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Zain Group revenue soars 14% to reach \$5.6bn in 2022

KUWAIT: Zain Group, a leading mobile telecom innovator in seven markets across the Middle East and Africa, announced its consolidated financial results for the full-year 2022 and fourth quarter ended Dec 31, 2022. The group ended the year with a customer base of 52.4 million, an annual increase of 7 percent, reflecting an addition of 3.5 million customers.

For the full-year 2022, Zain Group generated consolidated revenue of KD 1.7 billion (\$5.6 billion), a year-on-year (Y-o-Y) increase of 14

percent. The Board of Directors of Zain recommended a cash dividend of 25 fils per share for the second half (H2) of 2022. This dividend follows the semi-annual dividend of 10 fils distributed earlier in 2022, totaling 35 fils per share for the year and reflecting a 78 percent payout ratio, one of the highest of listed entities in the region.

Zain Vice-Chairman and Group CEO Bader Al-Kharafi commented: "The impressive results for the 4th quarter and full-year of 2022 are a culmination of many cost optimization, digital innovation, and data monetization initiatives executed, bolstered by 5G network upgrades, lucrative enterprise deals, tower sales, proactive regulatory and sustainability practices implemented across our footprint in accordance with our 4Sight strategy, all of which are combining to future-proof the company." (See Page 9)



Zain Vice-Chairman and Group CEO Bader Al-Kharafi

KUWAIT: First Deputy Prime Minister, Interior Minister and Acting Defense Minister Sheikh Talal Al-Khaled Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah called on the Kuwaiti army on Tuesday to continue their diligent and devoted work in defending the country and safekeeping its security and stability. The minister's statement, which came during his meeting with the army leadership in the presence of Deputy Joint Staff Chief Major General Ghazi Al-Shammari, was conveyed in press release issued by the defense ministry.

The minister underlined the importance of benefiting from joint drills conducted alongside brotherly and friendly nations' armies to increase performance, boost sense of collaboration and teamwork and facilitate the exchange of expertise. He commended the army members' tireless efforts and their high spirits, wishing them further success under wise guidance of the leadership.

Moreover, Sheikh Talal discussed a number of plans and accredited programs aiming to equip and improve force members' skillssets and performances.

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News in brief

Ex-MP acquitted of vote-buying

KUWAIT: The criminal court on Tuesday acquitted former MP Hamad Al-Harashani and a number of his supporters from charges of buying votes during last year's parliamentary elections. Harashani, who served as a lawmaker for several terms, failed to get re-elected. The verdict is not final as the government is expected to appeal against the ruling to the court of appeals.

Hotlines to report beggars

KUWAIT: The interior ministry announced on Tuesday hotlines that people can use to report any act of begging, which is illegal under Kuwait's law, especially during Ramadan. The numbers are 97288200, 97288211, 25582582 and 25582581. People can also report cases on the 112 emergency number 24/7, the ministry noted.

Riyadh Air, Saudia order 78 787s

RIYADH: Riyadh Air and Saudia reached agreements to purchase 78 Boeing 787 Dreamliner planes to support Saudi Arabia's expanding aviation plans, Boeing announced Tuesday. Riyadh Air, which is owned by Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund, agreed to purchase 39 Dreamliners, with options for 33 more jets. National carrier Saudia will buy 39 Dreamliners with options for 10 more. — AFP

Meta axes 10,000 jobs

WASHINGTON: Facebook owner Meta announced a fresh wave of job cuts on Tuesday, part of what CEO Mark Zuckerberg called the company's "year of efficiency" as the US tech sector continues to downsize. In an email to employees, Zuckerberg said Meta would shed 10,000 jobs over the next few months, targeting middle management, and that 5,000 other roles would remain unfilled. The cuts follow a cull of 11,000 jobs announced by the company in November. — AFP (See Page 10)

Lebanon pound hits historic low of 100K to dollar

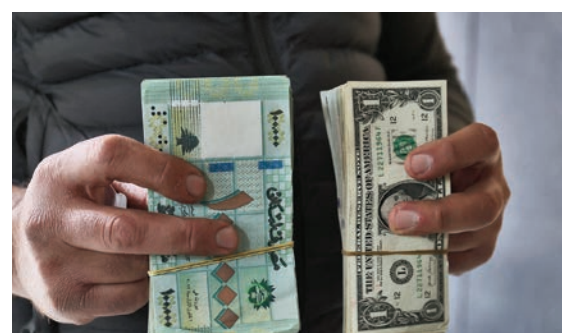
BEIRUT: The Lebanese pound sank to a historic low against the dollar on the parallel market Tuesday, the latest somber milestone in an economic meltdown that has plunged most of the population into poverty. Officially pegged at 15,000 to the dollar, the pound was trading at 100,000 against the greenback, deal-

ers said - a dizzying plunge from 1,507 before the economic crisis hit in 2019.

The currency's market value was at around 60,000 to the dollar in late January. The currency plunge has triggered price hikes including on fuel, food and other basic goods, with supermarkets this month starting to price items in dollars. Despite the gravity of the crisis, the political elite, which has been widely blamed for the country's financial collapse, has failed to take action.

Since last year, the country has had no president and only a caretaker government, amid persistent deadlock between rival factions.

Continued on Page 6



BEIRUT: A black-market currency dealer holds US dollars and Lebanese pounds on March 14, 2023. — AFP

6 months after death, Amini not forgotten

TEHRAN: Six months ago this week, Mahsa Amini was arrested for allegedly flouting Iran's strict dress code for women. Within days she was dead, sparking the country's biggest protests in years. The 22-year ethnic Kurd became a household name inside Iran, a rallying point for demands for change. Around the world, she became a hero for women's rights campaigners

and a symbol for Western opponents of the Islamic republic.

Amini was visiting the capital Tehran with her brother and cousins when she was arrested as they were leaving a metro station in the city center last September. Accused of wearing "inappropriate" attire, she was taken to a police station by officers of the morality police. There she collapsed after a quarrel with a policewoman, according to a short surveillance video released by the authorities.

She spent three days in hospital in a coma before her death on September 16, which the authorities blamed on underlying health issues.

Continued on Page 6



TEHRAN: A picture shows Iranian magazines Sazandegi (left) and Andisheh reporting on the death of Mahsa Amini on March 14, 2023. — AFP

Judges fasting for Ramadan more lenient

PARIS: Muslim judges are more likely to give lenient decisions while fasting during Ramadan, a study said Monday, contrasting to previous research suggesting that judges who have not eaten give harsher rulings. In what has been dubbed "the hungry judge effect", a 2011 study found that judges in the Zionist entity were more likely to deny criminals parole before they ate lunch than afterwards. Sultan Mehmood of Russia's New Economic School, the lead author of the new study, told AFP that he was curious to see if the same effect occurred during the holy month of Ramadan, when Muslims typically go without food or water from dawn to sunset. To find out, Mehmood and two other economic researchers sifted through a huge amount of criminal sentencing data, including roughly half a million cases

and 10,000 judges, covering a 50-year period in India and Pakistan, two of the top three countries with the largest Muslim populations.

They were "surprised" to find the opposite of the hungry judge effect, Mehmood said. There was a "sharp and statistically significant" rise in acquittals from Muslim judges during Ramadan - and there was no such increase for non-Muslims judges, according to the study published in the journal Nature Human Behaviour. Mehmood said Muslim judges in both countries gave an average of around 40 percent more acquittals during Ramadan than other periods of the year. And the longer the judges went without food and water, the more lenient they became. They were 10 percent more likely to acquit with each additional hour of fasting, the study said. The researchers also tried to quantify whether the more lenient decisions were better or worse than those made outside of Ramadan.

They found that the defendants on the receiving end of the lenient decisions were no more likely to commit another crime. The rate of recidivism was generally slightly lower - including for defendants of violent crimes such as armed robbery and murder. The lenient judgements were

also less likely to be appealed, the study said.

"The probability that the initial verdict was overturned was also lower," said Avner Seror, a study co-author and economist at France's Aix-Marseille University. Seror said that Ramadan was "well-suited to statistical analysis" because it offers numerous avenues for comparison, from being held on different dates every year to the duration of fasting differing depending on when the sun rises and sets.

He suggested that the change in the judges' decision-making could be connected to "the idea of clemency inherent in the Muslim ritual, a little like the spirit of Christmas among Christians". "But it goes further because it seems to help the judges make the right decision," he added.

Previous research has suggested that intermittent fasting can improve mood, cognition and memory, which could help the judges make better decisions, the researchers speculated. Mehmood said that when he talked to judges in Pakistan as part of the research, they all agreed that during Ramadan "we are too lenient". "I'm not sure if they agree whether this is a good thing or not," he added. — AFP



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KIPIC announces first shipment of solid sulfur from Al-Zour Refinery

Historical and remarkable achievement

KUWAIT: The Kuwait Integrated Petroleum Industries Company (KIPIC) on Tuesday announced the first shipment of solid sulfur from Al-Zour Refinery in cooperation with Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC). The first exported weight of the shipment amounted to 44,000 tons, official spokesman for KIPIC, Abdullah Al-Ajmi told Kuwait News Agency (KUNA).

In addition, the industrial island received four oil tankers as well as the first tanker to load solid sulfur for global markets. Al-Ajmi added that this achievement came a few days after second phase of the Al-Zour refinery operation, which doubled the volume of global oil exports and established its position as an influential source in the global energy market and a major provider of sustainable supplies of petroleum products with high environmental specifications that comply with international requirements.

He explained that the global exportation of all products is a historical and remarkable

achievement in the history of the Kuwaiti oil industry. The Al-Zour refinery exports are carried out through the largest artificial island that was established in the middle of the sea, which is used to export liquid petroleum products through two loading platforms with four docks for the export of liquid products, he added. The island is connected by four pipelines under the sea with Al-Zour refinery, as well as a special dock for exporting the solid sulfur product to all countries of the world.

Kuwait oil price up

Meanwhile, Kuwaiti oil price went up by \$2.13 to \$83.78 per barrel on Monday as opposed to last Friday's \$81.65 pb, said the Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) on Tuesday. The future contracts for the Brent crude and the West Texas Intermediate went down globally by \$2.01 and \$1.88 each, settling at \$80.77 per barrel and \$74.80 pb respectively. — KUNA



KIPIC exports first shipment of solid sulfur from Al-Zour Refinery. —KUNA

Families invest in the future

By Faten Omar

KUWAIT: There is never a bad time to start investing, as it is difficult to know what the future holds. After the COVID-19 pandemic led to a financial crisis, many families started to invest in their future. Kuwait Times spoke with citizens and residents to learn more. Salman Al-Qatan believes the future is in cryptocurrency and it will replace traditional fiat currencies in the future.

"Cryptocurrencies are not subject to inflationary pressures, can be used anonymously and have the potential to provide a high return on investment," he said. He affirmed that despite the risks, if people invest in the right cryptocurrencies, the value of the investment may increase much more than if they invested in stocks only.

For Abdullah Wael, the stock

market is worth studying due to its huge returns - if people buy the right stocks. "The stock market is full of options. It can be affordable, so people can buy more in the future. If the investment is for over at least 20 years with continuous stock dividends, you can actually end up with some great money for your retirement, children's college expenses, weddings or other expenses," he explained.

There are different areas for investing money. Mai Al-Nosairy sees that gold was and still is the best and safest investment. "Gold allows you to save money for your future. Other options are risky and could lead to losing all your savings," she said. She told Kuwait Times that gold was her mother's and grandmother's technique to save money, where it can be bought at the lowest rates and sold years later when money is needed.

Buying property for rent is also a smart investment. Masha Khaled affirmed people will be able to generate income from tenants while holding to the building value over time.



"Rental properties can be a great way to diversify your investment portfolio and protect you from the volatility of the stock market. In addition, if you can find a tenant who is willing to pay higher rent than the mortgage payment, you will be able to achieve a stable income every month, and be able to sell once the value of the land gets higher," she added.

"There are also many properties

inside and outside Kuwait worth checking out for real estate investors. These are a few of the best ways to invest your money in 2023, away from risky methods. With so many options available, it's important to do your research and choose the right investment for you. Also make sure to diversify your portfolio to reduce risk and not invest in something you do not understand," Khaled pointed out.

Over 1,000 teachers to be terminated

KUWAIT: Informed sources said the Education Ministry informed over 1,000 teachers of both genders will be terminated at the end of the academic year, with more teachers to be laid off. Education zones are reviewing their actual need of teachers and those who are not needed so as to announce who will be let go before the end of May.

Sources said education zones are waiting for the end of the second school term at Kuwait University and Public Authority for Applied Education and Training to welcome new Kuwaiti teachers who graduate from education colleges and according to their numbers and specialties, the number of expatriate teachers who will be laid off will be determined. The sources said there is another list of expat administrators, which includes 143 administrators employed on the reward system, who were told their services are no longer needed.

