

**2** Kuwaiti delegation participates in Arab League Council session



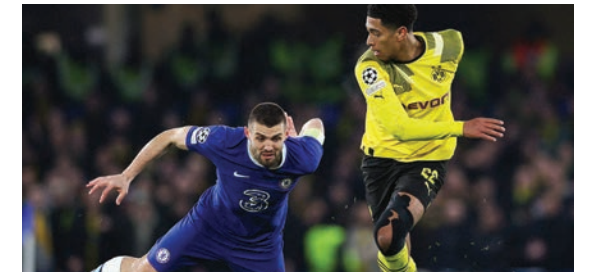
**4** Kidney disease on the rise in Kuwait



**5** Women march across the globe; rights under threat



**16** Chelsea see off Dortmund to reach CL quarter-finals



# Expats over 60 years allowed to transfer to private sector

Court to rule on election petitions on March 19

By B Izzak

**KUWAIT:** The Public Manpower Authority (PAM) on Wednesday amended rules governing expats who are over 60 and have only a higher secondary degree or lower, allowing them to transfer their residence to the private sector. Following a total ban on renewal of their residency, the Authority a year ago allowed them to renew their residence permits against the payment of a KD 250 annual fee and a comprehensive insurance from authorized insurers.

The Authority said the new amendment is effective from Wednesday. The amendment allows such expats who work in government jobs and state-owned agencies and departments, those on dependent visas or investors or partners in commercial or industrial activity to transfer their residence permits to the private sector. Expats over 60 years, with self-sponsored residency in accordance with article 24 of the residence law, can also transfer residence to the private sector, according to the new amendment.

In the meantime, the Constitutional Court on Wednesday set

March 19 as a date for issuing its rulings on all election petitions filed by a large number of losing candidates in the September 29 elections. The court, whose rulings are final and cannot be challenged, had received over 50 petitions challenging the results of the parliamentary elections.

The petitions called on the court to nullify Amiri decrees issued last year which dissolved the National Assembly, invited voters to cast their votes, allowed voters to use their Civil IDs to establish their identity and another decree allowing residents of new residential areas to cast their votes. Lawyers for the challengers claimed that there were discrepancies between the number of those allowed to vote and those who voted at some election centers.

A defense lawyer told the court that based on his revision of the election documents, he found that some 21,600 votes had not been counted in the Fifth Constituency. Lawyers also claimed that they found that some 2,600 barred voters had actually cast their vote in the Fourth Constituency. If the claims were proved to be true, there is a great chance that some results will be changed.

## Crown Prince receives world Jet Ski champion



**KUWAIT:** His Highness the Deputy Amir and Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah on Wednesday received Lieut Colonel Muhammad Ibrahim Burbae who set a new Guinness World Record by winning the world Jet Ski champion title. His Highness praised this international achievement which affirms the ability of Kuwaiti youth to overcome all obstacles to achieve honorable merits to serve the Kuwaiti sports movement, wishing him more success. — AFP

## Brand Finance ranks Zain as 'strongest brand' in Kuwait

**KUWAIT:** In a recent report, leading UK based valuation and strategy consultancy Brand Finance, has ranked Zain as the strongest brand in Kuwait with a rating of AA+ and brand value of \$2.74 billion, reflecting an annual increase of 14%. This much-improved brand valuation was attributed to Zain's strong revenue, profit and customer growth; its pioneering leadership in 5G technologies and digital innovation; expansion of ICT services including managed cloud; thought-provoking and popular creative campaigns; and its concerted efforts in Sustainability, Diversity, Equity and Inclusion initiatives that has reinforced the company's reputation as being one of the most exciting, progressive, and inclusive companies to work for.

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Minister of State for Women and Childhood Affairs Mai Al-Baghli

## Kuwaiti women play crucial role in state building

**NEW YORK:** Minister of State for Women and Childhood Affairs Mai Al-Baghli hailed Kuwaiti women's role in state building and development as pivotal. They were also on the frontline during the coronavirus pandemic, the minister said at a special UN Security Council session themed 'Women, Peace and Security: Towards the 25th anniversary of Resolution 1325' in New York.

Continued on Page 6

## Hawally seeks to be listed as 'healthy city'

**KUWAIT:** Hawally Governor Ali Al-Asfar on Wednesday signed a form that registers the governorate as an 'integrated healthy city' and meets demands of healthy cities in all areas in the next period, as part of efforts to register healthy cities in Kuwait. In a statement, Al-Asfar, who is also acting governor of Al Asimah Governorate said Hawally City suffered pressure on

infrastructure due to overpopulation that negatively affected environment surrounding its citizens.

He stressed the need of efforts of all to implement all requirements to turn Hawally Governorate into a healthy city in the future. Meanwhile, head of healthy cities' office at the Ministry of Health Dr Amal Al-Yahya said it is an important step in the country to turn Hawally into a healthy city. She indicated that Hawally is the first city that sought to be designated by the World Health Organization (WHO) as an accredited healthy city. Al-Asfar submitted a request last August to the ministry on Hawally joining the list of healthy cities. — KUNA



KUWAIT: Hawally Governor Ali Al-Asfar signs to register governorate as integrated healthy city. — KUNA

## Cash-strapped Egypt offers citizenship to foreign investors

**CAIRO:** Egypt announced Wednesday it is offering citizenship to foreign investors willing to spend at least \$250,000 in the country, as it struggles to fill its depleted coffers. According to state newspaper Al-Ahram, a decision by Prime Minister Mostafa Madbouli published in the official gazette, says the premier can now "grant Egyptian nationality" to applicants that meet one of four conditions.

Foreigners can either buy at least \$300,000 of real estate in Egypt, invest \$350,000 in the country,

deposit \$500,000 in an Egyptian bank account or "make a non-refundable \$250,000 deposit in direct revenues in foreign currency into the state's public treasury". It is the latest in a series of measures by the government to woo foreign investment into Egypt, which is sapped dry of dollars and battling crippling inflation.

In 2018, parliament had passed a law allowing foreigners to apply for the Egyptian nationality with a bank deposit of 7 million Egyptian pounds - at the time around \$400,000 - or its foreign currency equivalent. Now, however, transfers must be made in dollars, as Egypt scrambles to fill its depleted coffers. Cairo's foreign reserves currently stand at \$34.35 billion, down from \$41 billion in February 2022, when the Russian invasion of Ukraine unsettled global investors who pulled billions out of the country.

Some \$28 billion of those reserves are deposits from wealthy Gulf allies, who have also stepped up to acquire Egyptian state assets but stalled many deals ahead of a fresh currency devaluation, according to experts. In under a year, the Egyptian pound has lost half of its value, propelling annual inflation in the import-dependent country to 26.5 percent in January, according to figures published in February.

Late last year the International Monetary Fund (IMF) approved a \$3 billion loan program for Egypt spread over 46 months, conditioned on "a permanent shift to a flexible exchange rate regime".

The government also pledged to push forward with measures to transition away from subsidies on several basic goods, such as fuel. The plan has been in place since 2016, with the most recent price hikes announced last week. — AFP





# China-Kuwait trade ties flourish

## More than 600 Kuwaiti buyers to attend Chinese trade fair next month: Official

By Faten Omar

**KUWAIT:** Total bilateral trade between China and Kuwait has reached a historical high in 2022, amounting to \$31.48 billion, Economic and Commercial Counselor of the Chinese Embassy in Kuwait Cheng Yongru said Wednesday at the promotion conference of the 133rd Canton Fair, scheduled to be held on April 15.

Total trade has jumped by 42.3 percent year-on-year, he said. China exported goods amounting to \$4.97 billion to Kuwait and imported goods amounting to \$26.51 billion from Kuwait, where both imports and exports achieved growth. So far, China is Kuwait's largest trading partner and Kuwait is an important source of crude oil imports to China.

He added that China exported 524 buses and 35,500 passenger cars to Kuwait - double the volume of cars exported in the previous year. According to the information of the Kuwait Public Transport Company, the company has cooperated with Chinese automakers since 2006 and has imported about 1,100 traditional energy buses from China, accounting for more than 95 percent of the Kuwait bus market share.

"In January of 2023, the electric bus made in China was successfully put into the Kuwait market, becoming the first electric bus officially operated in Kuwait. We are confident that enterprises of the two countries will have cooperation in more new fields in the future," he said.

He indicated that since the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Kuwait in 1971, the two countries have always developed friendly relations, noting: "In 2018, the two countries established a strategic partnership. Political mutual trust has continued to be consolidated and economic and trade relations have developed steadily. At present, China-Kuwait economic and trade relations are showing vigorous development."

Yongru stressed that China mainly imports crude oil and petrochemical products from Kuwait, and its exports to Kuwait are traditionally dominated by

supporting equipment for oil exploration. But in recent years, China's exports have gradually expanded to construction machinery, automobiles, telecommunication products and large oil tankers.

"To showcase new products and meet new trading partners requires an international and trustworthy platform; the Canton Fair is such a platform. Since its establishment in 1957, the Canton Fair has been playing an important role in promoting the development of trade between China and Kuwait," he affirmed.

Chu Shijia, Secretary-General of the Canton Fair said: "When it comes to Canton Fair, many Kuwaiti friends are not familiar with it, and our regular buyers are among the guests here today. The Canton Fair is an important channel for China's foreign trade and a window of China's opening up."

Shijia, who is also Director General of China Foreign Trade Centre, said each session welcomes nearly 200,000 international buyers from 229 countries and regions, and has been renowned as "China's No. 1 Fair". It plays a key role in promoting the economic and trade exchanges between China and the rest of the world.

"The 133rd Canton Fair will fully resume its physical exhibition after three years of COVID prevention and control, setting off on a new journey in the new era. The fair will present a brand-new image to the world as it will include its venue expansion for the first time. The accumulated exhibition area will increase from 1.18 million to 1.5 million square meters. The exhibition scale will also reach a new high. Over 30,000 exhibitors will participate, including more than 5,000 high-quality exhibitors, including manufacturing enterprises, and national high-tech enterprises, etc.," he pointed out.

He revealed that national delegations from Turkey, South Korea, India, Malaysia and others will also participate, which will strengthen mutually beneficial cooperation with global industrial and commercial organizations.

Shijia said that during each session of Canton



Cheng Yongru, Economic and Commercial Counsellor at the Chinese Embassy in Kuwait.



Chu Shijia, Secretary-General of the Canton Fair, Director General of China Foreign Trade Centre.



KUWAIT: Attendees listen to a keynote speech at the event.

Fair, more than 600 Kuwaiti buyers are attending the fair, adding: "As of now, it has established partnerships with 177 industrial and commercial organ-

izations in 98 countries and regions around the world, including the Kuwait Chamber of Commerce and Industry, influential in the Gulf region."

## FM heads Kuwaiti delegation to Arab League meeting



CAIRO: Arab foreign ministers engage in discussions at the 159th ministerial session of the Arab League Council. — KUNA

**CAIRO:** Kuwaiti Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Salem Abdullah Al-Jaber Al-Sabah on Wednesday headed the Kuwaiti delegation participating in the 159th ministerial session of the Arab League Council in Cairo. During

the meeting, the ministers discussed several topics related to Arab security and joint coordination over regional and international issues, mainly the Palestinian issue and its latest developments. — KUNA

## 151,992 residency violators in Kuwait: CSB

By Majd Othman

**KUWAIT:** Kuwait has a population of 4,385,717 of whom 1,488,716 are Kuwaitis or 34 percent of the total population, said Central Statistics Bureau on Tuesday in its final report of the 2021 census project for Kuwait.

The statistics showed that the number of non-Kuwaitis in Kuwait reached 2,897,001, while the number of Kuwaitis under the age of thirty reached 904,688, equivalent to 60.7 percent of the population. The report pointed out that the number of Kuwaiti females reached 759,578, while the number of Kuwaiti males reached 729,638. Non-Kuwaitis were divided between 1,941,628 males and 955,393 females.

The statistics also showed that the number of violators of the residence law reached 151,992. The country issued 44,879 visas while the number of visa violators reached 26,985.

Minister of Industry and Commerce Mazin Al-Nahedh said, in his speech during a press conference held by the Central Statistics Bureau to announce the report, said the project is significant because of its critical role in planning, as there is no development without statistics. The census project was carried out with the cooperation of the Public Authority for Civil Information (PACI).

Nahedh said that the general census provides important basic data and information on the demographics, social and economic characteristics of the population, housing and establishments. These are important tools for preparing programs, development plans and drawing policies in the areas of population, housing, healthcare, education, the workforce and others, he said.

He added that the positive effects of the census vary between the data it provides and the indicators that can be extracted. It represents a strong source that supports decision-makers and planners in various fields such as improving living standards and equitable distribution of services.



Mazin Al-Nahedh. — Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat



Mansour Al-Methen

Nahedh pointed out that the statistical project in Kuwait faced many challenges, most notably following the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic and the consequent restrictions and shutdown the state resorted to in checking the spread of the pandemic in compliance with the health requirements and precautionary measures.

The project was completed in joint cooperation with the Central Administration for Statistics and the Public Authority for Civil Information by investing



KUWAIT: Attendees listen to the Central Statistics Bureau's report on Tuesday.

## CBK commits to empowering women in banking sector

**KUWAIT:** On the occasion of International Women's Day celebrated annually on March 8, and as part of the efforts to empower women and enable them to carry out their vital role in development, the Central Bank of Kuwait (CBK) affirmed its commitment to empowering women at all levels in line with the "New Kuwait 2035" vision and the fifth goal of the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, specifically gender equality and women empowerment.

In a special report issued by CBK marking International Women's Day, CBK highlighted its endeavors, since inception, to direct local banks towards strengthening women's role by keeping pace with the latest global practices and international agreements that uphold women's status in the banking sector.

In 2015, CBK issued the Customer Protection Guide, the first principle of which stresses on

gender equality among all customers. With regard to implementation of CBK's instructions that directed banks to increase women's presence in all units and on all levels of the banking sector, data shows that women make up 35 percent of local banks' staff.

Moreover, statistical data, as of December 2022, indicate that women occupy 26 percent of senior positions in the banking sector in Kuwait. The report indicated that CBK is one of the leading institutions in the State of Kuwait in the field of women's empowerment and provides them with an enabling work environment and opportunities for advancement and invests in their future.

This is demonstrated by the proportion of women in the CBK's senior management that grew to 41 percent of senior positions. In addition, the number of female staff reached 545, which accounts for 58 percent of CBK workforce.

CBK reaffirms its efforts to continuously empower women in the banking sector by directing banks and supervised entities towards empowering women, granting opportunities to national cadres and supporting women to perform their roles, serve the country from all positions and actively contribute to the development process.



Monya Al-Qabandi

the resources owned by the two authorities. Nahedh stressed the importance of strengthening partnerships between users and producers of statistical data and information to support development in all its economic, social and environmental dimensions at the national, regional and international levels.

Deputy Director General of Civil Information Mansour Al-Methen reviewed the foundations adopted by civil information in its work and a comprehensive information base for both population and buildings in the 2021 census registration, referring to the adoption of field plurality and registration by linking them automatically, which reduces human and financial efforts.

Acting Director General of the Central Administration for Statistics and Head of the Statistical Work Affairs Sector Monya Al-Qabandi said that the administration directs its efforts to provide accurate statistical data and information in a timely manner to all beneficiaries in accordance with international standards with the aim of supporting planning, development and decision-making through partnership with all relevant parties.

## Transformer blast injures 4 in Salmiya

**KUWAIT:** The Ministry of Electricity and Water said that an explosion erupted at a main electrical transformer in Salmiya during periodical maintenance, resulting in a fire that left four people injured. The blast resulted in partial power outage around the area. The ministry's emergency and the Kuwait Fire Force's teams rushed to the scene and managed to control the blaze. Those injured were admitted to Mubarak Al-Kabeer Hospital for treatment. The Ministry said the facility is being checked to unveil the reasons behind the blast, stressing that services went back to normal later in the day. — KUNA





Local

# Al-Kharafi Activity Kids Center honors mothers of differently abled children

## Center holds 'The Best Mother Award' event 8th year in a row

By Ghadeer Ghloum

KUWAIT: Under the auspices of the chairwoman of the Kuwaiti Foundation for Disabled Children, Sabeeka Saad Al-Jasser, an event was held by Al-Kharafi Activity Kids Center on Wednesday at Grand Hyatt Hotel — 360 Mall. The event honored mothers of disabled kids from Kuwait, GCC countries and other countries for winning Al-Kharafi Activity Kids Center's award. The award was established on the Jan 1, 2013 and launched on March 19, 2013, to coincide with the date of Mother's Day. The award rewards mothers who take care of differently abled kids. The goals of this event are multiple. It sheds light on the parents of disabled people and shows their important role in our society. It also supports mothers' role in the society and presents them as role models, encouraging and acknowledging mothers' efforts with their differently abled kids and bringing mothers together to highlight their role in alleviating differently abled people's suffering.

The awards were given to the winning mothers in accordance with certain standards, including the center's nomination of the winning mother, besides that the mother has to have a son or a daughter that has disability, she has to have the quality of self-learning, her disabled kid should not be less than 10 years old, and she has to be known for participating and supporting the differently abled community.

Al-Kharafi Activity Kids Center rewarded 22 mothers at its 8th year of celebration. Kuwaiti winning mothers are: Hanaa AbdulRahman Al-Zawawi, Sawsan Taha Salman Dawoud, Jehan Khalid Al-Enzi, Ezdihar Ahmad Al-Kanderi, Mariam Nasser Al-Khuder, Nuriya Jassem Al-Shimali, Bedoor Faraj Mutabagi, Hanadi Ahmad Al-Saleh, and Eman Yousef Al-Refai.

Alongside, other winning mothers from different countries include: Adaletkaranhan from Turkey, Feilina Muhammadfeisol from Malaysia, Salwa Al-Shawashi from Tunisia, Marwa Khaled Al-Kareem from Lebanon, Hussah Dakheel Al-Hamad from Qatar, Fatma Mohammad Al-Jaberi from Oman,



KUWAIT: Winning mothers and event organizers.

Kifaya Mohammad Abdulqader from Jordan, Sayeda Mohammad Hassanein from Egypt, Nada Mohammad from Emirates, Faten Abdulbadea Alyafi from Saudi Arabia, Eman Abdulsahab Ahmad from Bahrain and Shahila Malik from India.

During the event, Aisha Al-Salem, the secretary general of the award, said that the event is to welcome mothers from the Arab world and to honor them for their relentless work without expecting anything in return. She also clarified that the objective behind rewarding the winning mothers is not to

favor them over other mothers, but to present them as role models and representatives of mothers' endless compassion and kindness.

Additionally, Al-Salem expressed her gratitude to several groups such as the volunteering youngsters and the support of different people of the society, whose continuous efforts made the annual celebration successful. She praised Zain, the strategic sponsor of the celebration, for its continuous support and prompt delivery in various services. She also commended other companies.



Speakers address a press conference.



Participating mothers



Zain Kuwait's Chief Enterprise Business Officer Hamad Jassem Al-Musaibeh and Secretary General of the Award Aisha Al-Salem.

## Netherlands, Kuwait to expand commercial, climate cooperation

By Faten Omar

KUWAIT: Dutch Ambassador Laurens Westhoff said Kuwait and the Netherlands will further enhance their longstanding commercial relationship based on friendship and mutual trust for the benefit of the two countries and a stable and secure world. The remarks came at the reception held Tuesday by the Embassy of the Netherlands to celebrate the birthday of King Willem Alexander at the Netherlands Residence Garden.

"King's Day in the Netherlands is a confirmation of the strong bonds between the Dutch Royal family and its citizens. This year's official theme will be 'we are all Kings and Queens'. King's Day is inclusive and egalitarian like the Netherlands is inclusive and egalitarian," Westhoff said, explaining the meaning behind the cele-

bration of the king's birthday. Westhoff indicated that Kuwait and the Netherlands are discussing issues like food security and climate change, both of which require new partnerships to tackle. "Therefore, we are developing, together with research institutes KISR, KFAS, and Kuwait University and also with Shell Kuwait, new branches to our relationship," he said. He added that in 2024 the two countries will mark 60 years of diplomatic relations. Both will celebrate their shared values and interests, as well as their commitment to the multilateral system.

He affirmed that Kuwait and the Netherlands will further enhance their longstanding commercial relationship based on friendship and mutual trust for the benefit of the two countries and a stable and secure world.

The Dutch ambassador pointed out that Kuwait and the Netherlands share many values. "Being relatively small countries, with large and powerful neighbors, both our countries embrace the principle of an international rules-based order. Many times, Kuwait and the



KUWAIT: Ambassador Laurens Westhoff cutting the cake with Mohammad Yaqoub Hayati.

Netherlands have stood shoulder to shoulder in promoting and defending the principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the inviolability of internationally recognized borders," he said.

He revealed that KLM Royal Dutch Airlines will soon expand from six flights per week to daily direct flights to the Netherlands, adding that bilateral relationship is growing from strength to strength.



## Women represent 35% of workforce in Kuwait banking sector

KUWAIT: The role of Kuwaiti women in the banking sector reflects their effective and vital role in economic life countrywide, as women represent about 35 percent of the workforce in Kuwaiti banks while occupying 26 percent of leadership positions in the banking sector. As International Women's Day falls on March 8 annually, KUNA sheds light on Wednesday on the economic role of citizens in the business environment, especially female entry into banking six decades ago, according to data from the Central Bank of Kuwait (CBK) and the Kuwaiti banking sector, while five decades have passed since assuming the first supervisory position in the sector.

Ever since the national banking work began in Kuwait at the beginning of the 1950s and with the growth and development of business, the banking sector encouraged women working in local banks, giving them the opportunity to lead. Nasima Al-Rifai was the first Kuwaiti woman to manage a branch of a local bank, the National Bank of Kuwait (NBK), as this branch was inaugurated in 1972, and at that time it was reserved for women, afterwards she gained the expertise that qualifies her to assume this position after joining NBK in 1964.

