosted in less than a year, which shows Kuwait's keenness to enhance cooperation with the countries of the global coalition. "Kuwait is also keen to exert efforts to facilitate the process of transferring foreign fighters to their countries of origin in cooperation with the United States and other countries," he said, pointing out that the main objec-

tive of forming the working group within the framework of the coalition is to limit the flow of fighters to conflict areas, where there is always a need for continuous coordination and the formation of new mechanisms.

Otaibi said in a statement to the press that before the establishment of the coalition, Kuwait was committed to working to confront terrorism financing and committed to implementing it, but it is difficult to completely eliminate it and the danger still exists, so coordination and meetings are necessary.

Otaibi mentioned Kuwait has contributed to the transfer of around 648 fighters and their families from 12 countries on different continents since Sept 2019, stressing the importance of continuing to activate the guiding principles of Kuwait, which were adopted in Feb 2018 at the first ministerial meeting of the coalition to be held in Asia, which emphasized thwarting the sources of funding for IS, disrupting its ability to carry out terrorist acts and exchanging information in this regard.

"This in addition to transferring and facilitating the return of terrorist fighters to their countries, providing all possible means for rehabilitation and integration into societies, and supporting Iraq in the transition from the stage of restoring stability to the stage of sustainable reconstruction," Otaibi said.



KUWAIT: (From left) Head of Counterterrorism & National Security Division at the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs Mina Noor, Kuwait's Deputy Foreign Minister Mansour Al-Otaibi, Kuwait's Assistant Foreign Minister for Development and International Cooperation Hamad Al-Mashaan and Head of Section and Deputy General at Turkey's Directorate for Security and Intelligence Ayse Azra Kiran attend the Global Coalition's Foreign Terrorist Fighters Working Group Meeting on March 7, 2023. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

Qatari Amir names new prime minister



DOHA: Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani is sworn in as the new Qatari prime minister on March 7, 2023. — AFP

DOHA: Qatar's Amir named his top diplomat as prime minister Tuesday and brought in a new interior minister in what observers called the completion of a changing of the guard in the wealthy Gulf state. The ruler's office announced that Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani had accepted the resignation of prime minister and interior minister Sheikh Khalid bin Khalifa bin Abdulaziz Al-Thani.

Foreign Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani was named as the new head of government and was sworn-in within hours of the change, state media reported. Sheikh Khalifa bin Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani, who headed the government security committee for last year's World Cup, became interior minister.

At 42, the new prime minister, an economist, is the same age as the Amir and the new interior minister is also of the same generation. Sheikh Khalifa had also served in the Lekhwiya internal security force. The outgoing prime minister, 55, had only been in office since Jan 2020. The current Amir's father Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani abdicated in favor of his son in 2013.

The current Amir has not introduced any major changes to the foreign policy of the resolutely pro-US Gulf state. But Qatar's growing wealth built on its massive natural gas reserves has brought huge changes to the tiny state and its international profile.

The population has increased by a third to about three million in the past decade, mainly fueled by a massive influx of migrant workers. Political parties are still banned but Qataris held a first direct election in 2021 for a consultative council. Qatar organized last year's World Cup as part of a campaign to become an international sports hub and also sought a greater diplomatic and mediation role in geopolitical disputes. — AFP

Foreign firms to bid for Kuwait road projects

KUWAIT: Minister of Public Works and Minister of Electricity, Water and Renewable Energy Amani Bugammaz discussed on Tuesday with a number of friendly states' ambassadors the participation of companies from their countries in road ventures.

She indicated that a number of companies had been selected up for entering tenders for maintaining roads and streets, noting her desire to employ new technologies for renovating roads.

The minister affirmed the companies to be qualified must have sufficient expertise and a record of quality works, as well as the ability to train Kuwaiti engineers. The meeting grouped the ambassadors of South Korea, France, Japan, China and Turkey, and the charges d'affaires of US and Germany. — KUNA



KUWAIT: Public Works Minister Amani Bugammaz discusses road projects with foreign envoys on March 7, 2023. — KUNA

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Local

Kuwait keen on empowering women in various capacities

DigitALL: Innovation and technology for gender equality



KUWAIT: Participants take a group photo after the event. —Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat



Supreme Council for Planning and Development (SCPD) Secretary General Dr Khaled Mahdi



The UNDP Resident Representative Hideko Hadzjalic

KUWAIT: Supreme Council for Planning and Development (SCPD) Secretary General Dr Khaled Mahdi stated that Kuwait continues to develop and empower women's capacities for their positive involvement in development and advancement in the public and private sectors. This was in a speech delivered by Dr Mahdi before the start of a panel discussion hosted by the UN House on Tuesday on the occasion of International Women's Day and a celebration of the one-year anniversary of the launch of the Women's Economic Empowerment Platform (WEEP), in which the private sector in Kuwait participates with the support of the UN Development Program (UNDP), UN Women and the Department of Women's Studies at Kuwait University.

In the latest studies, it mentions that women constitute 60 percent of the workforce in the government sector and that the percentage of decision-makers and those in leadership positions rose to 21 percent, after it was 13 percent in the last study several years ago, Mahdi said. He also pointed to the employment of women as judges and prosecutors as examples, believing in the ability of women to work and strive together with men as part of development in any society.

The study indicates an increase in the percentage of women in state scholarships and their participation in civil society organizations, and that the current situation specifies the growth of women's capabilities within the workforce and leadership positions, he explained. The study showed that the involvement of women on the boards of directors of private companies in Kuwait had a direct positive impact on the culture and work environment in these companies, as well as an improvement in their financial statements,

while the link between the presence of women in human resources departments in companies is also positive, he added.

Despite these percentages and the observations that the study highlighted, the percentage of women's involvement in the private sector in Kuwait is relatively weaker than in the government sector for several reasons, perhaps the most important of which is the Kuwaiti economy, which has a strong social aspect, and the economic impact is governed by societal cultural change, while another reason revealed by the study is parental interference in the decisions of the workforce by directing them to the government sector, he explained.

He concluded his speech by saying that scientific studies confirm that women are the real changers of any economy, commending the companies that joined WEEP, which numbered 45, after seven companies signed on to it at its launch last year. Meanwhile, the UNDP Resident Representative Hideko Hadzjalic confirmed that despite the acceleration of world economies in employing women in their various sectors, the proportions of some sectors are still relatively small, for example, the technology and artificial intelligence sector that is sweeping the world.

Hadzjalic explained that smart companies have become aware that women constitute 50 percent of the composition of societies, and by intensifying efforts to empower women in various fields, especially technological ones, the world will continue to reach fair equality between women and men in the labor market in its various sectors. The seminar included the participation of heads of human resources departments from several Kuwaiti compa-

nies and banks that joined WEEP, where they presented their companies' experiences in involving women in their various departments, especially in leadership positions and boards of directors.

Our lives depend on strong technological integration: attending a course, calling loved ones, making a bank transaction, or booking a medical appointment. Everything currently goes through a digital process. However, 37% of women do not use the internet (ITU Nov 2022). 259 million fewer women have access to the Internet than men, even though they account for nearly half the world's population.

Suppose women cannot access the Internet and do not feel safe online - in that case, they cannot develop the necessary digital skills to engage in digital spaces, diminishing their opportunities to pursue careers in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) related fields. By 2050, 75% of jobs will be related to STEM areas. Yet today, women hold just 22% of positions in artificial intelligence, to name just one. The United Nations Observance of IWD this year, under the theme "DigitALL: Innovation and technology for gender equality", recognizes and celebrates the women and girls championing the advancement of transformative technology and digital education. The observance will explore the impact of the digital gender gap on widening economic and social inequalities. It will also spotlight the importance of protecting the rights of women and girls in digital spaces and addressing online and ICT-facilitated gender-based violence.

This theme is aligned with the priority theme for the upcoming 67th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW-67), "Innovation and technological change, and education in the digital

age for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls". Bringing women and other marginalized groups into technology results in more creative solutions and has more significant potential for innovations that meet women's needs and promote gender equality.

Their lack of inclusion, by contrast, comes with massive costs: as per UN Women's Gender Snapshot 2022 report, women's exclusion from the digital world has shaved \$1 trillion from the gross domestic product of low- and middle-income countries in the last decade—a loss that will grow to \$1.5 trillion by 2025 without action. Reversing this trend will require tackling the problem of online violence, which a study of 51 countries revealed 38 per cent of women had personally experienced.

Kuwait has achieved a high level of connectivity and broadband penetration, with almost 100 percent of individuals with internet access and 171.6 mobile-cellular subscriptions per 100 people. At the same time, Kuwait has been exploring ways in which broader elements of the digital ecosystems for educational gains could be strengthened, notes Hideko Hadzjalic, UNDP Resident Representative.

Bringing women into technology results in more creative solutions and has more significant potential for innovations that meet women's needs and promote gender equality. Their lack of inclusion, by contrast, comes with massive costs. Science, technology and innovation (STI) can be crucial in meeting internationally agreed development goals. However, they cannot effectively facilitate equitable and sustainable development unless women's and men's aims, concerns, situations and abilities are considered when formulating STI policies. —Agencies

CSC detains workers at security company

KUWAIT: The Civil Service Commission (CSC) announced it contacted the Interior Ministry for investigations into workers of a security company, as one of its employees had been receiving bribes to hurry up ID card issuance. It contacted the Interior Ministry in order to find the network based on the information they obtained at the CSC from auditors.

Officers were chosen by the CSC and the Interior Ministry was represented by the General Directorate of Investigation to cooperate and exchange information. These efforts culminated in the arrest of some employees of the security company and one CSC employee, who were referred to the public prosecution.

"There is no manipulation or forgery in any of the transactions, but only abuse of authority by the employee to hurry up the production of civil ID cards," the CSC stressed. Notably, the CSC on April 2020 provided an alternative Kuwait Mobile ID app, as all applications can be completed through it. This was done to decrease traffic and to ensure all procedures are going through the right process. The app is currently being used by 3 million people.

Two expat women jailed

In another development, the criminal court ordered to jail two expatriate women from an Asian country for seven and three years respectively on charges of impersonating a doctor and performing filler, Botox and other cosmetic surgeries on patients at a salon. Their arrest came after a tripartite committee was formed by the medical permits department at the health ministry, the medicine inspection department and the Public Authority of Manpower at the interior ministry, which discovered a women's salon that was violating its permits by performing medical operations. The two Asian women did not have a permit to practice medicine, and used unlicensed machines such as a laser machine. Moreover, local anesthetics and ampoules not licensed by the health ministry were found. The accused were sent to the public prosecution.



KUWAIT: Dasman Diabetes Institute marks the World Obesity Day under the title 'Changing Perspectives on Obesity and Encouraging Talking about Obesity in All Aspects'.

Dasman Diabetes Institute marks Obesity Day

KUWAIT: Dasman Diabetes Institute, which is founded by Kuwait Foundation for the Advancement of Sciences, is the sole member representing Kuwait in the International Federation of Obesity. The Institute celebrated the World Obesity Day on March 4th, 2023 under the title "Changing Perspectives on Obesity and Encouraging Talking about Obesity in All Aspects." Dasman Diabetes Institute, in cooperation with the Ministry of Health in Kuwait, Kuwait Obesity Society, and obesity-related authorities in the governmental and private sectors, organized an awareness event on the World Obesity Day, sponsored by Novo Nordisk.

Dr Ebaa Al-Ozairi, Chief Medical Officer at Dasman Diabetes Institute, talked about obesity and its associated comorbidities such as: insulin resistance, diabetes, heart disease, blood pressure, breathing problems, fatty liver disease and other possible health complications that could be avoided by prevention and proper treatment. She also presented the latest global trends on



overcoming obesity, due to its close association with diabetes, and eliminating the negative societal perception about obesity. On this occasion, the Ministry of Health in the State of Kuwait, represented by the Primary Health Care Department, Dr Dina Al-Dhubaib, launched a new service for the diagnosis and treatment of obesity in primary healthcare centers through non-communicable chronic diseases (NCD) clinics. These clinics provide diagnosis, treatment and support services for patients who suffer from obesity.

Dr Aisha Al-Fahd - Vice President of the Kuwaiti Obesity Association explained that obesity is a serious and chronic disease, and the Kuwaiti Obesity Association pays great attention to raising awareness and education about obesity in Kuwait through continuous cooperation with the public and private sectors.



"Obesity is a recognized chronic relapsing serious disease with high prevalence in Kuwait. Due to this alarming situation, Novo Nordisk continues its commitment to drive change in obesity by collaborating with key stakeholders to support people living with obesity in Kuwait" said Venkat Kalyan - Vice President and General Manager, Novo Nordisk Pharma Gulf.

"According to the results of the World Obesity Atlas 2023, which was published by the International Obesity Federation today, the global economic impact / overweight and obesity may reach \$4.32 trillion annually by 2035. By 2035, if no measures are taken in Kuwait, 52 percent of adults will suffer from obesity which puts Kuwait in a very high-risk category, and childhood obesity continues to rise rapidly," concluded Dr Al Ozairi.

Local

KIPIC inaugurates second phase of Al-Zour refinery

Second phase will boost refining capacity to 410,000 pb

KUWAIT: KIPIC's CEO Waleed Al-Bader on Tuesday announced the launch of the second phase of Al-Zour refinery, stressing accomplishing further progress according to the expected time. In a statement, Al-Bader told KUNA that running the second phase comes with national day's celebrations and specifically after a few months after running the first phase, adding that it is considered a huge achievement in the history of Kuwait's petroleum industry.



KIPIC's CEO
Waleed Al-Bader



Al-Zour refinery



He pointed out that the Al-Zour refinery project may achieve economic returns by offering job opportunities, and securing promising oil markets, besides providing steady oil supplies with low sulfur content in order to improve air quality. Furthermore, he added that launching the second phase will result in increasing refining capacity from 205,000 pb to 410,000 pb.

The third and final phase is expected to work with the maximum refining capacity from 615,000 pb to 535,000 pb Al-Bader added that Al-Zour Refinery is considered one of the most important pillars of KPC's 2040 strategy in shaping the future of Kuwait's oil industry by promoting the country's exports of high-quality petroleum and products that conform to future specifications in global markets.

He indicated that the refinery increased the material revenues and supports the power of Ministry of Electricity and Water generation sta-

tions constantly, stabilized environmentally safe supplies, estimated at 150,000 barrels of fuel with low sulfur content, to meet the increasing demand for electric energy. He added that they also provide other refining products to export to the global markets to meet commercial operations and keep pace with global demands, as the company established the largest industrial island in the middle of the sea to export liquid petroleum products through two loading platforms with four berths and a central platform under the sea.

Al-Bader stressed KIPIC's endeavor to instill full compliance with health and safety and to be a practical lifestyle environment for all its employees and contractors. He expressed his appreciation for the efforts exerted by all those in charge of the project since its inception phase and the continuous support of KPC and the joint cooperation with associate companies in the oil sector. He stressed that KIPIC continues to achieve the targeted strategic plans according to the set timetable, raising the slogan "to make more possible". —KUNA

Love 'core element' in raising kids

By Ghadeer Ghloom

KUWAIT: Despite the fact that parents' love for their children is a natural human instinct, some parents fail to reassure their children about their love. Clearly expressing and showing love both verbally and physically is necessary to raise children to ensure tranquility and serenity in the environment that the kids are growing in.

Om Abdullah, a mother of three, told Kuwait Times about the necessity of reminding children that they are loved. "Love is the core element of raising children to become peaceful and mature individuals. It is necessary to express love both in words and in action while parenting, because a family is a child's first experience of social life. Growing up in a loving family will result in upbringing an individual who has a good and peaceful character to socialize with others," she said.

People who are surrounded with enough love since their childhood grow into adulthood with a good understanding of its essentiality in life and develop a capability of offering it to others. "Because love has been rooted in their upbringing, my children are capable of reciprocating it among each other, which indicates how their experience at socializing with other people is going to look like," Om Abdullah said.

To confirm the necessity of notifying children that they are loved and its positive impact on their social, personal and practical life, Kuwaiti author Nejoud Al-Yagout said: "Children need to feel safe and cherished in order to thrive. In essence, children require love. But what does it mean to love a child? A child

needs to know that even when things are tough, they have a family who loves them. Children who are raised in loving households mirror love and share it in their communities. Because love is the water, the seed and the fertilizer that provide growth and nutrition to young ones. And when we realize that, we will understand that it is the only way to be with a child."

Parents worry about their children's vulnerability to a wide exposure of unacceptable content on their devices, at school or anywhere else. Om Abdullah said: "Teenagers today are being exposed to various contents that take part in formulating their ideas. However, children will come back to their parents' guidance if they had grown up on an explicit experience of love that created trust and transparency between both sides."

Showing clear expressions and signs of love to children solidifies their connection to their core values despite being exposed to multiple contents and ideas. Personalities differ from one person to another, which makes expressing love uneasy for some parents. According to Om



Nejoud Al-Yagout



Om Abdullah

Abdullah, adults who choose to become parents should not submit to this aspect in their personality, but rather learn to explicitly confirm and express their love to their children, because it is the parents' responsibility to fulfill their children's need for love. "This is an uneasy task as it requires a lot of effort and sacrifices. Unlike any other type of love, the genuineness of parents' love remains unreplaceable, which makes it a considerable responsibility for parents," she said.



Director-General of KUNA Dr Fatima Al-Salem and Omani Ambassador to Kuwait, Saleh Al-Kharosi.



Omani ambassador, KUNA chief discuss media cooperation

KUWAIT: Director-General of Kuwait News Agency (KUNA) Dr Fatima Al-Salem on Tuesday discussed with the Omani Ambassador Saleh Al-Kharosi on ways of enhancing media coop-

eration between the two countries. Dr Al-Salem, during the meeting in her office, affirmed KUNA's keenness on boosting Kuwaiti-Omani relations across various fields and hoped for more development and progress, especially in media.