Dangers of unsupervised cyberspace

KUWAIT: Speakers during the Education Technology Conference stressed the importance of digital transformation and keeping pace with modern technologies in education, building infrastructure in educational institutions and building a university for artificial intelligence, stressing on the dangers of leaving young people without supervision by concerned institutions in the virtual world.

MP Hasan Jowhar spoke about the role of legislation in the development of education. "It is necessary to keep pace with global development using modern technologies in education. There is an

unprecedented technological leap through the ChatGPT application, which is the biggest challenge for humanity and educational institutions. This application includes a huge and unlimited amount of data and information, and the danger lies in its impact on the minds of young people, marginalizing the human mind and replacing human thinking with artificial intelligence," he warned.

"The current level of education does not rise to the standards of Kuwait's history of education. Kuwait, ranked 97th in the world, spends on education just like Finland, which is in first place. Education indicators in Kuwait did not keep pace with its capabilities, history or quality of education, when it was at the forefront of Arab countries during the seventies and eighties of the last century. If we want a real reform of education with modern technologies, then this must be an integral part of Kuwait's strategy, and if this is not achieved, we cannot move a step forward," Jowhar

said, indicating on the need for educational technology to be a focal point in education.

Director of the Public Authority for Applied Education and Training's department of research Dr Ahmad Al-Hunayan spoke about the digital divide between the reality of current education and technological development. "Countries are racing to achieve scientific progress in various fields of knowledge and technological revolutions that have cast a shadow on educational systems. Studies indicated that the prosperity of countries is due to their possession of technologies that help the development and excellence of education," he said. "The digital divide and its three indicators - access, skills and application of knowledge - are related to educational administrations and the learning environment, in addition to educational legislation and policies in GCC countries," he added.

An observer explained future prospects and

risk analysis at the General Secretariat for Planning. "E-learning is a form of distance education that includes studying using educational technology tools in order to deliver information to learners in the fastest time and at the lowest cost. Moreover, theses and scientific materials can be stored until the recipient wants to read them. It also works to reduce material costs required in traditional education, as there is no necessity in e-learning for educational facilities to exist in the current form, as well as reduce transportation costs from homes to educational facilities for both students and teachers," Fudha Abd Al-Muaili said.

The conference included two sessions on "Educational Institutions and COVID" and "Education in Kuwait and the Technological Revolution", which were moderated by Dr Shaimaa Al-Ansari, a member of the Media Center and Public Relations of the General Administration of Private Education.

Kuwait's new public prosecutors take oath



KUWAIT: A new batch of public prosecutors took oath on Tuesday before Supreme Judicial Council Chairman Justice Mohammad bin Naji and Attorney General Justice Saad Al-Safran, Kuwait's Public Prosecution announced.

Local

Mol proposes law to counter 'hate speech' in Arab world

Kuwait promotes peaceful dialogue



Kuwaiti delegation participates in Joint council meeting in the Arab League. —KUNA photos



CAIRO: A meeting took place in Cairo on Monday to finalize a guiding draft that was submitted by Kuwait to promote peaceful dialogue between the different spectrums of Arab society. In a statement to KUNA, Interior Ministry Lt Col Fahad Al-Mesbah said that proposed draft by the Ministry is aimed at strengthening the dialogue between all parts of Arab society in order to reduce conflicts resulting from "hate speech."

While also stressing on the social responsibility - pointing out that the draft was received with good response, given that it will renounce hate speech and promote more peaceful dialogues. Heading the Joint council meeting in the Arab League, Al-Mesbah made it clear that the study of the proposed draft needs continues participa-

tion to be finalized and submitted for the next meeting of the Council of Arab Ministers of Justice to consider its final approval.

Director of Legal Affairs at the Arab League Maha Bakhit said that this is considered a closer step towards the international communities' tenacities by creating legislation to prevent hate speech and discrimination that "degrades human dignity," stressing that the Arab region is also concerned. Bakhit also added the main idea of drafting the law is to reduce widespread phenomena projected in the Arab societies and to prevent hate speech that leads to conflicts and societal conflicts, especially in educational institutions that have witnessed these types of incidents.

The meeting was summoned as a result of the

decision made during the 38th season of the Council of Arab Ministers of Justice in October of last year, to discuss the details of the drafted law with all its articles and to formulate a full-fledged law that can guide countries that do not have legislation prohibiting hate speech.

She also mentioned the urgent need to provide what is called a "Code of Conduct" in associations for either schools or universities to prevent any hate speech or discrimination, hoping that majority of countries lacking such laws will be guided to reduce hate speech in their societies. Kuwait Ministry of Justice had presented in 2018 the draft "Guiding Arab Law for the Prevention of Hate Speech" to strengthen the dialogue between all sects of Arab society. — KUNA

KUNA, Gulf team discuss e-media

KUWAIT: Director General of Kuwait News Agency (KUNA) Dr Fatma Al-Salem on Tuesday met with a visiting Gulf electronic media team on ways of fostering bilateral e-media cooperation. Welcoming the visiting team of the Committee of the Electronic Media in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Dr Al-Salem underlined the significance of electronic media to news coverage, but stressed that it is necessary to ensure news credibility.

She pointed out that her agency is keen to build bridges of cooperation between Gulf media agencies with a view to sharpening and strengthening news expertise and capabilities. The Gulf media officials, in turn, spoke highly of KUNA's coverage of local and regional events, especially ones pertinent to the GCC member states. The Gulf media team's visit is part of a program of Gulf media personnel visits to attend activities held on the sidelines of a meeting of Arab media officials, hosted by Kuwait. — KUNA



Director General of Kuwait News Agency (KUNA) Dr Fatma Al-Salem receives Gulf Electronic media committee. — KUNA

GCC chief, US official discuss partnership

RIYADH: GCC Secretary-General Jassem Al-Budaiwi and the US Principal Deputy Administrator of the National Nuclear Security Administration Frank A Rose discussed ways to execute the strategic partnership between the agency and GCC, which was announced on May 2015. In a statement, GCC Secretariat said during the meeting, the two sides also asserted on the importance of nuclear safety, nuclear proliferation, and ban on the transfer of nuclear materials to terrorist groups, including talks on bolster-

ing strategic partnership between the two entities.

During the meeting, Rose also congratulated Al-Budaiwi on assuming the new post, expressing best wishes and success in his mission. Al-Budaiwi also stressed on the importance of strengthening joint military cooperation within the framework of the GCC organization. This came during a meeting with the Commander of the Unified Military Command of the GCC Lieutenant General Dr Eid Al-Shalawi, at the General Secretariat HQ in Riyadh. Many issues related to joint military action were discussed to further develop the council's endeavors.

Secretary-General of the Gulf Cooperation Council has stressed the need of promoting digital cooperation among the GCC member countries in

coordination with the Digital Cooperation Organization (DCO). During his meeting with DCO Secretary-General Deemah Al-Yahya, he reviewed the progress of cooperation since the signing of a GCC-DCO MoU in April 2021, according to a statement from the GCC Secretariat.

The meeting also dealt with the latest developments related to digitization in the GCC members. Al-Yahya congratulated Al-Budaiwi on his nomination GCC Secretary-General, wishing him success in mission. In its 31st session in January 2021, the GCC Supreme Council decided to enhance the partnerships with regional and international organizations, and pursue implementation of plans for joint action. — KUNA



KUWAIT: Medical experts show the new technique for the treatment of gastroesophageal reflux without surgery.

A new technique without surgery

By Abdellatif Sharaa

KUWAIT: Associate Professor at the College of Medicine Gastroenterologist Dr Jaber Al-Ali said a new technique for the treatment of gastroesophageal reflux without surgery has been introduced in Kuwait for the first time. He said the new technology is called GERDX, adding it is highly effective with safety of more than 98 percent. He said the technique gives the opportunity to treat esophageal reflux without an invasive procedure.

Dr Ali said reflux has several symptoms, most common of which are increased stomach acidity, with severe burning sensation



that goes all the way to the mouth. It also causes food to get back to the mouth, chest pain and difficulty swallowing. He said this condition can be prevented by following medical advice, changing lifestyle, stopping smoking, avoiding sleeping immediately after taking food, avoiding fatty meals, maintaining ideal weight and exercising.



Here's to her

In my view

By Fadia Alrefai



Local@kuwaittimes.com

Growing up as a girl in a fairly conservative society, I was frequently reminded of the different lenses men and women were viewed through and how this lens portrayed me, a woman, to be the weaker link in society. However, on Wednesday, the 8th of March, I was reminded at the College of Law in Kuwait University that not only am I not the weaker link, but WE, the women of the Kuwaiti society, are the vital links that make sure the web of society does not de-thread.

On this day, that marks International Women's Day, Dr Sarah Alsultan of the public law department, along with many other female elite professors including Dr Bashayer Almajed of the private law department as well as Dr Noora Alnaomi of the criminal law department, organized a seminar on the important and key issues that Kuwaiti women are struggling with because of legal gaps and flaws, under the patronage of the dean of the faculty of law Dr Abdullrahman Alradwan.

Dr Jenan Boushehri, a current member of the Kuwait parliament, joined as well, ensuring that female issues are within her political, legal and social priorities. The seminar mainly discussed the issues that Kuwaiti mothers of non-Kuwaiti children deal with, as well as the problems workers face when dealing with female prisons. Despite that this seminar discussed deeply legal and social topics, Dr Sara Alsultan generously invited me, reminding me and my generation that my role is to fill the legal gaps in order for the Kuwaiti society to be a healthier environment for women, and that future starts now.

To be honest, as a Kuwaiti young lady, my relatives always reminded me of the key role women played in the earlier Kuwaiti society. The economy prior to the late '40s was mainly based on fishing and diving for pearls, which meant men would start their voyages in the beginning of April with the onset of summer and would not return until the beginning of August.

After the return of the divers, the merchants would then start their trading trips that would take around nine months. What this meant was for almost all of the 12 months of the year, our society was mainly run by women. This is when women played a prominent and key role in the infrastructure of families and Kuwaiti history. It is at this time that they took on the role of both men and women. This is also when our grandmothers proved that they are the reason why we are here today.

In conclusion, I cannot talk about women without talking about the strongest woman I know - my mother Dr Shoroq Alsawan. Ever since I was born until this very day, my mother has taught me the true meaning of womanhood, and that is sacrifice. She was and still is sacrificing for her home and children, and more importantly she is sacrificing for the wellbeing of her society by prioritizing building us, her children, the newer generation, to the best of her abilities.

Mama, on International Women's Day and every day, I hope I can one day become the woman you are. Lastly, to every strong lady out there, to my sisters Nour and Farah, my aunts and grandmother Fadia, to my friends Alaa, Dalal, Jena and Muneerah, to my role model Dr Muneerah Alnemash. Thank you for being the support system of the society we are in today.

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News in brief

FM receives Turkish letter

KUWAIT: Kuwait's Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Salem Abdullah Al-Jaber Al-Sabah on Tuesday received a handwritten letter from Turkish counterpart Mevlut Cavusoglu, expressing his country's appreciation and gratitude to Kuwait and continuous support regarding the devastating earthquakes that struck southeastern Turkey. Cavusoglu also praised the efforts of the teams that contributed to the rescue of those trapped under the wreckage, stressing that the Turkish people will not forget Kuwait's sincere solidarity during such a difficult time. —KUNA

House fire extinguished

KUWAIT: The Public Relations Department at the Kuwait Fire Force (KFF) received a report about a fire that erupted in a house in Salmiya. Teams from Salmiya and Al-Bedaa fire stations rushed to the scene and evacuated the residents before extinguishing the fire successfully. No injuries were recorded.

Illegal stores shut down

KUWAIT: Two basements have been shut down in Farwaniya for storing meat, food and bakery equipment in the basements without license. The supervision team at the Farwaniya Municipality shut down two basements after finding that one of them is used to make food and as a bakery without a license while the second basement is used to store meat. "We will continue intensive inspection tours in all governorates to monitor and limit violations. Legal measures will be taken against violators," Director of the governorate's municipality Mohammed Sarkhouh said.

Photo of the day



KUWAIT: This aerial picture shows high-rise buildings during a foggy morning in Kuwait City on March 14, 2023. —Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

Kuwait celebrated at medical school ceremony in Japan

Kuwaiti aid helped tsunami-hit area address medical shortage



KUWAIT: Kuwait's Ambassador to Japan Sami Al-Zamanan is seen with Tohoku Medical and Pharmaceutical University President Dr Motoaki Takayanagi and other officials.



Japanese medical graduates pose with the ambassador. —KUNA photos

KUWAIT: A Japanese official said he was thankful to Kuwait for its help in the aftermath of the 2011 earthquake and Tsunami which left close to 20,000 people dead and whole towns destroyed. In a press statement issued by Kuwait's embassy in Tokyo, Governor of Miyagi prefecture Yoshihiro Murai said the oil, Kuwait had donated at the time, which is valued at about \$524 million, helped accelerate the pace of reconstruction after the calamity. The remarks came at an event attended by Kuwait's Ambassador to Japan Sami Al-Zamanan and Tohoku Medical and Pharmaceutical University students and officials.