The banking services provided to women in Kuwait continued after the estab-

lishment of Kuwait Finance House (KFH) and the rest of the Kuwaiti banks that competed with each other to provide banking services to women and to draw them in to work for them and benefit from their creative energies in the banking business. In accordance with the directives of CBK, local banks have signed many agreements concerned with empowering women, including a deal signed by Gulf Bank in 2015 as the first bank to support and sign a UN deal concerned with equality between men and women and the empowerment of women in the work sector. CBK is one of the leading institutions in the field of empowering women and providing opportunities for career growth, in addition to the bank's continuous directives regarding interest within this as this is highlighted by women assuming leadership positions.

Regarding supervisory positions at the bank, women assume about 41 percent of the total supervisory positions, while the number of women working for the bank reached about 545 employees, which represents 58 percent of its workforce. The presence of women was not limited to specific jobs, but rather the banks encouraged them to develop and advance while providing them with opportunities to assume executive, leadership and supervisory positions, as well as giving them the opportunity to have an active presence in the boards of directors. CBK's statistical data indicates that women occupying leadership and supervisory positions in the local banking sector amounted to about 998 women, repre-

senting about 26 percent of the total leadership positions in this sector with the total amount is about 3,849 jobs, and the number of women employees in the banking sector amounted to about 4,819. Efforts towards empowering women in Kuwait began over 40 years ago, however the past two decades have witnessed intense efforts to expand women's participation in public work, represented in obtaining their political rights, which paved the way for them to enter parliaments, contributing to the legislative role, becoming several ministries and assuming many other positions such as executive positions, whether in the government or private sector.

Kuwaiti women are pioneers in the social, political, intellectual, cultural and sports fields, holding leadership positions in the fields of medicine, engineering, law and auditing. Also, Kuwaiti women worked as university professors and recently assumed judicial positions. These steps taken by Kuwait to empower women in various fields are consistent with the fifth goal of the UN Sustainable Development Goals, as this also comes within the framework of Kuwait Vision 2035, with the aim to transform the country into a regional leader in the financial, cultural and institutional fields by 2035. The Kuwaiti government aims to enhance women's participation in the labor market in a way that ensures accelerating the empowerment of women in government positions and achieving the goals of the country's development plan by raising the percentage to about 35 percent of the state's general leadership positions. —KUNA

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## Kidney disease on the rise in Kuwait

KUWAIT: The number of kidney dialysis patients in Kuwait has increased by 2 percent compared to last year, the Kuwait Nephrology Association said Wednesday. The number of patients this year has reached 2,400, said the association, with 54 percent being men. According to global statistics, there are 850 million patients with kidney disease, making it the most prevalent disease in the world. Dr Anas Al-Yousef, head of the association said chronic kidney failure is the most common condition, with 10 to 15 percent of the world's population having the disease. Kidney disease, he said, is so common because it's a silent disease that requires identification through lab tests.

About 100 patients received kidney transplants at Hamid Al-Essa center last year, Yousef, who is also the head of the nephrology unit at the Amiri Hospital, told KUNA Wednesday. More than 400 patients remain on the center's waitlist and the center is equipped to handle this large number of patients, he added. "Reducing the high rates of kidney disease across the world requires concerted global efforts. People should maintain moderate blood sugar levels, control their blood pressure, maintain an ideal weight through exercise and adhering to a healthy diet, and refrain from smoking and overusing pain killers," he said.

Yousef stressed the importance of periodic checkups, specifically for people with kidney disease risk factors, such as diabetes and high blood pressure, as well as those who have a family history of kidney disease. "The best treatment is early diagnosis," he added.

The association will set up a booth next Saturday at the Avenues Mall to mark World Kidney Day, which falls on Thursday, March 9. Aimed at raising awareness of kidney disease, the booth will include a group of nephrologists and nutritionists who will share educational and scientific materials with the public. Anyone can visit the booth between 10 am to 10 pm. — KUNA



Dr Anas Al-Yousef



The "Mariachi Romatitlán" musical band has held performances at international festivals to promote Mexican culture.

## Embassy, NCCAL to offer a night of Mexican music

KUWAIT: As part of the 28th Qurain Cultural Festival, the Embassy of Mexico, with the generous sponsorship of the National Council for Culture, Arts and Letters (NCCAL), is holding an evening of traditional Mexican folk music with Mariachi Romatitlán. The presentation will take place on March 10, 2023, at 8 pm, at Abdulhussein AbdulRidha Theater in Salmiya and all are welcome.

Listening to the unmistakable and rhythmic sound of the mariachi produces a special sensation and provokes a mixture of feelings of joy and even nostalgia, which only mariachi music produces. For this reason, the mariachi, whose emblematic figure has become the most representative of the music scene in Mexico, is celebrated.

But beyond these emotions that pass for expressions of identity and nationalism, few know that the mariachi music has been recognized as Intangible Heritage of Humanity by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). According to UNESCO, the mariachi interprets traditional music and a fundamental element of Mexican culture through which values, history and different languages are transmitted, for which reason it is recognized as Intangible Heritage of Humanity.

The mariachi attire is inspired by the clothes worn by the peasants with ornaments of Spanish clothing. They wear spurs on their ankle boots, tall hats, trousers with silver buttons, bow ties and jackets.

The "Mariachi Romatitlán" musical band is committed to the preservation and dissemination of traditional Mexican folk music. Since its creation, the band has been active, not only as interpreters of the mariachi music, but also in the search for traditional songs of this genre that is well known and popular worldwide.

# MILSET electrical installation contest announces three winners

Competition promotes optimizing energy consumption, boosts confidence among students



KUWAIT: Middle school students take on multiple electricity wiring challenges as part of the competition.



KUWAIT: Asia's Regional Office of the International Movement for Leisure Activities in Science and Technology (MILSET Asia) announced the results of the 10th annual Kuwait school competition in electrical installations, co-organized by the Ministry of Education and a group of volunteer engineers from the Ministry of Electricity, Water and Renewable Energy.

The first place, said the office in a press statement Wednesday, was won by Saif Al-Dawla Intermediate Boys School, while Ibn Al-Nafis Intermediate Boys School ranked second place, and Abdullah bin Amer Intermediate Boys School won the third spot.

MILSET is a global organization for investing leisure time in science and technology, founded in 1987 in Quebec City during the first international scientific forum with the aim of contributing to the development of scientific and technical culture among youngsters through the practice of qualitative experimental scientific activities.

MILSET Asia Regional Director Dawood Al-Ahmad said qualifying rounds were held within each school to choose the team that would be representing the school in the competition. This year's competition "Electrical Installations: Science and skills" also included training hours and practical workshops inside the MILSET office.

Ahmad said he was pleased with the continued success of the competition in its tenth consecutive year. He added that it aims to support activity programs within schools which develop students' capabilities and enhance their skills in the field of handicrafts and

help students discover their inclinations and interests through the practice of manual work.

The competition also aims to help participating students embrace values such as consumption rationalization — especially the consumption of electricity —, organization, planning, as well as enhancing communication skills in the work environment within a collaborative team and boosting the students' self-confidence and independence, he said.

He said the contest is an exciting challenge for students, who got the opportunity to compete in wiring home power distribution boards and energy-saving light bulbs among others. Students, he added, were evaluated based on quality and speed of their work. — KUNA

## New India envoy seeks to revitalize bilateral political engagement

By Sajeev K Peter

KUWAIT: Indian Ambassador Dr Adarsh Swaika said on Tuesday that he would strive to revitalize high-level political engagement between Kuwait and India. Addressing the media after presenting credentials as India's new ambassador to His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah on Tuesday, Dr Swaika said he wants to begin his official tenure by thanking HH the Amir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, HH the Crown Prince, HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Ahmad Al-Nawaf Al-Sabah and the government and the people of Kuwait.

Hinting at an upcoming high-level visit, he said: "We expect the visit of Kuwait's Foreign Minister to India at an early opportunity this year." Foreign Minister of Kuwait had last visited India in March 2021 and India's External Affairs Minister visited Kuwait in June 2021. The discussions at both ministerial visits led to elevation of Joint Commission meetings at the

foreign-minister level. Both foreign ministers had a very productive conversation in December last year during which India's external affairs minister extended an invitation to foreign minister of Kuwait to visit India, he said. The ambassador gave an overview of Kuwait-India partnership and spelled out his priorities and expectations as India's new ambassador.

"India and Kuwait have been traditional and time-tested partners. It is a relationship that has both historical foundations and modern-day ingredients for a strong partnership. Geographically, we are maritime neighbors, with the Arabian Sea connecting our shores. Culturally, we are close to each other especially the strong people-to-people connection that makes our relationship unique. Economically, India is crucial to Kuwait's food security while Kuwait is crucial to India's energy security. And most importantly, it is a relationship to which the leadership of both countries attaches utmost importance," he pointed out. The total bilateral trade between India and Ku-



KUWAIT: Indian Ambassador Dr Adarsh Swaika (L) addresses media at the Indian Embassy on Tuesday as Embassy First Secretary Dr Vinod Gaikwad looks on.

wait stood at \$12.243 billion in 2021 and is currently growing following the pandemic recovery. "India is second largest destination for Kuwait's oil exports. Kuwait also has good investments in India through Kuwait Investment Authority's investments. However, it is my considered view that there is a lot of untapped potential both in terms of trade and investments from both sides," he said.

"My endeavor as an ambassador would be to further strengthen our economic partnership. On the trade

front, there is a lot of scope for project exports from India," he said. "Having a large Indian community in Kuwait also keeps the embassy on its toes, practically on a 24/7 basis. But then again, this is our duty and responsibility."

"Our consular service delivery mechanisms are robust. The embassy also has a sound feedback and grievance redressal mechanism including 12 WhatsApp lines for various services. The WhatsApp lines are being monitored on 24x7 basis by dedicated people," he added.

## LuLu Hypermarket organizes free medical checkups

KUWAIT: LuLu Hypermarket, the leading retailer in the region conducted free doctor's consultations for its customers as a part of Kuwait Doctors Day.

The free consultation campaign was held on March 4 at the Dajeej outlet of the hypermarket. The consultation was conducted across several health factors, with doctors specializing in more than seven departments participating in the campaign. The free consultation was a part of the Hypermarket's CSR resolution that aims to benefit its customers in various aspects. Visitors to the hypermarket had the opportunity

to discuss their health concerns, receive medical advice and get their vital signs checked. The event was well-received by the community, with hundreds of customers taking advantage of the opportunity to consult with medical professionals.

The Hypermarket extends its gratitude to the Indian Doctors Forum who supported this cause by providing their highly qualified doctors, who volunteered their time and expertise for the initiative, by providing valuable insights on how customers can maintain a healthy lifestyle and prevent common illnesses. The consultations were given mainly by cardiologists, gynecologists, general physicians, dermatologists and infection specialists.

LuLu Hypermarket has always been committed to promoting healthy living among its customers and this initiative is just one of the many ways in which the company is working towards realizing this goal.



LuLu Hypermarket customers sign up to be seen by doctors at the event.



KUWAIT: Doctors and LuLu Hypermarket staff pose for a photo at the free doctors consultation event.





Muted response as Thailand hunger strikers hit 50 days

## In jihadi-ruined Iraqi city, restored church bells signal hope, unity

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ATHENS: People march during a demonstration as part of a nationwide day of mass strikes and protests over the country's worst rail tragedy that killed 57 people last week on March 8, 2023 in Athens. —AFP

# Greeks protest over rail tragedy

## Police fire tear gas at mass rallies urging PM to resign

ATHENS: More than 50,000 protesters took to streets across Greece on Wednesday and workers staged mass strikes, expressing anger over the country's worst rail tragedy and urging the prime minister to resign.

At least 57 people were killed, and 14 others remain in hospital after a freight train crashed head-on with a passenger train, carrying mostly students, on February 28. Demonstrators in Athens waved signs reading "it's not an accident, it's a crime" and "it could have been any of us on that train". By early afternoon, police said up to 53,000 demonstrators had taken to the streets across the country to protest the accident.

"I am here to pay tribute to the dead but also to express my anger and my frustration," Athens protester Niki Siouta, a 54-year-old civil engineer, told AFP. "This government must go." There were about 30,000 protesters in Athens, 15,000 in Greece's second city

Thessaloniki and 10,000 in the western port city of Patras, a police spokeswoman told AFP.

### Calls to resign

Fourteen people were detained for questioning in the capital on suspicion of offences including carrying flares, she added. Alongside the protesters, Greek civil servants staged a 24-hour walkout while doctors, teachers, bus drivers and ferry crew members also went on strike.

Railways were paralysed as train workers extended strike action launched in the aftermath of the accident. Last week protests triggered by the crash saw riot police clash repeatedly with demonstrators, including in Athens. The public order ministry has said talks were held with protest organisers to avert new violence.

Calls are growing louder for Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis to quit over the tragedy, which has shone a

harsh spotlight on decades of government mismanagement of the rail network. A station master, who admitted forgetting to reroute one of the trains, has been arrested and charged, but the government has been criticised for seeking to shift the blame mainly on him.

Greece's transport minister resigned on March 1 and Mitsotakis has apologised to victims' families, pledged to get to the root of what happened and embarked on a flurry of public appearances in an apparent bid to soothe anger.

### 'Belated'

The premier visited the crash site and gave a televised address, blaming "human error" for the accident while calling for a special committee of experts to investigate. But critics have been merciless. Writing in liberal daily Kathimerini, columnist Pantelis Boukalas called the prime minister's apology "belated" and said that some may sus-

pect it was "guided by PR gurus". The prime minister and other politicians suspended election campaigning in the wake of the tragedy. There is now speculation that the polls, expected in April, could be delayed until May. Mitsotakis has vowed to seek EU assistance to "finally" modernise the train network and called on the Supreme Court to investigate the tragedy as fast as possible.

There is little sign, however, that public anger is easing. Last weekend, football fans around the country hurled insults at the prime minister during matches. Political life will resume Thursday after a period of national mourning, but the premier seems in no rush to confront the issue of the looming polls.

Asked Monday when Mitsotakis will set an election date, government spokesman Yiannis Economou replied: "At this stage, this issue is not on the prime minister's mind at all." —AFP

## Britain defends asylum plan after Nazi comparison

LONDON: Britain Wednesday hit back at critics including the United Nations and football presenter Gary Lineker, after he compared its new plan on illegal immigration to the rhetoric of Nazi-era Germany.

The Conservative government intends to outlaw asylum claims by all illegal arrivals and transfer them elsewhere, such as Rwanda, in a bid to stop thousands of migrants from crossing the Channel on small boats.

Stopping the boats is the "people's priority", Prime Minister Rishi Sunak told the House of Commons, vowing also to "break the criminal gangs" profiting from the crossings. But rights groups and the United Nations said the legislation would make Britain itself an international outlaw under European and UN conventions on asylum.

"I am deeply concerned at this legislation," United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Turk said in a statement. "All people compelled to leave their country of origin to seek safety and dignity abroad are entitled to the full respect of their human rights, regardless of their migration status or mode of arrival."

Presenting the Illegal Migration Bill in parliament, Home Secretary Suella Braverman attached a letter conceding that she could not confirm yet whether the plan respected European human rights law.

But in a round of broadcast interviews, the interior minister insisted the government was within its rights to stop the seaborne migrants, who she said could total 80,000 this year. "We're not breaking the law," she told Sky News, claiming support from

the "vast majority" of the British public. "We are very confident that our measures that we've announced yesterday (Tuesday) are in compliance with our international law obligations."

### 'Immeasurably cruel'

Lineker, an ex-England striker who presents the BBC's flagship football coverage on TV, was warned by the broadcaster to respect its social media guidelines after he lashed out at Braverman on Twitter. "Good heavens, this is beyond awful," he tweeted over a video of Braverman explaining her plan, in his latest broadside against the Conservatives' immigration policies.

"There is no huge influx. We take far fewer refugees than other major European countries," Lineker noted. "This is just an immeasurably cruel policy directed at the most vulnerable people in language that is not dissimilar to that used by Germany in the 30s, and I'm out of order?" Braverman has often been accused herself of using inflammatory language over the migration issue, as the Conservatives try to restore their weak standing in opinion polls ahead of local elections in May.

"I'm obviously disappointed that he should attempt to equate our measures with 1930s Germany," she told BBC radio. The minister vowed to be "honest" with the British public, while defending her claim that "billions" of migrants were "eager" to come to the UK.

### 'Take back control'

Sunak said he was ready to fight legal challenges to the bill, as he vowed to "take back control of our borders once and for all"—reprising a popular pledge by Brexit campaigners in 2016. But the prime minister, who meets French President Emmanuel Macron in Paris on Friday, faces pressure to restore migration cooperation with the European Union and get stronger action from Paris.

source of the intelligence or the group involved. Germany, which along with Sweden and Denmark are carrying out investigations into the blasts, urged caution. German Defence Minister Boris Pistorius said he had read the reports "with great interest" but said it was necessary to wait and see "what ends up being confirmed". Sweden's Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson has said he would not comment on the report, while NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg warned against speculating.

### 'Traces found'

Four large gas leaks were discovered on the pipelines linking Russia and Germany last September, with Moscow and the West blaming each other for "sabotage". The Nord Stream 1 and 2 pipelines, it turned out, were ruptured by subsea explosives, seven months after Russian forces invaded Ukraine.

The Times report said the intelligence seen by US officials suggested that the perpetrators behind the sabotage were "opponents of President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia". Separately, separate



LONDON: A handout photograph released by the UK Parliament shows Britain's Home Secretary Suella Braverman giving a statement on the Illegal Migration Bill in the House of Commons in London, on March 7, 2023. —AFP

The perilous nature of the Channel crossings—with migrants traversing one of the world's busiest waterways on fragile craft—has been underlined by several tragedies in recent years. In November 2021, at least 27 people drowned when their dinghy deflated. They were mostly Kurds from Iraq and included a child aged seven.

If passed by parliament, the draft law would prevent anyone deported after making the journey from re-entering the UK and ever claiming British citizenship. More than 3,000 migrants have arrived by boat so far this year, often ending up in expensive hotels at taxpayer expense, and the backlog of asylum claims now exceeds 160,000.

The new plan would transfer illegal migrants to disused military barracks temporarily and cap the annual number of refugees who arrive legally. Citing a similar, deeply controversial, policy in Australia, Braverman said the boat crossings would "fall dramatically" in time but could not say when. —AFP



DUEODDE: File photo shows the gas leak at the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline as it is seen from the Danish Defence's F-16 rejection response off the Danish Baltic island of Bornholm, south of Dueodde. —AFP

German media reports published late Tuesday said German investigators believed that the unidentified group was made up of five men and one woman using professionally falsified passports. —AFP

## Women march as rights under threat across the globe

MADRID: Women were taking to the streets from Kabul to Bangkok on Wednesday to mark International Women's Day and defend rights that are coming under increasing attack. With the Taliban government's banning of women from universities in Afghanistan, Iran's repression of the Mahsa Amini protests, new US restrictions on abortion rights and the Ukraine war's impact on women, there are many reasons to protest.

In Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, which the UN called the "most repressive country in the world" for women's rights, AFP saw around 20 women holding a rare protest in the capital Kabul. Thousands of women also took part in rallies across Pakistan, despite efforts by authorities to block them. Rabail Akhtar, a schoolteacher who joined a crowd of around 2,000 in Lahore, said she was marching to "demand the security and safety that women are not afforded in this country and society."

"Why are they so afraid of women demanding their rights?" Soheila Afzal, a graphic designer also at the march, asked, referring to Pakistani authorities. Marches also took place in Thailand and Indonesia, where a few dozen women gathered in front of the country's parliament to urge lawmakers to pass a long-awaited bill to protect domestic workers and some chanted "long live Indonesian women".

In Ukraine, President Volodymyr Zelensky praised women for taking a central role in defending their country against Russia's invasion. He thanked "all women who work, teach, study, rescue, heal, fight—fight for Ukraine."

To mark International Women's Day, capitals across the world are hosting marches, rallies and demonstrations, including Madrid, where broad tree-lined boulevards are regularly packed with a sea of purple, a colour often associated with women's rights.

Global progress on women's rights is "vanishing before our eyes," UN chief Antonio Guterres warned on Monday, saying gender equality would take another three centuries to achieve. "Women's rights are being abused, threatened, and violated around the world," he added, pointing to Afghanistan, where "women and girls have been erased from public life".

Afghan universities reopened on Monday after a winter break, but only men returned to classes with the Taliban authorities' ban on women in higher education still in force some 18 months after they seized power. —AFP

## German prosecutors searched ship over Nord Stream blast

BERLIN: German investigators probing the Nord Stream gas pipeline blasts searched a ship suspected of having transported explosives used in the incident, federal prosecutors said Wednesday. Confirmation of the searches that took place from January 18 to 20 came after a report in the New York Times said US officials had seen new intelligence indicating that a "pro-Ukrainian group" was responsible for the sabotage.

The Ukrainian government denied involvement in the action, while the Kremlin rejected the Times report as "diversion". The Times report said US officials had no evidence implicating Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky in the pipeline bombing, and it did not identify the



## International

# In jihadi-ruined Iraqi city, restored church bells signal hope and unity

## UNESCO support for rebuilding Iraq, whose rich heritage has been ravaged by conflict

**MOSUL:** Where brutal jihadists once ruled in Iraq, church bells rang out on Tuesday, a symbol of hope, reconstruction, and unity. "They ring for everyone," the UN's cultural chief Audrey Azoulay said on a visit to the northern metropolis of Mosul, Iraq's second city.

Her agency, UNESCO, is rebuilding churches, mosques and other buildings devastated by the Islamic State group's three-year occupation of a city known for its religious and cultural diversity. "It's a symbol of a return to peace, connection to history but also a symbol of hope for the future," said Azoulay, director-general of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

She spoke on the second day of a visit to demonstrate UNESCO's support for the rebuilding of Iraq, whose rich heritage has been ravaged by conflict over the past 20 years. Since 2018 UNESCO has raised more than \$150 million for projects in Iraq, mostly the reconstruction of Mosul.

IS seized the city as its stronghold before being pushed out in 2017, but the battle to retake it reduced the Old City to rubble. Under UNESCO's "Revive the Spirit of Mosul" initiative, mosques, churches and century-old homes are being rebuilt.