The Omani ambassador congratulated Dr Al-Salem on her appointment as KUNA's Director General and commended the agency's sense of responsibility, fortitude, and role in advancing media in Kuwait. He also noted the significant role of Kuwaiti media as a whole in supporting bilateral ties and thanked KUNA for its efforts in connecting people and its credibility and objectivity in relaying facts and events. —KUNA



Kuwait FM receives Lebanon former PM

KUWAIT: Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Salem Abdullah Al-Jaber Al-Sabah on Tuesday met with the former Prime Minister of Lebanon Fouad Siniora on his official visit to Kuwait. During the meeting, they discussed the bilateral relation between both countries and praised Siniora's accomplishments during his role as prime minister, as well his continuous efforts in strengthening Lebanon's relation with Kuwait. —KUNA

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Health ministry launches infection control conference

KUWAIT: The Ministry of Health kicked off Tuesday the second edition of the infection control conference. Aimed at discussing new developments in the field, the conference will be held for three days with participation from Kuwaiti, Arab and international medical professionals. Medical professionals from Saudi Arabia, Oman, the United States, England and the Netherlands will be lecturing at the conference.

Head of the Infection Control Directorate Ahmed Al-Motawa said in a statement to KUNA that the conference will discuss topics related to protecting the safety of both patients and health-care workers, including how to combat novel infectious diseases, anti-biotic resistant bacteria and hospital-acquired infections. It will also examine best practices in sanitation and investigating outbreaks.

"We hope the conference will be a turning point in the ministry's journey in raising awareness and equipping workers with the skills needed to fight hospital-acquired infections," he told KUNA.

A 2016 study published in the American Journal of Infection Control found that device-associated hospital-acquired infections in Kuwait "are a challenge for patient safety". The study was based on data collected by the International Infection Control Consortium between 2013 and 2015.

Arab League chief demands funding \$70m UNRWA gap

CAIRO: Secretary General of the Arab League Ahmad Aboul-Gheit Tuesday called for filling the budget gap of the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Middle East (UNRWA) estimated at \$70 million. This came in a statement made by the League after its chief had met UNRWA secretary general Philippe Lazzarini who made a detailed presentation on Palestinian refugees' situations and the sufferings facing the agency. Aboul-Gheit expressed his full support to Lazzarini's efforts to the agency so as to overcome financial difficulties in a way that guarantees the UNRWA's continued services offered to 5.5 million Palestinian refugees, it said. He described the agency's work as a safety valve for the stability of the whole region, stressing the importance of the donor countries' commitment to the agency, it noted. — KUNA

Photo of the day



KUWAIT: Kuwait City's skyline is seen during sunset on a cloudy evening. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat.

Kuwait, South Korea ink education deal

Korea an important partner in infrastructure development: Official



KUWAIT: Kuwait University's Acting Director Fahad Al-Rashidi and the Korean Ambassador to Kuwait Chung Byung-ha signed the deal Tuesday.

KUWAIT: Kuwait University signed a memorandum of understanding Tuesday with South Korea's King Sejeong Institute, a government-funded institute which assists students worldwide seeking to learn Korean language and culture. The university's Acting Director Fahad Al-Rashidi and the Korean Ambassador to Kuwait Chung Byung-ha were present to seal the deal.

The agreement aims to increase the friendly relations between Korea and Kuwait through promoting the Korean language and culture. It also entails offering Korean language courses at Kuwait University.

Also Tuesday, Minister of Housing and Urban

Development Ammar Al-Ajmi said South Korea is an essential partner in Kuwait's quest to develop its infrastructure. Kuwait, said Ajmi, could learn a lot from the Asian country's experience in building residential cities. The remarks came in a statement to KUNA following the minister's meeting with South Korea's Second Vice-Minister of Land, Infrastructure and Transport Eo Myeong-so.

Ajmi said the ministry is planning on inking a few deals with South Korea. He added that the two countries need to further discuss signing bilateral agreements in several fields, specifically land and infrastructure development.

University, public sector join forces to train students

KUWAIT: Kuwait University is hosting a job fair for students in the faculty of social sciences to prepare them for the job hunt after graduation. The fair, to be held for three days starting Tuesday, will offer students the chance to learn about available jobs in the public sector.

Acting Dean of the College of Social Sciences Maha Al-Sejari told KUNA that participating gov-

ernment entities have signed agreements with the university by which they will collaborate to train students. Sejari added that the faculty is working on putting together specialized training courses for students. It also committed to providing as many students as possible with internships in the participating government entities, depending on their interest and field of study.

According to 2022 data from the Central Statistical Bureau, a majority of unemployed Kuwaitis registered with the Civil Service Bureau are in their 20s and 30s. Kuwait has a total of 8,318 unemployed citizens, with about 76 percent between 20 and 29 years old and about 13 percent between 30 and 39 years old.



KUWAIT: A group of participants pose for a picture at the Kuwait University job fair. — KUNA



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Pakistani migrants play deadly 'game' chasing future abroad

UK unveils contentious bid to stop cross-Channel migrants

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TANEGASHIMA SPACE CENTER: Visitors watch the launch of the "H3" rocket, a Japan's next generation rocket carrying the advanced optical satellite "Daichi 3", at the Tanegashima Space Center in Kagoshima, southwestern Japan on March 7, 2023. — AFP

Japan destroys rocket after lift-off failure

'My responsibility is to focus on discovering the cause and make efforts to restore confidence in our rockets'

TOKYO: Japan's second attempt to launch its next-generation H3 rocket failed after liftoff on Tuesday, with the spacecraft forced to self-destruct after the command centre concluded the mission could not succeed.

The failure is a blow for Japan's space agency JAXA, which has billed the rocket as a flexible and cost-effective new flagship. Its launch had already been delayed by several years, and then a first attempt last month failed when the solid rocket boosters did not ignite.

Tuesday's launch from the Tanegashima Space Center in southwestern Japan initially appeared to be a success, with the rocket lifting off. The first-stage separation appeared to go as planned, but signs of trouble soon emerged.

"It seems that the velocity is coming down," announcers on the JAXA live feed said while the rocket was about 300 kilometres (185 miles) above

ground. The command centre then announced: "The second stage engine ignition has not been confirmed yet, we continue to confirm the situation."

The live feed was briefly halted, with a message reading, "We are currently checking the status. Please wait." When it resumed, the command centre confirmed the bad news. "Destruct command has been transmitted to H3 because there was no possibility of achieving the mission."

The rocket was not going to reach its planned trajectory without confirmation of the second stage engine, JAXA Vice President Yasuhiro Funo told a news conference. Debris from the destroyed rocket is believed to have fallen in waters east of the Philippines, he said.

'Efforts to restore confidence'

The cause of the failure will be investigated, said

JAXA President Hiroshi Yamakawa. "When a failure like this happens, it is important that we show how quickly we can move and show our findings with transparency," he said. "My responsibility is to focus on discovering the cause and make efforts to restore confidence in our rockets."

The H3 rocket was developed for more frequent commercial launches as well as better cost efficiency and reliability and has been mooted as a possible competitor to Space X's Falcon 9. "The H3 rocket is a very important rocket for not only the government of Japan but also for private sector businesses to access space," Yamakawa said.

JAXA has said it envisions the H3 becoming a workhorse that could be launched six times or so annually for around two decades. There were no details on how long the investigation into the failure might take and whether or when JAXA could

attempt a new launch.

Developed by Mitsubishi Heavy Industries, the H-3 is the successor to the H-IIA model, which debuted in 2001. Tuesday's launch was carrying the ALOS-3 observation satellite, touted as having improved resolution and intended to help with disaster management and other monitoring.

The incident is not the only recent blow for JAXA. In October 2022, the agency was forced to send a self-destruct order to its solid-fuel Epsilon rocket after take-off. It was carrying satellites into orbit to demonstrate new technologies.

That was Japan's first failed rocket launch since 2003. The Epsilon rocket has been in service since 2013. It is smaller than the country's previous liquid-fuelled model, and a successor to the solid-fuel "M-5" rocket that was retired in 2006 due to its high cost. — AFP

Two strong earthquakes rock Philippines

MANILA: Two strong earthquakes jolted the southern Philippines on Tuesday, authorities said, with the second damaging buildings and forcing the evacuation of hundreds of villagers from their homes. A 6.0-magnitude quake struck at about 2:00 pm (0600 GMT), a few kilometres from Maragusan municipality in the mountainous gold-mining province of Davao de Oro on Mindanao island, the US Geological Survey said.

Local authorities said there were no reports of casualties or significant damage. But a shallower second quake, measuring 5.6 magnitude, hit nearly three hours later in the neighbouring municipality of New Bataan, triggering the collapse of some houses.

New Bataan disaster officer Lynne Dollolasa said nearly 300 people were forced to leave their homes in Andap village, where "a number of houses collapsed". About 100 people inside a shopping mall in Tagum city, in the adjacent province of Davao del Norte, were hit by falling glasses and plates as they fled the



MATI: Handout photo shows students taking shelter inside their classroom in Mati, after a 6.0-magnitude earthquake jolted the southern Philippines. — AFP

building, said Jay Suaybaguio, the provincial information officer.

"I was in the third floor buying office supplies when the quake suddenly struck," Suaybaguio told AFP. "When we reached the first floor we saw broken bottles of wine and condiments. The lights went out but emergency lights turned on, helping us to find our way."

Photos posted on the Facebook page of the Davao del Norte disaster agency showed collapsed ceiling sections inside the Tagum shopping mall, which it attrib-

uted to "the series of earthquake incidents". The Davao del Norte government suspended work and classes on Tuesday and Wednesday to allow for inspections of public buildings and infrastructure.

The first quake lasted about 30 seconds and was followed by aftershocks, said Corporal Stephanie Clemen, a police officer in Tagum, about 40 kilometres (25 miles) from Maragusan. "We immediately went under our desks and when the ground stopped shaking we went straight outside," Clemen told AFP. — AFP

Biden woos blue collar Americans for re-election

HOUSTON: President Joe Biden sought again to woo working white Americans, fine-tuning his words as he wages an all but official campaign for re-election and hoping to win over a demographic that snubbed him in 2020. "No billionaire should be paying a lower tax rate than a firefighter," Biden said in a speech to firefighters on Monday.

Since the start of his term in the White House, Biden, now 80, has told the same stories about growing up in a blue collar, middle class family in the factory town of

Scranton, Pennsylvania. But since his State of the Union address to Congress on February 7 — seen as the informal start of his quest for another term—Biden has really hammered away at this image of himself as a man of the people, a regular guy who can sympathize with families struggling to make ends meet.

In his speeches these days—like Monday before the first union to endorse him in 2020, the International Association of Fire Fighters—the flow of his message has been practically predictable. First comes an obligatory reference to his father, who Biden depicts as an example of proud, hardworking folk and would often say to him, "Joey, a job is about a lot more than a paycheck. It's about your dignity."

"It's about being able to look your kid in the eye and say, 'Honey, it's going to be OK,' and mean it," Biden said in

his February 7 address. He has repeated these words often since then. Then there is Biden's frequent allusion to his no-frills childhood home—three rooms for his parents, four children and a grandfather—which he bills as certifying his middle class credentials.

Biden also likes to talk about the need for everybody to pay their fair share of taxes, but does so with a nod to the glory of free enterprise in the country where it is sacrosanct. "I'm a capitalist. You want to go and make a lot of money? Go and do it but at least pay something," Biden told the firefighters on Monday. "Do you know what their average tax rate is? 1-h-r-e-e %. Poor people," Biden said, joking about billionaires. Biden will unveil the annual federal budget blueprint on Thursday and has again pledged to raise taxes on the rich. — AFP

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International

UK unveils contentious bid to stop cross-Channel migrants

'New law will send a clear signal that if you come here illegally, you will be swiftly removed'

LONDON: The UK government will Tuesday unveil radical plans to stop migrants crossing the Channel illegally on small boats, acknowledging it is stretching international law amid an outcry from rights campaigners.

Prime Minister Rishi Sunak said the plan would "take back control of our borders once and for all" - reprising a popular pledge from campaigners like him who backed Britain's Brexit divorce from the European Union. "This new law will send a clear signal that if you come to this country illegally, you will be swiftly removed," he wrote in *The Sun* newspaper, ahead of a summit Friday with French President Emmanuel Macron.

Under the draft law, anyone who is deported after making the dangerous journey from France would be banned from re-entering the UK and ever claiming British citizenship. Home Secretary Suella Braverman would be given a new legal duty to deport illegal migrants, trumping their other rights in UK and European human rights law.

"No more sticking plasters or shying away from the difficult decisions," the interior minister wrote in the *Telegraph* newspaper, before introducing the legislation in parliament later Tuesday. "Myself and the prime minister have been working tirelessly to ensure we have a bill that works - we've pushed the boundaries of international law to solve this crisis," Braverman added. Migrants would be returned to their home country or on to a "safe" destination such as Rwanda, under a hotly contested partnership agreed by the UK, and their rights of legal redress dramatically curtailed.

Sunak's Conservative government is trailing in the polls and the migrant issue is playing badly with voters and the right-wing press, particularly when they have crossed "safe" countries in Europe to reach Britain. But rights groups and opposition par-

ties say the plan is unworkable and unfairly scapegoats vulnerable refugees. Christina Marriott, executive director of strategy for the British Red Cross, said the UK would be in breach of its duties under international asylum conventions.

"We wonder if you are fleeing persecution or war, if you are running from Afghanistan or Syria and are in fear of your life, how are you going to be able to claim asylum in the UK?" she told *Sky News*. "If they don't have a valid asylum claim, then we are in support of people being returned to countries," she said. "But what we need for that is a really fair and fast asylum system. And that's what we don't have at the minute."

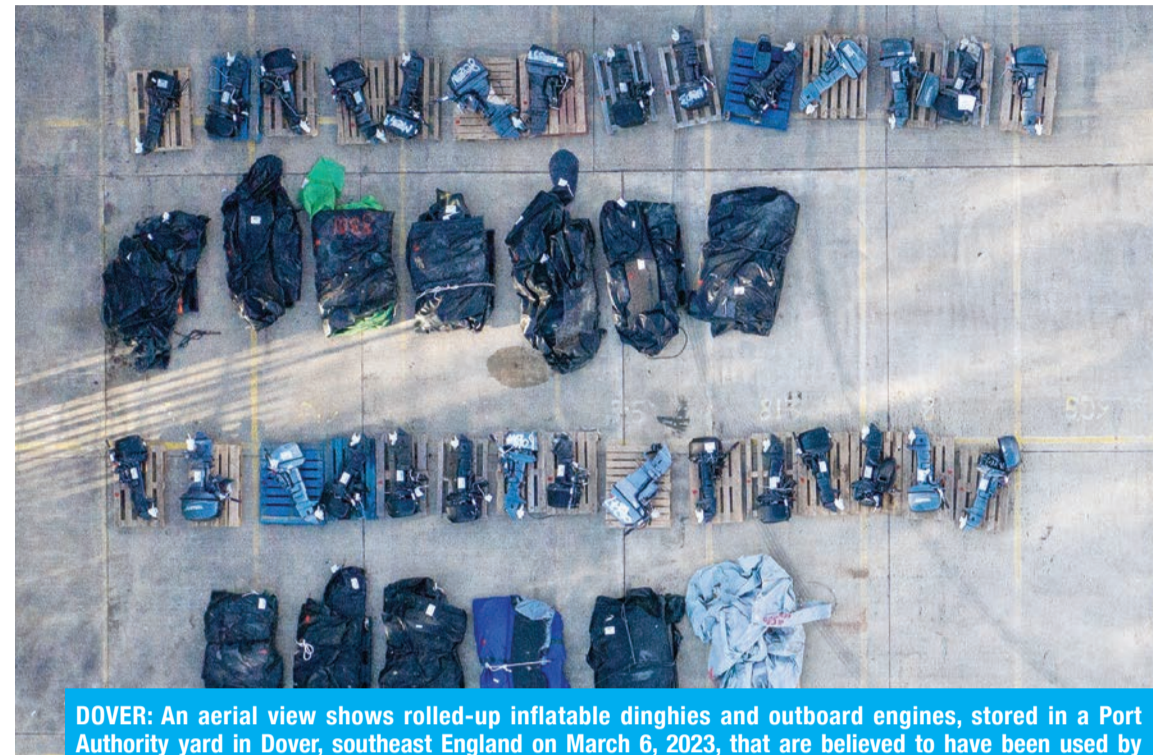
More than 45,000 migrants arrived on the shores of southeast England on small boats last year - a 60 percent annual increase on a route that has grown in popularity every year since 2018. Nearly 3,000 have arrived so far this year, often ending up in expensive hotels at taxpayer expense.

The new plan would transfer illegal migrants to disused military barracks, and cap annual asylum claims to a level set by parliament. The perilous nature of the crossings has been underlined by several tragedies in recent years, including in November 2021 when at least 27 people died when their dinghy deflated.

Gangster profits

The government has been striving for years to get a grip on the issue. It had hoped the threat of a one-way ticket to Rwanda, where migrants would remain if accepted for asylum, would deter the cross-Channel journeys.

But the plan was blocked at the last minute by the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), which is separate to the EU. It was then upheld by Britain's High Court, but remains mired in appeals, and no



DOVER: An aerial view shows rolled-up inflatable dinghies and outboard engines, stored in a Port Authority yard in Dover, southeast England on March 6, 2023, that are believed to have been used by migrants who were picked up at sea whilst crossing the English Channel to England from France. — AFP

flights to Rwanda have yet taken place.

Reports Tuesday said the government could withdraw from the ECHR if the Strasbourg-based court again intervenes in its latest legislation, although Sunak's spokesman has denied that is in the works. But it has yet to be confirmed to which so-called "safe third countries" cross-Channel migrants would be deported, other than Rwanda.