Miyagi prefecture, closest to the epicenter of the 9.0-magnitude earthquake, was one of the most severely affected areas, with reportedly over 10,000 victims. Part of the money the prefecture received from Kuwait went to support establishing the Kuwait Partnership Fund for Medical Education with a capital of \$104 million. The fund provides scholarships for medical students from Miyagi, who commit to working at designated medical institutions in the prefecture for 10 years after graduation from the then-newly established Tohoku Medical and Pharmaceutical University, according to a 2013 KUNA report. A brand-new building for the university's hospital, said Murai, was also built using Kuwaiti aid.

The projects, said Murai, helped address a shortage in

medical staff in Miyagi and neighboring areas. Ambassador Al-Zamanan stressed the sturdiness of Kuwaiti-Japanese relations as the two celebrate 62 years of diplomatic ties. He said Kuwait's support to Japan was a natural reaction by late Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, in appreciation for Japan's position during the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Zamanan reiterated the embassy's readiness to work diligently to further bolster partnership between the two friendly nations.

According to a 2011 KUNA report, Kuwait had donated five million barrels of crude oil to the quake-struck country. The first shipment of the donated fuel arrived on October 12, about seven months after the disaster. The oil was provided through Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) based on a decision made in April 2011.

The donated oil was to be delivered to four Japanese refineries, and money to the value of the oil was to be given to quake victims through the Japan Red Cross. The organization planned to use the money for eight projects in Miyagi, Iwate and Fukushima. "In our 134-year-old history, it is the first time that Japan Red Cross has received assistance in a form of crude oil," former Japanese Red Cross Society President Tadatake Konoe said at the time. —Agencies

Kuwait participates in Arab sustainable development forum

BEIRUT: The 2023 Arab Forum for Sustainable Development (AFSD) began Tuesday, with a focus on accelerating COVID-19 recovery and discussing actions needed for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in the Arab region.

A Kuwaiti delegation is attending the forum, including Secretary-General of the Supreme Council for Planning and Development in Kuwait Khaled Mahdi and Assistant Foreign Minister for Economic Affairs, Ambassador Sami Al-Hamad. In a video message posted on the forum's website, Mahdi said Kuwait has been committed to adapting the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals since they were first announced in 2015.

In addition to Kuwait, Arab Governments and stakeholders are coming together at AFSD to address sustainable development priorities from a regional perspective. The forum is organized annually by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), in collaboration with the League of Arab States and other United Nations entities operating in Arab countries. "Poverty is becoming more widespread, along with hunger, infant and maternal mortality. The number of displaced persons is still on the rise," said Arab League Secretary General Ahmed Aboul Gheit. He added that the Arab League launched an initiative to

eradicate hunger in the Arab region, which calls for a quick response to food security challenges. It's also published a white paper outlining a regional initiative for climate security in the region.

About Gheit said countries in the area need to support their national institutions in building capacity for facing sustainability challenges. Stemming from their belief in the importance of an Arab strategic vision, the secretariat general of the league and ESCWA, he said, are in the process of creating on a joint plan for the region. The goal is for it to come to fruition by 2045, which coincides with the 100-year anniversary of the founding of the United Nations and the Arab League, said Aboul Gheit.

Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations and Chair of the United Nations Sustainable Development Group Amina J. Mohammed said the Arab region is not safe from the environmental crisis threatening the world. The lack of water security and the declining biodiversity have led to inequality and poverty in 50 percent of the region's less developed countries and those in conflict, she said.

Food insecurity has affected 30 percent of the population, said Mohammed. But she pointed out that the region has potential in utilizing more sustainable energy sources. "The cost of producing solar energy in the Arab region is the lowest in the world. The region has broken the record (in solar energy production) in 2021 and 2022," she said.

Executive Secretary at ESCWA Rola Dashti said it was "unacceptable" for an Arab child to be born \$3,500 in debt due to the accumulated debts of the region, which amount to \$1.5 trillion. Dashti highlighted the widespread unemployment, poverty and gender inequality in the region. She pointed out that about 30 million Arabs are unemployed and 160 million people work in unregulated sectors without any social security. —Agencies



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China lifts sweeping tourist visa curbs

Saddam's ageing superyachts attest to legacy of excess, war

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SAN DIEGO: US President Joe Biden (C) participates in a trilateral meeting with British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak (R) and Australia's Prime Minister Anthony Albanese (L) during the AUKUS summit at Naval Base Point Loma in San Diego California. —AFP

China warns over nuke-powered sub pact

Australia to buy up to five US nuclear-powered submarines

BEIJING: China warned on Tuesday that Australia, Britain and the United States were treading a "path of error and danger" after they unveiled a nuclear-powered submarine deal. Australia announced on Monday it would buy up to five US nuclear-powered submarines, then build a new model with US and British technology under an ambitious plan to bulk up Western muscle across the Asia-Pacific in the face of a rising China.

US President Joe Biden has stressed that Australia, which joined the alliance with Washington and London known as AUKUS 18 months ago, will not be getting nuclear weapons. Wang Wenbin, China's foreign ministry spokesman, said: "The latest joint statement from the US, UK and Australia demonstrates that the three countries, for the sake of their own geopolitical interests, completely disregard the concerns of the international communities and are walking further and further down the path of error and danger."

Wang accused the three Western allies of inciting an arms race, saying the security deal was "a typical case of Cold War mentality". The sale of submarines "constitutes a severe nuclear proliferation risk, and violates the aims and objectives

of the Non-Proliferation Treaty", Wang said at a regular news conference in Beijing. The UN nuclear watchdog said it had to ensure there were no proliferation risks from the deal.

"Ultimately, the Agency must ensure that no proliferation risks will emanate from this project," International Atomic Energy Agency chief Rafael Grossi said. Moscow, which has sought to shore up its ties with China, also accused the West of fomenting "years of confrontation" in the Asia-Pacific region. "The Anglo-Saxon world, with the creation of structures like AUKUS and with the advancement of NATO military infrastructures into Asia, is making a serious bet on many years of confrontation," Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said in televised comments.

'Stability for decades'

Monday's announcement came at an event at a naval base in San Diego, California, where Biden hosted Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak. With a US Virginia-class nuclear submarine moored behind the trio's podium, Biden said the United States had "safeguarded stability in the Indo-Pacific for decades" and that the submarine alliance would bolster "the prospect of peace for decades to come".

Albanese said the deal represents the biggest single

investment in Australia's defence capability "in all of our history". The submarines are expected to be equipped with long-range cruise missiles, offering a potent deterrent.

The Australian government estimates the multi-decade project will cost almost \$40 billion in the first 10 years, and create an estimated 20,000 jobs. Albanese underlined that Australia was now only the second country, after Britain, to be granted access to US naval nuclear secrets.

Three conventionally armed, nuclear-powered Virginia class vessels will be sold "over the course of the 2030s", with the "possibility of going up to five if that is needed", said Biden's national security adviser Jake Sullivan.

Britain and Australia will then embark on building a new model, also nuclear-powered and carrying conventional weapons, dubbed the SSN-AUKUS. This will be a British design, with US technology, and with "significant investments in all three industrial bases", Sullivan said.

Defence spending on the rise

While Australia has ruled out deploying atomic weapons, its submarine plan marks a significant new stage in the confrontation with China, which has built a sophisticated naval fleet and turned artificial islands into offshore bases in the Pacific.

In the face of the Chinese challenge-and Russia's invasion of pro-Western Ukraine-Britain is also moving to beef up its military capabilities, Sunak's office said Monday. More than \$6 billion in additional funding over the next two years will "replenish and bolster vital ammunition stocks, modernise the UK's nuclear enterprise and fund the next phase of the AUKUS submarine programme", Downing Street said.

Australia had previously been on track to replace its ageing fleet of diesel-powered submarines with a \$66 billion package of French vessels, also conventionally powered. The abrupt announcement by Canberra that it was backing out of that deal and entering the AUKUS project sparked a brief but unusually furious row between all three countries and their close ally France. Compared with the Collins-class submarines due to be retired by Australia, the Virginia-class is almost twice as long and carries 132 crew members, not 48. However, the longer-term upgrade will require a long wait.

A senior US official said the British navy should get its "state of the art" SSN-AUKUS vessels in the late 2030s and Australia only in the early 2040s. Chinese President Xi Jinping made a fiery statement last week accusing the United States of leading a Western effort at "all-round containment, encirclement and suppression of China". —AFP

California scrambles to fix levee as another storm looms

LOS ANGELES: Emergency workers scrambled Monday to stabilise a California levee after a breach forced thousands from their homes, as another major storm loomed, threatening more flooding. Houses were inundated and vehicles submerged when the Pajaro River burst over a crumbling levee overnight Friday into Saturday, with firecrews going door-to-door to rouse sleeping residents.

By Monday morning, the hole had widened to 300 feet (100 meters), said officials in Monterey County, south of San Francisco. "Emergency temporary repair work to stabilize the breach is underway," the county said in a statement.

"Flood waters are moving through the community and southward. Residents who have not left the area are still encouraged to do so." Rescue teams, including divers, were working in the region, the county said, although no deaths or injuries have been reported.

More than 10,000 people throughout the county have been told to leave their homes because of the Pajaro River and nearby Salinas River, which is also expected to flood over the coming day. The area was hit by flooding in January as a long line of atmospheric rivers-ribbons of moisture that run through the atmosphere-dumped trillions of gallons (liters) of water on California.

County Sheriff Tina Nieto said the flooding from the breach was even more intense. "People are taking it seriously," she was quoted as saying by the San Francisco Chronicle. "This is real. Mother Nature is fickle. It's a holy moly situation."

Meteorologists said that while rain had eased off, it



PAJARO: A man helps Naomi Rodriguez (R) walk through flood waters in Pajaro, California. Residents were forced to evacuate in the middle of the night after an atmospheric river surge broke the Pajaro Levee and sent flood waters flowing into the community. —AFP

would be back late Monday and into Tuesday, with more than two inches (five centimeters) expected on ground too wet to absorb any more water. Brooke Bingham, lead meteorologist for the National Weather Service (NWS) in the Bay Area and Monterey Bay, said the danger of more flooding was very real.

"It is critical that you leave areas that are expected to be impacted," she said in a video posted to Twitter. "Remember, it's better to stay the night in a strange place than to wake up to rising water in your home or to realize that you've been cut off due to closed roads all around you."

The parade of winter storms that have pummeled California have caused hundreds of millions of dollars of damage as they washed out communities, brought down power lines and caused landslides.

More than 20 people have died. Mountainous areas have seen near-record snowfall over the winter months, leading to huge snowpacks and fears that relatively warm rain now could cause a huge melt that will overwhelm watercourses. —AFP

Known as Freedom Shield, the drills started Monday and will run for 10 days. In a rare move, Seoul's military this month revealed the two allies' special forces were staging military exercises dubbed "Teak Knife"-which involve simulating precision strikes on key facilities in North Korea-ahead of Freedom Shield. The Freedom Shield exercises focus on the "changing security environment" due to North Korea's redoubled aggression, the allies have said. They will "involve wartime procedures to repel potential North Korean attacks and conduct a stabilisation campaign in the North", the South Korean military said previously.

It emphasised that the exercise was a "defensive one based on a combined operational plan". But North Korea views all such drills as rehearsals for invasion and has repeatedly warned it would take "overwhelming" action in response. Last year, North Korea declared itself an "irreversible" nuclear power and launched a record-breaking number of missiles. Leader Kim Jong Un earlier this month ordered his military to intensify drills to prepare for a "real war".

Leif Easley, a professor at Ewha University in Seoul, said while Pyongyang routinely justified its missile tests by pointing to the South's military exercises, they also served a domestic purpose. "This is largely about the Kim regime not wanting to look weak as it struggles economically at home while South Korea succeeds at strengthening its conventional firepower and security partnerships," he told AFP. —AFP

N Korea fires two ballistic missiles: Seoul

SEOUL: North Korea fired two short-range ballistic missiles Tuesday, Seoul said, Pyongyang's second launch in three days and the first since South Korea and the United States began their largest joint military drills in five years. Washington and Seoul have ramped up defence cooperation in the face of growing military and nuclear threats from the North, which has conducted a series of increasingly provocative banned weapons tests in recent months.

South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff said the military had "detected two short-range ballistic missiles" fired between 7:41 am (2241 GMT) and 7:51 am, which flew some 620 kilometers. "Our military has strengthened surveillance and vigilance in preparation for additional launches," it added. Japanese government spokesman Hirokazu Matsumoto said the missiles had not landed in his country's waters, though Tokyo suspected North Korea might take "further provocative action." The launch comes just days after Pyongyang fired two "strategic cruise missiles" from a submarine in apparent protest over the US-South Korea exercises.

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Saddam’s ageing superyachts attest to legacy of excess, war

‘Everyone who comes is amazed by the luxury of the yacht’

BASRA: Frozen in time for 20 years, two superyachts lie at the confluence of Iraq’s Tigris and Euphrates rivers, bearing witness to the false glories of former dictator Saddam Hussein. Just a few hundred metres separate the grandiose vessels on the Shatt al-Arab waterway in Iraq’s southern city of Basra, but despite their proximity, they have met very different fates.