Among the most prominent of the restorations is Our Lady of the Hour convent, where the three church bells newly arrived from France pealed from the bell tower where they have just been installed. Known in Arabic as Al-Saa, the clock church, it was named for a timepiece given by France in 1880 to recognise the Dominicans' cultural and social work.

Azoulay said the convent provided Iraq's first

school for girls and first teachers' college for women. The site also hosted the first printing press in Mesopotamia, she said.

Its three new bronze bells, named after the arch-angels Gabriel, Michael and Raphael, the heaviest of which weighs 270 kilograms (168 pounds). They were cast at the same French foundry in Normandy which made those at Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris, said Azoulay, a former French culture minister. "We are in a place of religion, of culture, of coexistence, of education... very symbolic place," she said.

The walls of the convent church have been restored with "magnificent stone, gilded a little like bread", said Dominican Father Olivier Poquillon. UNESCO is also restoring Mosul's Al-Nuri mosque and the adjacent landmark minaret nicknamed Al-Hadba or the "hunchback", which dates from the 12th century. They were destroyed during the battle to retake the city from IS. Iraq's army accused IS of planting explosives at the site and blowing it up. The jihadists' arrival further decimated an Iraqi Christian population which has lived in the region for millennia. Since the 2003 US-led overthrow of Saddam Hussein, Iraq's Christian community has shrunk to about 400,000.

Still, "we are seeing life return to the area," Poquillon said late last month as he supervised installation of the bells which he hopes will regain "a function of dialogue". In Mosul's Old City, the church bells and the mosque minaret are neighbours and people can hear them both calling their faithful to prayer, he said. —AFP



**MOSUL:** A woman poses next to one of three bells cast in Normandy as they are prepared for installation on February 28, 2023 in the bell tower of the historic Roman Catholic Dominican Church of Our Lady of the Hour in Mosul, a metropolis in northern Iraq where heritage jewels are being rebuilt after the abuses of the jihadist group Islamic State (IS). — AFP

## Four dead in latest Egypt train crash

**CAIRO:** A train crash in Egypt killed four people and injured more than 20, officials said Wednesday about the latest in a series of deadly accidents blamed on ageing infrastructure and mismanagement. The train overshot the station and ran into the buffers at the end of the track after passing through a stop signal, in the Nile Delta city of Qalyub north of Cairo, the National Railways Authority said.

"That led to the derailment of the locomotive and the first carriage," it added in a statement. Pictures from the scene showed emergency crews overnight using a crane to lift the derailed coach that appeared to be partially crumpled.

Egypt's health ministry later gave the final toll of four killed and 23 injured, doubling the number of dead that had been announced overnight. Families of those killed in the latest train tragedy will receive compensation worth 100,000 Egyptian pounds (around \$3,000), said the solidarity ministry. A similar amount will go to those seriously injured, a statement said. President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi has vowed to hold to account those

responsible for recurrent deadly rail accidents in Egypt, the Arab world's most populous country.

In April 2021, Transport Minister Kamel el-Wazir fired the rail authority's head following uproar over mismanagement of dilapidated train lines. The sacking came after two train accidents within less than a month that killed more than 40 people.

Egypt's worst railway tragedy occurred in 2002, when a fire ripped through a train killing more than 370 people just outside Cairo. Egypt's 105 million people depends largely on rail transport, but the network, although one of the largest on the African continent, is riddled with problems.

After the 2021 tragedies, the transport minister had acknowledged that "the human element" is often to blame for the deadly accidents. Wazir vowed at the time that an automated network would be set up by 2024 -- part of marquee projects promoted by Sisi's administration.

The projects also include the construction of a new high-speed network to replace existing lines for which contracts have been awarded. Egypt's roads also see frequent deadly accidents which are often blamed on poor maintenance and rules flouted by drivers. In 2021, around 7,000 people were killed on Egyptian roads, according to official figures. — AFP

## Syrians risk their lives for truffles

**HAMA:** At a Syrian market, bags are brimming with desert truffles, a seasonal delicacy that people risk their lives to collect, braving Islamic State group attacks and landmines. "It's a treat dipped in blood," said vendor Mohammed Salha, 31, showing off truffles he spent a week collecting near his village in the central province of Hama. "Every day I leave my house not knowing whether I will come back to my wife and daughter," he said, a brown keffiyeh scarf wrapped around his head. "We risk our lives... but we don't care anymore, we want to feed our children," he told AFP, dark circles lining his weary eyes.

Between February and April, hundreds of impoverished Syrians search for the money spinning delicacy in the vast Syrian Desert, or Badia—a known hideout for jihadists that is also littered with landmines. So far this season, more than 130 truffle hunters have been killed, mostly in ambushes by the jihadists or in landmine blasts, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights war monitor.

Known for their high quality, Syria's desert truffles fetch high prices in a country battered by 12 years of war and a crushing economic crisis. At the market in the city

of Hama, truffles can sell for up to \$25 per kilo (\$11 per pound) depending on size and grade—in a country where the average monthly wage is around \$18. "We make big profits during the two months of the truffle season, but we risk our lives," Salha said with a pained smile.

Truffles big and small bulged from baskets, trays and hessian bags, some propped up on dirty plastic crates or sitting directly on the footpath. "Auction! Auction!" yelled one of dozens of vendors as wholesale buyers crowded around to bid for a 50 kilo (110 pound) lot. Seller Omar al-Boush opened the auction at the equivalent of \$4.50 per kilo in Syrian pounds—and the price had soon almost doubled. "We have types of truffles suited to people with middle class incomes," said Boush, 52, a red and white keffiyeh around his neck.

"Some families prefer to buy truffles instead of meat," he said, placing large white truffles on his stall with dirt-encrusted fingers. Different types of truffles are collected in the desert, which stretches across central Syria to the eastern border with Iraq.

Sellers told AFP the black truffle found in desert areas of Hama and Aleppo provinces fetches the highest prices. Jmaledine Dakak, a wholesaler from Damascus, said some traders bought high-quality truffles and exported them to neighbouring Iraq and Lebanon, while others are reportedly smuggled to rich Gulf countries through Jordan.

Sitting behind a stall, vendor Yusuf Safaf said he bought his truffles from Bedou-

in who came to Hama in the mornings—some with "blood on their clothes". "Some have lost family members while collecting truffles—but they keep doing it... because they have no choice," the 43-year-old said. "There are landmines, bandits and vast stretches" where IS is present, Safaf added. "People sacrifice their lives... just to support themselves."

Foragers take the risk despite repeated warnings in the Syrian media. In one report earlier this month, a military source warned people against hunting for truffles "as some areas have not yet been declared safe" from landmines and IS fighters.

Jihad al-Abdullah, 30, lost his leg when a mine exploded as he was driving to collect truffles east of Hama. He now gets around on crutches, yet he said he still sometimes goes out foraging and has spent much of this season selling truffles his brothers have collected.

"I have nothing to lose after I lost my leg," said Abdullah, stretched out on the ground near his stall. "I continue my work to make a daily living. The rest is up to God." Across the country, more than 10 million people live in areas contaminated by explosive hazards, according to the United Nations. Explosives planted in fields, along roads or even in buildings by all sides in Syria's conflict killed 15,000 people between 2015 and 2022, according to UN figures. Abdullah said collecting truffles was like playing a game of cards. "Sometimes you win, sometimes you lose," he said. "It's a gamble that I have accepted." — AFP

## Kuwaiti women play crucial role...

Continued from Page 1

Al-Baghli, also Minister of Social Affairs and Community Development recalled with pride, Kuwaiti women bravery and sacrifices during the Iraqi invasion. She affirmed that Kuwait attached great importance to the advancement and empowerment of women as well as to promoting and protecting their rights. Kuwaiti women are making more gains year after year, since they obtained their political rights, she clarified.

"Today, I consider myself a living example of the gains achieved by Kuwaiti women. I am participating in this session not only as a Minister of Social Affairs and Community Development, but also as a Minister of State for Women and Childhood Affairs, which is a new ministerial post in Kuwait," she said, adding that "this shows that the Kuwaiti political leadership is giving priority to women's rights and empowerment and is interested in boosting women's important role in the state renaissance and development in line with the Kuwaiti constitution provisions and the New Kuwait 2035 Vision".

Al-Baghli indicated that the important UNSC session coincided with the International Women's Day, which is an opportunity to highlight women's achievements around the world and vital role in all political, economic and social sectors. "It also reminds us that there are still more to be done at the national, regional and international levels to empower women; protect their rights and ensure that their voices are heard and their participation in the decision-making process is guaranteed; and to reduce the gender gap," she stressed.

The Kuwaiti minister lauded the UNSCR 1325 which set the agenda for women, peace and security more than two decades ago and the subsequent related nine UNSC resolutions. She pointed out that these resolutions became a ba-

sic pillar for international multilateral action in conflict prevention and settlement, societies renaissance and advancement in social, economic, developmental and political fields.

"History testifies that even though women are always the first victims of wars, conflicts, security, social, economic, political and even climate crisis, they have proven and demonstrated over time that they are able to withstand difficulties and play prominent and essential roles in preventing and resolving conflicts, building and maintaining peace as well as in humanitarian responses to crises, reconciliation, mediation and reconstruction efforts," she affirmed.

Al-Baghli underlined that women's participation had positive impacts on political and peace-building efforts, as reports showed that that women's participation increases the likelihood that peace agreements would stand for more years and be more sustainable. In this regard, Kuwait was keen on inviting representatives of Yemeni women to take part in the peace negotiations it hosted in 2016 under the auspices of the United Nations, she said.

She emphasized Kuwait's support for women's participation in all political negotiations in the region and around the world. The Security Council adopted resolution 1325 on women and peace and security on 31 October, 2000. It reaffirms the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts, peace negotiations, peace-building, peacekeeping, humanitarian response and in post-conflict reconstruction and stresses the importance of their equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security.

Resolution 1325 urges all actors to increase the participation of women and incorporate gender perspectives in all United Nations peace and security efforts. It also calls on all parties to conflict to take special measures to protect women and girls from gender-based violence, particularly rape and other forms of sexual abuse, in situations of armed conflict. — KUNA

## Arabs condemn Zionist massacre

**CAIRO:** The League of Arab States, on Wednesday, vehemently condemned the Zionist massacre committed in Jenin, which resulted in the death of six Palestinians and injuring many Palestinians. A statement issued by the sector of Palestine and occupied Arab lands within the league, said that this is the fourth bloody massacre to take place since the beginning of the year, as part of open war policy adopted by the radical right government.

The league condemned the storming by Zionist settlers into Al-Aqsa mosque compound on the first day of Jewish holiday, Purim, under the protection of occupation forces, as well as their continuous aggression on Palestinian citizens. The Arab bloc held occupation government accountable for these systemized crimes. It also called on the international community, namely the UN Security Council and human rights organizations to intervene immediately and put a stop to these massacres.

It called for providing protection for Palestinian people - affirming their right to an independent state

with Jerusalem as the capital. The Arab Parliament also strongly denounced the heinous crime committed by Zionist occupation forces in the city of Jenin.

### UN 'alarmed'

Meanwhile, the UN Middle East peace envoy has urged Zionists and the Palestinians to calm surging violence in the occupied West Bank, a day after the latest raid killed six people. "We are in the midst of a cycle of violence that must be stopped immediately," Tor Wennesland said in a statement. "The Security Council has spoken with one voice, calling on the parties to observe calm and restraint, and to refrain from provocative actions, incitement and inflammatory rhetoric."

The call came a day after intense fighting during a Zionist raid in the flashpoint northern West Bank city of Jenin, in which the soldiers killed six Palestinians, including a member of Hamas accused of killing two settlers last month. Wennesland said he was "alarmed" at the violence, which the army said included soldiers launching shoulder-fired rockets amid ferocious gunfire.

Nabil Abu Rudeina, spokesman for Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas, called the use of rockets in Jenin refugee camp an act of "all-out war", Palestinian news agency Wafa reported. — Agenices



**JENIN:** Relatives of Ziad Al-Zaraini, a Palestinian who was killed the previous day during a Zionist army raid in the Jenin camp for Palestinian refugees, react as mourners gather outside his house on March 8, 2023. — AFP



International

# Muted response as Thailand hunger strikers hit 50 days

## Another man jailed for rubber duck calendar royal insult

**BANGKOK:** Two young protesters held under Thailand's strict royal insult law entered their 50th day of hunger striking on Wednesday, but in the run-up to a general election and with the government cracking down on dissent, the response to their marathon action has been muted. Tantawan Tuatulanon and Orawan Phupong have been in and out of court and hospital since beginning their hunger strike on January 18 to urge political parties to support the abolition of the kingdom's tough lese majeste laws.

But with mainstream politicians focused on the upcoming polls and many activists fearful of being charged with lese majeste themselves if they voice support, even after seven weeks of hunger the pair's protest is not making waves. "There were many people at the beginning, but as the protest continues fewer people come," said Krisadang Nootjaras, from Thai Lawyers for Human Rights (TLHR), a legal aid group that handles many royal insult cases.

Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-Cha, a conservative former army chief who took power in a 2014 coup, has pleaded with the women's families to "monitor" their behaviour.

Opposition parties have stopped short of backing Tantawan and Orawan's calls for reform, reluctant to

get entangled in the highly sensitive question of the monarchy so close to an election.

And there has been little action on Bangkok's streets, which were brought to a standstill by mass youth-led protests in 2020 and 2021 that included demands for changes to the royal insult law.

Tantawan, 21, and Orawan, 23, were freed from custody last month as their condition worsened, and they are now conscious in hospital and receiving electrolytes, Krisadang said.

They were charged in 2022 with lese majeste over two separate protests in Bangkok. Since the protest movement erupted in July 2020, TLHR says more than 200 people have been charged under article 112 of the penal code, which orders up to 15 years in jail for anyone who "defames, insults or threatens" the king or his immediate family.

### 'Repressive environment'

Rights groups say the law is abused to silence political dissent, and the sentences handed out can be severe—one woman got 43 years in prison in 2021. At least 17 minors are facing prosecution, and on Tuesday a man was jailed for two years for selling a satirical calendar featuring yellow rubber ducks that a court ruled was insulting to the king.

"Under this repressive environment people are fearing to come out, and speak out, and demand democracy and any other causes that they want," Amnesty International researcher Chanatip Tatiyakaroonwong told AFP.

"I think that partly contributes to the overall silence that we are seeing right now," Chanatip said the election, expected sometime in May, added to peoples' fear of a tougher government crackdown. "Many people may have this assessment and decide to refrain from speaking out further," he said.

Napisa Waitoolkiat, political analyst at Naresuan University, said media attention on the election meant there was little room for other reporting.

In addition to that, she continued, the increasing use of the lese majeste law was "creating fear". "It doesn't mean that the pro-democracy movement has disappeared, or that Thai people do not pay attention. But it is less now," she said. With journalists outnumbering supporters outside Orawan and Tantawan's hospital, their strike goes on-and their condition worsens. Lawyer Krisadang said the women were determined to fight for their cause, even if public interest was low. "These kids still stick with their ideology. If they prove they are right, (the public) will support them," he said. — AFP



**BANGKOK:** File photo shows Thai political activist Tantawan "Tawan" Tuatulanon being transported on a stretcher to continue a hunger strike outside Thailand's Supreme Court after being released from Thammasat Hospital in Bangkok. — AFP

## Australia PM says to meet Biden in US

**SYDNEY:** Australia's prime minister said Wednesday he will soon meet President Joe Biden in the United States, where they are expected to unveil a nuclear submarine deal aimed at countering China's growing assertiveness in the Pacific.

After 18 months of negotiations, it's anticipated that Australia will reveal plans to obtain eight nuclear-powered submarines, in what Prime Minister Anthony Albanese has called "the single biggest leap" in defence capability in the country's history.

The deal is part of the fledgling regional security pact between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States known as AUKUS. "I'll be meeting with President Biden in the United States," Albanese told reporters in Perth on Wednesday. "We'll have further announcements about details soon about the arrangements that will be taking place." Australia does not have the expertise to build its own nuclear subs—which have an extended range and powerful strike capabilities—and must buy them from either the United States or Britain.

Since September 2021, detailed behind-the-scenes talks have been taking place between the AUKUS partners about how to equip Australia's military with sensitive nuclear-propulsion technology. The deal has worried some of Australia's largest regional allies, with both Indonesia and Malaysia questioning whether it could spark a nuclear arms race in the Indo-Pacific.

While the subs will be powered by a nuclear reactor, Australia has ruled out equipping them with nuclear weapons. It is the first time US-derived nuclear submarine technologies will be exported since the 1960s, when the United States helped Britain design its own undersea fleet. The submarine contract is worth tens of billions of US dollars, but experts say its significance goes beyond jobs created and investments pledged.

### Fearsome deterrent

Nuclear-powered submarines are difficult to detect, can travel large distances for prolonged periods and can be armed with sophisticated cruise missiles. That, experts say, makes them a fearsome deterrent—allowing Australia to launch strikes or counterstrikes deep into enemy territory with little warning.

Beijing has voiced deep opposition to the project, which it sees as "dangerous" and designed to corner China. Major questions still linger, including whether Australia will look to buy US or British submarines, where they will be built and when they will be in the water.

"The AUKUS partnership seeks to provide a conventionally armed, nuclear-powered submarine capability to Australia at the earliest possible date," a Pentagon spokesperson told AFP ahead of Albanese's announcement.

"Bolstering our deterrence means boosting all of our industrial bases, growing our collective capabilities, and sharing technology as never before." The AUKUS pact also foresees collaboration between the three allies on hypersonic missiles, artificial intelligence and cyber warfare.

The subs deal has been contentious in the US, which is struggling to grow its own fleet of nuclear submarines. The chair of the influential US Senate armed services committee, Democrat Jack Reed, warned Biden in December that selling subs to Australia could undermine American naval prowess.

In a leaked letter sent to Biden, Reed also wrote that the AUKUS agreement risked "stressing the US submarine industrial base to the breaking point". Australia had originally planned to buy diesel-powered submarines in a lucrative deal inked with France, but abruptly scrapped that agreement in favour of AUKUS. — AFP

## Thousands of women rally in Pakistan despite legal hurdles

**LAHORE:** Thousands of women took part in rallies across Pakistan on Wednesday despite efforts by authorities in several cities to block the divisive marches. Known as the Aurat (women) March, the rallies have courted controversy because of banners and placards waved by participants that raise subjects such as divorce, sexual harassment and menstruation. Each year some of the most provocative banners ignite weeks of outrage and a slew of violent threats. "The



**ISLAMABAD:** Activists of Aurat (women) March hold placards as they chant slogans during a demonstration rally to mark the International Women's Day in Islamabad on March 8, 2023. — AFP

## Dozens sick in Philippines hit by oil spill

**MANILA:** Dozens of people in the Philippines have fallen ill after oil from a sunken tanker washed up on their shores, officials said Wednesday, as authorities struggled to reach the leaking vessel. The Princess Empress was carrying 800,000 litres (210,000 gallons) of industrial fuel oil when it sank more than a week ago off the central island of Mindoro, south of the capital Manila.

Diesel fuel and thick oil from the vessel have contaminated the waters and beaches of nine municipalities along the coast of Oriental Mindoro province, Governor Humerlito Dolor told reporters. Oil has been spotted as far south as Semirara island—which is part of Antique province—more than 130 kilometres (80 miles) from where the tanker went down.

That has sparked concerns for the region's rich marine life and economy. Provincial health officer Cielo Ante said at least 43 people living in affected villages had reported suffering vomiting, headaches and nausea since the oil reached their shores. "They live in areas where the oil spill occurred," said Ante. No one was hospitalised and authorities had not confirmed if the symptoms were the direct result of the spill, she added. Dolor said clean-up efforts were underway to prevent a spike in sickness.

"We cannot afford to add more numbers. Every day that passes is calamitous," he told a briefing. Residents and coast guard personnel wearing protective clothing and rubber gloves have been removing oil-coated seaweed and other debris from affected beaches. An oil spill boom was deployed on Wednesday after rough seas hampered earlier efforts to contain the slick, Philippine Coast Guard spokesman Armando Balilo

## UK opens military base in Norway

**LONDON:** The UK on Wednesday announced the opening of a military base in the far north of Norway to strengthen NATO's capabilities in the Arctic amid concerns following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The newly-established Norwegian site, called Camp Viking, will serve as a hub for Royal Marines Commandos, Britain's Royal Navy said in a press release.

whole point of the Aurat March is to demand the security and safety that women are not afforded in this country and society," said Rabail Akhtar, a school-teacher who joined a crowd of around 2,000 in Lahore to mark International Women's Day.

"We are not going to sit silently anymore. It's our day, it's our time." City authorities had at the weekend refused to provide security, despite allowing a "modesty" counter-march to go ahead, before a court ordered them to back down. "It's ridiculous how we have to go through the same drama every year... Why are they so afraid of women demanding their rights?" asked Soheila Afzal, a graphic designer. In Karachi, judges dismissed a legal challenge by an individual to ban a related rally scheduled for the weekend so that working women could attend.

### Counter marches

In the capital Islamabad, organisers refused to comply with orders to confine the gathering to a city park where a woman was gang raped in February. Hundreds of women gathered instead outside the city's press club, where police eventually removed a barricade and allowed the march to begin. "Women used to be quiet, but now we have women on roads talking about their rights and justice and I think that is the change they were looking for," said 24-year-old NGO worker Aisha Masood. The Aurat March is seen by critics as supporting elitist and Western cultural values in the Muslim country, with organisers accused of disrespecting religious and cultural sensitivities.

Counter marches are also held in most cities, where women from right-wing religious groups call for modesty and "family values" to be upheld. "I will not defend men because we live in a patriarchal and male-dominated society. But we have to ensure an end to violence while confining ourselves within the parameters of Islamic Shariah," said 45-year-old Asia Yaqoob, a housewife veiled in a hijab at a rally of more than 1,000 women in the capital.

"The beauty of a woman lies in covering her body in a way that our religion teaches." In 2020, groups of hardline Islamist men turned up in vans and hurled stones at women participating in the Aurat March in Islamabad.