In Dover, the scene of an anti-migrant protest and counter-demonstration at the weekend, locals appeared uniformly sceptical about the draft law. Matthew Stevens, 43, predicted that its stipulations "won't happen". "Too many people are profiting for it to stop," he said of the criminal gangs who manage the illegal cross-Channel operations. — AFP

Iran announces first arrests as school poisoning top 5,000

TEHRAN: Iran announced Tuesday it had made the first arrests in a spate of mystery poisonings of schoolgirls that has affected more than 5,000 pupils since late November. Supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei had called Monday for the perpetrators of the "unforgivable crime" to be tracked down "without mercy" as public anger mounts.

"Based on the intelligence and research measures of the intelligence agencies, a number of people have been arrested in five provinces and the relevant agencies are conducting a full investigation," deputy interior minister Majid Mirahmadi told state television.

He did not identify those detained or elaborate on any possible motive. Scores of Iranian schools have been hit by poisonings since late November, with pupils suffering symptoms ranging from shortness of breath to nausea and vertigo after reporting "unpleasant" odours on school premises. Some have been treated in hospital.

"Twenty-five (out of 31) provinces and approximately 230 schools have been affected, and more than 5,000 schoolgirls and boys poisoned," Mohammad-Hassan Asafari, a member of the parliamentary fact-finding committee, told the ISNA news agency on Monday. "Various tests are being carried out to identify the type and cause of the

poisonings. So far, no specific information has been obtained regarding the type of poison used." The mystery poisonings have triggered a wave of anger and demands for action from the authorities.

They have also sparked international concern and Western calls for an independent investigation, particularly as the first cases were reported soon after the start of nationwide protests over the death of Iranian Kurd Mahsa Amini, 22, following her arrest for allegedly breaching Iran's strict dress code for women. President Ebrahim Raisi tasked the interior and intelligence ministries last week with providing continuous updates on the poisoning cases, dubbing them "the enemy's conspiracy to create fear and despair" among the people.

"In less than five percent of the students transferred to hospital, irritant materials were found which led to their ill-health," the interior ministry said in its latest update Monday. "Fortunately, so far, no toxic or dangerous substances have been found in any of the students transferred to medical centres."

Deputy health minister Saeed Karimi said symptoms included "respiratory irritation, stomach ache, weakness and lethargy". "These inhaled irritants may not necessarily be a gas but may be in the form of a powder or paste or even a liquid, which when poured over a heater or vaporised by heat can cause complications," he added. The latest case - reported by the ISNA news agency - involved 40 pupils, all of them female, in the restive southeastern city of Zahedan on Tuesday. — AFP

Tehran to avoid new censure over nuclear work

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 criticising Iran over its nuclear programme was planned.

US State Department spokesman Ned Price said words alone were not enough. "We've seen Iran issue vague promises only never to follow through" he told a press conference. "We expect, most importantly, Iran to take prompt and concrete action in line with the joint statement," Price added.

In November, Iran was censured over its lack of cooperation with the agency. But 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 delegation's forthcoming visit to Tehran.

In 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 programme 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

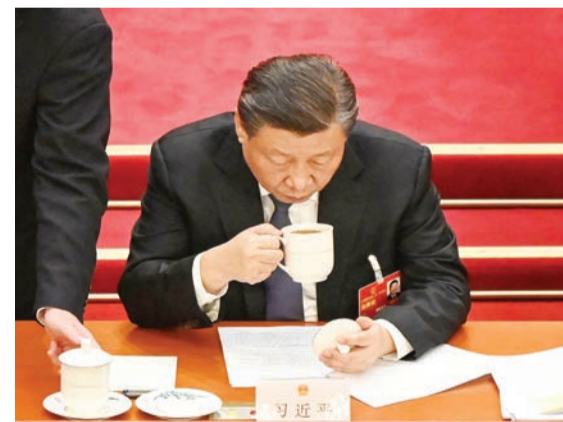
China lashes out at US, warns of 'consequences'

BEIJING: China lashed out at the United States on Tuesday, with the foreign minister accusing Washington of stoking tensions between the two powers and warning of "conflict and confrontation". The world's biggest economies have clashed in recent years over trade, human rights and other issues, but relations soured even further last month when the United States shot down a Chinese balloon it said was being used for surveillance - a claim strenuously denied by Beijing.

Beijing's new Foreign Minister Qin Gang told a press conference on the sidelines of the ongoing National People's Congress (NPC) there would be "catastrophic consequences" if the United States carried on in its current direction. "If the United States does not hit the brakes but continues to speed down the wrong path, no amount of guardrails can prevent derailing, and there will surely be conflict and confrontation," Qin told journalists. "Who will bear the catastrophic consequences?"

The foreign minister called American competition with China "a reckless gamble, with the stakes being the fundamental interests of two peoples and even the future of humanity". It was "a zero-sum game of life and death", he added. Qin's comments came after President Xi Jinping slammed the United States for leading a "containment, encirclement and suppression of China", while urging his country's private sector to boost innovation and become more self-reliant.

China's technology ambitions have been hit with a raft of restrictions by the United States and its Western allies, and Beijing has doubled down on the need to 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 risk of the technology being used by China's mili-



BEIJING: China's President Xi Jinping drinks a cup of tea during the second plenary session of the National People's Congress at the Great Hall of the People on March 7, 2023. — AFP

tary. In a rare direct criticism of the United States, Xi told industry leaders on Monday that "Western countries led by the United States have implemented all-round containment, encirclement and suppression of China, which has brought unprecedented severe challenges to our country's development".

Xi, who will be granted a third consecutive presidential term in the coming days at the highly choreographed NPC, said the past five years had been riddled with a new set of hurdles that threatened to weigh down China's economic rise. According to the state-run Xinhua news agency, Xi said China must "have the courage to fight as the country faces profound and complex changes in both the domestic and international landscape", in the address to delegates at the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), which runs alongside the NPC.

The 69-year-old said private firms "should take the initiative to pursue high-quality development", Xinhua reported late Monday. Xi also vowed to bolster China's manufacturing capacity and said the country 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," he said. — AFP

US wants to 'strengthen' ties with Iraq

BAGHDAD: Pentagon chief Lloyd Austin said Tuesday he hoped to "strengthen and broaden" relations with Iraq, on a Baghdad visit ahead of the 20th anniversary of the US-led invasion that toppled Saddam Hussein. Defense Secretary Austin also told Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia Al-Sudani that US troops were "ready to remain" in the country at Baghdad's invitation, a thorny issue that has divided public opinion in both countries.

The visit, which had not been publicly announced in advance, comes ahead of the March 20 anniversary of the ground invasion in March 2003 that started two decades of bloodshed that Iraq is only now beginning to exit. "I am optimistic about the future of our partnership," Austin told reporters in Baghdad after meetings with Sudani and Iraqi Defense Minister Thabet Al-Abbasi. "The United States will continue to strengthen and broaden out partnership in support of Iraqi security, stability and sovereignty."

The Iraqi premier told Austin he also wanted to "strengthen and consolidate relations" with Washington, and underlined Baghdad's commitment to "maintaining balanced relations with the regional and international powers". Successive governments in Baghdad have forged close ties with Iraq's neighbor Iran, the archfoe of the United States, in a delicate balancing act. Both Washington and Tehran provided extensive support during Iraq's fightback against the extremists of the Islamic State group, who overran swathes of northern and western Iraq in 2014. The jihadists were ousted from Iraqi territory in 2017 but retain sleeper cells in desert and mountain hideouts in both Iraq and neighboring Syria.

Iraq announced the end of combat operations by US-led coalition forces at the end of 2021 but some 2,500 American non-combat troops remain deployed to provide advice and training. "We must be able to operate safely and securely to continue this vital work," Austin said. In recent years, bases hosting coalition forces have come under drone and rocket attacks blamed on pro-Iranian factions. The Pentagon



BAGHDAD: Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia Al-Sudani meets US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin on March 7, 2023. — AFP

chief thanked Sudani and Abbasi for "their commitment to ensure that the coalition forces in Iraq... will be protected from state and non-state actors". Austin's visit comes after he held talks in neighboring Jordan with King Abdullah II, a staunch US ally in the region. While there, Austin voiced "his concerns on a range of shared challenges, including... maintaining focus on security and stability in Iraq, and countering other destabilizing activities in the region," a Pentagon statement said.

Despite its vast oil and gas reserves, Iraq has suffered from decades of underinvestment in its infrastructure and public services that have sparked repeated waves of protests. October 2021 elections were followed by a whole year of political vacuum before Sudani was sworn in at the head of a government led by pro-Iran factions.

The political arm of Iraq's Hashed al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilization) paramilitary force, made up heavily of Tehran-trained groups, has long demanded the departure of all remaining coalition troops, although its calls have been less shrill since it entered government. There had been a sharp deterioration in US-Iraqi ties under the Donald Trump administration following the assassination of Iran's foreign operations chief General Qasem Soleimani along with his Iraqi lieutenant, Hashed number two Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis, in a drone strike at Baghdad airport in Jan 2020. In the run-up to the invasion anniversary, Iraq has hosted a raft of foreign officials, including UN chief Antonio Guterres and the Iranian, Russian and Saudi foreign ministers. — AFP

International

North Korea warns US against intercepting test missiles

Pacific Ocean does not belong to the dominium of US or Japan



PYONGYANG: This undated photo shows North Korean leader Kim Jong Un attending the 7th enlarged plenary meeting of the 8th Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) at the office building of the WPK Central Committee in Pyongyang. — AFP

SEOUL: North Korea warned Tuesday that it would be a "clear declaration of war" if its missiles were shot down during their test launches over the Pacific Ocean. The United States and South Korea have ramped up defence cooperation, including joint drills, in the face of growing threats from nuclear-armed Pyongyang, which has conducted a wave of banned weapons tests in recent months.

North Korea has said its nuclear weapons and missile programmes are for self-defence, and has bristled over US-South Korea military exercises, describing them as rehearsals for an invasion. "It will be regarded as a clear declaration of war against the DPRK, in case such military response as interception takes place against our tests of strategic weapons," Kim Yo Jong, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un's powerful sister, said in a statement, using North Korea's official name.

"The Pacific Ocean does not belong to the dominium of the US or Japan." North Korea is "always on standby to take appropriate, quick and overwhelming action at any time", added her statement, published by the official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA).

This month, the US and South Korean militaries will hold their largest joint drills in five years. Ahead of those exercises, named Freedom Shield and scheduled for at least 10 days starting March 13, the allies held air drills this week featuring a nuclear-capable US B-52 heavy bomber.

In a separate statement on Tuesday, North Korea's foreign ministry accused the United States

of "intentionally" ramping up tensions. "The recent joint air drill... clearly shows that the US scheme to use nuclear weapons against the DPRK is being carried forward at the level of an actual war," it said in a statement published by KCNA. "We express deep regret over the irresponsible and worrying muscle-flexing of the US and South Korea."

'Irreversible' nuclear power

Last year, Pyongyang declared itself an "irreversible" nuclear power and fired a record-breaking number of missiles. Kim Jong Un recently called for an "exponential" increase in weapons production, including tactical nukes.

North Korea has framed its missile tests and military drills as justified countermeasures following US-South Korea drills. Last week, it called on the United Nations to urge a halt to these exercises, and reiterated that its nuclear weapons ensured the balance of power in the region.

South Korea is eager to reassure its increasingly nervous public about the US commitment to so-called extended deterrence, where US military assets, including nuclear weapons, serve to prevent attacks on allies.

Last month, a tabletop US-South Korea exercise at the Pentagon focused on responses to a nuclear attack by North Korea. Pyongyang responded to that exercise by firing cruise missiles, and claimed that ramped-up US-South Korea drills "can be regarded as a declaration of war". — AFP

Rescuers search for missing after deadly Indonesia landslide

JAKARTA: Rescuers on a remote Indonesian island were searching Tuesday for dozens still missing after a landslide that killed 15 people, a disaster official said. Poor weather and downed communication lines have complicated rescue efforts on the far-flung island of Serasan, in the Natuna region between Borneo and peninsular Malaysia, home to about 8,000 people.

Pictures provided by Natuna's communication and information agency showed houses reduced to rubble, with fallen trees and torn roofs visible. Body bags were lined up on top of a blue tarpaulin as officials gathered to pray for the victims.

Abdul Muhari, spokesman for the national disaster mitigation agency (BNPB), told local broadcaster Metro TV that rescuers had recovered 10 bodies at the scene, while villagers put the death toll at 15. "Six (bodies) have been identified, while four are still being identified," he said. Muhari said 42 people were missing. Eight previously missing people

had been found alive, though four remained in critical condition. Rescuers were focusing their efforts along a stretch of road near a cliff where dozens of houses were reportedly buried by the landslide, Muhari said. "Along this road, there are around 30 houses that were buried. This is our focal point of the search," he said. Muhari added that the agency was sending food and tents, as well as satellite communication equipment and two helicopters in a bid to establish communication lines and speed up aid.

Indonesia is prone to landslides during the rainy season, aggravated in some places by deforestation, and prolonged torrential rain has caused flooding in different areas of the archipelago nation. Experts say the country's weather-related disasters are likely being made worse by climate change. Floods further south in Banjar district, in the Indonesian part of Borneo, have inundated more than 17,000 houses and disrupted lives for a month. Neighbouring Malaysia has also been hit with torrential rains and vast floods. At least four people have died and nearly 41,000 were evacuated last week in several states of the country.

In 2020, the Indonesian capital Jakarta and nearby cities saw some of their deadliest floods in years after downpours triggered landslides. At least 67 people died in that disaster. — AFP



NATUNA: This handout photo taken and released on March 7, 2023 by the Natuna ministry of communication and information local office shows a rescue team inspecting damages and searching for victims following landslides in Natuna islands. — AFP

Pakistani migrants play deadly 'game' chasing future abroad

GUJRAT: When Muhammad Nadeem left home in eastern Pakistan, he asked his mother to pray for his safe passage to Europe then slipped away before she could object. Ali Hasnain showed off the new clothes he would wear as he prepared for the long journey west to a better life.

Both men departed from Gujrat, in Punjab province, and although they did not know each other, became fellow travellers on the human trafficking trail, escaping Pakistan's rapidly deteriorating economy.

They died on the continent's doorstep last month, relatives say, after boarding a boat in Libya and floundering in Mediterranean waters—the latest lives dashed on the world's deadliest migrant route. "It was like heaven had fallen when we first heard the news," said Nadeem's mother Kausar Bibi, as his wife keened in another room. "I cannot bear this pain," she told AFP in their family home, a basic concrete husk.

Pakistan is in economic freefall. A dire downturn-caused by decades of mismanagement and political instability—has drained dollar reserves, spurred runaway inflation and caused widespread factory closures. The desperate situation is creating an incentive for Pakistanis to take perilous, illegal routes to Europe. Nadeem, 40, was making only 500 to 1,000 rupees

(\$1.80 to \$3.60) a day in a furniture shop to support his wife and three boys when he left for Italy via Dubai, Egypt and Libya a few weeks ago. "I was happy he was going for his children, that it would brighten their future," said his 20-year-old brother, Muhammad Usman. After coordinating the 2.2 million rupee (\$8,000) loan to pay the agent, Nadeem told a friend he anticipated a smooth passage. "The sea is calm and there is no problem. I am in the game," he said, using a euphemism adopted for the illegal odysseys.

Pakistan's foreign office confirmed his death nearly two weeks later. Hasnain's family, meanwhile, learned of the 22-year-old's death from an image of their dead son before it was officially reported. "We also believed in sending him," said his grandfather, 72-year-old Muhammad Inayat, after taming wails of grief. "It's becoming hard to survive here."

'Agents took advantage'

Gujrat has long been a springboard for migrants. In the 1960s, a British firm built a gargantuan hydroelectric dam in the region, displacing more than 100,000 people who were invited to the UK as labourers.

The wealth was shared back home, giving families a footstep out of poverty, and the Pakistan diaspora organised legal migration for relatives, establishing communities in Europe. But after the 9/11 attacks, controls were tightened and human traffickers began to thrive. Today, Gujrat city and its suburbs are known as a hotspot for "agents"—shady middlemen who smuggle customers by land, sea and air. Nadeem and Hasnain's final communications suggest they may not have been on the same boat, but they are seen together in a



Eduard Heger

Slovak PM quits party before snap elections

BRATISLAVA: Acting Slovak Prime Minister Eduard Heger announced he was quitting his own party OLaNO on Monday night, months before a snap general election scheduled for September.

"My story in OLaNO ends today," Heger said in a Facebook post, adding that his role and mission in the party had been fulfilled. "I have my own vision of politics. I know that if I want to fulfil it, I have to go my own way," he added.

"Life simply brings situations where we have to make a decision. I'm doing it today. Heger did not say whether he intended to join another movement or form a new one. But local media said he could join forces with other members of the acting government, which lost a no-confidence vote in December and is caretaking the country until the new election.

"Together with Eduard Heger, we are looking for such a solution so that the voter has something to choose from," Slovak Defence Minister Jaroslav Nad said in January. The centre-right government coalition won the 2020 general election in the country of 5.4 million on an anti-corruption programme.

Heger replaced OLaNO leader Igor Matovic as prime minister in April 2021, following a quarrel within the ruling four-party alliance. Following December's no-confidence motion and the ensuing political crisis, the prime minister's ratings dwindled.