The Al-Mansur (Victorious) now lays on its side, having capsized after it was struck during the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq that ended Saddam’s decades of iron-fisted rule. Moored at a nearby quay, the Basrah Breeze-equipped with swimming pools and at one time a missile launcher-is by contrast partially open to curious spectators eager to board this relic of the war-scarred country’s past.

“Everyone who comes is amazed by the luxury of the yacht,” said Sajjad Kadhim, an instructor at the University of Basra’s maritime science centre, which now has jurisdiction over the boat as part of a project to study it. But to the surprise of many visitors, Saddam never sailed aboard the Basrah Breeze, which at a length of 82 metres (90 yards) was just one example of the former ruler’s extravagance.

The interior of the vessel is like a time capsule, bearing all the gilded trimmings typical of the late strongman’s vast collection of properties. The yacht’s presidential suite is decorated in golden and cream tones with a king-sized canopy bed and plush, 18th-century style armchairs, while the vast bathrooms are embellished with golden faucets.

During his nearly 24 years in power, Saddam was not known to spare any expense, and the Basrah Breeze, delivered in 1981, was no exception. With a capacity to board nearly 30 passengers and 35 crew members, the boat has 13 rooms, three lounge areas and a helipad.

Perhaps most impressive is a secret corridor leading to a submarine, offering an escape from any im-

minent threats, as noted on an information panel on the boat. “While the Iraqi people were living through the horrors of war and an embargo, Saddam owned such a ship,” said Kadhim, 48, decrying the “wastefulness of the former regime”.

Fearing the repercussions of the Iran-Iraq war during the 1980s, Saddam had given the boat to Saudi Arabia, before it travelled on to Jordan, Kadhim explained. By 2007, the vessel had come to be moored in Nice, France, where a year later it became the centre of a protracted legal dispute.

Iraqi authorities had claimed ownership over the Basrah Breeze after having discovered plans to sell it for nearly \$35 million by a company registered in the Cayman Islands. With its claim to the boat finally recognised, the Iraqi government in 2009 decided to moor the boat in Basra, having been unable to sell it. “What I like is the old equipment, the fax and the old telephones in the cockpit,” university professor Abbas al-Maliki told AFP. “It reminds me of the pre-internet era.”

The state of the Basrah Breeze is a far cry from the Al-Mansur, half-submerged, its rusty carcass protruding from the waters of Shatt al-Arab. Measuring 120 metres in length and weighing more than 7,000 tonnes, the former presidential yacht had been assembled in Finland and delivered to Iraq in 1983, according to the website of Danish designer Knud E. Hansen.

It has a capacity of 32 passengers and 65 crew members. In the period just before the US-led invasion two decades ago, the Al-Mansur had been moored in the Gulf. But Saddam would later send it up along Shatt al-Arab “to protect it from bombardment by American planes”, according to maritime engineer Ali Mohamed. “This was a failure,” he added. According to Basra’s former chief of heritage Qahtan al-Obeid, in March 2003 “several

limit judicial overreach, but protesters have decried them as threatening Zionist entity’s liberal democracy by weakening key checks and balances.

Demonstrations have flared for 10 weeks, and activists staged another sit-in early Tuesday outside government ministries in Jerusalem, briefly blocking access to staff. “Stop the rush toward a messianic dictatorship and start working toward democracy,” the protesters demanded before 10 of them were detained by police.

The latest measure was adopted by a 61 to 52 vote but will still need to be approved in a committee and then in second and third plenum readings before becoming law. It would allow lawmakers to override Supreme Court decisions that strike down legislation with a majority of 61 of the 120-member parliament, and then deny the court the right to review such a move. It would also make it harder for the Supreme Court to strike down legislation it



BASRA: This aerial image shows the Basrah Breeze, a private yacht that was owned by former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein, moored in the Shatt al-Arab waterway, in Iraq’s southern city of Basra, on March 2, 2023. —AFP

raids were launched on the yacht over a number of days. “It was bombed at least three times, but it never sank,” he said.

In pictures taken by an AFP photographer in 2003, Al-Mansur can be seen still floating on the water, its top floors charred from a fire that erupted due to the bombing. But by June of that year, the boat was already tipping precariously. It fell over “when the

deems to contravene Basic Laws, Zionist entity’s quasi constitution, by requiring the support of 12 out of 15 judges. In an earlier overnight vote, lawmakers also approved a bill in first reading that would considerably limit the chances of a prime minister being declared incapacitated for any reason other than mental or physical impairments.

The government of Netanyahu, which includes ultra-Orthodox and extreme-right parties, introduced its judicial reform package in January. Ten consecutive weeks of nationwide demonstrations have followed, with critics also charging that the proposed changes aim to protect Netanyahu as he fights corruption charges in an ongoing court battle.

Netanyahu and his justice minister argue the changes are needed to reset the power balance between elected politicians and the unelected judges on the powerful Supreme Court. The reforms would also grant the ruling coalition more powers in appointing judges.

motors were stolen. This created openings and the water rushed in, causing it to lose balance,” Obeid said. In a country wracked by decades of war, the authorities launched a campaign to clear the flotsam of smaller boats stranded in Shatt al-Arab.

But Al-Mansur “is a very big boat, it has to be dismantled then removed,” said Obeid-a process that would be “costly and difficult”. — AFP

Zionist President Issac Herzog, whose role is largely ceremonial, has tried to broker dialogue on the conflict that has deeply split Zionist entity’s politics and society. Herzog warned late Monday that the “constitutional and social crisis” was damaging the country and “could have diplomatic, economic, social and security repercussions”. Zionist entity’s opposition leader, centrist former premier Yair Lapid, has refused to engage in dialogue before the ruling coalition entirely freezes its push to turn the bills into law.

Lapid and three other Jewish opposition party leaders said Monday they would boycott the final votes on the legal reform bills if they reach their third readings. The heads of the two Arab opposition parties did not attend the meeting. A group of prominent scholars have meanwhile sought to present to the parliament a compromise version of the reforms, declaring that the aim was “preventing constitutional chaos”. — AFP

Odds of asteroid hitting Earth drop

PARIS: The chances have plummeted that a newly-discovered asteroid with the potential to wipe out a city will hit Earth on Valentine’s Day 2046, the European Space Agency said on Tuesday. The asteroid, which is named 2023 DW and is estimated to be around the size of a 50-metre Olympic swimming pool, was first spotted by a small Chilean observatory on February 26. It swiftly shot to the top of NASA and ESA lists of asteroids that pose a danger to Earth, leading to a raft of alarming news headlines, some warning lovers to cancel their Valentine’s plans on Feb 14, 2046.

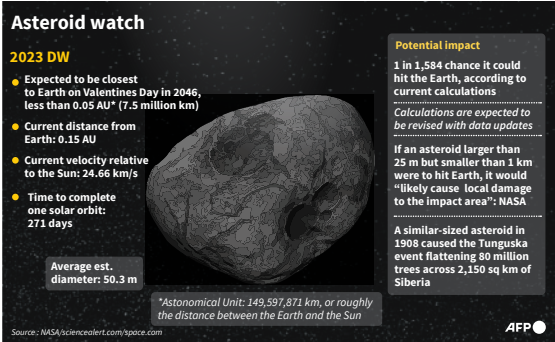
Late last month the asteroid was given a one in 847 chance of hitting Earth - but the odds rose to one in 432 on Sunday, according to the ESA’s risk list. However Richard Moissl, the head of the ESA’s planetary defense office, told AFP on Tuesday that overnight the probability fell to one in 1,584. “It will go down now with every observation until it reaches zero in a couple of days at the latest,” he said. “No one needs to be worried about this guy.”

NASA on Tuesday lowered its own odds of impact to one in 770, meaning there was a 99.87 percent chance that the asteroid will miss Earth. “We tend to be a little more conservative, but it definitely appears to now have a downward trend in probability,” NASA’s planetary defense officer Lindley Johnson told AFP. He said it was normal for the impact odds of newly discovered asteroids to briefly rise before rapidly falling.

This is because new observations shrink the “uncertainty region” where the asteroid will travel to on its closest point to Earth, he said. While the Earth is still inside that uncertainty region, the odds temporarily increase - until further observations exclude Earth and the probability drops down to zero, as is expected to happen with 2023 DW.

But what would happen in the increasingly unlikely event that the asteroid does strike Earth? Davide Farnocchia, a scientist at NASA’s Center for Near-Earth Object Studies, said a good comparison was the Tunguska event, in which a similarly-sized asteroid is believed to have exploded in the atmosphere above a sparsely populated area in Siberia in 1908.

“The resulting explosion flattened trees over an area of about 2,000 square kilometers,” Farnocchia said. London covers an area of around 1,600 sq km. Moissl said that an asteroid the size of 2023 DW would create “regionalized destruction” and not have a major effect



on the rest of the world. The asteroid, which is orbiting the Sun, came around nine million kilometers from Earth during its most recent closest approach on February 18 — a week before it was discovered.

If it was to strike Earth in 2046, it would be speeding along at around 15 km a second, according to estimations. There would be a roughly 70 percent chance it lands in the Pacific Ocean, but the potential strike zone would also include the United States, Australia or South-east Asia, Moissl said.

Even if the asteroid is heading our way, the experts emphasized that the world is no longer defenseless against such a threat. Last year, NASA’s DART spacecraft deliberately slammed into the pyramid-sized asteroid Dimorphos, significantly knocking it off course in the first such test of our planetary defenses. Farnocchia said the “DART mission gives us confidence that such a mission would be successful” against 2023 DW, if required. With 23 years to prepare, there is “ample time” for such a mission to be planned, Moissl said.

The ESA’s Hera mission, scheduled to launch next year to inspect the damage DART had on Dimorphos, could even be repurposed for reconnaissance if necessary, he added. Such plans would not be considered until the probability of an impact passes one in 100, when it would get the attention of UN-endorsed bodies like the International Asteroid Warning Network and the Space Mission Planning Advisory Group (SMPAG), Moissl said.

The aim of SMPAG is to “have everyone on the same page and avoid what happened in the movie ‘Don’t Look Up’,” in which “stupid stuff” happened because nations did not coordinate with each other, Moissl added. However such defense mechanisms look unlikely to be required for 2023 DW. “Everyone should relax, ignore the sensationalist headlines and stories, and watch how this situation plays out,” NASA’s Johnson said, adding that any threat was likely to “evaporate” soon. “Nevertheless, the planetary defense community will keep looking up!” — AFP

held talks on Monday with his Iranian counterpart Dr Ali Bagheri on friendly relations and ways to enhance cooperation between both countries in various fields. The joint Kuwaiti-Iranian legal committee later met on Monday under the co-chairmanship of Otaibi and Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister for Legal International Affairs Reza Najafi. The meeting focused on the demarcation of maritime boundaries between the two friendly countries. Both sides stressed the need to settle the matter in consistency with the rules of international law. — KUNA

Lebanon pound hits historic low...

Continued from Page 1

“The lira has become completely worthless,” said 75-year-old Abu Abbas, who owns a small jewelry stall on Beirut’s busy Hamra Street and said he was barely making ends meet. “I used to buy medicine for my wife for 40,000 pounds, now it costs 900,000,” he told AFP.

Lebanese banks, which have imposed draconian withdrawal restrictions - essentially locking depositors out of their life savings - were closed on Tuesday as they resumed an open-ended strike. The strike began early last month to protest what the Association of Banks in Lebanon described as “arbitrary” judicial measures against lenders, after depositors filed lawsuits to retrieve savings.

Some judges sought to seize the funds of bank directors or board members, or to force lenders to pay out customers’ dollar deposits in pounds at the old 1,507 exchange rate. Customers had a two-week reprieve from the strike after caretaker Prime Minister Najib Mikati intervened late last month to impede the work of one of the judges investigating banks.

Withdrawal limits have sparked public outrage that has seen some Lebanese resort to armed holdups in a bid to lay hands on their own money. The facades of

6 months after death, Amini...

Continued from Page 1

For many, the young woman from the western city of Saqez personified the fight against the obligation to wear the headscarf. Her name became the rallying point for a protest movement that gripped the country for months. The epitaph engraved on her tomb reads: “You are not dead Mahsa, your name has become a symbol”.

Almost overnight, her portrait became ubiquitous in Iran’s cities, fly-postered on walls and held aloft by protesters. It even made the cover of some magazines published inside Iran, including the March edition of the monthly Andisheh Pouya. “Unknown before her death, Mahsa has become a symbol of oppression and her innocent face reinforces this image,” said political scientist Ahmad Zeidabadi.

The protests over her death in custody, which began in the capital and in her native Kurdistan province, swiftly mushroomed into a nationwide movement for change. Public anger over her death merged with “a series of problems, including the economic crisis, attitudes toward the morality police, or political issues such as the disqualification of candidates for election” by Iran’s conservative-dominated vetting body the Guardian Council, said sociologist Abbas Abdi.