Much of Pakistani society operates under a strict code of "honour", systemising the oppression of women in matters such as the right to choose who to marry, reproductive rights and even the right to an education. Hundreds of women are killed by men in Pakistan every year for allegedly breaching this code. — AFP

## China confirms 53 'missing or dead' from mine collapse

**BEIJING:** The collapse of a coal mine in northern China last month left a total of 53 people "missing or dead", a top official has said, as search and rescue work appeared to come to an end. Dozens of people and vehicles were buried when a 180-metre-high (590-foot) slope gave way at an open-pit mine in the Inner Mongolia region's Alxa Left Banner on February 22.

Rescue workers initially recovered six people alive, while another six were found dead, as Beijing's ministry of emergency management urged "all-out efforts" to save 47 workers left unaccounted for. But the head of the ministry confirmed on Tuesday that no more people had been found two weeks after the incident, adding that the focus was now on ensuring such a disaster would not happen again.

The collapse "left 53 people missing or dead, which has made us extremely sad", Wang Xiangxi said on the sidelines of annual political meetings in Beijing, according to the state-run China Youth Daily newspaper.

"The lessons from this are extremely profound. In the next stage, we will make the prevention of major accidents a top priority of our work," he said. Authorities would look to ramp up safety measures, ferret out hidden dangers and promote automation in high-risk industries, the newspaper quoted Wang as saying. An arid, sparsely populated area, Alxa Left Banner's economy relies largely on mining and other extractive industries. Footage from state broadcaster CCTV at the time of the collapse showed rescue workers and excavators dwarfed by a mountain of rust-coloured rubble. — AFP



**POLA:** Coast guard personnel and volunteers seen collecting debris covered with oil during a clean-up along the coast in Pola, Oriental Mindoro Province, days after an oil spill from a sunken tanker. — AFP

It described the troops as "the tip of the Arctic spear" and "the unit the UK turns to when it needs troops able to fight in cold weather extremes". "A new Arctic operations base will support Britain's commandos for the next 10 years as the UK underscores its commitment to security in the High North," the navy added.

Norway, which borders Russia, refuses to host permanent bases for foreign soldiers, so Camp Viking is due to remain open for just a decade. The purpose-built base, located around 40 miles (65 kilometres) south of Tromsø, will be able to accommodate all personnel from the elite commando-led Royal Marines force which reacts to emerging crises in Europe.

"The camp's location is ideal for deterring threats in the region and situated so the UK can respond rapidly if needed to protect NATO's northern flank and its close ally, Norway," the navy statement said. Around 1,000 commandos have deployed to the base this winter.

Norway, which shares a 60-mile (98-kilometre) border with Russia, has provided Ukraine with a wide range of military equipment, including artillery and ammunition. The Ukraine conflict prompted its neighbours Finland and Sweden to apply for NATO membership in May 2022, turning the page on policies of military non-alignment in force for decades. — AFP



# Business

THURSDAY, MARCH 9, 2023

## High-level committee to develop a roadmap for digital transformation

The Business Year, KDIPA hold conference titled 'Towards a Digital Economy'

By Majd Othman

KUWAIT: Minister of Commerce and Industry Mazin Al-Nahedh said that the ministry is about to form a high-level committee with the inclusion of ministers and all relevant government agencies to build a national roadmap for overseeing the digital transformation of the country and unifying all projects under a comprehensive master system.

Nahedh said in his speech during the opening of the "Towards a Digital Economy" conference on Wednesday, organized by The Business Year (TBY) in partnership with the Kuwait Direct Investment Promotion Authority (KDIPA), that the ministry is currently working on developing secure and effective cloud computing to enable institutions to use it in an integrated manner and maximize its benefit in providing expansion and flexibility through appropriate governance and in line with procedures and policies that are currently under review by the Public Information Authority.

"Those who follow the global scene, and given the rapid progress of digital transformation, will fully realize the importance of digital transformation and its direct impact on the economy and the development of the country. We in the ministry and under the directives of the political leadership and the Council of Ministers will continue to work with our strategic partners in the field of technology to advance digital transformation through public institutions in Kuwait to achieve the New Kuwait Vision 2035 and transform the country into a regional and international financial and commercial center," he said.

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated and strengthened the cooperation between the public and private sectors through putting more focus on adopting promising smart technologies and signing strategic partnership with technology giants such as Google, Amazon, Microsoft and Huawei to further accelerate digital transformation and improve the quality of services for citizens and residents, he said.

"In addition to the business sector that witnessed successful examples that include the unified government apps "Sahel" and "Sahel Business" as well as "Kuwait Mobile ID" and "Meta App", the ministry is actively working to make government services more efficient, transparent and available to the public through digital transformation. This includes the implementation of e-government services and the use of digital technologies to simplify administrative processes," Nahedh explained.

### Diversify the economy

Nahedh clarified during his speech that the ministry is working to support and diversify the Kuwait economy by promoting the growth of new industries



KUWAIT: Minister of Commerce and Industry Mazin Al-Nahedh addresses the conference.

and technologies such as big data, software development, artificial intelligence, robotics and virtual reality. The ministry is creating a stimulating environment for innovation by promoting research and development, encouraging cooperation between academia and industry and supporting emerging startups and small companies, he said.

He added, "There is no doubt that cloud computing and cybersecurity have become important aspects of the safety of transactions and the sovereignty of the country. In this regard, the ministry is working, in cooperation with the concerned authorities to raise the level of awareness of cybersecurity."

Acting CEO of Kuwait Finance House (KFH) Group Abdul Wahab Al-Rushood, said that KFH is one of the first institutions to adopt digital transformation in its business and operations. Rushood explained that in line with New Kuwait Vision 2035, the country is focusing on diversifying its economy by adopting digital transformation to modernize its services and improve the quality of life, while increasing operational efficiency and the performance of key sectors.

He added that Kuwait enjoys high levels of accumulated financial and foreign assets and has significant competitive advantages to be a global center for trade and investment. Likewise, Kuwaiti banks are keen to invest in digital banking services, financial technology and digital transformation.

Kuwait Banking Association Chairman Sheikh Ahmad Al-Duaij Al-Sabah said the sought-after digital transformation has become a reality, especially since



(From left) Sheikh Ahmad Al-Duaij Al-Sabah, Abdulla Al-Senan, Ali Al-Fulaij during a panel discussion.



The attendees at the conference.

the new generation is using modern technologies in all areas of life. "Technology has become essential in their way of life, which means that the modern generation is raised on and educated in digitization."

Insurance Regulatory Unit (IRU) Vice President Abdulla Al-Senan said that the unit has launched its first four-year strategy (2023-2027) with a four-point plan to strengthen the digital transformation system for services provided in the sector.

Speaking about the potential challenges of digital

transformation in the investment sector, Rasameel Investment Company COO Ali Al-Fulaij said they include hurdles in facilitating operations and procedures as well as allowing customers or investors to make decisions quickly and implement them directly. But these challenges, he said, also represent an opportunity for investors to access information and make appropriate financial decisions based on available data, which will be beneficial for investors as well as the industry.

## US trade deficit widens slightly in January

WASHINGTON: The US trade deficit widened in January on a pickup in imports, to mark the biggest gap in three months, according to government data released on Wednesday. The overall trade gap grew \$1.1 billion from December to \$68.3 billion in January, according to Commerce Department data, amid a rise in consumer goods imports along with that of autos and parts. The deficit widened slightly less than anticipated, and the latest figures come as households shift more spending to services instead of goods while consumers grapple with stubborn inflation.

January imports rose \$9.6 billion from December to \$325.8 billion, while exports picked up by \$8.5 billion to \$257.5 billion. In the fourth quarter last year, the US trade deficit with China slipped \$30.2 billion to \$63.0 billion, the latest report showed. "Overall, trade flows have slowed on a shift in demand for services from goods and weaker global growth," said Rubeela Farooqi, chief US economist at High Frequency Economics.

"Growth prospects in the US and abroad will drive the trend going forward," she said. Last year, the US trade gap widened to a record on robust imports and strong spending. While the Federal Reserve has lifted interest rates multiple times over the course of the year to cool demand, spending has remained more resilient than anticipated. "The rebound in trade flows to start the year signals that the economy continues to carry momentum, but we do not expect the strength to be sustained in the months ahead," said Matthew Martin, US economist at Oxford Economics, in a note.

"Imports and exports are likely to weaken as consumers and businesses pull back, leading the deficit to move mainly sideways through the first half of the year," he added. Meanwhile, US employers stepped up their pace of hiring in February, payroll firm ADP said Wednesday, in a further indication that more effort may be needed to cool the world's biggest economy. Private sector employment surged by 242,000 jobs in February, around double the revised 119,000 figure in January and significantly more than analysts expected, the latest ADP report said.



WASHINGTON: US employers stepped up their pace of hiring in February, payroll firm ADP said Wednesday, in a further indication that more effort may be needed to cool the world's biggest economy.

This follows a series of recent indicators showing that hiring remained strong, consumer spending resilient and inflation persistent-despite the Federal Reserve's efforts to tame price increases. "We're seeing robust hiring, which is good for the economy and workers, but pay growth is still quite elevated," said Nela Richardson, chief economist at ADP, in a statement.

Wage growth in February slowed to 7.2 percent compared with a year ago, the survey showed, while the figure for workers who changed jobs also eased to 14.3 percent. "The modest slowdown in pay increases, on its own, is unlikely to drive down inflation rapidly in the near-term," Richardson cautioned. Since early last year, the US central bank has attempted to slow surging inflation with eight interest rate hikes, walking a fine line in an effort to ease demand without tipping the economy into a recession.

Fed Chair Jerome Powell warned on Tuesday that policymakers are prepared to step up rate hikes-and lift rates higher than previously anticipated-if needed to cool inflation and the robust jobs market.

The ADP report said Wednesday that "job gains are solid and wage growth remains elevated." The majority of job gains last month came about in the service-providing industry, in particular leisure and hospitality, as well as in financial activities. ADP added that small establishments are "a particular area of weakness," given that this segment has shed jobs every month since August 2022. —AFP

## TikTok seeks to calm Europe's fears over data privacy

BRUSSELS: TikTok launched a new effort to assuage European leaders' worries over data security on Wednesday, as Western governments consider further bans on the video-sharing app. Their initiative came as the Czech cyber watchdog issued its own warning, describing the Chinese-owned video-sharing app a security threat.

Western powers, including the European Union and the United States, have taken a tough approach to the app, which is owned by Chinese company ByteDance. They are worried that Beijing could access sensitive user data from around the world. TikTok executives said the company was working with a third-party European security company to oversee and check how it handles European users' data, which will be stored at three centers in Dublin and Norway from 2023 onwards.

TikTok insisted this project would also reduce its own employees' access to user data.

The company has refused to name the partner, but the project is worth 1.2 billion euros (\$1.3 billion) and began six months ago, Theo Bertram, TikTok's vice president of European public policy told jour-



nalists in an online briefing. TikTok already has a similar deal in the United States with Silicon Valley giant Oracle to keep US users' data in the country.

"In the same way we have done... in the US, we'll build a secure environment around that data to prevent access from outside of the region," Bertram said. As the company pushes a new charm offensive to convince lawmakers there is nothing to worry about, TikTok's general counsel Erich Andersen is in Europe this week. He held talks with policymakers in Brussels and London. Bertram said Andersen would also speak to officials in Paris and The Hague.

The EU's governing institutions told staff in recent weeks to purge the app from smartphones and laptops used for work purposes. US lawmakers are pushing a bill that would make it easier to ban the app, coming hot on the heels of a US Congress-ordered purge from all government-issued devices. — AFP

## UK regulator orders Heathrow to reduce airline fees

LONDON: Britain's aviation regulator ordered London's Heathrow airport on Wednesday to reduce fees it charges airlines, with demand bouncing back strongly after the lifting of pandemic lockdowns. Heathrow hit out at the decision, saying its costs have been hit hard by soaring inflation at time when it has yet to fully recover from aviation's COVID shutdown.

The Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) said the reduction "recognizes that passenger volumes are expected to return to pre-pandemic levels and should benefit

passengers in terms of lower costs". The regulator said the charge to airlines per passenger would drop by almost a fifth to £25.43, for three years starting in 2024.

Heathrow slammed the move in a strongly-worded statement. "The CAA has chosen to cut airport charges to their lowest real terms level in a decade at a time when airlines are making massive profits and Heathrow remains loss-making because of fewer passengers and higher financing costs," it said.

Luis Gallego, chief executive of British Airways' parent IAG, hinted that the cut did not go far enough. "Heathrow already charges three times more per passenger than other major airports in Europe including Gatwick and Madrid, and five times more than Dublin." He added that IAG, which owns various airlines including Spanish carrier Iberia, would "continue to assess... options for further action to ensure UK consumers do not pay an unfair price to use Heathrow". — AFP



## Business

# Sri Lanka banks on IMF deal to tap frozen billions of dollars

## China says to play 'positive role' in helping Colombo

COLOMBO: Sri Lanka voiced hope on Wednesday that a long-awaited IMF bailout would be finalised soon and help unfreeze billions of dollars in foreign aid for projects suspended since last year.

Government spokesman Bandula Gunawardana told reporters that the International Monetary Fund was expected to give its board approval for a \$2.9 billion bailout agreed at a staff level in September. "We are confident that the IMF board will give its approval," the minister said a day after the Washington-based lender confirmed Sri Lanka would be taken up at its March 20 board meeting.

IMF managing director Kristalina Georgieva said in a statement that she welcomed the progress by Sri Lankan authorities in grappling with an unprecedented economic crisis. "I look forward to presenting for approval Sri Lanka's IMF-supported program to our Executive Board on March 20," she added.

Gunawardana said that after approval was secured, Colombo expected the immediate release of billions of dollars in bilateral aid and loans that have been frozen since the South Asian nation defaulted on its \$46 billion external debt in April. "Our problems can't be solved with this \$2.9 billion, but what is really important for us is the endorsement of the IMF that our economy is now on the right path," he said. "An amount more than the IMF bailout can be unlocked after we get the IMF certificate."

Japan suspended funding a \$540 million airport expansion, while millions of dollars' worth of foreign-funded road construction was also halted after Colombo declared bankruptcy in April.

Sri Lanka's largest single bilateral creditor, China, announced that it had on Monday provided financial assurances required by the IMF to ensure the island's foreign debt was sustainable. Gunawardana said it was still unclear how official creditors, including China, Japan and India, would restructure their loans, but it would be in line with

IMF's debt sustainability analysis. "Some may agree to a hair cut, others could give a debt moratorium, reduce interest rates or have a combination of these," Gunawardana said. "This is yet to be worked out." Sri Lankan President Ranil Wickremesinghe, announcing in parliament on Tuesday that China had agreed to restructure its debt, warned that he had no option but to seek the IMF bailout.

### Suffering continues

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. Angry protests over economic mismanagement led to the toppling of then-president Gotabaya Rajapaksa, who fled the country and later resigned in July.

Wickremesinghe, who succeeded Rajapaksa, began cracking down on anti-government protests and pushed through sharp tax and tariff increases demanded by the IMF as a precondition for the bailout.

"We took many extremely difficult economic measures to stabilize the economy," he said Tuesday. "The suffering caused by this continues for everyone in our society." Fuel is still rationed and essential medicines are in short supply as the country maintains strict controls on imports to save foreign exchange. Inflation is down from its highs of 70 percent in September, but is still around 50 percent.

Wickremesinghe said the country needed \$6-7 billion annually until 2029 to repay its loans, but was unable to honor the debts. "We do not have the foreign exchange to pay this debt. Thus, we need the IMF to continue the agreed debt sustainability discussion with foreign creditors," he added.

Meanwhile, China said on Wednesday that it would "play a positive role" in helping bankrupt Sri Lanka get through its debt crisis after agreeing to restructure its loans. An unprecedented economic



COLOMBO: Police use tear gas to disperse anti-government demonstrators and university students during a protest demanding the release of Inter University Students' Federation leaders and the country's economic crisis, in Colombo on March 8, 2023. — AFP

crisis has seen Sri Lanka's 22 million people suffer acute food, fuel and medicine shortages, along with extended blackouts and runaway inflation.

"China is ready to work with relevant countries and international financial institutions to play a positive role in helping Sri Lanka cope with its current difficulties, ease its debt burden and achieve sustainable development," foreign ministry spokesperson Mao Ning said at a regular briefing. "The Export-Import Bank of China, as the official bilateral creditor, issued a financial assurance letter to Sri Lanka on March 6," she said when asked about President Ranil Wickremesinghe's Tuesday statement that Beijing had agreed to help.

China, Mao added, "supports relevant financial institutions in actively discussing debt disposal plans with the Sri Lankan side".

Wickremesinghe's government has been working to repair Sri Lanka's ruined finances and secure a sorely needed IMF rescue package.

But it was held up by debt negotiations with China, Sri Lanka's largest bilateral creditor. Beijing's confirmation that it would help clears the final obstacle to a long-awaited International Monetary Fund bailout. "Sri Lanka has now received financing assurances from all major bilateral creditors," Krishna Srinivasan, director of the IMF's Asia and Pacific Department, said Tuesday. —AFP



BREST: Dockers block the entrance of the commercial port in Brest, western France, on March 8, 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

## France workers keep up pressure after mass protests

PARIS: French unions on Wednesday pressed a standoff with the government over a deeply unpopular pensions overhaul, with fuel deliveries, trains and flights disrupted for a second day following mass rallies. Key sea ports were also blockaded, as dock workers were among those to join rolling strikes seeking to convince President Emmanuel Macron to reverse course on the bill he has championed.

The government says raising the retirement age from 62 to 64 and stiffening the requirements for a full pension are essential to keep the system from sinking into deficit.

France lags behind most of its European neighbors, which have hiked the retirement age to 65 or above. But the changes have faced stiff resistance in parliament and in the street since mid-January, with the opposition and unions charging the changes are unfair, especially for low-skilled workers and women. Unions on Tuesday night called for an urgent meeting with the president after strikes hobbled the country and 1.28 million people took to the streets, according to official figures.

But the presidency has not yet directly re-

sponded to their request. Unions have announced a new day of demonstrations for Saturday, and some have vowed to keep up walkouts with rolling indefinite strikes.

### 'Extra pressure'

Eric Sellini, national coordinator of the CGT union federation at energy giant TotalEnergies, said workers at most fuel shipping sites were again on strike on Wednesday morning. The FO union at the same company said the action was necessary to "put extra pressure on the government".

Production however did not appear to have stopped at the refineries, and TotalEnergies has said its petrol stations are well stocked. In the transport sector, national railway operator SNCF said more than half of high-speed trains had been cancelled, with only one train in 10 operating between provinces.

International rail travel remained slightly affected, with three out of four Eurostar trains running. One in five Air France flights did not take off, with more hassle due at airports nationwide on Thursday and Friday as air traffic controllers keep up their strike. Disgruntled dock workers were preventing access to several ports including the key hubs of Marseille on the Mediterranean and Le Havre on the Channel, the CGT said. The port blockages have prevented new deliveries by sea of liquefied natural gas, though the hydrocarbon continues to flow into France through pipelines from Norway and Spain. —AFP

products such as soybeans also contributed to record farm and fishing exports.

Exports to countries other than the United States reached a record high of Can\$16.7 billion, led by shipments of canola oil and coal to China, gold to Britain, and aircraft and oil to Germany.

Total imports, meanwhile, increased 3.1 percent to Can\$65.1 billion. Above-average passenger car and light truck sales fueled a bump in imports of motor vehicles and parts to record levels.

Canada also imported more industrial machinery and equipment, as well as electronics, led by shipments of cellphones as new models were released earlier than usual, along with laptops and tablets. Following three consecutive monthly declines, imports of consumer goods increased too, led by pharmaceutical products.

Shipments of trucks from Mexico and pharmaceuticals from Switzerland led the increase in imports from countries other than the United States. Canada's trade surplus with the United States—its southern neighbor and biggest trading partner—widened slightly to Can\$9 billion in January, marking a second consecutive monthly widening of the surplus following six months of narrowing. —AFP

## Canada starts 2023 with increased trade, bigger surplus

OTTAWA: Canada began 2023 with a larger trade surplus of Can\$1.9 billion (US\$1.4 billion) as its trade with countries other than the United States rebounded, the government statistical agency said Wednesday. The positive January data was marked by a rise in both imports and exports, and followed a Can\$1.2 billion surplus in December, which was revised upward from a small deficit.

Total exports in the month rose 4.2 percent to Can\$67.0 billion, said Statistics Canada, with increases widespread across all categories except energy. Hikes notably in farm and fishing products, motor vehicles and parts, and metals were partially offset by a nearly 33 percent drop in natural gas exports, following a peak in December when severe winter weather in the United States led to a spike in demand. Exports of wheat, canola oil and other crop

## US Justice Dept sues to block JetBlue-Spirit merger

NEW YORK: The US Justice Department on Tuesday sued to block a \$3.8 billion JetBlue-Spirit airline merger, saying that the combination would harm consumers and violate antitrust law. The suit puts in jeopardy a transaction that JetBlue has characterized as consumer-friendly because it would create a stronger competitor to the "Big Four" carriers that dominate the United States market.

"This merger will limit choices and drive up ticket prices for passengers across the country," Attorney General Merrick Garland said at a news conference, adding that the deal "will be particularly harmful for travelers who rely on what are known as ultra-low-cost carriers in order to fly."

The companies defended the tie-up, saying in a joint statement Tuesday that they would "continue to advance" their effort to extend the "JetBlue Effect," which has historically pressured bigger airlines to price more affordably. "We believe the DOJ has got it wrong on the law here and misses the point that this merger will create a national low-fare, high-quality competitor to the Big Four carriers which—thanks to their own DOJ-approved mergers—control about 80 percent of the US market," said JetBlue Chief Executive Robin Hayes. The joint press release said JetBlue would retrofit Spirit aircraft to allow more legroom, adding that the lost seats on aircraft would be offset by a greater number of flights.

"Together, we intend to democratize flying for travelers across the country—a goal we believe is worthy of the government's support," said Spirit Chief Executive Ted Christie.