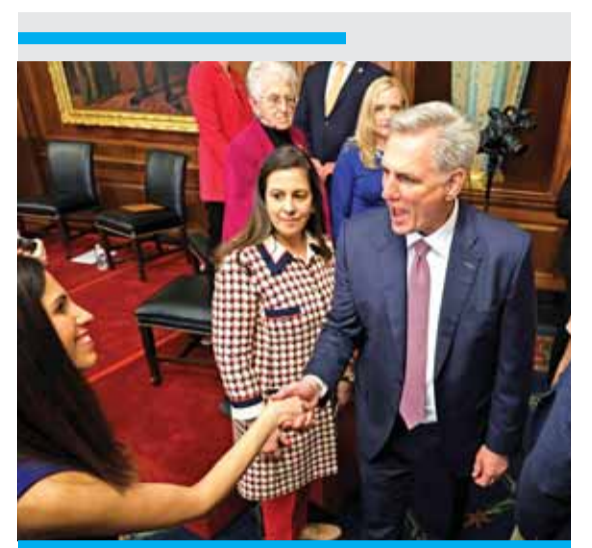
Only 19 percent of voters expressing their trust in Heger last month, compared to 28 percent a year ago. The early general election in Slovakia, a member of the European Union and NATO, is due to be held on September 30. — AFP

video, seemingly recorded by agents, sitting on blankets in a whitewashed room with around a dozen other South Asian men. "We are sending you on a small ship. Are you going by your own will and nobody forced you?" a voice asks. "Nobody forced us," the men answer in muddled unison. "God willing, we will reach Italy," Nadeem's brother Usman says smugglers "took advantage" of the scarce opportunities in Pakistan.

But a Gujrat agent speaking anonymously to AFP claimed to be making a "positive impact". "Do you



GUJRAT: Mourners gather at Muhammad Nadeem's house in Gujrat district of Punjab province, who died in Libya boat capsizing along with other migrants. — AFP



WASHINGTON: Speaker of the House Kevin McCarthy (R-CA) (C), Rep. Elise Stefanik (R-NY) and fellow Republicans greet guests during an event to introduce the Parents Bill of Rights Act in the Rayburn Room at the U.S. Capitol in Washington. — AFP

Taiwan president to meet US Speaker in California

TAIPEI: Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen will meet US House Speaker Kevin McCarthy in California rather than in Taipei, the Financial Times reported on Tuesday, hours after Taipei warned a high-profile US visit could provoke a Chinese military response.

Tsai's government had provided McCarthy's staff with intelligence about Chinese threats, the newspaper reported, citing an unidentified senior Taiwanese official. McCarthy had expressed an interest in visiting Taiwan, as his predecessor Nancy Pelosi had done in August.

Pelosi's trip sparked condemnation from China, which held massive military drills around the self-ruled island in response in a move Taipei said was preparation for an invasion. Taiwan lives under constant threat of such an invasion by China, which views the democratically ruled island as part of its territory to be seized one day, by force if necessary.

The United States is one of Taiwan's closest allies and biggest arms suppliers but also adopts a "One China" Policy, in which the United States recognises Beijing and opposes any unilateral changes to the status quo from either side.

Taiwan's defence minister said on Monday a sharp increase in Chinese defence spending announced at the weekend was potentially aimed at the island. "I think they are waiting for a good reason to send troops, such as high-level visits from other countries to Taiwan or too-frequent activities between our military and other countries," Chiu Kuo-cheng said.

The minister said Taiwan was "making advance preparations" for incursions deeper into waters around the island than have been the norm in recent years. McCarthy's office has not commented on the potential visit, which the FT reported would take place in April. Tsai's office also offered no confirmation when approached by AFP on Tuesday.

Taiwan's foreign ministry would neither confirm nor deny the planned visit. "The ministry will announce to the public if there is any confirmed arrangement for the president's visit but we don't have any relevant information to share at the moment," spokesman Jeff Liu said on Tuesday.

Tsai last visited the United States in 2019, stopping over while making official visits to diplomatic allies in the Caribbean. — AFP

have any other alternative that can improve the lives of locals so quickly?" he asked. "They come to us with dreams, and we do our best to fulfil them, but there are inherent risks involved."

'Princely lifestyle'

Nearly 90 percent of Pakistanis who recently arrived in Italy used a human smuggler, according to a 2022 survey by the Mixed Migration Centre, a Europe-based research group. An official from Pakistan's Federal Investigation Agency, speaking anonymously, estimated 40,000 illegal trips are attempted every year.

Spain recently announced those living in the country for two years could seek temporary residency and officially enter the workforce, while Italy has also introduced a scheme to "regularise" the employment of undocumented migrants. "It frustrates us and it's shameful," said Farooq Afgan, a local politician in Gujrat. "Nobody wants to leave his country, but poverty, lawlessness and hunger force people to migrate." Those living abroad can create a "princely lifestyle" for relatives back home, he said, enticing new migrants to try their luck. Outside Gujrat, the village of Bhakrevali is an outcrop of white and pastel-coloured mansions, tiered like wedding cakes, amid wheat fields sputtering with irrigation pumps. "You will not find a single house where they have not tried to send one of their youngsters to Europe," remarked one local. Malik Haq Nawaz, once a farmer, built his own villa, with a new 4x4 parked out front and gold filigreed furniture inside, after despatching three sons to Barcelona. — AFP

Business

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 8, 2023

Pension strike snarls France as unions vow to press protest

French strike disruption snares UK travelers



NICE: People take part in a demonstration in Nice, southeastern France, on March 7, 2023, as part of a nationwide action day against French President's pension reform and its postponement of the legal retirement age from 62 to 64. — AFP

PARIS: Fuel deliveries and public transport were severely disrupted in France on Tuesday as unions kicked off a fresh day of protest against a pensions reform that would push back the retirement age for millions. Unions have vowed to bring the country to a standstill with strikes over the proposed changes, which include raising the minimum retirement age to 64 from 62 and increasing the number of years people have to make contributions for a full pension.

"We mustn't give up, it's possible to make the government withdraw on 64 years," CFDT union chief Laurent Berger told broadcaster LCI, forecasting "more people" on the streets and warning of future actions if workers' demands were not heard. President Emmanuel Macron put the pensions plan at the centre of his re-election campaign last year, and his cabinet says the changes are essential to prevent the system from falling into deficit in coming years.

But they face fierce resistance from both parliament and the street, with almost two in three people

across the country supporting protests against it, according to a poll by the Elabe survey group published Monday. Ali Toure, a 28-year-old construction worker, on Tuesday morning was waiting for a delayed train north of Paris, but said it was "no big deal" if he arrived late to work for a month.

"They're right to be striking. Manual labor is hard," he said. Former left-wing presidential candidate Jean-Luc Melenchon said "the president would be wrong to count on (resistance) wearing out, on people getting exhausted".

"The French people deserve better," he told Le Parisien daily. The hard-line CGT union said fuel deliveries from refineries across France had been blocked from Tuesday morning, which could see petrol stations running short if the protests continue.

Meanwhile, mass protests in France spilled over to disrupt cross-Channel transport in Britain on Tuesday. Dozens of flights and trains were cancelled and ferries delayed as French workers rallied against government pension reforms. Air traffic con-

trollers and rail staff in France were among those to walk out. Budget carrier EasyJet axed at least 18 flights between Britain and France while British Airways cancelled at least 13, impacting passengers departing from hubs including Heathrow and Gatwick airports near London. Air France withdrew four flights from service between Heathrow and Paris. Eurostar, which runs the cross-Channel rail service, cancelled 16 of 26 trains scheduled between London and Paris, and a further six between the British capital and Brussels.

The company warned the fallout from the protests "could extend beyond" Tuesday. Ferry passengers travelling between Dover and Calais were told to expect disruption, with sailings delayed by up to 65 minutes. P&O Ferries advised passengers to travel on another date.

Unions have warned of rolling strikes on public transport that could paralyze parts of the country for weeks on end. Police expect 1.1 million to 1.4 million people to hit the streets Tuesday in more

than 260 locations nationwide, a source told AFP on condition of anonymity.

The upper limit of that range would mean stronger opposition than during the five previous days of rallies that have taken place since mid-January. On the unions' side, Frederic Souillot, leader of hard-left union Force Ouvriere, told RTL radio he expected more than two million people to march.

The biggest day of demonstrations so far brought 1.27 million people to the street on January 31, according to official figures. In the lead-up to Tuesday, unions had promised to bring the country "to a standstill". Only one in five regional and high-speed trains were expected to run, while a leading trade unionist representing refinery workers has vowed to bring the French economy "to its knees".

School teachers are also to stage walkouts. Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne told French television Monday that while she respected the right to protest, a nationwide standstill would primarily penalise "the most fragile" among the population. —AFP

CMA receives IsDB delegation

KUWAIT: Capital Markets Authority Chairman and Executive Director Dr Ahmed Abdul Rahman Al-Melhem on Tuesday received a delegation from the Islamic Development Bank (IsDB) at the authority's headquarters. The IsDB delegation was represented by Yahya Alim Al-Rahman, a global leader in Islamic financial advisory services, Dr Abu Dhar Muhammad, senior Islamic finance specialist, and Abdullah Mohammed, senior Islamic finance specialist.

The two-day visit comes in response to the authority's request for technical assistance in the field of the Islamic financial industry and with the support of the minister of Commerce and Industry and minister of State for Communications and Information Technology Affairs, as well as the minister of Finance and minister of State for Economic Affairs and Investment, the representative of Kuwait in the Islamic Development Bank.

This is also in line with the authority's initiative and its approved strategy to develop the Islamic financial industry in Kuwait's capital market and diversify its investment tools.

CMA has raised awareness of Islamic finance in Kuwait over the years and it reflects in several aspects, most notably the percentage of companies listed on Boursa Kuwait (in terms of market value) complying with Islamic sharia, which constitutes 60 percent of listed companies. Islamic finance is now universally accepted for its role in sustainable economic development, its association with real assets and its participation in profits and losses. Financial markets that are compatible with Islamic law provide an important opportunity for many countries seeking to develop their economy, since these markets have a positive impact on the future of the financial sector and boost the growth of gross domestic product and the economy.

During the visit, CMA agreed with the IsDB's representatives on a plan to conduct a study that includes a review of the standards and publications of relevant international organizations.



KUWAIT: Dr Ahmed Abdul Rahman Al-Melhem with the delegation of Islamic Development Bank at the Authority's headquarters on Tuesday.

World Bank halts Tunisia program over migrant remarks

TUNIS: The World Bank is pausing talks over its future engagement with Tunisia following anti-immigrant comments made by the country's president, Kais Saied, according to an internal message to staff seen by AFP. In the message sent on Sunday evening, the bank's outgoing President David Malpass said Saied's tirade had triggered "racially motivated harassment and even violence," and that the institution had postponed a planned meeting involving Tunisia until further notice.

"Given the situation, management has decided to pause the Country Partnership Framework and withdraw it from Board review," said Malpass in the note to staff. AFP understands that ongoing projects will continue and funded projects remain financed.

Hundreds of migrants have flown home from Tunisia, fearful of a wave of violence since the president's remarks. Last month, Saied ordered officials to take "urgent measures" to tackle irregular migration, claiming without evidence that "a criminal plot" was underway to change Tunisia's demographic makeup. He claimed that migrants were behind most crime in the North African country, fueling a spate of sackings, evictions and attacks.

'Completely unacceptable'

"Public commentary that stokes discrimination, aggression, and racist violence is completely unacceptable," said Malpass in the note to World Bank staff. But he also noted that measures announced by the Tunisian government to protect and support migrants and refugees marked a "positive step," adding that the bank would assess and monitor its impact carefully.

The development lender will roll out additional safety measures for its staff on the ground, and may take more action if needed, he added. The African Union has previously expressed "deep shock and concern" at Saied's remarks, and governments in sub-Saharan Africa have scrambled to bring home hundreds of frightened nationals who flocked to their embassies for help. The United States is "deeply concerned" by President Saied's remarks, State Department spokesman Ned Price said at a press briefing on Monday. "These remarks are not in keeping with Tunisia's long history of generosity and hosting and protecting refugees, asylum seekers and migrants," he said.

"We urge Tunisian authorities to meet their obligations under international law to protect the rights of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants," he added. He also called on Tunisian authorities to facilitate the "safe, dignified and voluntary" return of migrants looking to return to their countries of origin.

Since the president's speech on February 21, rights groups reported a spike in vigilante violence, including stabbings targeting African migrants. "We condemn without reservation any and all statements that are xenophobic, that are racist, that are meant to increase racial hatred," said Stephane Dujarric, a spokesman for UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, at a press briefing on Monday. According to official figures, there are around 21,000 undocumented migrants from other parts of Africa in Tunisia, which is home to around 12 million people. Many African migrants in the country lost their jobs and homes overnight.

The embassies of Ivory Coast and Mali earlier provided emergency accommodation for dozens of their citizens evicted from their homes, including young children. Citizens of other African countries whose countries have no diplomatic representation in Tunisia had meanwhile set up makeshift camps outside the Tunis offices of the International Organization for Migration. —AFP

Business

Sri Lanka president says China agrees to restructure loans

Colombo clears the final obstacle to long-awaited IMF bailout

COLOMBO: Sri Lanka's president said Tuesday that China had agreed to restructure its loans to the bankrupt island nation, clearing the final obstacle to a long-awaited International Monetary Fund bailout. An unprecedented economic crisis has seen Sri Lanka's 22 million people suffer acute food, fuel and medicine shortages, along with extended blackouts and runaway inflation.

President Ranil Wickremesinghe's government has been working to repair Sri Lanka's ruined finances and secure the sorely needed IMF rescue package. But it was held up by debt negotiations with China, its largest bilateral creditor.

Wickremesinghe told parliament Beijing had now agreed to a restructure and that he expected the first tranche from the Washington-based lender's promised \$2.9 billion in funds to be released within the month. "We have done our part, I hope the IMF will do theirs," he said in a special address to lawmakers.

Wickremesinghe said the state-owned Exim Bank of China had sent a letter to the IMF on Monday night signaling its willingness to go ahead with a restructure. There was no immedi-

ate confirmation of the announcement from the bank or the IMF. Sri Lanka defaulted on its \$46 billion foreign debt last April.

Just over \$14 billion of that is bilateral debt owed to foreign governments, of which China holds 52 percent. Wickremesinghe's government entered into a staff-level agreement with the IMF for a \$2.9 billion rescue package in September, but its release was held up pending "financial assurances" from creditors.

Japan and India, its other biggest creditors, along with a host of others known as the "Paris Club" creditor nations, had given assurances earlier this year, leaving only China to give its assent. Financial analyst Murtaza Jafferjee, the head of the Colombo-based Advocata Institute think tank, told AFP "a significant shift in China's earlier position" would have been necessary for the bailout to proceed.

Beijing had earlier proposed a debt moratorium for up to two years instead of taking a haircut on its loans, an offer considered insufficient to meet the IMF's requirements.

"It is up to the IMF board to decide if the Exim

Bank letter provides sufficient financial assurances they expect from all creditors," Jafferjee told AFP.

'Rebuild this nation'

Sri Lanka's economic crisis culminated last July when tens of thousands of protesters stormed then-president Gotabaya Rajapaksa's official residence, forcing him to flee abroad and resign. Wickremesinghe has imposed sharp tax hikes and ended energy subsidies to repair the nation's finances and meet the terms of the IMF deal. He has also announced plans to sell off loss-making state enterprises, including Sri Lanka's national airline, to satisfy the terms of the IMF bailout.

The president warned last month Sri Lanka would remain bankrupt for at least three more years and acknowledged that his austerity measures had caused discontent. "Introducing new tax policies is a politically unpopular decision. Remember, I'm not here to be popular. I want to rebuild this nation from the crisis it has fallen into," he said then. On Tuesday he told parliament that inflation had eased to about 50 percent, from a



Ranil Wickremesinghe

high of nearly 70 percent in September. Police have used tear gas and water cannon to disperse several protests against the government's economic reforms in recent weeks. Government doctors and bank employees were among those who went on strike last week, defying a government ban on trade union action by "essential services". —AFP

Lego's profits rose in 2022 despite inflation

BILLUND, Denmark: Lego, the world's number one toymaker, said Tuesday that its revenue and profits rose last year as demand for its plastic bricks remained strong despite inflationary headwinds. For 2022, net profit at the Danish firm rose four percent to 13.8 billion kroner (\$1.98 billion) while sales jumped 17 percent to 64.6 billion kroner.

"These results were delivered despite extraordinary inflationary pressures on materials, freight and energy costs," the company said in a statement. Excluding currency effects, the sales gain was 11 percent. The privately-held company did not provide unit sales. The firm, in which the holding company of Denmark's Kirkbi family owns 75 percent with the rest being held by the Lego Foundation, said sales improved in all markets and its market share grew globally.

"The company expects single digit revenue growth in 2023, ahead of the global toy market and will continue to accelerate investments in strategic initiatives," it said. The company has seen continued success in the last two years even after no longer enjoying a boost from lockdowns keeping people at home, so far withstanding pressure from inflation and slowing economies.

It has been buoyed both by sets based on franchises such as Star Wars and Harry Potter as well as home-grown hits like Lego Friends and Lego Technic. Lego, which has completely



BILLUND, Denmark: This file photo taken on November 29, 2022 shows people checking LEGO boxes at a shop in the hotel LEGOLAND in Billund, Denmark. — AFP

withdrawn from Russia following Moscow's invasion of Ukraine, has continued its strategy of opening more stores, with 155 new shops opened during the year, bringing the number of shops worldwide to 904.

Lego, which employs some 27,000 people, has also been making major investments to reduce the

climate impact of its products and operations, including by manufacturing closer to consumers. The group has just opened a carbon-neutral factory in Vietnam, joining already established ones in Hungary, the Czech Republic, Mexico, China and Denmark. A new factory is also being constructed in the United States. — AFP

Macron vs unions: What's at stake for France?

PARIS: French President Emmanuel Macron is facing his biggest standoff with France's trade unions since coming to power in 2017, with the outcome of a series of strikes and protests over a pensions overhaul seen as decisive for both sides. As labor groups look to bring the country "to a standstill" on Tuesday, AFP looks at what's at stake for the president, the unions and the country at large.