Spearheaded by young people demanding gender equality and greater openness without a leader or political program, the street protests peaked late last year. Hundreds of people were killed, including doz-

many banks in the capital are almost unrecognizable from the outside, covered in protective metal panels, while ATMs have been vandalized. “Ruling politicians... robbed the country and stole depositors’ money,” said Mohammad Al-Rayes, a Beirut shopkeeper. “They should leave and bring new leaders,” the 65-year-old told AFP, adding: “Very tough times are coming.”

Political inaction and a lack of accountability has been a hallmark of the Lebanese economic crisis, dubbed by the World Bank as one of the planet’s worst in recent history. In April last year, the International Monetary Fund announced an agreement in principle to provide Beirut with \$3 billion in loans spread over four years - conditional on a package of sweeping reforms.

But officials have failed to enact the changes demanded by international creditors in return for unlocking the emergency loans. Central bank governor Riad Salameh is being investigated at home and abroad for the suspected embezzlement of hundreds of millions of dollars. A Lebanese judge has asked Salameh to appear before visiting European investigators on Wednesday as part of a multinational probe into his personal wealth.

Lebanon is facing the economic meltdown largely leaderless, as the divided parliament has failed to elect a new president for months - in a country already governed by a caretaker cabinet with limited powers. Repeated sessions convened to elect a successor to Michel Aoun, whose term ended in October last year, have all failed to reach agreement on a consensus candidate. — AFP

ens of security force personnel. Thousands more were arrested for participating in what officials described as “riots” and blamed on hostile forces linked to the United States, the Zionist entity and their allies.

In February, after the protests abated and supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei decreed a partial amnesty, the authorities began to release thousands of people arrested in connection with the protests. Some 22,600 people “linked to the riots” have so far been released, the head of the judiciary, Gholamhossein Mohseni Ejei said this week. But Abdi said protesters could return to the streets again as the underlying grievances remained unaddressed.

“The demonstrations are over, but I doubt the protest has ended,” he said, noting that “the main causes of the crisis remain. “In the current situation, any incident can trigger new protests.” He cited as an example the public anger sparked by a spate of mystery poisonings that have affected thousands of pupils at more than 200 girls’ schools over the past three months.

The mass demonstrations inside Iran, among the largest since the 1979 revolution, prompted some in the exiled opposition to talk of an imminent change of regime. “Some people, especially in the diaspora, have mistakenly bet on the fall of the Islamic republic in the very near future,” political scientist Zeidabadi said. Zeidabadi argued that the emigres had misunderstood the nature of the protest movement which he said was more “civic” than political. He stressed that, viewed in that fashion, the movement had produced “results”, notably a quiet relaxation in enforcement of the dress code for women. — AFP

Defense minister calls for more...

Continued from Page 1

as well as deliberated on the collaboration and coordination with various military sectors to unite efforts and achieve immediate response in addressing crises and emergent situations.

Meanwhile, Kuwait’s Deputy Foreign Minister Mansour Al-Otaibi, on an official visit to Tehran,

International

China lifts sweeping tourist visa curbs

Major easing of travel restrictions in place since the outbreak of pandemic

BEIJING: China will once again start issuing a range of visas to foreigners as of Wednesday, the country's foreign ministry said, in a major easing of travel restrictions in place since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The move marks the latest step towards reopening China to the outside world, as Beijing breaks with the strict zero-COVID strategy that defined its pandemic response until a few months ago. In addition to new visas being reviewed and approved, those issued before March 28, 2020 that remain valid will once again allow entry to China, said a notice posted Tuesday on a social media account affiliated with the foreign ministry's consular affairs bureau.

Similar notices appeared on the websites of several overseas Chinese missions, including its embassies in the United States and France. The updated policy will also allow for the resumption of visa-free travel for those arriving on cruise ships to Shanghai as well as for certain tourist groups from Hong Kong, Macau and countries within the ASEAN regional grouping, the notice said. The move would "further facilitate the exchange of Chinese and foreign personnel", it added. China received 65.7 million international visitors in 2019, according to data from the UN World Tourism Organization, before sealing itself off from the rest of the world during the pandemic.

While most countries started fully reopening their economies and welcoming international travellers earlier, China only began emerging from its strict COVID-19 containment strategy in late 2022, after rare demonstrations against President Xi Jinping's signature policy broke out across the country. Those protests in late November expanded into calls for more political freedoms, with some even calling for Xi to resign, the most widespread opposition to communist rule since the 1989 Tiananmen Square uprising.

Abrupt reversal

In early December, Chinese authorities effectively ended the regime of mass testing, lockdowns and



BEIJING: Passengers walk through the arrivals hall for international flights at the Capital International Airport in Beijing on March 14, 2023. China will once again start issuing a range of visas to foreigners on March 15, in a major easing of travel restrictions. — AFP

long quarantines-but the abrupt reversal led to a spike in COVID cases. Beijing announced in late December that inbound travellers to the country would no longer need to quarantine from January 8, but kept in place visa restrictions on foreigners.

At the time, Beijing said it would "continue to adjust its visa policy for foreigners visiting China in a scientific and dynamic manner in accordance with... the epidemic situation". It also then resumed issuing Chinese passports for "tourism" or "overseas visits of friends". With cases surging in China around the New Year, several countries-notably Japan and South Korea-reimposed restrictions on Chinese visitors, provoking a tit-for-tat response

from Beijing. As cases waned in China, both sides subsequently eased those restrictions.

The announcement that China will resume issuing visas to foreigners comes on the heels of an important session of the country's rubber-stamp parliament, which saw Xi confirmed to a third term as president and his close ally Li Qiang named premier.

Li on Monday admitted that achieving the country's economic growth target of "around five percent" would be "no easy task". China posted just three percent growth last year, missing its stated target of around 5.5 percent by a wide margin as the economy strained under the twin impact of strict COVID policies and a property crisis. — AFP

Pakistan politicians' gift trove revealed

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan politicians and government officials received a treasure trove of gifts from foreign dignitaries over the past two decades including more than 150 Rolex watches, bullet-proof BMW cars and a 21-karat gold crown, newly released records show.

The South Asian nation, home to more than 220 million, has always been economically precarious and is currently gripped by a punishing downturn which has sent the cost-of-living soaring. But records reveal a staggering list of luxury products the political and administrative elite have acquired. Under the rules governing Islamabad's "Toshakhana"-a Persian word meaning "treasure house"-politicians can keep official gifts if they have a low worth, while they must pay a dramatically reduced fee to the government for extravagant items.

Information minister Marriyum Aurangzeb said Tuesday that the government would introduce a new limit, meaning gifts worth more than \$300 cannot be kept by officials. The ream of paperwork reveals former military dictator Pervez Musharraf-who died last month-kept a pearl necklace worth around \$250 by paying just 750 rupees in 2006, or around \$12 according to the exchange rate at the time.

In many countries, diplomatic gifts are intended as a symbolic exchange between cultures rather than tailored presents for specific individuals. Former president Asif Ali Zardari-the husband of ex-premier Benazir Bhutto who was slain in a suicide attack on her convoy in 2007 — was gifted three bulletproof vehicles two years after her death. The Toyota SUV and two BMWs were worth around \$1.6 million but Zardari paid the equivalent of just \$240,000 to keep them in his personal fleet. The 21-karat gold crown, worth around \$500, was bought by former prime minister Shaukat Aziz in 2005 for around a tenth of its value.

And like dozens of others on the list, former prime minister Imran Khan took the opportunity to buy a Rolex watch at a vastly reduced rate. In 2018, he paid the rupee equivalent of around \$6,000 for a watch appraised at around \$32,000. Rolex watches were also bought by an Arabic interpreter, the prime minister's personal physician and a press secretary. The Swiss-made timepieces generally hold their value and there is a healthy resale market among the super-rich.

The Toshakhana records do not detail which foreign states gave the gifts between 2002 and the present. The papers were released at the weekend amid a spiralling row over Khan, who is facing allegations that he did not declare gifts received during his time in office from 2018 to 2022, nor the profit he made from reselling them. Khan surged into office on a promise to reform Pakistan's deeply corrupted politics. But since being ousted he has become tangled in allegations of his own double-dealings. — AFP

Pakistan Taliban kill policemen

PESHAWAR: Two Pakistani policemen were killed while guarding teams collecting census data in separate attacks claimed by the local Taliban, police said Tuesday. Pakistan started a month-long digital census at the beginning of March with security officials deployed alongside more than 120,000 enumerators.

Police are increasingly on the frontline of Pakistan's battle with the Tehreek-e-Taliban (TTP) and are frequently targeted by militants who accuse them of extra-judicial killings. On Monday, two teams were attacked in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, in separate districts close to the border with Afghanistan. "Gunmen attacked the police party responsible for supervising the security of the census team from two directions," said Farooq Khan, a police official in Tank district, adding that one officer was killed and four were wounded.

Later in the evening, the Pakistani military reported that one militant was killed in an "intense exchange



FORT MAGSAYSAY: (L-R) Philippine army Brigadier General Leodevic Guinid, US army Brigadier General Jeffrey Vanantwerp, Philippine army chief Lieutenant General Romeo Brawner, commanding general US army corps, Lieutenant General Xavier Brunson, and Philippine army Brigadier General Alvin Flores, exercise control group director, link arms during the opening ceremony of US-Philippines Arm-to-Army exercise. - AFP

Philippines, US to hold largest joint war games

MANILA: The Philippines and the United States will hold their largest ever joint military exercises next month, Philippine and US officials said Tuesday, as the longtime allies seek to counter China's growing regional influence. A total of 17,680 soldiers will take part in the annual drills, which for the first time will include live-fire exercises in the disputed South China Sea and a simulated defence of a tiny Philippine island nearly 300 kilometres (190 miles) south of Taiwan.

The countries will also stage an amphibious landing on the western island of Palawan, the closest Philippine landmass to the Spratly Islands-a flashpoint for Beijing and Manila. "Any armed forces has the right to conduct military exercises," said Colonel Michael Logico, the Philippine spokesman for the war games called Balikatan, which means "shoulder to shoulder" in Filipino. "It's really part of our combat readiness," he said. The announcement comes less than six weeks after Manila and Washington agreed to restart joint patrols in the South China Sea, and struck a deal to give US troops access to another four military bases in the Southeast Asian country.

The countries have been seeking to repair ties that were fractured under President Ferdinand Marcos's predecessor Rodrigo Duterte. Beijing's growing assertiveness on Taiwan and its building of bases in the

of fire". In the other attack, men on a motorbike opened fire on police, killing one and wounding three.

"The security measures were further intensified and the census process was resumed," Lakki Marwat district administration official Tariq Ullah told AFP. The attacks follow a similar assault last week in the same region which left an officer dead.

The TTP, which is separate from the Afghan Taliban but has a similar Islamist ideology, claimed all three attacks. "Our primary target is the police, regardless of whether they are escorting politicians, polio teams, or census teams," a TTP commander told AFP. Pakistan is facing overlapping political, economic and environmental crises, as well as a worsening security situation, since the Afghan Taliban took control of Kabul in August 2021. In January, more than 80 officers were killed when a suicide bomber detonated an explosive vest at a mosque inside a police compound in the north-western city of Peshawar.

The census is gathering demographic data ahead of parliamentary elections due by October. Political parties and ethnic groups regularly criticise census statistics for undercounting, data manipulation and other irregularities. — AFP

South China Sea have given fresh impetus to Washington and Manila to strengthen their partnership, which is underpinned by a mutual defence treaty.

The exercises, scheduled for April 11-28, will involve more than 12,000 American, nearly 5,000 Filipino and 111 Australian soldiers-about twice as many as last year, Logico said. A US official confirmed the figures. One of the drills will involve military helicopters landing on Calayan island, off the northern tip of the main island of Luzon.

The maritime and coastal defence drill has been held in the past, but this will be the first time on Calayan. It will also be the first time Philippine and US navy frigates will fire their weapons towards the South China Sea from waters off Zambales province, north of Manila, Logico said. Previous live-fire exercises were held on land. The Americans will also use their Patriot missiles, considered one of the best air defence systems in the world, and the HIMARS precision rocket system during the drills.

The Australian troops involved will mainly take part in "special operations" type exercises, Logico said, while Japan will send an observer delegation. This is the first Balikatan to be held since Marcos took power in June 2022.

Marcos has insisted he will not let China trample on the Philippines' maritime rights-in contrast to Duterte who was reluctant to criticise Beijing. Beijing claims sovereignty over almost the entire South China Sea, including the Spratlys, ignoring an international ruling that its claims have no legal basis. The Philippines and several other countries have rival claims. The US and Australian embassies in Manila did not immediately comment on the exercises. — AFP



BANNU: Security personnel stand guard next to an official (C) from the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, using a digital device to collect information from residents during the first ever door-to-door digital national census in Bannu, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province on March 14, 2023. - AFP

Philippine police officer jailed for killing teens

MANILA: A Philippine police officer has been found guilty of killing two teenagers during former president Rodrigo Duterte's drug war, court documents obtained by AFP Tuesday showed, a rare conviction of one of the crackdown's enforcers.