### Valuable disruptor

The suit argues that removing Spirit from the travel market would "eliminate the unique competition" it provides as a low-cost carrier, DOJ said. This would "leave tens of millions of travelers to face higher fares and fewer options," the department said



WASHINGTON: This combination of file pictures created on March 07, 2023 shows (left) the tail section of an Airbus 320 operated by Spirit Airlines on March 11, 2019, at Baltimore Washington International Airport; and (right) a JetBlue aircraft at Washington's Dulles International Airport 28 March 2007. — AFP

in its complaint, adding that JetBlue has evolved from a "disruptor to closer ally of the Big Four."

The department has also challenged an alliance between JetBlue and American Airlines that it argues impedes competition. The two sides presented arguments to a federal court in Boston in November, but a judge has yet to rule on that case. Tuesday's US complaint, joined by Massachusetts and New York states and the District of Columbia, characterized Spirit as a valuable disruptor in air travel—an industry that has heavily consolidated over the last 15 years.

Spirit's practice of "unbundling" features of flying to charge separately for carry-on bags, food and other items, has been "particularly important for cost-conscious travelers," the DOJ said.

DOJ officials said that prior to the pandemic, Spirit had planned to double its fleet of airplanes by the end of 2025 and add flights to five more cities in 2023 alone. "And if this acquisition is complete, all that growth would be over before it even has a chance to start," said Doha Mekki, a deputy assistant attorney general. —AFP

## Brussels tells EU members to tighten spending

BRUSSELS: The European Commission told EU member states on Wednesday that they must gradually rein in their spending in 2024 and row back on energy support measures. In 2020, Brussels suspended budgetary constraints to allow member states to spend freely to support the European economy during the Covid pandemic. The suspension was prolonged last year, allowing states to plough money into protecting households and businesses from soaring energy prices following Russia's assault on Ukraine.

The constraints under the Stability and Growth Pact are due to come back into effect in 2024, but the EU executive now proposes a gradual return. The pact aims to ensure that the states' public deficits do not go above three percent of gross domestic product (GDP), and debt should stay below 60 percent of GDP. The European Commission, the EU's executive arm, has now told member states preparing their 2024 budgets to make sure that their public deficit does not go above three percent "in the medium term".

"The direction is moving towards more prudent policies," commission Vice President Valdis Dombrovskis told reporters. The EU's economy commis-

sioner Paolo Gentiloni recommended focusing on energy efficiency and said member states "should phase out support measures" and ensure they help those that need it the most.

The EU is working on reforming the pact, and the text of a bill is expected before the end of March, but there will not be enough time between negotiations and implementation before the suspension lifts. "To allow for an effective bridge," the commission has decided to apply from next year "some elements" of the reforms.

### More prudence

The commission said each state must set targets in the budget that ensure "the public debt ratio is put on a downward path or stays at a prudent level". It will propose country-specific recommendations in May and targets will be set for each state based on a single indicator: the level of public spending, and not the deficit level.

Brussels wants to give wiggle room to EU members to implement reforms and investments that contribute to the green and digital transitions, two priorities for the EU. The European Commission does not plan to reinstate the excessive deficit procedure in the spring aimed at states that violate the pact's rules. It does, however, intend to reactivate the procedure, a complicated process that can lead to fines, for spring 2024 based on fiscal data for 2023. Brussels' recommendations must therefore be taken into account in the implementation of this year's budgets. — AFP



## Business

# US pick for WB says 'emission heavy' growth model outdated

## Banga calls for a revamp of development model

**NAIROBI:** The United States' candidate to head the World Bank (WB), Ajay Banga, on Wednesday called for a revamp of the development model to better meet the challenge of climate change. Banga, who is on trip to Kenya, said the world cannot continue to "pursue the prior model of (an) emission heavy growth system," and rallied for adaptation.

"We cannot afford it, our children cannot afford it," he told reporters in Nairobi. The 63-year-old Indian American was last month nominated by US President Joe Biden to head the global lender after its current chief David Malpass announced plans to step down early.

The nomination comes amid a push for development lenders to revamp and address global problems like environmental issues more effectively. Banga is currently serving as vice chairman at equity firm General Atlantic and was previously chief executive at Mastercard.

Malpass had been accused by former US vice president Al Gore of being a climate skeptic and of not having been able to strengthen the financing of climate projects in developing nations.

Faced with global warming, "we must do more on adaptation," Banga said, urging partnerships with the private sector. The World Bank last month began accepting candidate nominations in a process set to run until March 29, with the bank saying that women contenders would be "strongly" encouraged.

### 'Champion of equality'

Banga, a Sikh who was born and raised in India, is so far the only declared candidate and has received the support of several countries including India, Kenya and Ghana. "I am not a woman but I do bring a lot of diversity." "I am a champion of equality not just of gender, of ethnicity, of sexual orientation, of where you grew up, I don't care about all that, what I care about is what you do, and I am an example of that myself," he added.

Kenya is Banga's second stop on a global tour after Ivory Coast. He is planning to meet officials in Europe and parts of Asia including China, India and Japan, as well as Latin America in the coming weeks. The US nominee has drawn criticism over his corporate background and gender.

"We don't need another World Bank president who will further corporate interests like fossil fuel and industrial agriculture," Friends of the Earth said last month. The president of the World Bank is typically American, while the leader of the International Monetary Fund is customarily European.

The United States is the World Bank's largest shareholder. Last month, Malpass said he would step down nearly a year early, ending a tenure that has been clouded by questions over his climate stance. —AFP



**NAIROBI:** US candidate to head the World Bank, Ajay Banga (second right), visits a stand of food preservation by dehydration at the Kenya Climate Innovation Center (KCIC) at the Strathmore University Business School in Kenya in Nairobi on March 8, 2023. —AFP

## Gulf Bank to hold 'Lead the Way' conference Mar 20

**KUWAIT:** In celebration of International Women's Day 2023, Gulf Bank is organizing a national conference titled 'Lead the Way', to celebrate the achievements of women leaders, and to discuss and analyze the efforts of empowering women in Kuwait, and the modern-day challenges they face at work.

Gulf Bank will host the conference at Grand Hyatt 360 Mall on March 20, which will be a combination of interactive workshops, inspirational speeches, and thought-provoking discussion panels to uncover, and shed light on ongoing issues related to women. The conference consists of two workshops: The first one being exclusively for women, which will be presented by Kuwait University Professor, and Founder of SHORE Consultancy, Dr Amar Behbehani, who will discuss how women can remain emotionally and physically resilient as they progress to leadership positions.

The second workshop will be presented by Global Brand Strategist and Reputation Risk Mitigator Steve Brazell who will provide deep insights and actionable strategies to develop,

build, and grow a personal brand of value.

The conference will also be featuring keynote speeches by Gulf Bank Board Member, Ahmad Mohammad Al-Bahar, and the General Manager of Human Resources, Salma Al-Hajjaj. In addition to an open panel discussion with: The General Secretary of the Supreme Planning and Development Council, Dr Khaled Al-Mahdi, the Resident Representative of the United Nations Development Program, Hideko Hadzalic, and a Representative from MasterCard.

On this occasion, Al-Hajjaj stated that organizing this conference comes as part of Gulf Bank's continuous efforts to support and empower women and help them reach leadership positions. She also indicated that this conference falls in line with the United Nations women empowerment principles, as well as the Bank's 2025 strategy, where one of the main pillars is based on achieving social sustainability, inside and outside the Bank.

Al-Hajjaj pointed that Gulf Bank is keen to consolidate the concept of women empowerment through many decisions and initiatives, considering that it was one of the first financial institutions to sign the United Nations fifth principle application, which aims to promote gender equality, and support and empower women in both the workplace and society. She further affirmed the Bank's keenness to support and empower women - whether through employment or by supporting their career paths as they seek leadership positions. This has been evident in

the rising number of women employees in the Bank, which has exceeded 43.5 percent out of the total number of employees in the bank, while their share of leadership positions exceeded 28 percent.

Gulf Bank's vision is to be the leading Kuwaiti Bank of the Future. The Bank is constantly engaging and empowering its employees as part of an inclusive and diversified workplace in recognition of every employee's role in delivering customer excellence and serving the community at large. With its extensive network of branches and innovative digital services, Gulf Bank is able to give its customers the choice of how and where to conduct their banking transactions, all while ensuring a simple and seamless banking experience.

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



Salma Al-Hajjaj



## Kalaam Carrier Solutions partners with Riedel Networks

**KUWAIT:** Kalaam Carrier Solutions (KCS), the wholesale division of Kalaam Telecom Group, has been selected by Riedel Networks, a Riedel Group company and global network provider focused on customized networks, as partner of choice to serve their comprehensive connectivity networking requirements to support motorsport events in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates in 2023 and beyond.

In collaboration with its strategic national partners and Riedel Networks, KCS will provide multi-service connectivity from race-tracks in the Middle East to partners in Europe and Asia. This will support a comprehensive network that will enable teams racing at the events to seamlessly share data from the cars and drivers, as well as to support social media platforms and broadcasters.

KCS is providing a Point-of-Presence in the region for Riedel Networks, allowing them to connect to their global POPs in Europe and Asia with ultra-low latency service level assurances. The solution will utilize the fully owned Kalaam Network Optical Transit (KNOT) cable system and the Europe-India Gateway cable (EIG). KNOT is a 1,400-km terrestrial network which spans Kuwait, Bahrain, KSA, UAE and Qatar. EIG is a 15,000 km international fiber-optic submarine cable system covering 12 countries from India and the Middle East to Europe.

"Together with Riedel, we are serving one of the most dynamic and data-driven sports in the world. We collaborated to go beyond what was previously available to motorsport teams and deliver a solution that is robust, reliable, and future-ready to meet growing demands," said Veer Passi, Group Chief Executive Officer at Kalaam Telecom. "We are an ambitious and agile player that puts customers first and our people and innovative mindset set us apart. Our people, precision and performance are a great fit for Riedel and demonstrate the value of our global network to develop unique, customised connectivity solutions that meet customer needs in the MENA region." KCS was invited to tender in late 2022 and was selected after an extensive review of potential global and regional partners. In 30 days, KCS provided the infrastructure needed to ensure Riedel's customers could benefit from new levels of network performance throughout motorsport events in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE.

"Riedel Networks prides itself on delivering the highest quality of services to our clients and we wanted a partner in the region who understood our need to deliver and matched our passion for success. Kalaam Carrier Solutions was chosen for its innovative thinking, robust connectivity and consistent experience across multiple markets in the Middle East. Riedel now benefits from a secure network with control over its design so that it can deliver the services our global customers have come to expect since we started serving the motorsports industry in 2006," said Michael Martens, CEO, RiedelNetworks.

KCS delivers redundant services to the race-tracks and build a robust and secure network in a relatively short period of time, demonstrating its strong global presence and making it a trusted partner of choice for the world's leading telecommunications operators.

## KIPCO appoints Ghada Khalaf as Group Senior VP

**KUWAIT:** KIPCO, the Kuwait Projects Company (Holding), has announced the appointment of Ghada Khalaf as Group Senior Vice President - Investment. With more than two decades of experience in multiple financial and investment verticals, Khalaf will play an important role in monitoring the performance of KIPCO's portfolio and seeking opportunities for new investments.

Sheikha Dana Nasser Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, KIPCO's Chief Executive Officer, said: "We are delighted

that Ghada is joining KIPCO as part of our investment team. Her experience and her track record in successfully managing private and institutional assets will be of added value to the executive team."

On her part, Ms Khalaf said: "I am happy to be joining KIPCO at this important time in the company's history. I look forward to working with the executive management team on implementing the Board of Directors' vision for the company."

Prior to joining KIPCO, Khalaf held the position of CFO at Al-Kout Industrial Projects. Before that she was the Executive Director of the Kuwait Office of Asiya Capital Investments Company. Khalaf started her career as a chemical engineer and has experience working in the education sector. She holds a Masters in Chemical Engineering from Imperial College London, and an MBA from the Tepper School of Business, Carnegie Mellon University in the USA.



Sheikha Dana Nasser Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah



Ghada Khalaf



## Al Mulla Automobiles hosts unique Mercedes-EQ display

**KUWAIT:** Al Mulla Automobiles Co, a member of the Al Mulla Group and the sole authorized distributor of Mercedes-Benz in Kuwait, hosted an exclusive display of its all-electric Mercedes-EQ range at Melenzane By The Sea on the waterfront in Salmiya. The vehicle display lineup included the EQS, EQB, EQA, EQC and EQE models by Mercedes-EQ. Also on display was the



Concept EQG, which gives a promising preview of the capabilities of a Mercedes-Benz G-Class with a battery-electric drive.

In attendance was the German Ambassador-Designate to Kuwait Hans-Christian von Reibnitz, accompanied by several embassy representatives, members of the executive management of Al Mulla Group and the management team at Al Mulla Automobiles Mercedes-Benz Kuwait.

Commenting on the event, Steven Brown, Director, Mercedes-Benz Kuwait said: "As reflected in the 'Ambition 2039' strategy, Mercedes-Benz is getting ready to go all-electric by the end of the decade, where market conditions allow. And the brand has laid the foundations



for its vision of the future with Mercedes-EQ.

We always strive to create unique and exciting experiences that are of global Mercedes-Benz standards for our customers and automotive connoisseurs in Kuwait. And we would like to express our sincerest gratitude to those who made the event possible and our guests for attending.

We look forward to hosting them again soon." The Mercedes-Benz EQ product brand stands for intelligent electric mobility - representing two Mercedes-Benz brand values - "emotion and intelligence". The Mercedes-EQ models also share a new and distinct electrical aesthetic that sets them apart from the conventional Mercedes-Benz product line.



Business

# Digital transformation a key pillar of New Kuwait Vision: CAIT official

## Kuwait moving towards paperless office system: Dr Al-Harbi

By Sajeev K Peter

KUWAIT: Digital transformation is a fundamental pillar on which "New Kuwait Vision 2035" is based, therefore, both government and private sectors aspire to increase operational efficiency in all departments to improve the level of quality and push the economy towards a secure digital transformation, said Dr Anwar Al-Harbi, Chief Technology Officer at the Central Agency for Information Technology (CAIT) in Kuwait.

Delivering his opening speech at a technology conference on Wednesday titled "Automation Key to Digital Transformation", organized jointly by CAIT and United Business Group, Dr Al-Harbi said: "The CAIT seeks to shed light on technological solutions and methodologies in the automation of digital transformation, international best practices and innovative solutions in order to help organizations in Kuwait overcome the challenges they face today."

"This will, in turn, help Kuwait ensure successful and safe automation and raise the level of digital automation, leading to more efficiency, lower operational costs and the ability to quickly and smoothly adapt to existing technologies and the possibility of merging them later with new technologies," he said.

Bringing together ICT professionals, cyber security experts and thought leaders from the region and across the globe, the two-day conference discusses Kuwait's fast-evolving digital technology landscape in line with the "New Kuwait Vision 2035".

"The CAIT has a central role to play in promoting



KUWAIT: Dr Anwar Al-Harbi delivering his opening speech at the conference titled 'Automation Key to Digital Transformation' on Wednesday.

Kuwait's digital transformation strategy in line with the national development plan," Dr Al-Harbi told Kuwait Times on the sidelines of the conference. "That means, we have to put all the projects we are handling into effective planning and execution as we introduce innovative solutions to overcome challenges faced and ensure a successful and secure digitalization," he said.

### Paperless system

"Most importantly, our goal is to move towards a paperless office system. We have a G2G (go to go) system in place for transactions among government bodies. Internally, we have a plan to put all documents, correspondence and procedures into a fully automated system. While doing so, we need to take into



Fahad Al-Menayes delivers his speech.

consideration factors such as security issues related to e-signature and address potential cybersecurity issues and privacy issues," he said.

"While moving towards full automation, we need to be sure that there are no digital threats emerging both internally or externally and all ecosystems of the government bodies in the country are fully updated, safe and secure, as they have been provided by software companies among the top ten in the world," said Dr Al-Harbi.

"There is a growing realization in Kuwait's government and private sector, particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic, that it is essential to move towards automation, digitalization and integration," said Fahad Al-Menayes, Chief Executive

Officer at the Credit Information Network Company in Kuwait (Ci-Net).

Speaking on the sidelines of the conference Menayes said: "Kuwaiti banks are the best example. They are integrating the data and processing it digitally, accelerating country's digital transformation journey. This has a huge security impact and the regulators in Kuwait are also working to ensure that everything is happening fast, digitally and securely. There's government intervention to ensure that digitally migrating the data from one sector to another is happening securely. Significantly, Kuwait's private sector is leading the digital migration, particularly the financial sector," he underlined.

Ahmad Farrag, a key speaker of the conference and a cloud platform expert, said added: "It is definitely an exciting time in Kuwait and across the Middle East. Digital transformation is a priority for governments, the financial services sector and even the commercial sector as this is not only helping the industries compete with one another, but also providing services to the new generation, which is very tech savvy."

"Unlike old times, when people could rely easily on human interaction, today everyone is looking for some sort of self-serving capability, either through web portals, mobile channels or even chatbots which are becoming increasingly invasive these days," Farrag added. The conference provides an insight into Kuwait's digital transformation goals and highlights the initiatives the authorities are taking to transform the country into a digital society and economy.



## Al-Sayer unveils all-new Toyota Veloz 2023

KUWAIT: Further building on its commitment to creating mobility for all and developing versatile vehicles that reflect the aspirations of today's drivers, Mohamed Naser Al-Sayer & Sons Est Co and Toyota launched the all-new Veloz 7-seater. The spacious vehicle blends sleek design with comfort and functionality, and comes equipped with a host of advanced features that cater to the needs of the brand's most discerning customers.

The new Toyota Veloz is a supremely practical vehicle that combines efficient fuel economy of 19.3km/l and maneuverability on narrow roads with ample interior space. Envisioned as a sub-compact group carrier, it features three rows of seats that can comfortably accommodate seven passengers thanks to flexible configurations to offer an exceptional ride. The vehicle's outstanding performance is ready to take on the demands of users seeking thrills and excitement in their daily drives, while its enhanced safety features deliver added protection and peace of mind.

Eiji Fujibayashi, Chief Engineer in charge of development, commented: "The new Veloz was developed around the theme 'Easy to drive anywhere, anytime, and for anyone.' It provides exceptional maneuverability, allowing for stable and stress-free driving even on narrow roads. With "Proud Active" as the key design concept, we aimed to deliver a spacious and dynamic vehicle suited to a wide range of uses and driving styles. We are happy to bring the benefits of Toyota's advanced technology to more drivers in the Middle East, and believe our customers will

be very satisfied with what we have achieved." Kei Fujita, Chief Representative, Middle East and Central Asia Representative Office, Toyota Motor Corporation, said: "We are excited to introduce the new Veloz to the Middle East. With its advanced features and spacious interior, our newest vehicle comes with a premium look that embodies Toyota's commitment to Quality, Durability, and Reliability, and is designed



to create a sense of adventure. The adaptable interior offers true versatility, enabling people from all walks of life to experience the joy of mobility while providing outstanding safety and comfort on every journey. I would like to thank our loyal customers in the region for their tireless support, which serves as powerful motivation as we continue on our drive to create ever-better cars."

The 2023 Toyota Veloz's new platform and highly-rigid body structure contribute to outstanding handling, stability, and ride comfort, even on rough roads or with multiple passengers. The vehicle features newly-developed MacPherson strut-type front suspension, which provides linear and direct driving dynamics, while the rear is equipped with a new tor-

sion beam suspension system. Drivers can experience three different driving modes with a choice of ECO, Normal, and Power modes to suit a variety of driving conditions and styles. The vehicle also boasts excellent maneuverability, with a 5.0-meter turning radius.

The new Toyota Veloz delivers smooth acceleration and a dynamic driving experience thanks to its four-cylinder 1.5-liter capacity engine with 16-valve DOHC and dual VVT-I, which produces 105 horsepower and 138 Nm of torque with fuel consumption of 19.3 km/l. Paired with Continuously Variable Transmission (CVT) that simulates a seven-speed sequential shift transmission to deliver powerful, smooth acceleration from start-off and at low speeds, as well as quiet, efficient transmission at higher speeds with excellent fuel efficiency.

A unique front design has been adopted, with the high nose and large trapezoid grille creating a proud expression. The slim LED headlamps and chrome moldings give an elegant, yet sporty look. On the side, the strong character lines running from the nose to the rear express length and presence, which is complemented by large-diameter wheels and over fenders. At the back, long rear combination lamps emphasize the vehicle's wide stance and stability.

Toyota has prioritized comfort and convenience throughout the 2023 Veloz's interior. Upon entering the vehicle, passengers are welcomed by ambient lighting that complements the overall feel of the spacious cabin, which comes with a range of advanced and practical features. These include a 7-inch color Multi-Information Display (MID), which is complemented by an 8-inch multimedia screen with Apple CarPlay and Android Auto integration for seamlessly connected journeys. The vehicle also features a wireless charging pad for smartphones and three dedicated USB charging ports for the first and second rows, as well as two 12V sockets for powering other types of devices.

## Fed mulls bigger rate hikes to cool US economy

WASHINGTON: The United States is prepared to speed up interest rate hikes-and could raise them higher than anticipated-if needed to cool inflation and a strong jobs market, Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell said Tuesday. An "unseasonably warm" January across much of the country was likely behind the robust employment, consumer spending, manufacturing and inflation figures, which pointed to a partial reversal of earlier softening trends, Powell told the Senate Banking Committee. "If the totality of the data were to indicate that faster tightening is warranted, we would be prepared to increase the pace of rate hikes," he said. He added that the "ultimate level of interest rates" is likely to be higher than previously anticipated as well. Stocks fell sharply following Powell's comments, with the Dow Jones Industrial Average closing 1.7 percent lower. The dollar strengthened sharply against the euro and other major currencies, while the two-year US Treasury yield surged above five percent.