What's in the reform?

Macron's flagship proposal would raise the minimum retirement age from its current level of 62 to 64, bringing France more into line with its EU neighbors, most of which have pushed back the retirement age to 65 or higher. The law also stiffens the requirements for a full pension and would abolish privileges enjoyed by some public-sector employees, such as those at the Paris Metro.

After initially claiming it was intended to make the system fairer, the government now emphasizes that it is about savings. "The status quo in the next 10 years means 150 billion euros [\$160 billion] of accumulated deficits and a fall in the quality of life of pensioners," Labour Minister Olivier Dussopt said at the weekend. The changes, which would also see small raises for the lowest pensions, are slated to come into force in September.

Who are the opponents?

France's trade unions have organized five separate days of protests so far, but Tuesday will see them move into a higher gear, with a threat of rolling strikes risking a severe knock-on in subsequent days. Their main complaint is that the changes penalize unskilled workers who tend to start their careers early and often toil in physically demanding jobs, unlike university graduates.

They also contest that government's claim of looming deficits for the pay-as-you-go pensions system, saying that small increases in contributions could keep it solvent. The unions are backed by the hard-left France Unbowed (LFI) political party, which wants the retirement age lowered to 60, as well as the Socialists and Greens. The far-right party of Marine Le Pen is also against the overhaul, while expressing unease over attempts to paralyze France with rolling strikes. A host of left-wing intellectuals have also voiced opposi-



NANTES: People take part in a demonstration in Nantes, western France, on March 7, 2023, as part of a nationwide action day against French President's pension reform and its postponement of the legal retirement age from 62 to 64. — AFP

tion, notably star economist Thomas Piketty, who sees Macron as reinforcing his reputation as "the president of the rich".

What's at stake for Macron?

After trying and failing to push through pension reform during his first term, Macron returned to the issue while campaigning for re-election last April. He defeated Le Pen running on another pro-business platform that promised to lower unemployment and make the French "work more" in order to finance the country's social security system. But political analysts say his mandate is weak, and Macron himself acknowledged in his victory speech that many people had voted for him simply to keep Le Pen out of power. Despite warnings from allies about the timing of the reform so soon after the COVID-19 pandemic and in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis, the 45-year-old has pressed ahead. "For Emmanuel Macron, pulling back would be an abdication," senior right-wing senator Bruno Retailleau, who supports the reform, said on Sunday. "If he pulled back, he couldn't reform anymore, his term would be over."

What about public opinion?

Around two thirds of voters tell pollsters they are against the changes, and a majority of people support the strikes. Opposition appears to be particular-

ly strong in small and midsize towns, where Le Pen draws much of her support. Fears that the changes could prompt a resurgence of the so-called "Yellow Vest" protests, a spontaneous and sometimes violent anti-government movement in 2018, have been unfounded so far. Despite its unpopularity, two in three people say they believe the reform will pass, a poll by the Elabe group showed on Monday.

Are these protests typical?

The government was expecting a rough ride-few major changes happen in France without protests.

For left-wingers, any attempt to roll back the rights of workers-to short working hours, generous pensions or protected employment contracts-is seen as an attack on the achievements of the labor movement over the past century. The current protests might end up surpassing those of 2010, when right-wing president Nicolas Sarkozy raised the retirement age to 62 from 60. They are also bigger than those of 1995, when the government was forced into a notorious U-turn on pensions. But the impact of Tuesday's stoppages is different, with the advent of working-from-home and new technology reducing disruptions. "So far, the mobilization of French people to demonstrate or go on strike has been important, but probably not enough to have a significant macroeconomic impact," economists at the bank ING wrote Monday. — AFP

S Africa's GDP fell below pre-COVID levels

CAPE TOWN: South Africa's economy shrank 1.3 percent in the final three months of 2022 to return below pre-pandemic levels as record power shortages hit activity, official data showed Tuesday. "After rallying in the third quarter of 2022, South African gross domestic product (GDP) declined by 1.3 percent in the fourth quarter," the national statistics agency StatsSA said, adding that "GDP fell below pre-pandemic levels".

The trade and finance sectors were the biggest contributors to the economy's decline. The slump compares to the 1.6 percent seasonally adjusted quarter-on-quarter growth rate in July through September. Growth in Africa's most industrialized country was weighed down in the final quarter by unprecedented levels of power outages. Only two days were spared the staggered blackouts during the last three months of last year.

State-owned energy firm Eskom, saddled with constantly breaking down generating plants, is failing to meet demand. South Africa's economy was badly hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, which amplified joblessness and poverty, in one of the world's most unequal countries.

Economic growth slowed for about two years. After the economy returned to its pre-pandemic size in the first quarter of 2022, growth has been hampered by floods and an energy crisis.

Economic growth is forecast to be as low as 0.3 percent in 2022 due to the electricity supply crisis, according to the central bank, down from 2.5 percent in 2022. — AFP

Australian CB lifts rates to 11-year high

SYDNEY: Australia's central bank on Tuesday hiked interest rates to an 11-year high, putting mortgage holders under mounting pressure as it tries to curb inflation. The Reserve Bank of Australia lifted borrowing costs by 25 basis points to 3.6 percent, marking the 10th successive increase.

The bank has been criticized for raising interest rates-and pushing up mortgage repayments-as people face spiraling food and electricity prices. "Global inflation remains very high. It will be some time before inflation is back to target rates," bank governor Philip Lowe said in a statement.

Lowe said he expected further rate increases would be needed to return inflation to the bank's 2-3 percent target range, and he vowed to "do what is necessary" to get there. Household inflation in Australia is above seven percent, according to the latest government figures.

The widely anticipated rate hike comes as central banks around the world continue to tighten monetary policy in the face of runaway food and energy prices, exacerbated by the war in Ukraine. — AFP



SYDNEY: People walk past a real estate agent's window in Melbourne on March 7, 2023, as the Reserve Bank of Australia (RBA) raises interest rates for the 10th consecutive meeting, taking the cash rate target to 3.6 per cent. — AFP

Business

Energy industry must lead climate fight: COP president

US wants hike in global crude output, including from OPEC: Official

HOUSTON: Sultan Al-Jaber, the president of this year's UN climate talks, on Monday said the oil and gas industry must lead the fight against climate change. Al-Jaber is minister of industry for the United Arab Emirates and is also chief executive of the UAE's Abu Dhabi National Oil Company. Climate activists have criticized the decision to hold COP28 in the UAE, a major oil producer, and also the choice of Al-Jaber as the meeting's president.

"No one can be on the sidelines and this industry in particular, is integral to developing the solutions," Al-Jaber told hundreds of oil and gas executives at the CERAWEEK conference in Houston, Texas. "In fact, this industry must take responsibility and lead the way," he added. The last UN climate talks, in Egypt in November, ended with a landmark deal to create a fund to cover the costs that developing countries face from climate-linked natural disasters.

But observers were left disappointed that little progress was made on reducing planet-heating carbon emissions from fossil fuels. Al-Jaber, who has taken part in more than 10 COP meetings, headed the UAE's delegation to the last UN climate summit in Egypt. It was by far the biggest delegation to attend the talks, and one of the largest in COP history. In Houston, he said the oil and gas industry must "rapidly decarbonize its own operations... and has a vital role to play in decarbonizing its customers."

"The science is clear. We need to get fully behind net zero," he said. The oil and gas industry has been accused of delaying the climate and energy transition by working to preserve the

extraction and consumption of fossil fuels. The UAE, one of the world's biggest oil producers, argues that crude remains indispensable to the global economy and is needed to finance the energy transition. The Gulf country is pushing the merits of carbon capture-removing carbon dioxide as fuel is burned, or from the air.

Oil production

The United States wants to see a hike in oil production, including from OPEC countries, said a senior State Department official Monday. "As world economies recover, we'll see more consumption. And therefore we'd like to see supply meet demand," said Jose Fernandez, the US Undersecretary of State for Economic Affairs, Energy and the Environment, on the sidelines of the CERAWEEK energy conference, in Houston, Texas. "We would like to see more supply" of crude globally, including from OPEC+ — the 13 members of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries and 11 non-OPEC allied countries—Fernandez said.

OPEC+ decided in early October to cut production by two million barrels per day and has not changed its output level since. The price of a barrel of West Texas Intermediate (WTI), the benchmark US variety, is now worth about a third less than a year ago, in the early days of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

But it is still more than 40 percent higher than during the same period in 2019, and up almost 30 percent compared to 2018. Between the beginning of September 2021 and the beginning of January



HOUSTON: United Arab Emirates Minister of Industry and Advanced Technology Sultan Ahmed Al-Jaber speaks during CERAWEEK by S&P Global in Houston, Texas on March 6, 2023. —AFP

2023, the administration of President Joe Biden drew nearly 250 million barrels from the US strategic reserves, which was then sold on the US market to relieve skyrocketing gas prices. The US president has regularly called in the last year for an increase in the OPEC+ output, but the cartel has

not raised its quotas for six months. In February, the organization's crude production, as estimated by Reuters, was nearly two million barrels per day lower than in February 2019. OPEC forecasts a rise in demand of 2.32 million barrels per day in 2023 compared to last year. —AFP

Gulf Bank launches 'Get Cash in A Flash' offer

KUWAIT: As a way to continue meeting the needs of the Salary Account customers, Gulf Bank is launching a multitude of offers this year, one of them being the 'Get Cash in A Flash' offer, which includes a cash gift of up to KD 1,200.

In addition to receiving a cash gift, the offer includes many benefits, such as: Automatic enrollment in the best and fastest rewards program in Kuwait, discounts at leading car dealerships, a personal loan of up to KD 25,000 with a repayment period of five years, housing loans up to KD 70,000 with a repayment period of 15 years, as well as a free credit card and safety deposit box for one year.

As a way of empowering women in society, the Salary account also provides women customers with special benefits, such as the opportunity to choose between the following welcome gifts: A cash gift up to KD 1,200, a health and beauty care package, or a prenatal care package from Hadi Hospital.

Gulf Bank's General Manager of Consumer Banking, Mohammad Al-Qattan, said, "These offers apply to newly-hired Kuwaiti employees who receive a salary of KD 350 or more; as well as employees in the government and oil sectors." Al-Qattan indicated that Gulf Bank's Salary Account is the only account in Kuwait that provides special offers tailored to fit the customer's needs - as part of the Bank's keenness to reward its customers and help them achieve their dreams. He also mentioned that customers can open an account with Gulf Bank or transfer their salaries, in just a minute, through Gulf Bank's mobile application or website.

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 inclu-

sive 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 whilst 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.



Mohammad Al-Qattan



LONDON: Most workers on Britain's offshore rigs want an energy transition.

UK offshore energy firms 'want public ownership'

LONDON: Most workers on Britain's offshore rigs want energy firms taken into public ownership to help fairly fund the transition to net zero, a survey showed Monday. The poll, contained in a report by environmental campaigners and trade unions, quizzed more than 1,092 workers across the sector in England and Scotland.

The report, entitled "Our Power: Offshore Workers' Demands for a Just Energy Transition", was organized by Friends of the Earth and Platform, as well as unions GMB, RMT and Unite.

Some 92 percent of respondents were in favor of taking energy firms into public ownership, and 94 percent wanted a permanent windfall tax. A majority also favored the creation of a sovereign wealth fund to finance the transition away from dirty fossil fuels and toward cleaner energy. And they wanted more government assistance to support new jobs in the renewables sector. "Industry profiteering and government inaction has left us with soaring bills, declining working conditions and no plan for an energy transition," added Platform campaigner Gabrielle Jeliakov.

"In the midst of the climate and cost of living crises, offshore oil and gas workers have developed a way forward." The sector has long faced calls to step up efforts to transition away from fossil fuels as the world targets net-zero emissions by 2050.

At the same time, Britons face surging energy bills that have sparked a cost-of-living crisis. Yet top oil and gas companies amassed record profits in 2022 after Russia's invasion of Ukraine propelled prices higher. "This report shines a light on the reality for workers in the oil and gas sector whose terms and conditions are being eroded at the same time as bosses make eye-watering profits," said Scottish Trades Union Congress boss Roz Foyer.

"This research starts from the perspectives of workers-enabling them to identify their key demands and only then developing policy proposals that flow from these. The recommendations should be seriously considered by policy makers." In response, a UK government spokesman insisted that plans to decarbonize the oil and gas sector were "entirely just". Energy transition plans "supported tens of thousands of jobs" in the North Sea, the spokesperson added. —AFP

Japan commits \$1.6bn to Australia hydrogen project

TOKYO: Japan will spend 220 billion yen (\$1.6 billion) on an ambitious but controversial venture in Australia to produce liquid hydrogen from a type of coal, the project announced on Tuesday. The Hydrogen Energy Supply Chain (HESC) project is a joint Japanese-Australian undertaking intended to produce plentiful and affordable fuel for Tokyo.

Its backers argue it will help reduce global emissions by producing "clean hydrogen", but researchers say that claim is premised on carbon capture technology that does not exist. In a statement, HESC said the project has entered its commercial demonstration phase with money from Japan's Green Innovation Fund, which will be used to design and build facilities to liquefy and ship hydrogen from Australia's Victoria to Japan.

"This is truly a watershed moment for our combined efforts to decarbonize global energy production," said Eiichi Harada, CEO of the Japanese joint enterprise participating in the project. He acknowledged, however, that the

project is "complex" and "there is still some way to go in terms of approval, design, construction and commissioning."

The project aims to produce and liquefy hydrogen from a type of coal known as lignite. This so-called brown coal currently effectively lacks a market, making it a potentially attractive, cheaper alternative to domestic hydrogen production for Japan, despite the extra costs of transporting it 9,000 kilometers (5,600 miles) by sea. But hydrogen's green credentials depend largely on how it is produced.

Green hydrogen can be manufactured by electrolysis of water, using electricity obtained through renewable energy. Every ton of hydrogen produced from coal emits 20 tons of carbon dioxide, more than double the CO2 emissions created when hydrogen is produced from natural gas. Comparing the emissions from producing hydrogen to those from burning coal is complicated, experts say, but they agree that it would not be considered environmentally friendly unless produced renewably.

HESC backers insist it can be environmentally viable-if not renewable-through carbon capture and storage (CCS) programs. In a research paper published last year, The Australia Institute dismissed that claim. "There are no coal gasification hydrogen projects in the world



VIENNA: Japan will spend 220 billion yen (\$1.6 billion) on an ambitious but controversial venture in Australia to produce liquid hydrogen from a type of coal.

with CCS, and the CarbonNet (CCS) project that HESC claims will sequester its emissions is far from certain," the think tank said.

"If that project does not go ahead or is unsuccessful, it seems that the HESC project will remain simply a brown coal gasification hydrogen project, amongst the most polluting forms of energy in the world."

The project's backers argue it will create economic opportunity in Victoria, but NGO Environment Victoria has also warned about the HESC's CCS claims. "CCS doesn't have a proven track record of working-which makes generating hydrogen from coal something that should be off the table," policy engagement manager Bronya Lipski said. —AFP

A super offer from Behbehani Tire Center, Pirelli

KUWAIT: Following the high demand on the promotional campaign 'Buy 2 Tires & get 2 Tires Free' and since Pirelli always strives to provide its customers with outstanding service and quality, Behbehani Tire Center re-launched the 'Buy 2 Tires & get 2 Tires Free' campaign. Hurry up to benefit from the offer before 18th of March, 2023 which is applicable on a wide range of selected sizes. This process takes place at our highly equipped centers with fully advanced technologies and machinery. Our specialized team of experts who underwent advanced training courses from Pirelli International factories will provide our valued customers with the highest quality service.

This amazing opportunity is available for everyone willing to change their vehicle tires in preparation for the summer season. It is vital to prepare your tires before summer begins since

weather becomes hotter and harsh which will endanger tires safety condition.

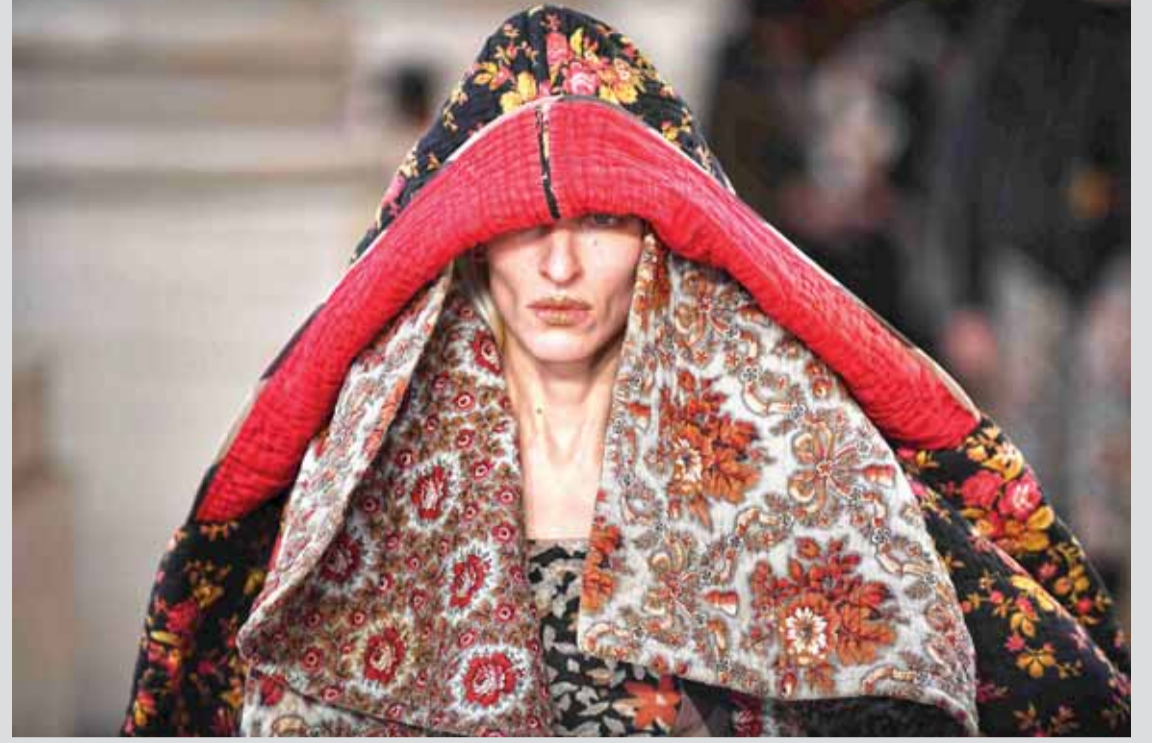
Pirelli Premium tires are offered in a wide variety of specifications and sizes that suit different car makers and car types. In addition to a range of motorcycle tires made available locally, Behbehani Tire Center also provides a particular center for replacing Truck tires. Pirelli tires are suitable for the Gulf and Kuwait weather, as they are meticulously crafted to provide superior performance and high stability on all roads. They are also able to withstand harsh weather conditions, high temperatures and speeds.