During his six-year term, which ended in June 2022, Duterte openly ordered police to shoot dead drug suspects if officers' lives were in danger. More than 6,200 people died in the anti-narcotics campaign, according to official figures, but rights groups estimate the actual figure was in the tens of thousands.

Only three police officers had previously been convicted for killing a suspect during the crackdown, which sparked an investigation at the International Criminal Court (ICC). On March 1, a Manila court ruled that Jeffrey Perez was guilty of murdering Reynaldo De Guzman, 14, and Carl Arnaiz, 19, in 2017, according to a copy of the verdict shared by the public attorney's office.

Perez was sentenced on the same day to a minimum of 20 years behind bars. He was already serving a lengthy jail sentence after being found guilty by a different court in November of torturing the two teenagers.

His co-accused, police officer Ricky Arquilita, died during the first trial. Both denied the charges. De Guzman and Arnaiz were last seen together on August 17, 2017. A trial witness said he saw one of the teenagers, Arnaiz, exit a parked police vehicle with his handcuffed hands raised, shouting "I will surrender" before the officers shot him.

The body of De Guzman was found weeks later north of Manila. It had dozens of stab wounds. President Ferdinand Marcos, who succeeded Duterte, has vowed to keep pursuing the drug war but focus on prevention and rehabilitation.

However, rights groups say the killings have continued under his watch. The ICC said in January it would resume its probe into the drug war because its pre-trial chamber was "not satisfied that the Philippines is undertaking relevant investigations that would warrant a deferral of the court's investigations".

Manila has appealed the decision. Human Rights Watch senior researcher Carlos Conde said while he welcomed the Philippine court ruling, the rarity of the conviction showed the justice system was "broken". "This is the second drug war (murder) conviction out of thousands of similar cases," Conde said. "This is... proof that the ICC needs to come in."

In 2018, three police officers were convicted of killing 17-year-old student Kian delos Santos in a Manila alley. Police said he was a drug courier who fired at them while resisting arrest. However, CCTV footage showed two of officers dragging the unarmed boy moments before he was shot dead. — AFP

Five killed in Somalia suicide attack

MOGADISHU: At least five people were killed and 11 others, including a regional governor, wounded in a suicide attack on Tuesday in southern Somalia, a police commander told AFP. A vehicle laden with explosives ploughed into a guest house hosting government officials in Bardera, 450 kilometres (279 miles) west of the capital Mogadishu, area police commander Hussein Adan, said. "The explosion destroyed most parts of the building and five security guards died in the blast," Adan said. Eleven people, including the governor Ahmed Bulle Gareed, were injured, he added. There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the attack, but Islamist group Al-Shabaab remains a potent force in the troubled Horn of Africa nation despite multinational efforts to degrade its leadership.

Mohamud Saney, who witnessed Tuesday's attack, said, they had "never heard anything as big as the explosion." "It shook the earth like and earthquake." Al-Shabaab has been waging a bloody insurgency against the central government in the fragile nation for about 15 years.

In recent months, the Somali army and local clan militias have retaken chunks of territory from the militants in an operation backed by US air strikes and an African Union force known as ATMIS. Despite the gains by the pro-government forces, the militants have continued to demonstrate the ability to strike back with lethal force against civilian and military targets.

In the deadliest Al-Shabaab attack since the offensive was launched last year, 121 people were killed in two car bomb explosions at the education ministry in Mogadishu in October. The UN last month said that 2022 was the deadliest year for civilians in Somalia since 2017, largely because of an increase in mass-casualty attacks by the jihadist group. Although forced out of Mogadishu and other main urban centres more than a decade ago, Al-Shabaab remains entrenched in parts of rural central and southern Somalia. — AFP

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 15, 2023

Business

US consumer inflation still elevated Fed comes under stress amid financial stability concerns

KUWAIT: US consumer inflation remained elevated in February, according to government data released on Tuesday, adding pressure to the Federal Reserve as it balances its fight to lower prices with financial stability concerns. The central bank has been on an aggressive campaign to tame inflation, raising interest rates eight times since early last year to ease demand.

While Fed Chair Jerome Powell initially said the Fed is prepared to increase the pace of rate hikes if necessary as economic data runs hot, the collapse of Silicon Valley Bank (SVB) last week and New York-based Signature Bank may complicate its efforts. The consumer price index (CPI) rose six percent from a year ago, below January's figure and in line with expectations, according to Labor Department data released Tuesday.

While this was the smallest annual rise since September 2021, the level remains well above policymak-

ers' longer-term two percent inflation goal. Between January and February, the CPI rose 0.4 percent, slowing from the month prior as well. "As challenges in the banking sector remind us, there will be setbacks along the way in our transition to steady and stable growth," said President Joe Biden in a statement on Tuesday.

"But we face these challenges from a position of strength," he added, noting he would continue "working to lower costs" for Americans.

Worsening position
The Labor Department said the "index for shelter was the largest contributor... accounting for over 70 percent of the increase," with rent prices adding to pressures. It added that the indexes for food, recreation, as well as household furnishings and operations were also contributors. In particular, the food index in February remains nearly 10 percent above last year's level, with prices of dining out still high. "This stickiness in the most essential categories, where it is hard for consumers to cut volumes, means the squeeze on discretionary budgets continues," said Neil Saunders, managing director of analytics firm GlobalData.

He warned that the financial position of many households is worsening, and that "inflation is not an enemy that consumers can withstand indefinitely." In February, costs of shelter and transportation services ticked up. And underscoring the difficulty of cooling inflation, the "core" CPI figure excluding the volatile food and energy segments came in stronger than expected-up 0.5 percent from January.

Taken together, the readings are "not good enough to stop the Fed hiking next week, provided markets are calm," said Ian Shepherdson, chief economist at Pantheon Macroeconomics. Underlying inflation in services is "declining painfully slowly" as well, he said, adding that the progress will not be enough to placate more hawkish policymakers at the Fed. While many analysts had predicted that the central bank could step up its rate increases as the economy runs hotter than hoped, some are dialing back their expectations now. — AFP



NEW YORK: In this file photo, price tags are displayed at a supermarket in New York City. — AFP

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Crypto market resilient after SVB collapse

LONDON: As the Federal Reserve seeks to calm financial markets following the collapse of Silicon Valley Bank, the cryptocurrency market is showing signs of resilience despite links to the crisis.

The "stablecoin" USDC, which is pegged to the dollar, initially tumbled after its creator Circle said it held a sizeable investment in SVB. Last week saw also the collapse of US-based Signature Bank and peer Silvergate-and the combined turmoil marked the biggest banking failures since the 2008 global financial crisis.

Despite the huge fallout, USDC has recovered and crypto king bitcoin soared to a nine-month high above \$26,300 on Tuesday. This contrasts with the collapse in cryptocurrency values following the bankruptcy of crypto exchange FTX in late 2022.

"The long-term concern is on the future of fiat banking partners for crypto companies," said Clara Medalie at Kaiko, a digital asset data and information services provider. "Silvergate and Signature were hugely important for crypto companies in the industry, and right now there remain no strong alternatives," she told AFP.

While equity and commodity markets have tumbled in recent days, bitcoin has rallied by about one third since Friday. The decentralized cryptocurrency, launched in 2008 by opponents of bank bailouts from the likes of the Fed and US Treasury, has ironically benefitted from their actions in recent days.

America's top finance bodies unveiled a series of measures over the weekend aimed at restoring confidence in the banking sector and settling turbulent markets. These included plans to ensure SVB's customers would be able to access all their deposits in the bank. But while the US has moved to protect customers' deposits, it won't be bailing out the bank's investors, President Joe Biden insisted on Monday. —AFP



FINANCIAL RESULTS FULL YEAR 2022

196

Million KD
NET INCOME
↗ %6

REVENUE

↗ %14

1.7

Billion KD

EBITDA

↗ %7

673

Million KD

EPS

↗ %5

45

Fils

CUSTOMERS ↗ %7

52.4

Million

The Board of Directors recommended a cash dividend of **25** fils per share for the second half of 2022, subject to Annual General Assembly and statutory approvals. This dividend follows the semi-annual dividend of **10** fils distributed in 2022, totaling **35** fils per share for the year 2022

Business

Zain Group revenue soars 14% to reach \$5.6 billion in 2022

Net profit grows 6% to reach \$640m • Customer base expands to hit 52.4m

KUWAIT: Zain Group, a leading mobile telecom innovator in seven markets across the Middle East and Africa, announced its consolidated financial results for the full-year 2022 and fourth quarter ended December 31, 2022. The Group ended the year with a customer base of 52.4 million, an annual increase of 7 percent, reflecting an addition of 3.5 million customers.

For the full-year 2022, Zain Group generated consolidated revenue of KD 1.7 billion (\$5.6 billion), a year-on-year (Y-o-Y) increase of 14 percent. Consolidated EBITDA for the period increased by 7 percent Y-o-Y, to reach KD 673 million (\$2.2 billion), reflecting an EBITDA margin of 39 percent. Consolidated net income reached KD 196 million (\$640 million), up 6 percent Y-o-Y and reflecting earnings per share of 45 fils (\$0.15).

The Board of Directors of Zain recommended a cash dividend of 25 fils per share for the second half (H2) of 2022. This dividend follows the semi-annual dividend of 10 fils distributed earlier in 2022, totaling 35 fils per share for the year and reflecting a 78 percent payout ratio, one of the highest of listed entities in the region. Furthermore, the Board made another recommendation to implement a minimum semi-annual and annual cash dividend policy of 35 fils in total, for the forthcoming three years, both recommendations are subject to Annual General Assembly and statutory approvals.

It is worth noting that the total recommended cash dividends of 25 fils for H2, 2022 and 35 fils each year for the next three years will total 130 fils in cash dividends. This expected distribution based on the current share price of Zain as of March 13, 2023 will reflect an average annual yield of approximately 8 percent for entitled shareholders for the three-year period.

For the fourth quarter (Q4) of 2022, Zain Group generated consolidated revenue of KD 458 million (\$1.5 billion), up 20 percent Y-o-Y. EBITDA for the quarter amounted to KD 182 million (\$591 million), up 22 percent Y-o-Y, reflecting an EBITDA margin of 40 percent. Net income for the period amounted to KD 44 million (\$143 million), representing earnings per share of 10 fils (\$0.03).

Key operational notes for 4th quarter and 12 months ended December 31, 2022

- Throughout 2022, Zain Group invested \$936 million in CAPEX reflecting 17 percent of revenue, mainly on 4G and 5G rollouts as well as expansion of Fiber-to-the-Home infrastructure and spectrum license fees
- Notable 7 percent customer growth of 3.5 million; and consolidated data revenue growth of 5 percent to reach \$2.2 billion, representing 40 percent of the Group's revenue for the year



Chairman Ahmed Al-Tahous:
A successful year highlighted by operational efficiency, ESG initiatives and development of lucrative business verticals to drive shareholder value



Vice-Chairman & Group CEO Bader Al-Kharafi:
Our impressive operational performance and financial solvency has placed Zain in a solid position to drive future growth

- Zain KSA completes sale of 8,069 towers for \$807 million to the Public Investment Fund, to transfer at least 3,000 towers in January 2023, remaining towers to be transferred over 18 months
- In January 2023, Zain Iraq entered into a definitive 15-year agreement with TASC Towers to sell and leaseback, plus the management rights of its 4,968 tower portfolio for \$180 million
- Zain fintech across the group attracted 1 million customers, a 64 percent Y-o-Y increase, with revenue up 241 percent Y-o-Y and having transactions value of \$3.6 billion in 2022
- ZainTech completes acquisition of BIOS Middle East, a leading managed cloud service provider; Group wide B2B revenues grow 28 percent as a result of new dynamic and lucrative ICT services
- Digital services group-wide witness revenue growth of 52 percent Y-o-Y, inclusive of Dizlee (API) platform offering 51 live services, and having over 191 million API transactions since its launch in mid-2018
- The growth of Zain Esports saw it hold 28 tournaments in 2022, with over 30,000 gamers, more than 70 million social media impressions and 15 million engagements on social media channels
- Zain maintains the region's highest A-rating on the 'CDP Score Report-Climate Change 2022', among the leaders globally; commits to Science-Based Targets initiative emission guidance
- Zain named Best Telecom Brand in MENA for 2022 by Telecom Review, and as having the Best Diversity & Inclusion strategy and Best Women Development & Leadership Program by Informa
- Zain brand valuation grows 14 percent to \$2.74 billion according to Brand Finance 2022 rankings

Commenting on the 2022 full year results, the Chairman of the Board of Directors of Zain Group, Ahmed Al-Tahous said, "A challenging year where the Board and management focused on operational efficiency, ESG initiatives,

and the development of lucrative business verticals to drive shareholder value among many other key initiatives. I would like to recognize the government bodies and regulatory authorities in Kuwait and across our markets for their foresight in creating a conducive environment that supports the telecom sector and empowers Zain to provide meaningful connectivity to the communities, businesses, and governments we serve."