### Chance of bigger hike

The US central bank has already raised its benchmark lending rate eight times since early last year, as it contends with inflation that remains stubbornly above its long-term target of two percent. It raised rates last month by a quarter percentage point to 4.50-4.75 percent, its highest level since the global financial crisis. Powell's comments raise the likelihood of the Fed lifting rates by 50 basis points at its next meeting this month, Evercore ISI economists Krishna Guha and Peter Williams wrote in a note to investors. "We must accept that this option appears to be somewhat more live than we had previously believed," they said, though adding that a quarter-point hike was still the more likely option. Markets are now roughly evenly split on the chances of a larger half-point rate hike, said Joe Manimbo, senior market analyst at Convera. Despite its forceful moves, the Fed's favored inflation measure, the personal consumption expenditures (PCE) price index, rose slightly to reach an annual rate of 5.4 percent in January.

Core PCE inflation, which excludes volatile energy and food prices, also rose 4.7 percent. At the same time, the labor market remains "extremely tight," with close to two jobs available for every one unemployed person in December, Powell said.

US job creation surged in January, with employers creating more than half a million new jobs and driving the unemployment rate to its lowest level since the 1960s. A strong labor market supports incomes and, in turn, demand. "To restore price stability, we will need to see lower inflation in this sector, and there will very likely be some softening in labor market conditions," Powell said.

At Tuesday's hearing, Powell also faced questions about ongoing negotiations between the Biden administration and Republicans in Congress over raising the debt ceiling. "Whatever else may happen Congress really needs to raise the debt ceiling," Powell said, adding to calls for the two sides to come to an agreement. The United States hit its \$31.4 trillion borrowing cap in January, kicking off frantic talks between Congress and the White House to raise the limit and allow the US to meet pre-existing spending commitments.

Republicans in Congress have asked for spending cuts in exchange for their support, while the Biden administration has said it wants to separate any talks over the upcoming budget from the debt limit vote. The nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office warned last month that the country risks defaulting on its debt as soon as July if an agreement is not reached. Powell's appearance comes shortly after the US central bank released a semiannual report on monetary policy, which pointed to a tight labor market, robust job gains, historically low unemployment and elevated nominal wage growth.—AFP

## Deliveroo launches Ramadan 'Kindness Calendar'

KUWAIT: In honor of the holy month of Ramadan, Deliveroo is launching an exclusive Kindness Calendar for families and children in partnership with the Family Hub, an educational platform that supports families via workshops, community events, and engaging educational products. The Kindness Calendar highlights 30 acts of kindness, with one act of kindness per day reminding everyone to be kind to their families, friends, community, schoolmates, and themselves.

"With the holy month of Ramadan is upon us, we could not be more thrilled to launch such an exciting initiative that brings together every member of the family," said Seham Al-Husaini, General Manager of Deliveroo Kuwait. "We would like to thank our partners at the Family Hub for helping us encourage our community to count down the days of Ramadan with little acts of kindness that go a long way. Ramadan is a month full of warmth and generosity, and we hope that everyone uses their Kindness Calendar to remember to be kind to both themselves and to others." Speaking about the collaboration, Hanan Ezzeldin, Founder of The Family Hub said, "We are excited to launch the Kindness Calendar in partnership with Deliveroo Kuwait. The month of Ramadan reminds us of all the things we should be grateful for and we can't think of a better occasion to teach the principles of gratitude and generosity to children."



The Kindness Calendar aims to instill the Ramadan spirit in both children and adults, reminding everyone of the power that one act of kindness can have on others, and how kindness can give meaning and value to our lives. Customers can order this year's Kindness Calendar via the Family Hub's website and will be delivered within 2-3 working days. It is priced at only AED 155 including Delivery (around KD 13) and includes a calendar, pouch, 50 cards, and a certificate for the children. Through the Kindness Calendar, Deliveroo and The Family Hub are keen on spreading the values of empathy and generosity one little act at a time!

## ECB chief vows to do 'whatever it takes' to tame inflation

FRANKFURT: European Central Bank president Christine Lagarde vowed Wednesday to do whatever it takes to bring down high inflation and restore price stability. Speaking at the World Trade Organization in Geneva, Lagarde said the ECB would spare no efforts to combat the inflation lashing most of the countries in the eurozone as following Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

"We will restore that price stability and we will do whatever it takes," she said. "Those that are the prime victims of high inflation are the underprivileged, the vulnerable, the lowest paid."

"It keeps us all up at night, because it's not a pretty situation," she said, citing countries "where it's hurting, where it's bad". Speaking alongside WTO chief Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala at an event marking International Women's Day, Lagarde highlighted that women were among those feeling the inflation crunch the most.

Women "are the first and prime victims", she said. The ECB has raised interest rates at an unprecedented pace since last July to bring inflation back down to its two-percent target. And last week, Lagarde said that more interest rate hikes might be needed in the eurozone after the half percentage point hike it has already signaled will come later this month. Stock markets wavered Wednesday after US Federal Reserve chief Jerome Powell warned a quicker pace of interest rate hikes might be needed to tame stubbornly-high inflation.—AFP



# ACTIVIST INVESTOR TRIGGERS REAL-LIFE K-POP INDUSTRY DRAMA

It is the kind of K-drama that rivets millions of viewers - bitter boardroom battles, expensive lawyers, hostile takeover claims and high-stakes shareholder meetings. Except this is playing out in real life as the godfather of K-pop fights his nephew for control of the music company he founded.

It features HYBE, the agency behind the smash-hit group BTS, and tech giant Kakao in an A-list battle that could also determine the billion-dollar industry's future. And it was triggered largely by one man: South Korean activist investor Lee Chang-hwan.

Lee's fund Align Partners bought a one percent stake early last year in SM Entertainment, one of South Korea's leading music companies that helped bring K-pop to the world, managing early hit groups such as boy bands Super Junior and SHINee. He used that stake to argue for corporate reform, saying that SM founder Lee Soo-man - the so-called Godfather of K-pop - was, in effect, syphoning off millions of dollars every year in bogus consulting fees.

"It didn't make sense," Lee Chang-hwan told AFP in a recent interview, saying the money - six percent of publicly listed SM Entertainment's sales every year - was paid to a private entity called Like Planning, which was entirely owned and controlled by Lee Soo-man.

The 36-year-old self-made investor, who was raised by a single mum and



SEOUL: In this photo taken on March 2023, Lee Chang-hwan, a South Korean activist investor, whose fund Align Partners bought a one percent stake in SM Entertainment, one of South Korea's leading music companies which helped bring K-Pop to the world, uses his computer during an interview with AFP in Seoul. — AFP

first shot to public attention by winning a popular South Korean TV quiz show, started asking uncomfortable questions. Lee Soo-man's pet company had raked in "nearly 160 billion won (\$120 million) over the past 20 years", he said, as SM risked major financial and reputational damage due to the behavior of its founder.

## Creating K-pop

Lee Soo-man not only created individual K-pop bands in the 1990s such as H.O.T. and S.E.S., whose success arguably laid the groundwork for the stratospheric rise of groups like BTS and BLACKPINK, he came up with the industry's whole modus operandi.

He pioneered an obsessive level of training and micro-management of "idols" - trained K-pop stars - and his idea of combining strong visual performances and aggressive overseas marketing helped make SM Entertainment an industry behemoth.

He founded the company in 1989 and took it public in 2000 - so he was predictably outraged last year when SM Entertainment's management, including his nephew, agreed with activist investor Lee Chang-hwan's assessment and moved to terminate the "unfair" deal with Like Planning. In an apparent fit of revenge, Lee Soo-man sold the majority of his stake in SM - 14.8 percent of the company - to one-time rival

HYBE, the agency that manages BTS, for \$325 million.

The move made HYBE the single largest shareholder in SM Entertainment, prompting outraged protests from SM's management that it was a hostile takeover that would create an HYBE monopoly and damage the K-pop industry's massive potential.

In a bid to wrest back control, SM's management brought in South Korea's Kakao, a sprawling cash-rich tech conglomerate that owns the country's most popular messaging app. Kakao is now seeking to buy a controlling share of the company to block HYBE.

## 'Valley of death'

The feud has unleashed a family succession drama, with founder Lee's nephew, Lee Sung-su, who is the company's CEO, taking to YouTube to air their dirty laundry. Accusing his uncle of tax fraud using overseas companies, he demanded the elder Lee "kneel down and apologize" for his alleged crimes.

"Sir, please stop now... It is the only way to save you from the Valley of Death", he said in a video posted online. Lee Soo-man has not responded to his nephew's allegations, and could not be reached for comment by AFP, but Yonhap reported he has said Lee Sung-su is a "good nephew" and that his "heart aches" due to the feud.

Experts say the drama is an illustration of a perennial problem in South Korea's dynastic chaebols: founding families exerting control through a complex web of crossholdings, allowing them to wield unchecked power despite not holding controlling shares.

The chairman of South Korean giant Samsung Electronics, who was also the heir of the founding family, was convicted and jailed in 2017 over corruption, although he was given a presidential pardon last year. Align Partners' Lee Chang-hwan says the SM Entertainment case is similar.

"It was a bad example of a person who runs the company as if it's his private entity... Whether it was legal or not, it is hard to accept as a shareholder," he said. Lee Chang-hwan also opposes HYBE's bid for control, saying their efforts to create a monopoly bode ill for the market.

"We thought there was great potential for further K-pop growth," he said, adding he first started looking at investing in the industry in early 2021. "BTS was already a huge success and we witnessed the formation of a real K-pop fan base in North America and Europe," Lee Chang-hwan said. SM Entertainment was "undervalued" due to its management woes, he said, and seemed a good target. — AFP

## British architect David Chipperfield wins Pritzker prize

British architect and urban planner David Chipperfield won the 2023 Pritzker Prize, organizers of the profession's most prestigious award announced Tuesday. The 69-year-old was honored for "timeless modern design that confronts climate urgencies, transforms social relationships and reinvigorates cities," they said in a statement.

Chipperfield said he was "so overwhelmed" to become the prize's 52nd laureate. "I take this award as an encouragement to continue to direct my attention not only to the substance of architecture and its meaning but also to the contribution that we can make as architects to address the existential challenges of climate change and societal inequality," the statement quoted him as saying.

Chipperfield is renowned for renovations and reconstructions of old buildings, updating them for the modern age while honoring their history and culture and preserving the natural environment. Among his best is a rebuild of the Neues Museum in Berlin, which was built in the 19th century and largely destroyed in



STOCKHOLM: In this file photo taken on May 23, 2016, British architect Sir David Chipperfield presents the future Nobel Center to be built on Blasieholmen, along Stockholm's central waterfront, during a press conference in Stockholm. — AFP

World War II, and reinvention of a 16th century Venice landmark, the Procuratie Vecchie. Other major works include the Museo Jumex in Mexico City; the Museum of Modern Literature in Marbach, Germany; Iowa's Des Moines Public Library; and a new building for the Saint Louis Art Museum in Missouri. The Hyatt Foundation, which sponsors the award, said every work of Chipperfield's "becomes a civic undertaking serving society."

It praised him for his "subtle yet powerful, subdued yet elegant" works that span over four decades and several

continents. "He is assured without hubris, consistently avoiding trendiness to confront and sustain the connections between tradition and innovation, serving history and humanity," said Tom Pritzker, the foundation's chairman.

The Pritzker Prize was first awarded in 1979. Illustrious winners include Britain's Norman Foster, Japanese architect Arata Isozaki, and Balkrishna Vithaldas Doshi of India. Last year, Burkina Faso-born Diebedo Francis Kere became the first African winner.

Chipperfield has completed more than 100 projects across Asia, Europe, and North America. Last month, the National Archaeological Museum in Athens, announced that he would lead a massive upgrade of the institution that is expected to take four years.

It is Greece's largest museum and one of the most important of its kind in the world, housing such antiquities as the prehistoric frescoes of Thera and the Bronze Age gold treasures of Mycenae. Chipperfield said in his statement that architects "can have a more prominent and engaged role in creating not only a more beautiful world but a fairer and more sustainable one too." "We must rise to this challenge and help inspire the next generation to embrace this responsibility with vision and courage," he added. — AFP

## John Williams: Hollywood's maestro goes for more Oscars history

From "Star Wars" to "Jaws" to "Schindler's List," John Williams has written many of the most instantly recognizable scores in cinema history. The 91-year-old is already the oldest person to receive an Oscar nomination for a competitive award, which he earned thanks to his spare yet poignant compositions for Steven Spielberg's "The Fabelmans."

With 53 total nods, Williams has more Academy Award nominations than any other living person, and is second only to Walt Disney, who had 59. And if he gets another statuette on Sunday, which would be his sixth, he will become the oldest person ever to triumph in any competitive category. The record is currently held by screenwriter James Ivory, who was 89 when he won. It "seems unreal that anybody could be that old and working that long," Williams recently told NBC News, adding: "It's very exciting, even after 53 years. I'm very pleased, I think it's a human thing - the gratification of any kind of appreciation of one's work."

Out of the dozens of nominations over the course of his extraordinary career, the composer won Academy Awards for the original "Star Wars," "Fiddler on the Roof" and three films by Spielberg, with whom he is closely associated - "Jaws," "E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial" and "Schindler's List." He's even competed against himself multiple times for Oscars glory.

Williams is known for his grand neo-Romantic scores in the fashion of Wagner, a contrast to the more experimental fare prevalent among many modern composers outside Hollywood. But his work is also steeped in mid-century influences including jazz and popular American standards.

Williams holds he's not as Wagnerian as his music might indicate, but admits the 19th century German giant's influence on Hollywood's early composers, and therefore his own, is palpable. "Wagner lives with us here - you can't escape it," he told The New Yorker in 2020. "I have been in the big river swimming with all of them."

## 'Single greatest collaboration'

Williams was born on February 8, 1932 in New York's Queens borough to a percussionist father, and was the eldest of four children. The family moved to Los Angeles in 1948, where Williams later studied composition and took a semester of jazz band at Los Angeles City College.

While in the Air Force, he played both piano and brass while arranging music for the service's band. Afterwards, he moved to New York, where he enrolled at the prestigious Juilliard school to study piano. Though he aspired to be a concert pianist, it became clear to Williams that composition was his true forte. He moved back to LA, where he worked on orchestrations at film studios - earning plaudits for his range - and as a session pianist, including for the film adaptation of Leonard Bernstein's "West Side Story."

Williams notched his first Oscar nod for the 1967 film "Valley of the Dolls," and won his first in 1972 for "Fiddler on the Roof." His momentous partnership with Spielberg began in the early 1970s, when the soon to be household-name director approached him to score his debut, "The Sugarland Express."

Spielberg approached him once more to work on his second film, "Jaws." The menacing two-note ostinato Williams composed for the film has practically become synonymous with fear itself. "John Williams actually is the teeth of Jaws," Spielberg said last year at a concert for the composer's 90th birthday.

The pair then worked on "Close Encounters of the Third Kind" and a decades-long creative partnership unfurled. At the Williams birthday celebration in Washington, Spielberg dubbed their relationship "the single greatest collaboration of my career and one of the deepest friendships of my life. Through the medium of movies, John has popularized motion picture scores more than any other composer in history."



HOLLYWOOD: In this file photo taken on January 22, 2019, conductor John Williams speaks at conductor Gustavo Dudamel's Hollywood Walk of Fame Star ceremony in Hollywood, California. — AFP

## 'Soundtrack of our lives'

Spielberg also introduced Williams to one George Lucas - it would become another iconic collaboration that spawned perhaps the most recognizable film score ever. Several of Williams' "Star Wars" compositions are prime examples of leitmotif, with musical cues tying together the vast, character-rich story.

"He has written the soundtrack of our lives," conductor Gustavo Dudamel told The New York Times last year. "When we listen to a melody of John's, we go back to a time, to a taste, to a smell. All our senses go back to a moment."

Other credits from Williams' more than 100 film scores include the music for 1978's "Superman," the first three "Harry Potter" films and a number of "Indiana Jones" films. "Harrison Ford made Indiana Jones into an iconic action hero, but John made us believe in adventure again, through that pulse-pounding march," said Spielberg.

Off-screen, he is responsible for the "Olympic Fanfare and Theme" first composed for the 1984 Summer Games in Los Angeles and used ever since on US broadcasts. Williams has recently indicated he might take a step back from film scoring, giving more energy to conducting and composing concert music; he was a longtime leader of the Boston Pops orchestra. But speaking at a panel with Spielberg earlier this year, Williams seemed to walk back the notion of slowing down, vowing to work until he's 100 or so. "So I've got 10 more years to go. I'll stick around for a while!" he told the crowd. "You can't 'retire' from music. It's like breathing." — AFP



## Queen's corgis take center stage at London exhibition

A new exhibition of photographs showing the relationship between Queen Elizabeth II and her beloved corgis opens in London on Wednesday, celebrating her bond with the dogs. The exhibition, titled "The Queen and Her Corgis", features images taken during the late sovereign's life, showcasing her unique bond with her Pembroke Welsh Corgis.

"We've got this very small but really exquisite exhibition that shows nine photographs taken of the queen and her corgis and they chart her life every 10 years," exhibition curator, Xavier Bray, told AFP. The images capture her as a young girl to monarch on official duty, he said. "You also see her up in Balmoral, relaxing with the corgis and even at Windsor giving them a walk," he added, referring to royal estates in Scotland and just west of London, respectively.

The photographs, chosen from a pool of over 5,000 images, range from informal snapshots to formal portraits -- each capturing a moment in the queen's 96-year life and her bond with the breed. The earliest image in the collection dates from July 1936 with a young Princess

Elizabeth playing with a pair of corgis named Jane and Dookie in a garden at the home where she grew up in London. Another photograph features her posing with Susan, the corgi from which many of the dogs she would later have during her reign were descended.

## 'Very intimate'

"You see the queen but from a very different perspective through this extraordinary relationship that she had with her corgis," Bray said. "When you have a dog in the relationship, it's very intimate, it's personal."

The little sandy-colored canines with pointy ears were a constant presence in the queen's court, following her from room to room in Buckingham Palace and often featuring in official photos. As well as corgis, she also kept dorgis, a breed which came about when one of her corgis had a chance encounter with her sister Princess Margaret's dachshund Pipkin. Bray's favorite image in the collection, he said, is "the one of her sitting on a rock by a beautiful cascade up in Balmoral in the Scottish Highlands." — AFP

## Adidas stuck with Yeezy gear after dropping Kanye

Adidas said Wednesday it was still weighing what to do with its huge inventory of Kanye West's Yeezy products after it ended its partnership with the controversial rapper. Potentially not selling the apparel and shoes linked to West would lead to a revenue loss of 1.2 billion euros (\$1.3 billion), the group said, announcing its 2022 full-year results.

Adidas halted its tie-up with West -- now known formally as Ye -- in October after he made a series of anti-Semitic outbursts. As a result, the group ended production of the highly successful Yeezy line designed together with West. "Should the company irrevocably decide not to re-purpose any of the existing Yeezy product going forward," it would have to write-off the entire inventory, it said.



Kanye West

That would lower the company's operating profit by an additional 500 million euros in 2023, it said. Along with one-off costs projected to reach 200 million euros related to a company strategic review, Adidas said it could end up with an operating loss of 700 million euros in 2023. Bjorn Gulden, the group's new chief executive, said the company will use 2023 as a "transition year to build the base for 2024 and 2025." "We need to reduce inventories and lower discounts." — AFP



## Lifestyle | Features



A woman rides a motorcycle in Ouagadougou, on March 2, 2023. — AFP



Students from the Women's Center for Initiation and Learning to Trades (CFIAM) take practical courses in mechanics, in Ouagadougou, on March 2, 2023.

## In Burkina, motorbikes bring treasured independence for women

The motorcycles that buzz along the streets of Ouagadougou, the capital of Burkina Faso, have a story to tell. Once the preserve of men and a sign of male status in this West African country, today they are used ubiquitously by women — and are a prized tool of emancipation.

When Nigerian filmmaker Kagho Idhebor first came to Ouagadougou he was overwhelmed by how many women whizzed about on a motorbike. "I'd never seen women drive with such attitude, such independence," he said. "There are more motorbikes than cars, and more women than men on these motorbikes."

He was so struck by the phenomenon that he made "Burkina Babes" — a documentary which ran at the pan-African FESPACO cinema and TV festival in Ouagadougou that ended last weekend. Dressed in jeans or a suit, some with a baby slung on their back, women of all ages ride around on motorbikes in Burkina Faso. "The motorbike is above all a necessity" for getting around, said Valerie Dambre, who had stopped at a traffic light. But they are also a symbol of

autonomy for many women in a deeply poor country beset with problems imposed by a brutal years-long jihadist insurgency.

Nearly one person in seven in Burkina's population of 22 million has a motorbike, according to transport ministry figures for 2020. Between 2011 and 2020, the number of motorbikes tripled as a share of the population, cementing their role as a solution for mobility.

### Breaking barriers

"In the coastal countries (in West Africa), people went straight to cars" from walking or using bicycles, said anthropologist Jocelyne Vokouma. "But we (in Burkina) turned to motorbikes before using cars." The key period of change was the early 1990s, she said. Until then, "a woman would proudly say that her motorbike had been bought by her husband. 'My husband is doing OK,' was what women used to say," Vokouma said.

But the country went through wrenching austerity and many men lost their jobs. It was women who picked up the baton, setting up small businesses such as selling fruit and vegetables to

make money — and as time progressed, many used their savings to swap their bicycle for a motorbike. With that came greater freedom, in developing their business, taking the children to school, seeing friends or just going out for a ride. But, said Vokouma, some important seeds had already been sown by Burkina Faso's revolutionary leftwing leader, Thomas Sankara. During his four years in power in the 1980s, which ended traumatically with his assassination, Sankara "played an emancipating role, breaking down traditional mindsets and thrusting women into the public space, outside the home," she said. "Young women today were brought up on his ideas."

### Training

Hand in hand with the new mobility has come an entry for women into the male-dominated business of auto maintenance. Since 1997, the Women's School for Skills Initiation and Training (CFIAM) has trained more than 700 women to be mechanics and bodywork repairers. Its CEO and founder, Bernard Zongo, said he set up the school to help "girls... into non-traditional areas of

work, so that they can become economically independent."

He hired a full-time woman psychologist and installed a nursery for students with babies. The center gets by through donations from NGOs, which account for 75 percent of revenue, while the remaining income comes from fees. The two-year course costs 100,000 CFA francs (\$163) — a hefty sum in a country where annual per-capita income is little more than \$900.