You can visit Behbehani Tire Center branches in four different locations which include the biggest flagship Pirelli store in Shuwaikh on the 4th Ring Road next to Abdul Wahab showroom. The second Showroom is located in Al-Rai, next to ACE Hardware. The third showroom is located in Ahmadi. The Fourth and the ultra-sophisticated showroom in Industrial Shuwaikh near Abyat showroom branching from Canada dry Road. In assurance of our customers' satisfaction, all our centers have a comfortable waiting area, latest technologies and machinery reinforced by teams of specialized technicians and experts in the field.

German industrial orders rise again in January

BERLIN: German industrial orders climbed for a second straight month in January, official data showed Tuesday, as Europe's top economy weathers the fallout from Russia's war in Ukraine better than expected. New orders, which provide a foretaste of industrial output, rose 1.0 percent compared to the previous month, federal statistics agency Destatis said.

The figure surprised analysts, who had predicted a decline in factory orders for January. Destatis said the increase was driven by large orders in aircraft and spacecraft construction from outside the eurozone. The manufacturing data added to signs "that the current phase of economic weakness will be mild", the economy ministry said in a statement, noting the "improved business climate in recent months". Germany's economy has proved unexpectedly resilient to the shocks from the Ukraine war, partly thanks to government measures to cushion the impact of higher energy costs and efforts to diversify gas supplies. —AFP



GOODBYES AND GOOD BUYS

PARIS FASHION WEEK



The womenswear autumn-winter season finally comes to a halt on Tuesday, having rumbled through New York, London and Milan before ending in the French capital. Here are some of the highlights from the final set of shows in Paris.

Vivienne and Paco, au revoir

The fashion crowd said adieu to two titans of 20th century design. Vivienne Westwood's widower Andreas Kronthaler presented something of a greatest hits collection, with new takes on her iconic pirate boots, corsets, petticoats and platform shoes. "Maybe the most important thing you ever taught me was to put the woman on a pedestal," he said in a poem accompanying the show, while Westwood's granddaughter Cora Corre capped proceedings in an appropriately inappropriate wedding dress. For the farewell to eccentric Spaniard Paco Rabanne, who died last month at 88, it was the clanging, tinkling sound of gold and silver dresses—a fitting memorial to the man behind the sci-fi "improbable dresses" of the 1960s.

Balenciaga's Humble-core

When the hype bubble grows too large and bursts in your face,



it's time for a reset. Balenciaga's Demna was in full contrition mode after disastrous ad campaigns last year that appeared to reference child abuse (unintentionally, he insists). No clever stagings or provocative \$1,500 trash bags this time—just a clean white room and some elegant clothes. Call it "Humble-core". Before the fall, it would have been "praised to high heaven", said the New York Times, but in the circumstances it "seemed more like the march of the penitents".

Models present creations from Vivienne Westwood Womenswear Fall-Winter 2023-2024 collection during Paris Fashion Week at the Hotel de la Marine, on Place de la Concorde in Paris. — AFP photos

Buyer's delight

For the buyers from Harrods, the highlights included Chloe, Rick Owens and Schiaparelli. It was Chloe designer Gabriela Hearst's "strongest collection to date," said the department store's womenswear head Clemmie Harris, with "luxurious fabrics... in newer, cleaner shapes" and "instant must-haves" such as puffer capes and shearling vests. Rick Owens consistently finds new twists on his dark, alien aesthetic—this time with dramatic capes and huge

cooing wraps. "While always true to his distinct and compelling vision he never fails to push the boundaries," said Simon Longland, Harrods director of buying. There was also praise for the first pret-a-porter catwalk show by Schiaparelli's Daniel Roseberry: "An important step in the revival of the house... rich in detail fabrication and execution," said Longland.

Louis Vuitton eye-lights

The French brand's hot streak was evident from the front row, which included film stars Zendaya, Alicia Vikander and Lea Seydoux, as well as hip-hop artist Pharrell Williams, its newly minted menswear designer. The show was a mix of classic, elegant and inventive tailoring, but it was accessories like the light-up visors that grabbed the most attention.

Pencilled in Last cool when it was encircling the legs of Marilyn Monroe and Audrey Hepburn, several labels seem to think it's time to bring back the pencil skirt. They were part of Dior's homage to the 1950s—though in a crumpled, less figure-hugging form—while Saint Laurent combined them with giant shoulder pads and aviator shades to create some kind of ultra-elegant 1980s fever dream. Young designer Charles de Vilmorin made them out of vinyl for Rochas and what he called a "pimped-out mermaid silhouette". — AFP



Models present creations from Christian Dior Womenswear Fall-Winter 2023-2024 collection.





AL-ANDALUS GARDEN, ARTISTIC VISION OF ARAB CULTURE, EGYPTIAN CIVILIZATION



Al-Andalus Garden of Giza Governorate was established back in 1935 during the reign of King Fuad I. The Garden, sprawling across the Nile's riverbank, is modeled after Andalusian architecture. The garden celebrates both Arab culture and the ancient Egyptian civilization as it is split into sections the southern named "Arabian Paradise" inspired by Arab architecture in southern Spain, whereas the northern part, "The Pharaonic Gardens" is derived from the Egyptian civilization. — KUNA



'Forget the war': Ukraine ski slope offers respite from conflict

Far from the Ukraine war's frontlines, only the whirring of generator-powered ski lifts disturbs the calm at Bukovel in the country's west, a winter resort nestled in the pine-forested Carpathian Mountains. For Liliya, an English interpreter from Ukraine's Sumy region just 20 kilometres from the Russian border, who declined to give her surname for safety reasons, a first-time skiing holiday offered welcome if only brief respite.

"Here we try to forget about the war," she told AFP while adjusting her eight-year-old daughter's ski goggles. "Although my mobile phone alerts me three or four times a day about sirens back home," she said wearily.

Sprawling above the village of Polyanytsya, Bukovel boasts 75 kilometres

of pistes and 17 lifts. Now late in the season, the melting slopes are topped up daily by snow cannons run on generators. After Russia invaded, Liliya fled to Germany, but returned three months later to be near her soldier husband. "We came here in late winter, because he could only get time off now," as she pointed nervously toward her husband slaloming down a slope.

Svetlana Kocievskaya, another newcomer to skiing, watched her two children frolic beside the beginners' slope, waiting for an instructor to arrive. "For children the war is psychologically difficult. Studying online at home and not meeting other kids is bad for their eyes and their minds," said the 33-year-old, a dentist from the central region of Vinnytsia. "Kids love snowballs, and we have no snow in our town," she said, adding that the trip was a gift from her children's grandparents.

'Very different vibe'

This year "the vibe is very different," said ski instructor Bogdan Nakonechniy, a tall 26-year-old who has worked at Bukovel for three seasons. Since the start of Russia's invasion, most skiers are women and children-or men not of military age.

Many of the hotel developments dotted all over the hills lie unfinished. Only one in

every four or five of the lifts heading upwards carried skiers. "Less people have come this year but those that do are more emotional due to the war, they seem to

bearded 22-year-old. "Ukraine will win, and soon we can return to normal life," he said, adding that one day he might also learn how to ski.



Picture shows people in a chair lift in an Ukrainian ski resort close to Bukovel town about 640 km south-west from capital Kyiv, Ukraine. — AFP photos

appreciate it more," Nakonechniy said after finishing the last of his four daily lessons.

At a refreshments kiosk Vladislav Fedchuk, a seasonal worker from Lviv, sold homemade cherry liqueur to thirsty visitors. "They need bravery to go up on the lift," laughed the goatee-

Foreign tourists vanished

For Taras Humenyuk, a worker at the Extreme Style Sports skiwear store, the hardest part of visiting Bukovel is returning home to more dangerous parts of Ukraine. "The sirens sound here too sometimes, but people ignore them and

the ski lifts don't stop working," the 22-year-old said. "Ninety-nine percent of our customers are Ukrainian now. Before, 30 percent were foreign," he added.

Just after the invasion, a Russian missile strike near the store's central warehouse at Hostomel outside Kyiv destroyed most of the store's stock of ski gear, jackets, boots and warm socks. "We still struggle with supplies, foreign brands don't send new equipment as they fear we cannot pay," Humenyuk said.

In the mostly empty restaurant of Baza Smart Hotel, its manager Natalia Havrylenko, 48, estimated that Bukovel's tourist trade had fallen 90 percent since the invasion. When the Russian army targeted critical infrastructure across Ukraine last year, she converted the hotel lobby into a co-working space for small-businesses, equipping it with generators and a Starlink internet connection.

"The goal of the hotel became to help society" by offering a shared space "to be calm and work without interruption," Havrylenko said. "When Ukraine wins, we trust that the tourism business will flourish again," she said. — AFP



Picture shows Ukrainians skiing in an Ukrainian ski resort close to Bukovel town.



Picture shows Ukrainians strolling in an Ukrainian ski resort close to Bukovel town.

Lifestyle | Features

World's most premature babies celebrate first birthday

A Canadian girl and boy born over four months premature and not expected to survive have celebrated their first birthday with a Guinness World Records nod as the world's most premature twins. Adiah and Adrial Nadarajah were born on March 4, 2022 at the gestational age of 22 weeks, or 126 days early-breaking by one day the previous record set in 2018 by American twins. Weighing just 330 grams (0.72 lbs.) and 420 grams (0.92 lbs.), respectively, they are also the lightest twins at birth ever, Guinness World Records (GWR) said on its website.

Citing the babies' parents, the reference book for records of human achievements and natural world

extremes said the twins were given "zero percent chance of survival" by doctors when they arrived. "When I went into labor, the babies were denied all life-sustaining measures at the hospital I was admitted to and almost left to die," their mother, Shakina Rajendram, told GWR. Most hospitals do not attempt to save babies born before 24-26 weeks.

But these two are alive and kicking. A photo of the twins sitting on a couch next to their GWR framed certificate shows Adiah looking surprised with her mouth wide open, while her brother Adrial appears pensive. The twins were described as having been extremely thin, with transparent skin at birth. After a six-month hospital stay that saw doc-

tors dealing with several complications including brain bleeding and sepsis, they were finally sent home.

Since being discharged, according to GWR, Adiah has grown to 18 times her birthweight. "She's an extremely happy and social baby, and smiles all day long," Shakina said. "She is very chatty and has 'conversations' with us and her toys for hours." Adrial has suffered a few setbacks-infections and respiratory issues that sent him back to hospital twice for care-but is said to be "progressing well." Shakina described him as "observant, attentive, and intelligent," and a music lover. — AFP



Oscar short docs race showcases booming art form

When marine biologist Maxim Chakilev flings open the door of his ramshackle Siberian hut in the Oscar-nominated short documentary "Haulout" to find 100,000 honking and heaving walrus, the effect is breathtakingly cinematic. For almost two minutes, the screen is

crowded with jostling animals, their guttural snorts filling the soundtrack and putting the viewer right in the middle of an astonishing natural spectacle.

The scene, the centerpiece of a 25-minute film on how climate change affects the natural world, illustrates how short documentaries have exploded as an art form-and why big guns like The New Yorker and Netflix are getting involved. "Video is a very powerful medium, and right now, this is how many people get their information about the world," Soo-Jeong Kang, executive director of programming and development at The New Yorker, told AFP.

"Traditional media companies are increasingly recognizing this as both a

way to reach new audiences and as a profound storytelling platform." The almost language-free "Haulout," produced by brother-sister team Maxim Arbugaev and Evgenia Arbugaeva, who spent three months living in Chakilev's rudimentary hut, is exactly the kind of top-notch content that dove-

by hate, but whose warm welcome at the mosque he had planned to blow up reconnects him to his humanity. Nobel peace laureate Malala Yousafzai is the short's executive producer.

"How Do You Measure a Year?" splices together interviews that filmmaker Jay Rosenblatt conducted every year with his daughter between the ages of two and 18. Netflix's "The Elephant Whisperers" is a joyous exploration of the love an Indian couple share for the baby animals in their charge. The streamer's second nominee in the category is "The Martha Mitchell Effect," a curation of archival footage about a woman on the fringes of the Watergate scandal. The Netflix contenders are just two of the scores of documentaries available on its platform-some of which regularly feature as its most watched offerings.



In this file photo Pakistani activist Malala Yousafzai arrives for the Film Independent Spirit Awards, 38th annual ceremony in Santa Monica, California. — AFP photos

YouTube channel and newyorker.com, with documentaries at the top of the list, both in terms of total views and average number of views per video. Those burgeoning audiences are increasingly seeing themselves reflected in the kind of documentaries that are getting made, as improving technology lowers the barriers to entry and allows almost anyone to become a filmmaker.

"In recent years because of the accessibility and affordability of editing software and high-quality cameras... anyone who dreams of making a documentary now (has) reasonable access to the tools," says Kang. "It's a democratization of this field that allows people from all walks of life to make a story about their experiences." For filmmakers like Arbugaeva, whose stunning cinematography elevates "Haulout," this democratization is key to the authenticity and intent required of a good documentary. "When local storytellers tell stories of their environment, it's something that is so personal," she told AFP. "You're talking about your own heart and the heart of your community that is breaking." —AFP

Democratization

Documentaries were dominated in past decades by the likes of Britain's publicly funded BBC, or America's PBS-both organizations that lean towards didacticism. But in recent years, the sector has shown its entertainment chops. Netflix's "Making a Murderer" and HBO's "The Jinx"-real-life crime thrillers from 2015 — were instrumental in popularizing the format for the streaming age.

And such fast-paced, watchable fare continues to come thick and fast-well before a jury found a South Carolina lawyer guilty of killing his wife and son last week, Netflix said "Murdaugh Murders: A Southern Scandal" was one of its most popular programs. But even the less-obviously digestible offerings are doing well, as important subject matter-particularly around climate change and identity-resonates with viewers.

The New Yorker says it gets nearly 11 million monthly video views across its



In this undated handout marine biologist Maxim Chakilev looks out of his Siberian hut at walrus in the Oscar-nominated short documentary "Haulout".

crowded with jostling animals, their guttural snorts filling the soundtrack and putting the viewer right in the middle of an astonishing natural spectacle.

The scene, the centerpiece of a 25-minute film on how climate change affects the natural world, illustrates how short documentaries have exploded as an art form-and why big guns like The New Yorker and Netflix are getting involved. "Video is a very powerful medium, and right now, this is how many people get their information about the world," Soo-Jeong Kang, executive director of programming and development at The New Yorker, told AFP.

"Traditional media companies are increasingly recognizing this as both a

tails with The New Yorker's high-brow fiction and deep-dive reporting, Kang said. "It's a pure cinematic experience, where you don't need a spoken word to know what that story is about...an extension of that intersection between art and great journalism."

Range

"Haulout" is competing for the Academy Award for best documentary short film against four other nominees, and the range of those contenders demonstrates the breadth of a format audiences are increasingly embracing. New Yorker stablemate "Stranger at the Gate" tells the story of a US military veteran whose tours have left him scarred



Women workers walk outside the construction of the "Jorge Rodriguez Padre" residential building at lunchtime in the community of Algodonal in Caracas, Venezuela. — AFP photos



Workers rest during lunch break at the construction of the "Jorge Rodriguez Padre" residential building in the Algodonal community in Caracas.

From homemakers to home builders: Venezuelan women breaking ground

Ursulina Guaramato and Claudia Tisoy, both homemakers in their forties, apply a special glue to a complex network of pipes in an apartment block they and other women are building with their own hands in Caracas. On this project in Antimano, a poor neighborhood of the Venezuelan capital, 80 percent of the workforce is made up of women, most of them single mothers. Some cut reinforcing bars, some prepare concrete mix and others lay pipes.

They are making use of a government program that encourages construction by providing materials and technical guidance to first-time builders at no cost in a bid to tackle an acute housing shortage in a country battling a severe economic crisis. It was not planned that the workers on the Antimano project would be mainly women.

In Venezuela, a deeply Catholic and conservative country, construction work is still viewed as the domain of men. "We live in a patriarchal society but we are breaking paradigms," Ayari Rojas, a spokeswoman for the builders, told AFP. The development will have two structures of six stories each.

Most of the construction work has been completed and the first apartments of 95 in total are due to be finished this year. The 75 workers on the project-

most of whom now live in cramped quarters shared with relatives-are building these apartments for their own families. But eight years ago, when they started, none knew anything about plumbing or masonry, let alone building plans or construction materials.

"Crafts and pastry used to be my thing," Guaramato said, smiling as she measured a piece of PVC pipe. Now she is the on-site reinforcement bar (rebar) expert. Tisoy said she was "proud to see

so many women here learning." "We are all here not just building homes, but a community." She plans to move into the building with her four daughters and a one-year-old grandson.