Zain Vice-Chairman and Group CEO Bader Al-Kharafi commented, "The impressive results for the 4th quarter and full-year of 2022 are a culmination of

strength of our financial solvency as we methodically grow the business and manage the continuing socio-economic challenges that several of our markets present."

"Similar to previous completed transactions in Kuwait and Jordan, the recent sale and leaseback of our passive tower infrastructure in Saudi Arabia and Iraq for a combined value of approximately \$1 billion, creates significant value for shareholders. By injecting the sale proceeds into the business, it gives both operations greater flexibility to invest in network upgrades and ICT technologies to meet the ever-increasing demand for reliable

tives maximizing our 5G, FTTH and 4G networks. The Dizlee API platform continues to attract more partners offering sort-after digital content and gaming solutions, resulting in profitable growth on multiple levels. Zain Esports' tie-up with PLAYHERA MENA to offer a new tournament platform with e-commerce across the Zain footprint is driving gamers to us and cementing Zain as a leading regional gaming powerhouse."

"ZainTech's acquisition of managed cloud provider BIOS Middle East is a major milestone in our drive to transform Zain into a leading ICT and digital lifestyle provider. This strategic acquisi-

Board recommends cash dividend of 25 fils for H2 2022 and a new minimum cash dividend policy of 35 fils per share for the next three years, commencing 2023

- The enhanced 35 fils dividend for 2022 reflects a 78 percent payout ratio, one of the region's highest
- Customer base grows by 3.5 million customers, a 7 percent increase to reach 52.4 million
- Q4 2022 revenue KD 458 million (\$1.5 billion), net income KD 44 million (\$143 million)
- Data revenue grew 5 percent, represents 40 percent of total revenue
- Digital services revenue soared 52 percent; Fintech customer growth of 64 percent, revenue up 241 percent
- Enterprise revenues up 28 percent as ZainTech and local B2B teams target lucrative opportunities
- \$1 billion in tower sales in Saudi Arabia and Iraq creating value and efficiencies
- Zain maintains region's highest A- rating on the 'CDP Score Report-Climate Change 2022'

many cost optimization, digital innovation, and data monetization initiatives executed, bolstered by 5G network upgrades, lucrative enterprise deals, tower sales, proactive regulatory and sustainability practices implemented across our footprint in accordance with our 4Sight strategy, all of which are combining to future-proof the company."

"The Board's recommendation of 25 fils per share dividend for H2 2022, in addition to the earlier semi-annual 10 fils dividend, totaling 35 fils for the year, reflects a 2 fils increase on the previous three years and a 78 percent payout ratio, one of the highest in the region. This improved dividend, along with the Board's minimum 35 fils recommendation for the forthcoming three years, provides a clear indication of the strong operational performance and

and high-speed broadband. Moreover, the deal enhances operational efficiencies and enables a laser focus on offering new services and providing customers a better mobile and data experience."

"The impressive growth of several digital entities that were recently launched is a key part of the Zain's financial performance and brand strength in recent years. One million customers are now benefiting from the numerous dynamic fintech solutions across several operations, recording over \$3.6 billion worth of transactions in 2022. We will nurture this ever-growing demand and plan to extend much-needed fintech offerings across all operations in the near future."

"The impressive 52 percent growth of our Group-wide digital services revenue reflects the many data monetization initia-

tion is set to supercharge our capabilities in hybrid and multi-cloud managed services and enable us to provide the best suite of digital and ICT transformation services in the region to organizations and government entities. The 28 percent annual growth in B2B revenues across our footprint reflects the sound cooperative business model between ZainTech and our local operations' B2B teams."

"Our wholesale division, 'Global Connect' focus on managing capacity, voice, roaming and cable business across the region witnessed the obtaining of approvals for the cable landing station in Sudan through the Africa submarine cable landing station. This follows Global Connect's first investment in a portion of the state-of-the-art PEACE subsea cable, connecting the Middle East with Europe through the J2M (Jeddah, Saudi Arabia to Marseille, France) submarine cable system, that will offer Zain full operational independence. This is a critical factor for Zain operations to foster digital transformation initiatives in their markets, particularly for cloud and IoT services, that will accordingly contribute positively to increasing revenues and reducing operational costs."

"The A- ranking that Zain maintained in the latest 'CDP Score Report-Climate Change 2022', positioned us first in the region and among leaders globally. We have recently committed to setting emissions targets in line with the Science-Based Targets initiative (SBTi) guidance to halve carbon emissions before 2030 and achieve Net-Zero carbon emissions by 2050, highlighting our mission to foster sustainable systemic change and provide meaningful connectivity by integrating technologies to generate safe energy to help reduce global warming. Protection of our planet should be a key priority for every organization and individual."

"The multiple recognitions we received during 2022, which include the Best Telecom Brand, the Best Diversity, Equity & Inclusion (DEI) strategy, as well as the Best Women Development & Leadership Program in the region, solidify our reputation as one of the most exciting, progressive, and inclusive companies to work for. Zain is proactively embedding its shared values into its DNA to drive our business, sustainability, and DEI agenda, enriching our purpose for being as an organization."

Al-Kharafi concluded, "As we enter 2023 on the back of these impressive 2022 results, Zain is primed to further execute on its 4Sight strategy, building on and maximizing the many opportunities within the core telecom business while diversifying into new lucrative business verticals in the ICT, digital infrastructure, fintech, and digital services arenas."

Group Key Performance Indicators (KD and USD) for the Fourth Quarter 2022	
Consolidated Revenue	KD 458 million - (\$1.5 billion)
EBITDA	KD 1.7billion- (USD 5.6billion)
EBITDA Margin	KD 673million - (USD 2.2billion)
Net Income	39%
EPS	KD 196million -(USD 640million)

Group Key Performance Indicators (KD and USD) for the Full-Year 2022	
Total Active Customers	52.4 million
Consolidated Revenue	KD 1.7 billion- (\$5.6 billion)
EBITDA	KD 673 million - (\$2.2 billion)
EBITDA Margin	39%
Net Income	KD 196 million - (\$640 million)
EPS	45fils - \$0.15



Global oil markets still uncertain a year after Ukraine crisis: OAPEC

OPEC + decision has clear impact on oil markets: Al-Loughani

KUWAIT: Commenting on global oil market developments, the Secretary-General of the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries (OAPEC), Eng Jamal Essa Al-Loughani, indicated that a year after the Russian-Ukrainian crisis, global oil markets are experiencing a state of uncertainty, which has reflected in turn on their future prospects. He said that the sanctions imposed on Russia made Europe more dependent on the Middle East countries, especially OAPEC members and the United States of America to meet their energy needs.

Al-Loughani added that the Russian-Ukrainian crisis has relatively contributed to the decline in the growth rate of global oil demand during 2022 compared to the previous year, to remain below its levels recorded before the COVID-19 pandemic. Demand has been negatively affected by a number of factors, including high oil prices, slowdown in the performance of global economy, and restrictions associated with China's zero-COVID policy.

Al-Loughani indicated that the impact of the Russian-Ukrainian crisis on supplies in 2022 was much less than what was expected at the beginning of the crisis, as Russian oil production proved resilient and recovered quickly, thanks to the success of Russian oil companies in finding new buyers for their oil exports. Although the majority of forecasts indicate a decline in Russian

oil production in 2023, this decrease may be less than expected, in light of the continued flow of Russian oil exports to their Asian destination. The Secretary General said that the Russian-Ukrainian crisis led to an increase in the stock of oil in transit in light of the change in the course of oil trade flows. The USA resorted to using its strategic oil stocks as a tool to manage the oil market, through withdrawals from those stocks in collaboration with the rest of the OECD countries. Al-Loughani explained that crude oil prices were not immune from the repercussions of the Russian crisis, as they witnessed sharp fluctuations in their levels. During March 2022, Brent crude oil prices approached the \$140 barrel benchmark, and West Texas crude oil prices crossed the \$130 barrel threshold. These are the highest levels recorded since July 2008. Coinciding with expectations related to a slowdown in global economic growth, tightening monetary policy by raising interest rates by central banks around the world, and restrictions to contain the Corona virus in China, oil prices witnessed a decline in the second half of the year to settle at \$79.7 per barrel.

Among the other repercussions of the Russian-Ukrainian crisis that Al-Loughani touched upon is forcing crude oil tankers to travel longer distances to reach buyers of Russian crude oil, which limited the availability of tankers and caused an increase in

freight prices. The crisis also led to a massive shift in global oil trade flows and international oil trade relations within a very short period of time, with the emergence of a parallel market for tankers.

In light of the above, Al-Loughani stated that concerns related to energy security for European countries in particular and the ability to bear its high costs have become the main drivers of energy policy in these countries and at the world as well. He added that OPEC + countries, led by the Arab members of OAPEC, in the context of their endeavor to achieve stability and balance in the global oil market in light of the Russian-Ukrainian crisis, did not stand idly in the face of these developments, as they made relentless efforts in this regard.

Al-Loughani concluded by saying that OAPEC Secretariat General is monitoring global oil market developments closely due to their impacts on the revenues of its member countries, which are the main engine of eco-



Eng Jamal Essa Al-Loughani



nomc and social development, and the main supporter of their central banks' foreign currency reserves. The Secretariat underscores the importance and effectiveness of the approach adopted by the OPEC + group, represented in taking proactive measures in anticipation of any emergency developments that the oil market may witness, which is a clear sign of reassurance from the group's countries to the oil market. The Secretariat General also confirms that the decisions taken by the OPEC + group, on top of which the decision to cut production by 2 million bd, had a clear impact on the stability and balance of the oil market, which is the goal that the countries of the group seek to achieve.

Meta axes 10,000 jobs in new round of cuts

WASHINGTON: Facebook owner Meta announced a fresh wave of job cuts on Tuesday, part of what CEO Mark Zuckerberg called the company's "year of efficiency" as the US tech sector continues to downsize. In an email to employees, Zuckerberg said Meta would shed 10,000 jobs over the next few months, targeting middle management, and that 5,000 other roles would remain unfilled. The cuts follow a cull of 11,000 jobs announced by the company in November.

"This will be tough and there's no way around that. It will mean saying goodbye to talented and passionate colleagues who have been part of our success," Zuckerberg said.

The first victims will be Meta's recruitment department as the company officially puts an end to the hiring spree that came when big tech ramped up operations to meet high demand during the coronavirus pandemic. In subsequent months, tech and business departments will also be affected and "in a small number of cases, it may take through the end of the year to complete these changes," Zuckerberg said. In January, Zuckerberg warned that further pain was coming when he told analysts the company's "management theme for 2023 is the 'Year of Efficiency'" and that he would focus on making the company "a stronger and more nimble organization."

Meta had suffered a rough 2022 amid a souring economic climate, which forced advertisers to cut back on marketing, and Apple's data privacy changes, which have reduced leeway for ad personalization.

Leaner, faster?

The company is also under pressure for making a huge gamble on the metaverse, the world of virtual reality that Meta believes will be the next frontier online. The problems last year sent the company's share price down by an astonishing two thirds over 12 months, but the stock has recovered in 2023, with investors satisfied by Zuckerberg's pledge to run a leaner company.

Meta's share price shot up a further 5 percent after the announcement of the latest job cuts. Meta's CEO and founder said he "will make our organization flatter by removing multiple layers of management" which would mean many managers will be ordered to become "individual contributors."

Zuckerberg explained he was pleasantly surprised by the benefits of running a more tightly organized operation where "many things have gone faster" with the elimination of lower priority projects. "A leaner org (sic) will execute its highest priorities faster. People will be more productive, and their work will be more fun and fulfilling," he said. —AFP

EU bids to reassure markets SVB panic won't spread

BRUSSELS: European ministers raced to calm markets Monday over the collapse of Silicon Valley Bank in the United States, insisting it does not seriously threaten the continent's financial sector. French Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire went the furthest, telling investors to "calm down".

SVB, a key lender to start-ups across the United States since the 1980s, collapsed after a sudden run on deposits, prompting regulators to seize control on Friday. By Sunday night, US federal authorities stepped in to ensure depositors still had

Jazeera Airways to establish low-cost airline in Saudi

KUWAIT: In line with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 to expand the tourism and aviation sector, Jazeera Airways along with Saudi partners announced its intention to establish a low-cost airline in the Kingdom, to be based at the King Fahad International Airport in Dammam.

Coordination is underway with the regulatory authorities in the Kingdom to complete procedures to obtain the necessary licenses in accordance with the applicable laws.

Malabar Gold & Diamonds enhances gold rate protection offers

KUWAIT: With an impressive retail network of over 305 outlets across 10 countries, Malabar Gold & Diamonds, the 6th largest jewelry retailer globally has enhanced their gold rate protection offer by providing customers with free diamond gift voucher worth KWD 10 for 10 percent advance bookings made on or before the 2nd of April.