Other African countries, including Niger, Ivory Coast and Mali have sent representatives to the CFIAM to see how it operates, and "boys are asking to enrol," Zongo said with a smile. "There are people we know who are jealous of us," said one student, Salamata Congo, speaking above a racket of cutting and hammering. But patriarchal habits and machismo die hard. "Men try to discourage you," said Berenice Zagali, who is learning to become a mechanic. "They say, 'You're a woman, what are you doing here? This is man's work. Your place is the kitchen, the office.'" — AFP

## Caterpillars easy prey in artificial light: Study

Artificial light is providing predatory insects with an unfair advantage in hunting caterpillars, potentially decimating butterflies and moth populations already suffering from a global insect decline, according to a study published Wednesday. When researchers glued fake clay caterpillars to forest leaves and punched holes in the leaves to mimic their eating habits, the dummy green larvae experienced a significantly higher attack rate when exposed to unnatural light. The uptick is likely due to an increase in the abundance of light-seeking predators, higher visibility, and the opportunity for daytime hunters to seek prey at night.

"Your porch light can influence the lives of insects even if they're not fluttering around the light bulb," lead author John Deitsch of Cornell University told AFP. Light pollution impacts caterpillars even if they don't flock to bright bulbs the way moths or butterflies do, he explained. Both the expanding area affected by artificial light at night (ALAN) and increased brightness threaten insect biodiversity, driving changes in natural cycles that govern everything from insect reproduction to pollination and navigation. Earlier research has shown that light pollution increases the vulnerability to predation of other insect species such as adult moths, but the new study is the first to observe impacts on early life stages. Nocturnal light pollution is probably affecting caterpillar populations, said the authors.

### Energy vs biodiversity

Nearly half of the over 500 clay caterpillars deployed showed predatory marks from an array of forest-dwellers including birds, beetles and spiders, with more attacks occurring when the predators had a guiding light. Caterpillars are critical members of the food web and many feed at night, decreasing the risk of becoming a bird's or bat's snack. The type of light-bulb can also play a role in predation, according to the findings. Energy-efficient LED lights — altering the intensity and directionality of light pollution — can employ a much sharper white light compared to the low-pressure yellow-orange glow of older streetlights.

The study reported a nine percent higher predation rate in the presence of artificial light — strong enough to overcome changes such as temperature or lunar phases. But the researchers acknowledged that dummy caterpillars could only provide a proxy for actual attack rates, which might be lower due to anti-predation tactics such as rolling off leaves, or higher if predators are attracted to movement. — AFP



This picture taken on February 7, 2023, shows children sitting next to a campfire at a forest camp on the outskirts of Ballerup, Denmark.



This picture taken on February 7, 2023, shows a girl having lunch at a forest camp on the outskirts of Ballerup, Denmark.

## Wild education: The joy of Scandinavia's forest preschools

Come rain, sleet or snow, young children nap outside even in mid-winter all across Scandinavia, where outdoor preschools teach children a love of nature. Sitting in the forest on a tarp laid out over the snow in Solna near Stockholm, Agnes and her friends — all around five — are lining up sticks.

"We use pieces of wood to show them that you can use anything you find in nature to do maths," said their preschool teacher Lisa Bystrom. In a scene that would shock some parents elsewhere, the children whittle sticks with large knives, their teachers seemingly unperturbed. "Once they get to school, they will sit down with a piece of paper and a pencil but here we think this is more fun," Bystrom said. In Sweden and Denmark, school is mandatory from the age of six. But before that most children attend daycare or preschool, with many parents opting for outdoor ones where children play in the woods and learn to appreciate nature.

"Technology today takes over most (things), so I think it's necessary to be in nature from a young age to learn how to behave and to respect nature," said Andreas Pegado, one of the educators whose daughter also attends the preschool. Every day, the little ones eat lunch seated on wooden benches around a wood fire — unless heavy rain forces them indoors. After their meal, kids that are two and under settle down for a nap, bundled into sleeping bags under a canopy — even when the temperature falls below zero.

"They get a lot of fresh air, (so) they sleep longer, they sleep better," said Johanna Karlsson, the head of the "Ur & Skur" (Come Rain or Shine) preschool, unbothered by the day's temperature of five degrees Celsius (41 Fahrenheit).

### 'Forest buses'

In neighboring Denmark, many preschools use "forest buses" to bring "asphalt kids" to nature areas. Every day, a group from the Stenurten preschool — one of 78 Copenhagen preschools that offer daily excursions like this — leaves the Norrebro neighborhood in the city center on a 30-minute bus ride to the forest. A little wooden house provides shelter if necessary, and a large field leads to the forest where the kids can run free. In the open air, the educators can vary their

The educators all agree: young children who spend their days outside have better self-confidence and are sick less often. In the 1920s, an Icelandic doctor recommended that babies sleep outdoors to strengthen their immune systems, a practice now common across the Nordic countries and which the medical community has never contradicted.

A study published in 2018 in the British Educational Research Journal suggested that outdoor preschools improve children's team working skills by encouraging



Children from the "Ur och Skur" preschool are pictured as they wait for their lunch to be prepared, on March 1, 2023, in Jarvastaden, Solna, Sweden.

pedagogical approaches and develop the children's independence. "Their curiosity is a bit different here," said Iben Ohrgaard, one of the preschool staff.

### Snowsuits for all

Everyone is kitted out in snowsuits, kids and adults alike. A popular Nordic saying goes: "There's no such thing as bad weather, only bad clothes." But is it really reasonable to stay outside all day, even when it's minus 10 Celsius?

kids to collaborate through play, among other things. Outdoors "they try different solutions themselves," said Ohrgaard, helping limit conflicts. "If they climb a bit too high in a tree, they know there are adults there. But they try a little more themselves. And they grow up with the feeling that 'I can do it,'" she explained. "That gives them the strength to try once more before asking for help." — AFP

## China's students leap 'Great Firewall' to get homework help from ChatGPT

Chinese schoolchildren are turning to AI bot ChatGPT to slash their homework time — vaulting the country's "Great Firewall" to write book reports and bone up on their language skills. With its ability to produce A-grade essays, poems and programming code within seconds, ChatGPT has sparked a global gold rush in artificial intelligence tech. But it has also prompted concern from teachers, worried over the possibilities for cheating and plagiarism. In China, where the service is unavailable without a virtual private network (VPN), over a dozen students told AFP they have used it to write essays, solve science and maths problems, and generate computer code.



This file photo taken on January 23, 2023 in Toulouse, southwestern France, shows screens displaying the logos of OpenAI and ChatGPT. — AFP

Eleven-year-old Esther Chen said ChatGPT has helped to halve the time she studies at home, while her sister Nicole uses it to learn English. Esther, who attends a competitive school in the southern megacity of Shenzhen, said she used to spend four to five hours every day on homework. "My mum would stay up late until I finished all my homework and we would fight constantly," she said. "Now, ChatGPT helps me to do the research quickly."

Several students told AFP they had bought foreign phone numbers online or used VPNs to bypass restrictions and access ChatGPT. One retailer allows users to buy a US number for just 5.5 yuan (\$0.8), while one registered in India costs less than one yuan. And for those unable to scale the firewall, AI Life on the ubiquitous WeChat app charges one yuan (\$0.15) to ask ChatGPT a question, as do other services.

### AI book report

Chinese media last month reported major tech firms, including WeChat's parent Tencent and rival Ant Group, had been ordered to cut access to ChatGPT on their platforms, and state media blasted it as a tool for spreading "foreign political propaganda". But Esther's mother, Wang Jingjing, said she wasn't worried. "We've used a VPN for years. The girls are encouraged to read widely from different sources," she told AFP, adding she is more worried about plagiarism and keeps a close eye on her daughter.

Esther insisted she does not get the chatbot to do the work for her, pointing to a recent assignment in which she needed to finish a book report on the novel "Hold up the Sky" by Liu Cixin, a globally renowned Chinese sci-fi writer. With a weekly schedule crammed with piano practice, swimming, chess and rhythmic gymnastics, she said she did not have time to finish the book. Instead, she asked ChatGPT to give her a summary and paragraphs about the main characters and themes, writing the report from that.

### 'It's less pressure'

Students are also using ChatGPT to bypass China's lucrative English language test prep industry, in which applicants learn thousands of words by rote with expensive tutors ahead of the exams needed to enter colleges in the United States, United Kingdom or Australia. "I didn't want to memorise word lists or entire conversations," Stella Zhang, 17, told AFP. So instead of spending up to 600 yuan (\$85) an hour, she dropped out and now learns through conversations with the chatbot. "It's less pressure... It also offers instant feedback on my essays, and I can submit different versions," she explained.

Thomas Lau, a college admissions counsellor in the eastern city of Suzhou, said more than two dozen students he works with have dropped out of language cramming schools and opted to prepare with ChatGPT. But the tool has created new problems. "I run all the personal statements and other application materials written by students through software to detect whether parts of it have been written using AI," Lau said. "Many fail the test."

A flurry of Chinese tech firms including Baidu, Alibaba and JD.com said they are developing rivals to ChatGPT. But Beijing is already primed to crack down and said it would soon introduce new rules to govern AI. While tools to detect whether a text has been written using AI can be accessed in China, schools are also training teachers to ensure academic ethics are upheld. — AFP



## Sports

# Myanmar traditional boxing packs a punch, kick, headbutt

## One of the most aggressive combat sports in the world



HLAINGBWE: A fighter kicks an opponent during a traditional Myanmar boxing Lethwei tournament at Pyi Thar Lin Aye pagoda in Hlaingbwe township in Karen state.

HLAINGBWE: After Hlaing Htet Aung landed another vicious kick to his opponent's chest, the referee called a stop to the bout of traditional Myanmar boxing, the crowd cheered and the ring-side band ended their tune with a flourish. The 22-year-old strided victorious from the ring at the end of a five-day traditional Lethwei tournament, now in front of big crowds again following the pandemic.

He has just beaten the current champion for his weight and has the bruises and lumps on his face to prove it. "It's nothing," he said of his swelling face. "It's normal to get hit like this in Lethwei." "I'm happy because I won." Lethwei is considered one of the most aggressive combat sports in the world, with fighters eschewing boxing gloves for thin gauze bandages wrapped around hardened knuckles. Feet, knees, elbows and even the head can also be used to strike an opponent.

Handing her son an ice cube to cool his

wounds, the fighter's mother Chit Htwe, 52, was unfazed by his injuries. "Nothing happened. He's a man, isn't he? A Lethwei fighter is used to going home with injuries." Later she counted out his winnings - 900,000 kyat (\$430). The tournament also featured children aged about 10 slugging it out in a whirl of skinny arms and legs.

Many Lethwei fighters start training and competing from a young age. "I was frightened when I went into the ring... I had no experience in fighting then," said Hlaing Htet Aung. Lethwei has a long history, with Myanmar temple carvings appearing to show pairs of men locked in combat, suggesting the sport is over a thousand years old. In the modern era it was kept alive in the eastern border states of Karen and Mon, where bouts are held to mark everything from monks' funerals to New Year festivities.

More than 1,000 people turned out to watch



HLAINGBWE: A fighter stands over a fallen opponent during a traditional Myanmar boxing Lethwei tournament at Pyi Thar Lin Aye pagoda in Hlaingbwe township. —AFP Photos

the end of the tournament in Hlaingbwe township in Karen state, sitting in plastic chairs under a huge wooden roof. In the crowd a dozen or so monks watched the violence unfold as flutes played, drums and cymbals clanged and a commentator encouraged the fighters through a microphone. Fighters from the local Border Guards Force - former ethnic insurgents now loosely allied with the military - stood outside on guard holding rifles or rode in jeeps with machine guns mounted on the back.

### 'Not afraid'

Karen state has been riven by conflict since independence from Britain in 1948, with ethnic rebels fighting the military and each other. The biggest of the ethnic rebel groups, the Karen National Union, has clashed repeatedly with the military since the junta's coup two years ago and bloody crackdown

on dissent. But on Sunday officers and senior figures from rival groups sat in the same crowd to watch the spectacle. Not far from the boxing ring thousands prayed at a Buddhist pagoda as part of a ceremony to mark the hoisting of an auspicious golden umbrella to the top of its spire. One of the few female fighters on the bill, Dawna Bo Ma, 16, is from Myawady on the Thai border.

Like Hlaing Htet Aung, her father was a Lethwei fighter. In her match she went the full five rounds with her taller and heavier Thai opponent. After the fight her team took her bandages from her hands and applied petroleum jelly to a cut above her eyebrow. She had drawn that match but had big ambitions for her fighting skills. "I have to beat female fighters in Myanmar first and if there is no one who will challenge me, I will go to Thailand to fight," she said. "I am a fighter... I'm not afraid of being hurt." —AFP

## Smith hopes for 'bigger totals' on fourth Test pitch

AHMEDABAD: Stand-in Australia skipper Steve Smith said Wednesday the pitch for the fourth Test looks good for batsmen and different from the usual day-one turners in the previous matches in India. Australia will look to level the series at 2-2 in the final Test starting Thursday in Ahmedabad after they bounced back from two losses to win the third Test on a viciously turning pitch. "It's just playing what's in front of us really, obviously the scores haven't been big throughout this whole series. India scored 400 in that first Test match and Rohit got 100 and 400 proved to be way too many," Smith told reporters.

"This wicket may be a little bit different. Perhaps it may not spin as much from the first ball or the first day but I do think it will spin as the game goes on. So yeah, there might be opportunities for bigger totals on this wicket." Smith was unsure of which pitch the crunch final Test would be played after the curators kept two tracks covered at the world's biggest cricket stadium. But doubts for the visitors cleared as the day progressed on a hot afternoon in Ahmedabad. "Yeah rocked up today and there was only one covered so yeah looks like they have chosen," said Smith.

"Looks like probably of the four wickets we've seen so far, potentially the flattest on day one. Having said that, it's I think 38 degrees out there at the moment, it's pretty hot. Looks like it'll dry out as the day goes on." The 33-year-old Smith, standing in as captain in place of Pat Cummins, had earlier said he could not recall ever having been in this situation so close to the start of a Test. India have long been accused of preparing pitches to favor their spinners. The International Cricket Council ruled that the surface in the third Test in Indore-won by Australia-was "poor".

### Three spinners

The tourists switched to a spin-heavy team selection from the second Test in New Delhi and handed India a nine-wicket loss in Indore in just over two days. Smith strongly hinted that Australia would play the spin trio of Nathan Lyon, Matthew Kuhnemann and Todd Murphy again, praising the "variation" that each has been able to produce. Lyon, an off-spinner, took eight wickets to dismiss India for 163 in their second innings on a pitch that turned from day one in the third Test. Newcomer Murphy has been economical and got Virat Kohli out three times. "(We have) had faith in what we're trying to do and it's good that we are able to show that we can play with three spinners and win," Smith said. —AFP

## Netherlands stun Cuba in Baseball Classic opener

TAICHUNG: The Netherlands shrugged off nerves to stun Cuba 4-2 in the opening game of the World Baseball Classic on Wednesday in Taiwan. The Dutch scored three runs in the sixth inning in Taichung to sink Cuba, who featured players from Major League Baseball on their team for the first time. Didi Gregorius and Josh Palacios each scored a run for the Netherlands, who finished fourth at the two previous editions of the world tournament, while Chadwick Tromp notched two.

"It's very, very important to win the first game-it takes a monkey off your back, it relaxes everybody," said Netherlands manager Hensley Meulens. "We know we have the talent. Until you win that first game though, it's like a nervous wreck." Palacios broke open a tied game when he grounded an RBI single up the middle, before Tromp followed

it up with a hit that fell between two Cuban outfielders to increase the Netherlands' lead.

The win gives the Dutch, whose roster features several players with MLB experience such as Gregorius and San Diego's Xander Bogaerts, the early edge in a Pool A that also includes Taiwan, Italy and Panama. "It's 12:00am over there in Aruba but my whole family is up watching the game," said Tromp. "They've always been there for me, and they're there for me again this year." Cuba, who finished runners-up in the inaugural World Baseball Classic in 2006, scored both their runs through Yadil Mujica.

Cuba are allowing MLB players to represent them for the first time, but they endured a frustrating day. Chicago White Sox slugger Luis Robert Jr had one hit in four at-bats, while his Chicago teammate Yoan Moncada was hitless in three visits to the plate. Twenty teams are participating in the fifth edition of the World Baseball Classic. There are four first-round groups hosted at venues in Taiwan, Tokyo, Arizona and Florida before the



TAICHUNG: Cuba's Roi Santos dives to second base during the World Baseball Classic game between Cuba and the Netherlands at Taichung Intercontinental Baseball Stadium in Taichung on March 8, 2023. —AFP

bulk of the knockout rounds get under way in the United States.

The tournament was last staged in 2017, with the United States finally winning the title for the first time with victory over Puerto Rico at Dodger Stadium in Los Angeles. The pandemic forced the postponement of the

tournament in 2021, meaning the United States are only now launching their title defense with a team bristling with stars from Major League Baseball. They play Britain in their opening game on Saturday at Chase Field in Phoenix, the home of the Arizona Diamondbacks. —AFP

## India host Aussies at world's biggest cricket stadium

AHMEDABAD: India will host Australia from Thursday at the biggest cricket stadium in the world for the fourth and final Test. Prime ministers Narendra Modi and Anthony Albanese will be in attendance, with huge billboards of the pair erected at the ground. AFP Sport takes an in-depth look at the Narendra Modi Stadium in Ahmedabad, where a bumper crowd is expected:

### How big is it?

The stadium has a capacity of 132,000. It has never been full for cricket, but it set a record for a cricket match in May last year when 104,859 saw the Indian Premier League final between Gujarat Titans and Rajasthan Royals. The stadium is in the western state of Gujarat.

### What's the history?

It is named after the current Indian prime minister, who will be there on Thursday with his Australian counterpart for the first day. The stadium was built in 1982 but then reconstructed, enlarged and renamed several times. It opened in its current form in 2020 but crowds were initially restricted because of the COVID pandemic.

### What's it like?

The latest rebuild of the circular venue cost an estimated \$100 million and provides unobstructed views from every seat. There are two tiers, with the top of the upper tier under cover, and seats are in the blue and saffron of the Indian team. The site includes an Olympic-sized swimming pool as part of a multisports complex. There are 76 corporate boxes.



AHMEDABAD: A large banner with pictures of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Australia's Prime Minister Anthony Albanese is displayed on the facade of Narendra Modi stadium in Ahmedabad on March 8, 2023, ahead of Albanese's visit to India and the fourth and final Test cricket match between India and Australia. —AFP

### What's Trump connection?

The latest incarnation of the stadium hosted a rally in 2020 for then-US president Donald Trump. An estimated 100,000 were in attendance as Trump emerged in the sweltering stadium, to the strains of the Village People's "Macho Man", as Modi went all out to welcome the US leader to his home state.

### What do the players say?

Organizers have not said how many tickets have been sold, but Australia's players are relishing the prospect of what could be a crowd of more than 100,000. "It's a good chance it will be a pretty cool atmosphere," stand-in skipper Steve Smith said. "Lots of guys haven't seen the stadium before, they all walked in today and it's huge-it holds 130,000 - if we get somewhere up around that number, it will be unbelievable, the atmosphere." —AFP

## Ohtani primed but nervous for Classic debut

TOKYO: Japanese superstar Shohei Ohtani said Wednesday he was nervous but raring to go for his World Baseball Classic debut in front of an adoring home crowd in Tokyo. Two-way ace Ohtani - one of the biggest names in baseball - will pitch in Japan for the first time since he joined the Los Angeles Angels in Major League Baseball in 2018 when he takes to the mound against China on Thursday.

Ohtani is an icon in baseball-loving Japan and his presence in the national team has stoked expectations that they can win the global tournament for a record third time. All eyes were on the 28-year-old as he spoke to reporters at Tokyo Dome, where Japan will play all their first-round games and a potential quarter-final. "I'm really excited - it's the first game and I want to go into it with the highest concentration," said Ohtani, who hit two huge home runs in a warm-up game earlier this week. "It's my first World Baseball Classic so I will be nervous, but I want to play the way I usually do and prepare the way I usually do."

Ohtani has earned comparisons with the legendary Babe Ruth for playing as both a pitcher and a hitter - something almost unheard of in baseball. He has enjoyed huge success since moving to MLB and was named American League Most Valuable Player in 2021. Ohtani said he was not sure if he would be up to full speed when he makes his first pitching start of the year against China but promised to "give 100 percent". "I probably won't pay too much attention to how many pitches I've had," he said. —AFP



Sports

# Bucks tighten their grip on top spot in the Eastern Conference

## Bucks sink Orlando; Sixers down Wolves

LOS ANGELES: The Milwaukee Bucks shrugged off the injury absence of Giannis Antetokoumpo to tighten their grip on top spot in the Eastern Conference on Tuesday with a 134-123 defeat of the Orlando Magic. The Bucks moved 2.5 games clear of the Boston Celtics at the top of the standings with a clinical offensive display that saw Brook Lopez, Khris Middleton and Jevon Carter share the scoring around.

Lopez finished with 26 points after shooting 64.3 percent from the field while Middleton and Carter both chipped in with 24 points apiece for Milwaukee. Bobby Portis, Jae Crowder, and Joe Ingles also finished in double digits for the Bucks, who have now won nine straight games on the road. Milwaukee - who saw their 16-game unbeaten streak snapped by Philadelphia on Saturday - improved to 47-18 at the top of the Eastern Conference. The Celtics are 45-21.

The Bucks were always in control against Orlando on Tuesday, leading from the end of the first quarter onwards and maintaining a comfortable double-digit lead for most of the fourth quarter. Bucks coach Mike Budenholzer singled out Lopez for praise following the win. "We tend to talk about his defense so much but offensively he's been really good - it was great to get him going early," Budenholzer said. "It's good to see him scoring in a variety of ways... we're fortunate for all the different things he can do."