'Warrior'

The builders include nurses, teachers and beauticians. Yrcedia Boada, one of the workers, told AFP the women are often at the receiving end of insults about their perceived "manliness" in a society rife with machismo. "We have suffered horrible derogatory comments," she said. The project has had to overcome numerous setbacks, not least delays due to the coronavirus pandemic, hyperinflation that has plagued the country for years, and international sanctions affecting the flow of goods, including building materials.

Luis Perez, Guaramato's 19-year-old son, is one of 20 men on the project. He started to help out two years ago, has learned much about masonry and carpentry since, and hopes to study auto mechanics. "It is the first time I have known a woman who is a rebar master and I feel very proud because she is my mother," he told AFP. "My mother is a warrior." — AFP



Women workers unload buckets of cement by a rope-driven mechanical device to lift heavy loads during the construction of the residential building "Jorge Rodriguez Padre" in the Algodonal community in Caracas.

Matterhorn mountain melting away from Toblerone bars

Switzerland's famous Matterhorn mountain is gradually disappearing from Toblerone's packaging to comply with "Swissness" laws once its new plant in Slovakia opens, the world-famous chocolate brand's owners said Monday. Established in 1908 in the Tobler family factory, the instantly-recognizable triangular chocolate has so far been produced exclusively in Bern, the Alpine nation's capital.

But Toblerone is opening a new plant in Bratislava in the third quarter (Q3) of 2023 "to meet increased global demand", said the brand's owner, US food giant Mondelez International. That meant Toblerone had to replace "of Switzerland" on its packaging, which was revealed when the new Slovakia production line was announced in June last year.



But along with "established in Switzerland" now appearing on the pack, the pyramid-shaped Matterhorn, a cherished national icon, is being replaced with a generic triangular mountain, sparking heated debate in Switzerland. "We have to adapt our packaging to the Swissness legislation," a Mondelez spokeswoman told AFP.

"The pack redesign introduces a modernized and streamlined mountain logo, in line with the geometric and 'be more triangle' aesthetic." However, the bear of Bern, symbol of the city, will still be hidden in the new mountain's contours. "More and more people will see the brand's exciting new visual identity and packaging design, as it started to be rolled out across markets from Q3 2022," the spokeswoman said.

'Matter of pride'

Toblerone produces seven billion chocolate bars a year, with 97 percent exported to 120 countries. They are ubiquitous at airport duty-free shops around the world, where one bar is sold every two seconds, according to Mondelez. The name is a play on words from Tobler and "torrone"-the Italian name for honey-almond nougat.

The Tribune de Geneve newspaper debated whether it was "commercial suicide" for Toblerone. But Michael Kamm, owner of the communications agency Trio, said the brand was "very well established aside from its logo", telling the daily that its shape, colours and letters were "emblematic and recognizable among a thousand".

Fribourg University marketing professor Olivier Furrer added: "The Matterhorn is especially important for Swiss consumers, because it is a matter of pride. "We may be offended by this change. But foreigners might not even notice." The news comes after Swiss pride took another hit last week. A US appeals court ruled Friday that in the United States, the word "gruyere" is a common label for cheese and cannot be reserved just for the kind made originally in France or Switzerland, where the medieval town of Gruyeres is located. "Cheese and chocolate are among the flagship products of the Swiss food industry," Olivier Perrin wrote in an opinion piece published Monday by the Le Temps newspaper. —AFP

Sports

Cavaliers send Boston Celtics spinning to 3rd straight defeat

Embiid shines as 76ers have another towering performance

CLEVELAND: Donovan Mitchell poured in 40 points as the Cleveland Cavaliers sent the Boston Celtics spinning to a third straight defeat in a heavyweight clash of the Eastern Conference rivals on Monday. Boston's Grant Williams missed two free throws with less than a second left on the clock that would have given the Celtics victory before the Cavs escaped to win 118-114 in overtime. A depleted Boston missing stars Jayson Tatum, Al Horford and Robert Williams III went into Monday's game in Cleveland desperate for victory after consecutive defeats to the Brooklyn Nets and New York Knicks.

But the Celtics' hopes of snapping out of their mini-slump ran into a red-hot performance from Mitchell, who nervously drained two free throws of his own with 5.8 seconds on the clock in the fourth to tie the game at 109-109. Boston however had a golden chance to win it at the death, sweeping up the court and winning two free throws after Lamar Stevens fouled Williams at the basket.

Williams, though, fluffed both of his free throws, allowing Cleveland to take the game into overtime and pull away for victory. Mitchell could be seen exchanging words with Williams before the Boston player prepared to take his free throws, and the Cavs star admitted later he was "trying to mess with him mentally." "I wanted to find a way to get in his head a little bit," Mitchell said. It completed a battling fightback by Cleveland, who had trailed by 15 points in the third quarter before staging a fourth-quarter rally to haul themselves into contention, outscoring Boston 31-17 in the final frame.

Mitchell finished with 40 points from 14-of-34 shooting, with 11 rebounds and four assists. Evan Mobley provided offensive back-up with 25 points—and 17 rebounds—while Darius Garland was the



CLEVELAND: Donovan Mitchell #45 of the Cleveland Cavaliers drives around Mike Muscala #57 of the Boston Celtics during the third quarter at Rocket Mortgage Fieldhouse on March 06, 2023. —AFP photos

only other Cleveland player in double figures with 14 points. Jaylen Brown led Boston's scorers with 32 points, while Malcolm Brogdon added 24 off the bench. Boston fell to 45-21 after the defeat and remain second in the Eastern Conference, two games adrift of leaders Milwaukee. Cleveland improved to 41-26 and remain in fourth place in the table.

Embiid's 42 sets up Sixers win

Elsewhere on Monday, the Philadelphia 76ers had another towering

performance from Joel Embiid to thank for their 147-143 win on the road against the Indiana Pacers in Indianapolis. Embiid, who scored 31 points in Saturday's pulsating defeat of Milwaukee, finished with 42 points as the Sixers improved to 42-22 to remain in third place in the East. A seesaw game saw the lead change hands no fewer than 32 times as the two teams went toe-to-toe throughout.

Philadelphia finally pulled away in the fourth quarter, opening up a slender lead and successfully hanging on for victory.



CLEVELAND: Evan Mobley #4 of the Cleveland Cavaliers shoots over Mike Muscala #57 of the Boston Celtics during the third quarter at Rocket Mortgage Fieldhouse on March 06, 2023.

The Sixers' James Harden finished with 14 points but laid on 20 assists, while Tyrese Maxey added 24 points and Jalen McDaniels 20. Tyrese Haliburton led the Pacers scoring with 40 points but was unable to drag Indiana over the line. In Miami, Jimmy Butler finished with 26 points as the Heat recovered from an early 15-point deficit to down the Atlanta Hawks 130-128.

Victor Oladipo nailed four three-pointers in a 22-point haul while Caleb Martin had 21 off the bench for Miami,

who improved to 35-31. Trae Young led Atlanta's scoring with 25 points.

In Denver, the Western Conference-leading Nuggets left it late before finally edging past the Toronto Raptors 118-113. Toronto led for most of the game only to see Denver squeeze ahead after a crucial late defensive play from Nikola Jokic in the fourth quarter that helped the Nuggets take the lead. "I'm just going to let Nikola's greatness speak for itself," Nuggets head coach Michael Malone said. —AFP

Smith relishes 'game of chess' as Australia look to square India series

AHMEDABAD: Stand-in captain Steve Smith is looking forward to a new "game of chess" against India as Australia aim to square the series on another spin minefield when the final Test begins in Ahmedabad on Thursday. India were chastened by a rare home defeat in the third Test last week and are looking to bounce back to take the series 3-1, and with it secure their berth in the ICC World Test Championship final at the Oval in June.

Australia clinched their place in the showpiece with their nine-wicket third Test win, completed before lunch on the third day on a treacherous Indore track. Australia captain Pat Cummins has remained at home because of a family illness, leaving his deputy Smith with another chance to pit his wits against India in the subcontinent, something he clearly relishes. "It's a game of chess, every ball means something," said Smith after the Indore victory, which followed India's wins in Nagpur and Delhi.

"It's good to just move people and try to make the batter do something different and just play games with them," Smith said after the Indore triumph. "It's probably my favourite place in the world to captain." India and Australia's prime ministers are scheduled to attend on Thursday where another sharply turning wicket is expected at the Narendra Modi Stadium, the world's largest cricket ground with a capacity of 132,000. Joe Root's England were thrashed there twice two years ago, including inside two days in a day-night game, the shortest completed Test since 1935.

Despite the local Gujarat Cricket Association's



Australia's captain Steve Smith

assurances of a "normal pitch", both sides are again expected to pick three spinners, though India may opt for the wrist-spin of Kuldeep Yadav instead of Axar Patel, who has taken only one wicket in the series. India may also strengthen their batting by dropping a seam bowler and bringing in the explosive Suryakumar Yadav.

Australia's spinners Nathan Lyon and Matthew Kuhnemann took full advantage of an Indore pitch officially rated as "poor" by the match referee to give Australia only their second Test victory on Indian soil since 2004. Kuhnemann took five wickets and Lyon three as India were rolled for 109 in their first innings after opting to bat. Usman Khawaja's 60 in a 96-run stand with Marnus Labuschagne helped Australia to an 88-run lead, despite a late collapse from 186-4 to 197 all out. Lyon ripped through with 8-64 as India made 163 in their second innings, before Travis Head and Marnus Labuschagne chased down the 76-run target with ease. India captain Rohit Sharma said he was fed up with the constant focus on the playing surfaces and wanted to focus instead on some exceptional bowling performances. —AFP

NZ stand in way of Lanka's world Test final quest

CHRISTCHURCH: New Zealand will take momentum from their dramatic one-run win over England into this week's first Test against Sri Lanka, who could reach the ICC World Test Championship final with a 2-0 series sweep. Tim Southee's hosts became just the fourth team to win a Test after following on as they secured a draw in the two-match series against England.

Kane Williamson, who became New Zealand's record run-scorer in the thrilling Wellington win, said it was vital to kick on after the Black Caps ended a seven-Test winless run. "It's been a long time for us to get over the line," former skipper Williamson said ahead of the first Test against Sri Lanka starting on Thursday in Christchurch. "We haven't had the results we would've liked, despite putting the work in, so it's nice to get those rewards."

"It's an important series for us now as we are looking to improve and we're focused in trying to put out better performances." Sri Lanka have only won two Tests of the 19 they have played in New Zealand. But skipper Dimuth Karunaratne's side have extra incentive this time. They can reach the WTC final against Australia with a 2-0 series triumph, providing India fail to beat Australia in the final Test in Ahmedabad, which also begins Thursday.

Sri Lanka are an improving and more consistent side under Chris Silverwood, who took over as head coach in April last year. They beat Bangladesh 1-0 away and drew 1-1 at home with both Australia and Pakistan, all in two-Test series, since the former England fast bowler's appointment. Their



New Zealand's Kane Williamson

hopes of qualifying for the showpiece at The Oval in June were boosted when Australia clinched their place by winning the third Test against India in Indore inside three days last week.

"To get to the WTC final would be unbelievable," Silverwood said. "But at the same time we know we've got a very good New Zealand team in front of us as well and we have to respect that, work hard, and try and earn that right." New Zealand retained the squad that beat England in Wellington while Sri Lanka brought in two uncapped players, the 23-year-old batsman Nishan Madushka and seam bowler Milan Rathnayake, 26.

Madushka forced his way into the Test squad after scoring two centuries and a double hundred in three appearances against the touring England Lions a few weeks ago. Sri Lanka's preparations have been disrupted by rain, with the second day of their only warm-up match against a New Zealand Board XI washed out on Sunday in Lincoln, just outside Christchurch. Sri Lanka will also play three one-day internationals and three Twenty20s against New Zealand after the Tests. —AFP

Neymar will 'come back stronger' from ankle surgery

PARIS: Neymar promised to "come back stronger" after Paris Saint-Germain said on Monday the forward requires ankle surgery and will be out of action for three to four months. The Brazilian, who injured his ankle on February 19 against Lille in Ligue 1, "has had several episodes of instability in his right ankle in recent years," said the club, adding that its medical staff "recommended a ligament repair operation to avoid a major risk of recurrence".

Neymar tweeted he would not be discouraged by his latest injury. "I'll come back stronger," he wrote with a praying hands emoji. Qatar-owned PSG said Neymar would go under the knife in Doha "in the next few days" and said it would take "three to four months before he can return to training with the team". That would appear to end any prospect of Neymar playing again this season, with the Ligue 1 season due to end on June 3 and the Champions League final, if PSG were to get there, a week later in Istanbul.

PSG, still waiting for a maiden Champions League title, will bid to overturn a 1-0 first-leg deficit in the last 16 against Bayern Munich in Germany on Wednesday. Neymar, who has scored

18 goals in all competitions for his club this season, was in fine form for the French champions before the World Cup break. But the 31-year-old has netted only three times in nine appearances since returning from Qatar, where he injured the same ankle playing for Brazil. He came off with a sprain in his country's 2-0 win over Serbia in their opening game and didn't play again in the group stage.

The ex-Barcelona man returned in the knockout rounds but Brazil lost to Croatia on penalties in the quarter-finals, despite Neymar putting them ahead in extra time in that game. He has had injury problems at World Cups before. In 2014, he suffered a broken vertebra in the quarter-finals against Colombia and missed the semi-final, which Brazil lost 7-1. Neymar's fitness has been a regular concern for PSG, since he signed from Barcelona for a world-record fee of 222 million euros (\$264m) in 2017.

He has scored 118 goals in 173 games for PSG, but has missed more than 100 games due either to injury or suspension. In Ligue 1, he has played only 49 per cent of PSG's Ligue 1 matches since his arrival (112 out of 228). In his first season at PSG, a fractured metatarsal ruled him out of the second leg of their Champions League last-16 tie against Real Madrid, which they lost. He didn't play again for his club that season and faced a race against time to be fit to play for Brazil at that year's World Cup in Russia.

The following year another metatarsal injury saw him miss the last-16 tie against Manchester United as PSG again went out in the first knockout round.



DOHA: A general view of the Aspetar Orthopaedic and Sports Medicine Hospital in Doha on March 7, 2023, where Paris Saint-Germain's Brazilian forward Neymar is expected to undergo surgery on his injured ankle. —AFP

PSG are also without Presnel Kimpembe against Bayern on Wednesday, with the France centre-back set to miss the rest of the season due to an achilles injury. On Saturday, during the celebrations of

Kylian Mbappe's club record 201st goal, Neymar ventured onto the pitch on crutches. In his absence, Mbappe and Lionel Messi have eight goals and four assists between them in three games. —AFP

Sports

'Stand up and fight': Albanian women footballers break taboos

'We have to shatter the glass ceiling'

ELBASAN: Emanuela Rusta battled combative crowds and misogynistic headlines for years as she navigated Albania's football scene before becoming the country's first female international referee. Rusta has been one of the leading figures pushing for more equality on Albania's football pitches, where entrenched sexism has kept women on the sidelines. "You have to fight hard to be accepted," the 29-year-old told AFP. "We have to shatter the glass ceiling."

Football has long been a national obsession but women have started to make inroads only recently. The women's national team first competed in 2011, while the Albanian Football Federation (FSHF) remains overwhelmingly male-dominated with just 2,000 female members compared to 22,000 men. Wracked by decades of poverty, authoritarian rule and mass migration, Albania has grappled with an uneasy path to global integration since its communist government collapsed in the early 1990s.

Many people have clung to their traditions, including deeply rooted ideas of gender, especially in rural areas where women have had fewer opportunities. But things are beginning to change with women increasingly working in leadership positions as judges, university presidents, and playing a major role in government. The sporting world has slowly come around, including its football scene, where rowdy crowds and occasional scuffles at men's games are not uncommon.

Undeterred

Despite the hurdles, Rusta remained unfazed in the face of local media head-



ELBASAN: Referee Emanuela Rusta takes part in a training session with colleagues at the Elbasan Arena stadium, in Elbasan, central Albania. — AFP photos

lines such as "the xxx referee who turns up the heat". Refereeing "is not a question of gender but of competence," said Rusta, who has refereed at a dozen international matches in European stadiums and hopes to be selected to work at the men's World Cup. "In order to make good decisions, you have to know the rules of the game perfectly, but you also have to be in excellent physical condition and have a great capacity for concentration," she added. To support her career, Rusta works as a physical education teacher at the high school in her hometown of Elbasan and trains in the afternoons.

She hopes to be the head referee for the Albanian League 1 derby between the capital's two rival teams, Tirana and Partizani. "A woman referee eases tensions and normalises the situation," said

sports analyst Andi Vreçani. The history of women's football is deeply rooted in Albania's northern city of Shkodra, where the club Vllaznia first made a name in 2009. In just a few years, the team has dominated domestically and gone on to play against Europe's best teams, including Chelsea, Real Madrid and PSG in the group stage of the 2022-2023 Champions League.

"The key to the success of the team lies with the girls, who have managed to break the myth and prejudice that football is only a male sport," said team president Lazer Matija. Crucial to their recent success has been 26-year-old striker Megi Doci. Originally from a poor village in northern Albania, Doci took up football against her mother's wishes and moved to Tirana at the age of 12 to pursue her passion.



ELBASAN: Referee Emanuela Rusta teaches an hour of physical education at the Dhaskal Todri high school where she works as a professor in Elbasan, central Albania.

Things were not easy, she admits, even as she racked up impressive accolades, including prizes for best striker and most valuable player. "I have fallen, I have suffered, I have cried, I have had to swallow my tears, but each time I have chosen to stand up and fight," she told AFP, saying she hopes to join the women's team of Bayern Munich or Real Madrid in the future. Doci regularly trains four hours a day with men, who are often surprised by her presence on the field. "It's a challenge, you can feel the weight of this mentality still present because they are not used to seeing a girl play," she added.

'We have won'

Others have broken boundaries while juggling the demands of an athletic career with the desire to start a family. "I never

wanted to choose between my career and my personal life, I always wanted to be happy in both," says Ardiola Raxhimi, 24, the mother of a two-year-old boy she had with Muhamet, a former footballer who now runs a barber shop.

FSHF head Armand Duka said that "women's football is the priority" of the governing body, which is hoping to see the number of female footballers soar. But he acknowledged that parity is a long way off. Female players are paid almost half as much as male players, with their average salary fetching just 400 euros (\$425) a month. And while many hurdles remain, Duka believes the path ahead has taken shape. "A few years ago, women's football was almost a taboo because it was considered a male sport," he said. "We have won that battle." — AFP

Football world bids adieu to Fontaine

TOULOUSE: Football on Monday paid its respects to former France striker Just Fontaine, who holds the record of 13 goals in a single World Cup, who died on March 1 aged 89. Fontaine set his record as France reached the last four in the 1958 World Cup in Sweden where they lost 5-2 to Pele's Brazil. He then scored four in the third-place playoff win over West Germany. "Abroad as well as on all the fields of France, amateurs and professionals, soccer pays tribute to him," said Philippe Diallo, acting president of the French Football Federation (FFF), before a ceremony at Toulouse Cathedral.

"With this unequalled record and which will remain so for a long time, he has traversed time and marked generations of players," said Diallo. Born in Morocco in 1933, Fontaine won four French league titles one with Nice, three with Reims and two French Cups. He played for Reims in their second European Cup final loss to Real Madrid in 1959. He then coached Paris Saint-Germain, Toulouse and Morocco, settling in Toulouse. In Sweden, he was part of a dazzling attacking trio with his Reims club-mates Raymond Kopa and Roger Piantoni.

Among football stars who attended the service were the former France internationals Alain Giresse, Bernard Lacombe and Didier Six and the long-time Auxerre coach Guy Roux. Reims president Jean-Pierre Caillot said that "We are extraordinarily lucky to have a history that many envy us, shaped



TOULOUSE: French football legend Just Fontaine's wife Arlette (center), son (2nd left) and grandchildren stand in front of the coffin after his funeral ceremony at the Saint-Etienne cathedral in Toulouse, southwestern France. — AFP

by exceptional men and players like Raymond Kopa and Just Fontaine." On a bench at the back of the cathedral, Fabrice Lamborelle, a 61-year-old retired Reims supporter, red and white scarf around his neck, saluted "the legend". "I grew up in this atmosphere, that of the great past stars," he said.

Messaoud Bennani, who was coached by Fontaine at Toulouse, recalled a man "with an

incredible kindness. He was adorable. I had to be here". Abdelaziz Ghodbane, a former employee of the Just Fontaine sports store in Toulouse, remembered that "Justo" "only had friends, they loved him because he was a good person." At the end of the ceremony, Omar Hasan, a former Argentina Pumas and Toulouse rugby club prop turned operatic baritone sang a Hail Mary. — AFP

High-flying Mbappe determined to lift PSG past Bayern

PARIS: Kylian Mbappe heads to Munich fresh from a record-breaking weekend with Paris Saint-Germain and determined to lead the French giants past Bayern and into the quarter-finals of the Champions League. PSG trail 1-0 from the first leg of the heavyweight last-16 tie, after injury reduced Mbappe to a cameo appearance off the bench in that match last month. Yet the 24-year-old France superstar did enough in his short time on the pitch then - including having a goal disallowed for a marginal offside - to make it clear that he can swing the tie the Parisians' way.

Since that game, the Ligue 1 leaders have recovered from a worrying slump in form to claim three straight domestic wins, scoring 11 goals in the process. Mbappe has netted five of them, including one in Saturday's 4-2 win over Nantes that saw him overtake Edinson Cavani and become PSG's all-time top scorer, five and a half years after signing from Monaco in 2017. The player who in December became the first to score a hat-trick in a World Cup final since Geoff Hurst in 1966, boasts the remarkable record of 201 goals from 247 games in a PSG shirt.

'Leave a mark'

"Every player plays to leave a mark and so that his name goes down in football history, to not be forgotten. I think with this record that people will remember me here," Mbappe said after being awarded a trophy by PSG in a lavish on-field presentation before an adoring crowd. Mbappe has 30 goals in 30 games for his club this season and has a strong claim to be the best player in the world right

now, even if Lionel Messi recently pipped him to win The Best FIFA men's player award.

Messi, with 18 goals himself for PSG this season, is mainly there to serve Mbappe in Christophe Galtier's side, for whom the absence of Neymar due to injury in Munich - and for several more months - may not matter. Going out of the Champions League in the first knockout round for what would be the fifth time in seven seasons really would matter for PSG and their Qatari owners, however.

They lost to Bayern in Lisbon in their only appearance to date in the final, in 2020, but one of the defining performances of Mbappe's time with PSG so far came in Munich the following year. It was a snowy night in April 2021 when Mbappe netted twice in a 3-2 quarter-final first-leg win over Bayern in an empty Allianz Arena. He opened the scoring as Paris went 2-0 up. Bayern pulled themselves back level only for Mbappe to score a superb winner, shaping to curl one towards the far corner only to smash his shot past goalkeeper Manuel Neuer at his near post.

"My mind is already on Wednesday's match. We are going to Munich with the clear aim of qualifying," Mbappe said on Saturday before playing down suggestions a PSG exit would precipitate his departure from the club. "I don't think this match will have an impact. If I linked my future to the Champions League, without wishing to show a lack of respect to the club, I would have left a long time ago. "I am here and I am very happy to be here. I am not thinking about anything other than making PSG successful."

Defensive problems

PSG may need Mbappe's goals more than ever in Bavaria because coach Galtier does not have his defensive problems to seek. His side have looked their best this season when playing with three centre-backs, but the coach's options in that sector have been limited by the loss of Presnel Kimpembe for the rest of the campaign with an achilles injury.

Captain Marquinhos came off at the weekend



Paris Saint-Germain's French forward Kylian Mbappe

with a rib injury, while Nordi Mukiele was also forced off. The former, whose mobility is so important to a defense also featuring an ageing Sergio Ramos, is expected to play even if not fully fit. Mukiele's presence would be useful too, although Achraf Hakimi may return at right-back less than a week after being charged with rape. PSG have said they are supporting the Moroccan while the case is investigated, and the legal proceedings do not stop the player from leaving France. — AFP

Today's matches on TV

UEFA Champions League

Bayern v Paris Saint-Germain	23:00
beIN Sports 1 HD Premium	
beIN Sports HD 1 English	
Tottenham v AC Milan	23:00
beIN Sports 2 HD Premium	
beIN Sports HD 2 English	
beIN Sports 1 FR	

AC Milan ready for Champions League showdown

MILAN: AC Milan head to Tottenham Hotspur with a slender lead to protect and their season once again in the balance following a damaging defeat at the weekend. Stefano Pioli's side are a goal in front before Wednesday's last 16, second leg clash in London, Brahim Diaz's goal separating the two sides in the scrappy first encounter at the San Siro. The seven-time European champions were completely outplayed in their 2-1 loss at Fiorentina, a mid-table team who before Saturday had not beaten anyone in the top half of Serie A this season.

That defeat, and Roma's win over Juventus on Sunday, left Milan outside Italy's top four on goal difference and with a rediscovered defensive solidity suddenly punctured. Pioli insisted that his players weren't distracted by the importance of Wednesday's match but they were a shadow of the team which comfortably beat Atalanta last weekend. Milan had gone into Saturday's match on a run of four wins-including the first leg against Spurs-in which they hadn't conceded a single goal.

But the remodeled three-man defense implemented by Pioli in the wake of a disastrous January which killed their league title defense fell apart in Florence, with Fikayo Tomori in particular having a dreadful night. Pioli said on Saturday that he "more or less has an idea on who to play" and will have star attacker Rafael Leao back after he was suspended for Saturday's match. Portugal winger Leao hasn't been the same player as before the World Cup but his presence will inject more threat into what was a toothless attack at the Stadio Artemio Franchi.

Milan have scored more than one goal just twice in their last nine matches, one of those a 5-2 home humiliation at the hands of lowly Sassuolo, and Leao is crucial to a new system which has closed gaps but has also dulled creativity. In his absence Ante Rebic and summer signing Charles De Ketelaere did very little, Belgian attacker De Ketelaere a genuine conundrum for Pioli after an awful debut season in Italy which has produced more yellow cards than goals or assists.

De Ketelaere has the backing of Leao, whose powers of prediction were shown to be weak when he wrote on Instagram on Saturday "Cdk will score today, u saw here first". The 21-year-old will almost certainly be back on the bench in London as Milan try to make this year's Champions League run their best since 2012, when they were comfortably beaten in the last eight by then-European champions Barcelona. They will have to retain the solidity which gave them a first leg advantage if they are to stay in a tournament which they have won more times than any other club apart from Real Madrid. — AFP

Brentford stun rivals Fulham

Toney extends hot-streak - 15th EPL goal this season



LONDON: Fulham's Dutch defender Kenny Tete (left) vies with Brentford's English striker Ivan Toney during the English Premier League football match between Brentford and Fulham on March 6, 2023. — AFP

LONDON: Ivan Toney extended his hot-streak as the Brentford striker's 15th English Premier League (EPL) goal this season helped clinch a 3-2 win over west London rivals Fulham on Monday. Toney has shown no signs of being distracted since he was charged with 262 breaches, dating back to 2017, of the Football Association's gambling laws. The 26-year-old recently criticized the FA in an Instagram post over what he alleged are lapses of confidentiality as he prepares to argue his case.

But Toney has kept his focus on the pitch and his penalty at the Community Stadium made it eight goals in his last 10 games. Only Manchester City's Erling Haaland and Tottenham's Harry Kane have scored more than Toney's tally in the league this term. Toney's 15th goal put Brentford back in front after Fulham's Manor Solomon had cancelled out Ethan Pinnock's opener.

Mathias Jensen netted late on and Carlos Vinicius's stoppage-time strike was no consolation for Fulham as Brentford extended their unbeaten league run to 12 matches. Brentford, undefeated in the league in 2023, sit ninth, just one point behind seventh placed Fulham in the

race to qualify for European competition. Toney has scored 27 of his 28 career spot-kicks, with his only miss coming while playing for Peterborough in 2018. "Ivan is the best penalty taker in the world for a few reasons, his strategy, he practices it and he is very cool," Brentford boss Thomas Frank said. "He is a special footballer. His character is unique in terms of leadership and driving his team. His link-up play and the way he sees his team-mates in terms of combinations and then his ability to score goals. He is an all-around player."

Given the genteel west London districts that Brentford and Fulham call home, their encounters will never rank among football's most explosive derbies. Before 2014, the neighbors had never even met above the third tier of English football. But after decades in the shadow of local rivals Chelsea, both clubs are enjoying a golden period and have climbed above the spluttering Blues this season. Brentford quickly looked more likely to finish as west London's preeminent club this term as they laid siege to the Fulham goal.

Brentford's early blitz paid off in the sixth minute as Pinnock's strike from the edge of the area took a

wicked deflection off Tim Ream and fizzed past the wrong-footed Bernd Leno. Despite being battered for the opening half an hour, Fulham equalized in the 39th minute. Andreas Pereira's free-kick smacked down off the bar and Solomon alertly headed into the empty net from close-range. It was a fifth goal in his last five games for the Fulham winger, who signed on loan from Shakhtar Donetsk last year. Solomon is the first Israeli to score in four consecutive Premier League appearances. That milestone became just a footnote when Brentford regained the lead in the 53rd minute.

Jensen's long throw wasn't cleared by Fulham and Issa Diop's raised boot caught Christian Norgaard, conceding a penalty that Toney converted with minimal run-up and maximum composure. Jensen ensured Brentford's enterprising display would earn three points in the 85th minute when the Dane turned in Kevin Schade's cross from close-range. Vinicius flicked home after David Raya spilled Pereira's shot but it was too late for a Fulham escape act. — AFP

English Premier League table

English Premier League table after Monday's match (played, won, drawn, lost, goals for, goals against, points):

Arsenal	26	20	3	3	59	25	63
Man City	26	18	4	4	66	25	58
Man Utd	25	15	4	6	41	35	49
Tottenham	26	14	3	9	46	36	45
Liverpool	25	12	6	7	47	28	42
Newcastle	24	10	11	3	35	17	41
Fulham	26	11	6	9	38	34	39
Brighton	23	11	5	7	43	29	38
Brentford	24	9	11	4	40	32	38
Chelsea	25	9	7	9	24	25	34
Aston Villa	25	10	4	11	31	38	34
Crystal Palace	25	6	9	10	21	32	27
Wolves	26	7	6	13	19	35	27
Nottm Forest	25	6	8	11	20	44	26
Leicester	25	7	3	15	36	43	24
West Ham	25	6	5	14	23	33	23
Leeds	25	5	7	13	29	40	22
Everton	26	5	7	14	19	38	22
Southampton	25	6	3	16	20	41	21
Bournemouth	25	5	6	14	24	51	21

Karamoh lifts Torino past Bologna 1-0

PARIS: Yann Karamoh tiptoed past four Bologna defenders and poked the ball into the net to give Torino a 1-0 victory on Monday in the last Serie A game of the weekend. In the evening's early match Nedim Bajrami crashed in a half volley in added time to crush a Cremonese comeback and give Sassuolo a 3-2 victory. In Turin, Karamoh conjured a moment of magic in the 22nd minute of a four game.

Forward Antonio Sanabria laid the ball back to Karamoh just inside the area. The Franco-Ivorian sidestepped a first tackle, leaving the defender on the ground, squeezed between two more defenders and, as a fourth defender lunged, scuffed the ball into the corner of the goal from the edge of the six-yard box.

The victory lifted Torino to ninth a point and place behind Bologna. In Sassuolo, the home team took the lead when Armand Lauriente whipped a free kick over the wall and under the bar in the 22nd minute. The French winger's backheel set up Davide Frattesi to double the lead after 41 minutes. Cremonese, who gained their first league victory of the season in the previous round, responded as half-time substitute Ciriaco De Sire scored twice. In the 62nd minute Nigeria's Dressers intercepted a bad pass and flipped the ball past goalie Andrea Consigli.



Torino's French forward Yann Karamoh

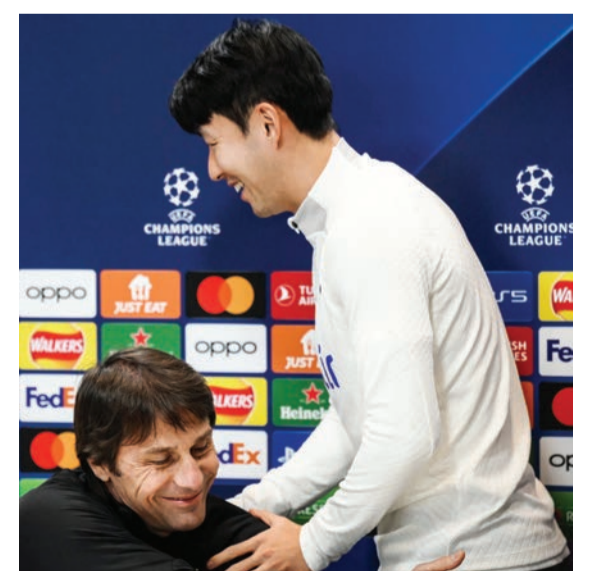
With seven minutes left, Dressers skipped round Consigli to level. Cremonese seemed on course for only their 13th point of the season. In added time, Laurentie raced down the left and swung a cross to substitute Bajrami who was unmarked beyond the far post. He steadied himself before blasting the ball back across the goal and into the net. Sassuolo climbed to 13th with a 12-point cushion to the relegation places. Cremonese remain second from bottom, above Sampdoria only on goal difference. The pair are nine points from safety. — AFP

Tottenham face uncertain future

LONDON: Antonio Conte is set to return to the bench for Wednesday's decisive Champions League showdown against AC Milan but persistent questions over the Italian's future risk overshadowing the rest of the season. Conte has missed the past four games as he recovered from gallbladder surgery in Italy with his assistant, Cristian Stellini, taking the reins. During his time away, Tottenham have shown the frustrating inconsistency that has blighted the club since the Italian took the reins in November 2021.

A pair of 2-0 wins against West Ham and Chelsea suggested Spurs were on course to clinch a top-four place in the Premier League. But that optimism faded after a dismal 1-0 loss at second-tier Sheffield United in the FA Cup fifth round and a drab league defeat by the same scoreline at Wolves on Saturday. Conte walked back into Tottenham's plush training complex this week to find a club still sitting in fourth place in the Premier League but at risk of an anti-climactic end to the season, being hunted down by a rejuvenated Liverpool.

The north Londoners are still without a major trophy since 2008 and even a manager of Conte's pedigree has been unable to break that long drought. The Italian has portrayed Tottenham's problems as beyond his control, subtly hinting at frustration with the transfer policy of chairman Daniel Levy without explicitly condemning him in public. But the 53-year-old is taking his share of the blame from fans, who



ENFIELD: Tottenham Hotspur's South Korean striker Son Heung-Min (right) jokes with Tottenham Hotspur's Italian head coach Antonio Conte as he leaves during a press conference at the Tottenham Hotspur Football Club Training Ground on March 7, 2023. — AFP

have grown tired of his conservative tactics. Stellini's record of three wins during his time in charge, prior to the FA Cup defeat, led to speculation over what the future would look like without Conte. The former league winner at Chelsea, Inter Milan and Juventus has yet to sign an extension to a contract that expires at the end of this season and would surely be in demand from Serie A clubs if he became available. — AFP