### Embiid rolls on

In Minneapolis, the Philadelphia 76ers rolled to a third straight victory with a 117-94 blowout over the Timberwolves. Joel Embiid came within a whisker of a second consecutive 40-point game after his 42 points against Indiana on Monday, delivering 39 points against a Minnesota team who struggled offensively.

Embiid shot 13-of-22 from the field, with a perfect 4-from-4 from three-point range and nine-from-nine from the free-throw line. With James Harden rested, Tyrese Maxey once again provided offensive support with 27 points while Tobias Harris (10) and De'Anthony Melton (11) also made double figures. Minnesota's challenge was led by Anthony Edwards with 32 points but no other starter for the Wolves had more than seven points. The Sixers improved to 43-22 to remain in third place in the Eastern Conference.

"I just want to do whatever it takes to win games," Embiid said afterwards. "Tonight without James (Harden) I wanted to be as aggressive as possible to make sure we got the win. We played really good defense and offensively we moved the ball and made shots. "It doesn't matter who I play - I just feel like I'm going to do my thing regardless." Embiid brushed off suggestions that his form should put him amongst the favorites for the NBA's Most Valuable Player award after several

near-misses in recent seasons. "This year I'm taking a different approach - just trying to focus on the right things, win games, dominate and whatever happens, happens," Embiid said.

### Hornets sting Knicks

The New York Knicks' nine-game winning streak came to an abrupt end at Madison Square Garden with a 112-105 defeat to the lowly Charlotte Hornets. Charlotte - second from bottom in the East - looked to be sliding towards their 47th defeat of the season as New York pulled into a 16-point lead early in the second half.

But Charlotte came alive with a 37-point third quarter and then outscored the Knicks 25-16 in the final frame to snatch victory. Kelly Oubre Jr had 27 points, Terry Rozier had 25 and Gordon Hayward had 23 for Charlotte. The Knicks showed visible signs of weariness as they returned home after a grueling sequence of road wins over Miami and Boston. Elsewhere Tuesday, Stephen Curry poured in 40 points for Golden State in only his second game since returning from injury but could not prevent the NBA champions from slipping to a 137-128 loss to the Oklahoma City Thunder.

Shai Gilgeous-Alexander led the Thunder scoring with 33 points, with all of Oklahoma City's starters making double figures. In Los Angeles, Anthony Davis finished with 30 points and 22 rebounds



Brook Lopez of the Milwaukee Bucks

to help the Lakers to a 112-103 victory over the Memphis Grizzlies, who were without the suspended Ja Morant for a

second straight game. The win moves the Lakers into ninth place in the Western Conference standings on 32-34. — AFP



LONDON: Dortmund's German defender Nico Schlotterbeck jumps above during the UEFA Champions League round of 16 second-leg football match between Chelsea and Borussia Dortmund on March 7, 2023. —AFP

## Dortmund must regroup to keep title dreams alive

BERLIN: Moments after his side's controversial last 16 exit to Chelsea on Tuesday, Borussia Dortmund coach Edin Terzic gave his disappointed charges time to digest the defeat. "We're not thinking about the season right now" Terzic told Amazon Prime on the sidelines of Stamford Bridge after the 2-0 defeat saw Dortmund eliminated 2-1 on aggregate. "We're simply disappointed." Dortmund's run of 10 wins from 10 starts in 2023 had come to an end in contentious circumstances.

With Chelsea up 1-0, the score tied at 1-1 on aggregate, a VAR intervention found a handball against winger Marius Wolf in the box. While Chelsea's Kai Havertz missed the spot kick, VAR again stepped in and told him to re-take it, as Dortmund players had entered the box too early. Havertz converted the penalty at the second attempt and Chelsea held on for a 2-0 win. "The boys immediately wanted to look at the replay of

the penalty, because they hadn't seen it yet," Terzic said of the incident, which took place just after half-time but dominated the post-match discussions.

After a stuttering end to 2022, Dortmund closed the nine-point gap on leaders Bayern Munich this year and now sit just behind the perennial German champions on goal difference with 11 games remaining. Like with all runs of good form, luck had been on Dortmund's side during their barnstorming start to 2023. With luck deserting Dortmund in dramatic fashion in London, the challenge now for Terzic is to ensure the side's good form and a shot at a first league title since 2012 does not leave with it.

Asked after the match why his side had fallen against Chelsea, Dortmund midfielder Emre Can answered simply "the referee". "The referee was very bad today... We're playing here at Stamford Bridge, maybe he's afraid of the fans." Dortmund's Jude Bellingham, ten years Can's junior, echoed his midfield teammate's sentiment. The English teenager felt the re-taken penalty was "a joke", while saying "I don't want to get in trouble, I've paid enough fines to them lol". Still standing on the grass in west London, Terzic was asked for his thoughts on the referee's performance and whether it had cost Dortmund a chance to join the last eight. "I don't want to talk about the referees," Terzic said. — AFP

## PGA players benefit from LIV revolution

MIAMI: Rory McIlroy admitted on Tuesday that the PGA Tour's top golfers were reaping the benefits of the emergence of the Saudi Arabia-backed LIV Golf circuit. McIlroy, one of the staunchest defenders of the PGA Tour in its bitter feud with LIV over the past year, said the launch of the upstart tour had forced the US-based circuit to innovate. The Northern Ireland star was speaking ahead of this week's Players Championship at TPC Sawgrass, which will tee off on Thursday without its reigning champion Cam Smith—who has since defected to LIV.

The PGA Tour has responded to emergence of the lucrative LIV circuit by introducing its own money-spinning no-cut events starting in 2024. McIlroy acknowledged on Tuesday that those changes would probably not have happened had it not been for the rise of LIV Golf. "I'm not going to sit here and lie: I think the emergence of LIV or the emergence of a competitor to the PGA Tour has benefited everyone that plays elite professional golf," McIlroy told a press conference.

"I think when you've been the biggest golf league in the biggest market in the world for the last 60 years, there's not a lot of incentive to innovate. "This has caused a ton of innovation at the PGA Tour. What was quite, I would say, an antiquated system is being revamped to try to mirror where we're at in the world in the 21st century with the media landscape. "The PGA Tour isn't just competing with LIV Golf or other sports. It's competing with Instagram and TikTok and everything else that's trying to take eyeballs away from the PGA Tour as a product.

### Monahan defends 'no-cut'

"LIV coming along, it's definitely had a massive impact on the game, but I think everyone who's a professional golfer is going to benefit from it going forward." McIlroy's remarks were mirrored by world number one Jon Rahm, who agreed that the momentum for change on the PGA Tour had been driven by LIV Golf's emergence.

"Without a doubt," Rahm said. "Without LIV Golf, this wouldn't have happened. "So to an extent, we should be thankful this threat has made the PGA Tour want to change things. I wish it didn't come to the PGA Tour being under fire from somebody else to make those changes and make things better for the players, but I guess it is what we needed. "So,

yeah, it is because of LIV Golf. Otherwise, we wouldn't have seen any of this."

PGA Tour commissioner Jay Monahan meanwhile defended the introduction of no-cut events from 2024, noting that the PGA Tour had held similar format tournaments in the past. "The players that are competing in our events in this new format next year will have earned the right to compete in them and they will have earned it through top-50 position in the FedExCup this year," Monahan said. "The PGA Tour has always had limited-field, no-cut 72-hole stroke play events. In fact, Jack Nicklaus won 17 times in that format. Arnold Palmer won 23. Tiger Woods won 26.

"To me, those wins, the format did not diminish those accomplishments as we sit here today. I think as we look out to 2024, 2025, 2026, the same will hold true." LIV Golf held its inaugural season in 2022, luring a slew of PGA Tour players and major winners with huge signing bonuses and 54-hole tournaments offering purses which dwarf the richest events on the PGA Tour. The tour faced stinging criticism from human rights groups however who say the circuit is "sports washing" by Saudi Arabia in an attempt to improve the kingdom's international image. — AFP

### Today's matches on TV

UEFA Europa League	
AS Roma v Real Sociedad	20:45
beIN Sports 2 HD Premium	
Bayer 04 Leverkusen v Ferencvarosi	20:45
beIN Sports HD Xtra 1	
Union Berlin v Royale Union Saint	20:45
beIN Sports 3 HD Premium	
Sporting v Arsenal	20:45
beIN Sports 1 HD Premium	
Sevilla v Fenerbahece	23:00
beIN Sports 3 HD Premium	
Juventus v Freiburg	23:00
beIN Sports 2 HD Premium	
Manchester United v Real Betis	23:00
beIN Sports 1 HD Premium	
beIN Sports HD 1 English	
Shakhtar Donetsk v Feyenoord	23:00
beIN Sports HD Xtra 1	

# Classifieds

### Hospitals & Clinics

Sabah Hospital	24812000	Khalidiya	24848075
Amiri Hospital	22450005	Kaifan	24849807
Maternity Hospital	24843100	Shamiya	24848913
Mubarak Al-Kabir Hospital	25312700	Shuwaikh	24814507
Chest Hospital	24849400	Abdullah Salem	22549134
Farwaniya Hospital	24892010	Nuzha	22526804
Adan Hospital	23940620	Industrial Shuwaikh	24814764
Ibn Sina Hospital	24840300	Qadsiya	22515088
Al-Razi Hospital	24846000	Dasmah	22532265
Physiotherapy Hospital	24874330/9	Bneid Al-Gar	22531908
		Shaab	22518752
		Qibla	22459381
		Ayoun Al-Qibla	22451082
		Mirqab	22456536
		Sharq	22465401
		Salmiya	25746401

### Clinics

Kaizen center	25716707
Rawda	22517733
Adaliya	22517144

### Change of Name

I, HAVE CHANGED MY NAME FROM MOHAMAD YUSUF ABDUL RAHIM TO MOHAMMED YUSUF ABDUL RAHIM SHAIKH AS PER MY DOCUMENTS. (C#3176)

I, MOHAMMAD SHAKEEL ABDUL KALAM DARUGAR holder of Indian Passport No. L1458509 do hereby change my name to MOHAMMAD SHAKEEL

BARUDGAR for all purposes. I will henceforth be known in the name MOHAMMAD SHAKEEL BARUDGAR and I also undertake to carry out this name change in all my documents. (C#3177)

I, JENAB HOJEFA BADODIYAWALA, Civil ID No. 298042001882, do hereby change my name to ZAINAB HUZEFA BADODIYAWALA for all purposes. I will henceforth be known in the name ZAINAB HUZEFA BADODIYAWALA and I also undertake to carry out this name change in all my documents. (C#3178) - 09-03-2023

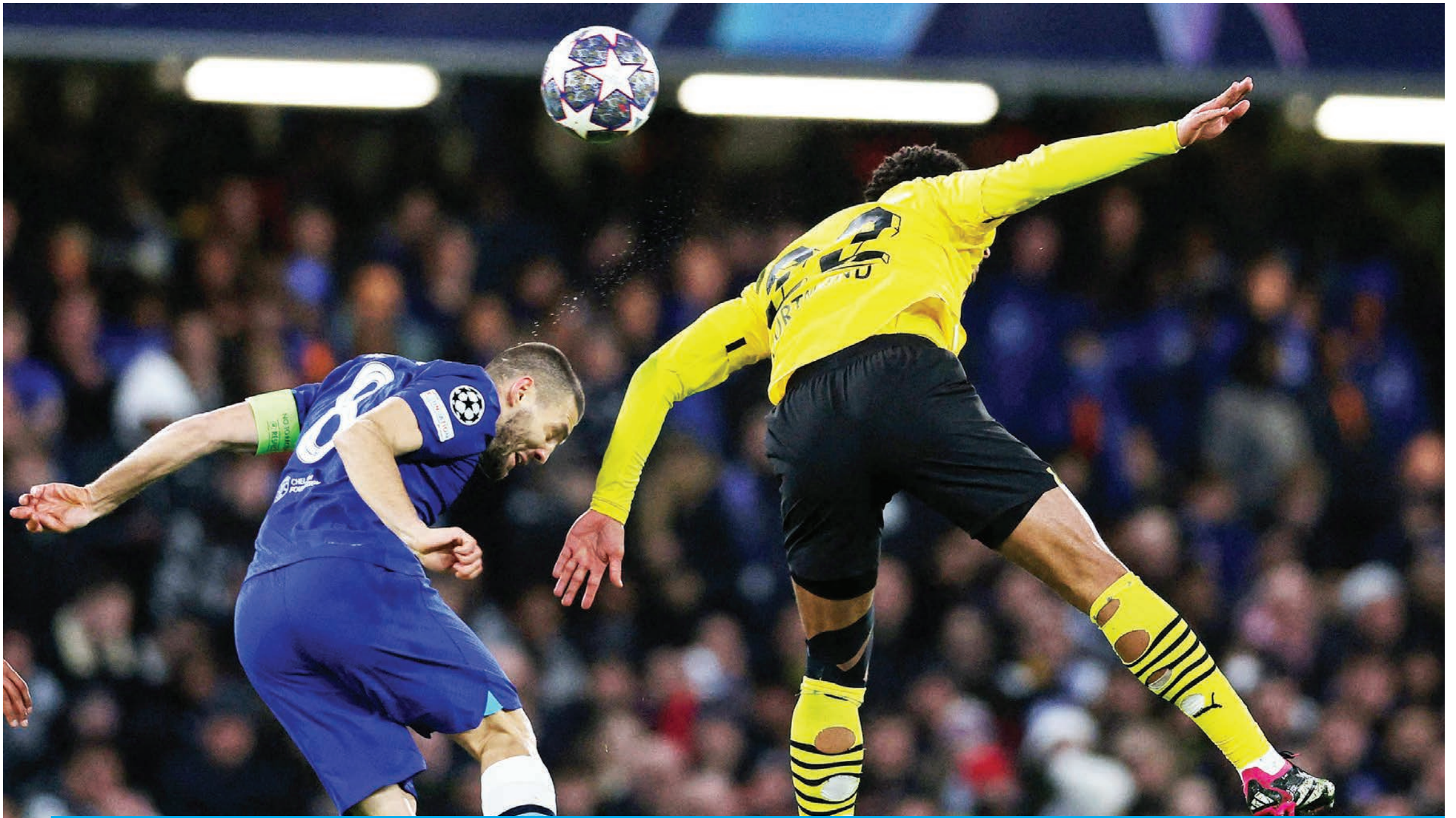
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## Chelsea book CL quarter-finals

Chelsea manager Potter breathes a sigh of relief



LONDON: Chelsea's Croatian midfielder Mateo Kovacic (left) and Dortmund's English midfielder Jude Bellingham vie to header the ball during the UEFA Champions League round of 16 second-leg football match between Chelsea and Borussia Dortmund at Stamford Bridge in London on March 7, 2023. — AFP

LONDON: Chelsea manager Graham Potter breathed a sigh of relief after his side finally delivered some return on a world record one-season spend in the transfer market on Tuesday. Chelsea kept their season alive by beating Borussia Dortmund 2-0 at Stamford Bridge to progress to the quarter-finals of the Champions League (CL) 2-1 on aggregate on Tuesday.

Raheem Sterling and Kai Havertz, with a twice-taken penalty, got the goals as the Blues relieved the pressure on manager Graham Potter. The Englishman's job was on the line after a season that has so far failed to deliver any return on a world-record injection of over £500 million (\$600 million) in one season on new signings. Chelsea had won just three of their previous 16 matches to fall to 10th in the Premier League and bow out early of both domestic cups.

But some of their expensive collection of stars showed up in time to remain in the hunt for a third European Cup. "There was a fantastic feeling in the

dressling room. We have been through a tough period and this competition means a lot for us," said Potter. "We wanted to progress and get into the last eight and it sets us up for the next few weeks."

Dortmund arrived in England on the back of a 10-game winning run in all competitions. But the visitors posed barely any attacking threat in the first half bar a Marco Reus free-kick that Kepa Arrizabalaga did brilliantly to palm to safety.

"We have to say, over the course of two games, Chelsea deserve to go through," said Dortmund boss Edin Terzic. "Both legs were very tight games. In this type of games inches and moments decide if you are going to the next round or not." Chances came and went frequently at the other end. Havertz smashed a volley off the inside of the post and then finally found the net via the underside of the bar only for the goal to be ruled out for an offside against Sterling earlier in the move.

The worst miss was to come as Kalidou Koulibaly miscued with an open goal from Ben Chilwell's free-kick and Felix's follow-up effort was blocked on the line. Potter was uncharacteristically animated on the touchline as he constantly whipped the crowd up to keep pushing his side forward. "There is a lot of emotion in the end," added Potter. "It was tense in the end but the boys played fantastic. "I am delighted for them to get the win and great for everyone here." The home fans finally had something to celebrate three minutes before half-time.

### Sterling comes good

Sterling's first attempt was another one to forget as he swiped and missed Chilwell's low cross, but the England international composed himself to dribble past Reus and fire high into the net. "I had a little mis-kick with the first touch but it landed perfectly and allowed us to build on that for our performance,"

said Sterling. That was just Chelsea's third goal in the last eight games. Havertz's penalty early in the second half meant Potter's men scored more than once for the first time since December 27, but the German international needed two spot-kicks to make his mark. Marius Wolf was penalised for handling Chilwell's cross after a VAR review.

Havertz's first penalty came back off the post, but VAR came to Chelsea's rescue once more as Dortmund were further punished for encroaching. There was no second reprieve as Havertz coolly slotted the ball the same way, this time finding the corner of the net. Chelsea's spending spree may have ruled them out of the running for Jude Bellingham with the Dortmund midfielder expected to have his choice of Europe's top clubs this summer. But on his return to England, Bellingham missed Dortmund's best chance to take the tie to extra-time when he side-footed wide from close range. — AFP

## Savea suspended over throat-slitting gesture



Ardie Savea

WELLINGTON: Wellington Hurricanes captain Ardie Savea has been suspended for a week after making a throat-slitting gesture towards an opponent during a fiery clash with the Melbourne Rebels. All Blacks star Savea was called before a judiciary committee on Tuesday evening after running his thumb across his throat following an argument with Rebels halfback Ryan Louwrens in Friday's game. The 29-year-old Savea, who had been shown a yellow card just before the incident, later apologized.

The loose forward said that, as a role model, he regretted the action that overshadowed his team's 39-33 win. The judiciary committee said it issued Savea with a warning for "unsportsmanlike play" after deciding that his action did not meet the threshold for a red card. However, it said the combination of the yellow card and the warning amounted to "persistent offending" by Savea.

The committee ruled that "an appropriate sanction" would be a one-week suspension. Savea, who has played 70 Tests for the All Blacks, including four as captain, acknowledged after the game that he lost control and revealed his father had given him a stern dressing down. "I got off the field and my old man called me and kind of groaned me off, so that's a lesson learned," he told reporters. — AFP

## Benfica thrash Brugge 5-1 to book CL last 16

LISBON: Goncalo Ramos struck twice to help Benfica romp to a 5-1 Champions League (CL) last 16, second leg win over Club Brugge on Tuesday in Lisbon and a 7-1 aggregate victory. Ramos, who shot to global fame during the World Cup when he was selected ahead of Cristiano Ronaldo for Portugal and netted a hat-trick against Switzerland, set up the opener for Rafa Silva. The 21-year-old forward then produced two clinical finishes either side of half-time to ensure the two-time European Cup winners would reach the quarter-finals in consecutive seasons.

Joao Mario struck from the spot to score in his fifth consecutive Champions League match -- Portugal great Eusebio was the last player to manage the feat for the club. David Neres added the fifth for Benfica before Bjorn Meijer netted a spectacular late consolation.

Roger Schmidt's ruthless side finished top of a group containing heavyweights Paris Saint-Germain and Juventus, and made light work of Scott Parker's knockout stage novices. "It's always good (to score), a striker like me makes a living from that, but the most important thing was that we won and played well," Ramos told Eleven Sports. "Whoever we get (in the next round), we will play in the same way." Benfica have only been beaten twice all season across all competitions and dominated from the outset against the Belgian visitors.

Chiquinho, who has taken Enzo Fernandez's place in midfield after his Premier League record transfer move to Chelsea in January, returned from injury for the hosts. Parker picked Ukrainian striker Roman Yaremchuk against his former side, pairing him with Noa Lang to try and spring an unlikely comeback. Joao Mario, in sparking goalscoring form this season from midfield, netted after just two minutes with a glorious, flicked finish, but the goal was ruled out for an offside in the build-up. The Portugal midfielder was then foiled



LISBON: Benfica's Portuguese forward Goncalo Ramos (right) scores his team's second goal during the UEFA Champions League round of 16 second-leg football match between SL Benfica and Club Brugge on March 7, 2023. — AFP

by Meijer, who hacked his goal-bound effort off the line. Eventually the hosts took the lead at the Estadio da Luz through Silva after 38 minutes, picked out well in the box by Ramos. Silva showed good close control to dig out some space and a deft finish to beat former Liverpool goalkeeper Simon Mignolet. Ramos steered home the second just before the break after being teed up by Joao Mario. He netted a brace on Friday against Famalicao to help the Portuguese league leaders maintain an eight-point advantage and was decisive in the box yet again.

Ramos surged inside from the left before firing back across himself into the bottom corner, leaving Mignolet with no chance, notching his 22nd goal of the season across all competitions. Close behind him on 20 is Joao Mario, enjoying the best goalscoring season of his career by a distance. The 30-year-old midfielder slashed a volley narrowly off target early in the second half. Brugge, who have now won just two of their last

17 games, were a surprise package in the group phase and helped eliminate Atletico Madrid, but were picked apart by the Eagles. Ramos netted his second before the hour mark with a clinical first-time finish from Alex Grimaldo's low cross. Then Joao Mario's coolly taken penalty added sheen to the scoreline after Abakar Sylila clumsily fouled Gilberto.

It was the midfielder's sixth goal of the tournament, pulling him level with Real Madrid's Vinicius Junior as the third top scorer, although five have come from the spot. Neres slotted home the fifth on a bruising night for Parker and his team, who pulled one back through Meijer, as Benfica proved they will be no pushovers in the next round. "The result hits us hard," said Brugge midfielder Hans Vanaken. "The way in which it happened was painful too, because we shipped the goals too easily. "I am emotional because we had a great campaign... you don't want to go out like that." — AFP