The additional incentive was announced by the brand after the resounding acceptance of their gold rate protection offer which was unveiled on the 1st of March, through which customers can just pay 10 percent advance for their favorite jewelry and block

SVB's demise: Why didn't US regulators see it coming?

WASHINGTON: With hindsight, there were warning signs ahead of last week's spectacular collapse of Silicon Valley Bank, missed not only by investors, but by bank regulators. Just why the oversight failed remained a hot question among banking experts Monday, with some focusing on the weakness of US rules. The Federal Reserve announced Monday plans for a "thorough, transparent and swift" review of the supervision of SVB that will be publicly released on May 1, effectively acknowledging that it could have done better. President Joe Biden promised a "full accounting of what happened," adding that he would ask regulators and banking regulators to tighten rules on the sector.

Banking experts have been among those alarmed at the rapid collapse of SVB, the country's 16th biggest bank by assets and how its demise became a harbinger of Sunday's failure of another lender, Signature Bank. The failures have "exposed the inadequacy of regulatory reforms that have been made since the global financial crisis," said Arthur Wilmarth, a law professor at George Washington University.

A once-over of the bank would have pointed to clear potential red flags in SVB's disproportionate ex-

access to their funds at SVB and regulators took over a second troubled lender, Signature Bank.

Most financial market observers do not fear a meltdown in the markets comparable to the 2008 financial crisis, but economists warned of a growing risk of recession. On Monday, senior EU figures sought to reassure investors that the European financial system could withstand such shocks, after the collapse was felt across Europe's banks. "The possibility of indirect impact is something that we have to monitor but, at the moment, we don't see it as a significant risk," the EU's economy commissioner Paolo Gentiloni told reporters in Brussels, ahead of a meeting of euro-zone finance ministers.

He said an impact of SVB's demise on global markets was "predictable" but added, "this is one thing; assessing the fact that there is a real risk of contagion is a different thing". Gentiloni said,



the gold rate until the 23rd of April 2022, protecting themselves from any increase in gold rate during this period. If gold rate increases at the time of purchase, customers can avail the blocked rate and if it reduces they can still draw mileage of the reduced rate.

This offer will be valid across all Malabar Gold & Diamonds showrooms. Customers can either pay the advance directly at the outlet or online, via Malabar Gold & Diamonds' mobile app. The free gift voucher will be available to the customers through the brand's mobile app and can only be obtained for the first 10 percent advance booking made by a customer before April 2nd. The gift voucher can be redeemed at any Malabar Gold & Diamonds showrooms in the country of issue.

"In the short period since we have introduced the gold rate protection offer, our valued customer have seized the opportunity to invest in gold, which is one of the safest assets to invest in, without having to worry about the constant change in prices. By paying just

posure to tech startups, a risky area that can be likened to commercial real estate or emerging markets-areas that have plagued lenders in the past. Wilmarth noted that SVB grew very fast between 2020 and 2022 and that its exposure to long-date fixed interest bonds made it especially vulnerable to the a shift in monetary policy by the Fed. "That's almost a sure proof formula for failure. If the economy turns you begin to have trouble," Wilmarth said. "None of those would have been a mystery to the regulators."

No excuses

Experts pointed as well to the eventual easing of US laws enacted soon after the 2008 crisis. The original Dodd-Frank law of 2010 imposed higher capital, liquidity and other requirements on banks with at least \$50 billion in assets. In 2018, with support from former President Donald Trump, this requirement was raised to \$250 billion, affecting fewer banks.

But that shift in law does not excuse regulators for these failures, according to Anna Gelpner, a law professor at Georgetown University. "When regulatory requirement are relaxed either by the premise that those institutions don't pose a risk to the system because of their size or that they are easier to supervise, that puts much more pressure on old-fashioned supervision because you don't have the automatic alarm that goes off with the requirements," she said.

"If this was clearly unsafe and unsound behavior," the banks' official designation in the law "does not excuse a failure of supervision," she said. Michael Ohlrogge, an associate professor of law at New York

however, that the EU was "monitoring the situation in close contact" with the European Central Bank. The EU's largest economies, France and Germany, said on Monday there were no risks to their financial systems from the collapse.

'Calm down'

Several major European banks including Societe Generale, BNP Paribas, Unicredit and Santander saw their share prices fall steeply by more than five percent just after 1500 GMT. A spokeswoman for France's central bank, however, said French banks are not exposed to SVB. France's Le Maire also told investors to "calm down, and just have a look at the reality. The reality is that the French banking system is not exposed to the SVB".

German Finance Minister Christian Lindner said US financial institutions acted decisively, and European authorities were carefully monitoring

10 percent as advance, customers can ensure that they reap the benefits of the fluctuating prices, regardless of whether it goes up or down. As Malabar Gold & Diamonds steps into its 30th year of providing exemplary jewelry shopping experience, we are providing our customers with an added benefit of free diamond gift vouchers to ensure that they get to enjoy the upcoming festive season to the fullest extent", commented Shamlal Ahamed, MD-International Operations, Malabar Gold & Diamonds. With the upcoming festive season, this exclusive offer from Malabar Gold & Diamonds will help customers shop for their favorite jewelry, without having to worry about the gold price. Gold being a reliable investment is one of the intrinsic reasons for people buying gold jewelry while also serving as an adornment. It is the ease to liquidate the metal for cash without losing much value even during difficult times that has further increased its dependability.



TORRANCE, United States: Signage is displayed outside of a Comerica Bank branch in Torrance, California, on March 13, 2023. —AFP

University, said regulators as a matter of course assign "very little to zero-risk weight" in terms of bank capital requirements for Treasury-linked securities because they are considered safe.

At the same time, regulators are also lenient with banks with regard to depositors with more than \$250,000 — the threshold for federally insured deposits-believing the bank has a meaningful business relationship with such clients. "That's probably going to warrant revisiting and thinking more seriously about the run risk of uninsured deposits," Ohlrogge said. —AFP

the situation. "These institutions have no doubt about the stability" of the European financial system, Lindner said in Brussels.

Italian Economy Minister Giancarlo Giorgetti echoed Lindner's sentiments. "The Italian and European banking system is subject to regular monitoring by supervisory authorities, which helps to ensure its stability," Giorgetti said.

The head of the eurogroup, ministers representing the 20 EU member states using the euro, Ireland's Paschal Donohoe, was more cautious about the possible long-term impact. "We are still in the very early days of seeing the consequences of the effective collapse of this bank," Donohoe said. "It will take some time for a full assessment to be done, but we have seen the cost of borrowing rise for Ireland and all other EU member states in recent times, and that just underlines the need for us to manage the public finances carefully." —AFP

Business



KUWAIT: Honoring after the Union of Investment Companies seminar.



KUWAIT: The UIC hosts a seminar entitled 'Energy outlook amid macroeconomic and geopolitical uncertainties, impact on Gulf producers' on Monday.

UIC discusses energy outlook, impact of global uncertainties on Gulf producers

Seminar aims to improve financial markets in Kuwait

KUWAIT: In a distinguished step that falls within the efforts of the Union of Investment Companies (UIC) helping to improve the financial markets in Kuwait, it organized an economic seminar entitled "Energy outlook amid macroeconomic and geopolitical uncertainties, impact on Gulf producers", on Monday which tackled the current economic conditions and future expectations of the oil and gas markets and their repercussions on the global economy. UIC hosted experts from Bloomberg to present their outlook on the global economic situation in the field of energy.

Fadwa Darwish, Secretary-General of UIC, welcomed the guests, who were executive managers, top economic analysts, asset and fund managers from investment companies and financial institutions. She indicated that the global economy is in a precarious position due to ongoing trade tensions slowing economic growth in key markets, and increasing geopolitical risks. Other potential risk factors include the interconnectedness of global supply chains, rising debt lev-

els, and oil and gas prices. Despite these challenges, there are reasons for optimism with the release of some economic indicators, also measures taken by central banks to support growth and improve financial stability, and technological advancements fueling innovation and productivity gains.

Ultimately, the future of the global economy will depend on the compatibility of government policies with private sector investment decisions, and the evolving nature of international trade and finance. Salih Yilmaz, a Bloomberg Senior analyst who specializes in energy, delivered the seminar. He touched on a number of topics related to the global economic outlook, the most notable of which were: economic optimism at the start of 2023, the reopening of the Chinese economy faster than anticipated, and controlling inflation in the United States. Also, he discussed the challenges brought on by the economic recession and the strong demand that has emerged as the global economy starts to revive, as well as the World Bank's prediction for 1.7 percent worldwide growth.

Yilmaz stated that there is still uncertainty around the supply and demand for oil, which leaves room for significant price swings. Moreover, he noted that as one of the world's major producers of oil and gas, Russia's political and military situation has a significant

OPEC + countries have not reached full production capacity. Yilmaz hinted also that the strong dollar position played a role in setting a ceiling for oil prices.

The oil exporting nations, including the State of Kuwait, benefit from the present oil prices. However, global inventories are still relatively low with unstable supply of oil. On the other hand, Yilmaz noted that traditionally oil prices decline in the years that follow recessions, often by as much as 30 percent, but it's possible that this won't happen given the present situation.

At the end of the seminar, participants shared their views regarding the global economic situation and how it may reflect on the Kuwaiti economy and were able to access the latest economic and financial information through the Bloomberg Terminal. The Union of Investment Companies thanks all those who attended the seminar and highlights the importance of participating and organizing valuable seminars that contribute to Kuwait's economic success and the implementation of Kuwait Vision 2035.

Experts from Bloomberg present outlook on global economic situation

impact on energy consumption and pricing worldwide. In addition, the challenging circumstances facing the OPEC + organization which is struggling to increase production with changes in supply even though the

Ukraine grain deal talks ongoing after Russian proposal: UN

GENEVA: Consultations to prolong a vital Ukrainian grain exports deal are continuing, the UN said Tuesday, after a Russian proposal for just a 60-day extension cast doubt over its fate. "The United Nations will do everything possible to preserve the integrity of the agreement and ensure its continuity," Jens Laerke, spokesman for the United Nations humanitarian agency OCHA, told reporters.

"The consultations... with all parties and various levels continue." His comments came after a one-day meeting in Geneva between top Russian and UN officials, which ended in Moscow announcing it would not oppose prolonging the so-called Black Sea Grain Initiative, as had been feared. But it only agreed to extending the deal aimed at easing the global food crisis, which is due to expire on Saturday, for half of the 120-day period of the original accord. Ukraine said that "contradicts" the original agreement but did not reject the proposal. Laerke meanwhile stressed the importance of renewing the agreement.

'Good agreement'

"It is a good agreement... It has a very good impact on global food prices, bringing them down, getting food out on the market and to the right places," he said. "So that is the prize that we keep our eyes on, and consultations continue with that in mind." Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 saw Ukraine's Black Sea ports blocked by warships until the deal, signed in July, allowed for the safe passage of exports of critical grain supplies. Ukraine was one of the world's top producers and the Black Sea Grain Initiative has helped soothe the global food crunch triggered by the conflict. Nearly 24.3 million tons have been exported so far under the agreement, according to the UN. The initial 120-day agreement struck with the UN and Turkey last July was extended for a further 120 days in November, until March 18. The Kremlin had cast doubt on whether it would agree to any fresh extension, citing concerns that a twin deal on unhindered Russian food and fertilizer exports was not being respected.

It charged Monday that Western sanctions exemptions on such exports were "essentially inactive". Following the talks, Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Vershinin said Moscow would agree to an extension of the Black Sea Grain Initiative, "but only for 60 days." "Our further stance will be determined upon the tangible progress on normalization of our agricultural exports, not (in) words, but in deeds," he said.—AFP

UK unemployment at historic low but inflation hits wages

LONDON: British unemployment remains near its historical low but wages are still falling in real terms, official data showed Tuesday on the eve of a budget. The unemployment rate was stable at 3.7 percent in the three months to the end of January compared with the three months to the end of December, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) said in a statement.



LOS ANGELES: In this file photo taken on October 22, 2020 app-based drivers from Uber and Lyft protest in a caravan in front of City Hall in Los Angeles where elected leaders hold a conference urging voters to reject on the November 3 election, Proposition 22, that would classify app-based drivers as independent contractors and not employees or agents. — AFP

Court upholds Uber drivers being contractors

SAN FRANCISCO: A California appeals court on Monday upheld a state law letting Uber, Lyft and other app-based, on-demand companies treat drivers as independent contractors rather than employees.

The ruling came as a victory for ride-share firms and food-delivery app platforms that backed a measure called Proposition 22 ahead of its passage in the state in 2020. "We're pleased that the court respected the will of the people, and that Prop 22 will remain in place, preserving independence for drivers," Uber chief legal officer Tony West told AFP.

The California voter-approved referendum that lets many gig workers be treated as independent contractors was ruled unconstitutional in August of 2021, setting up more legal fights over the controversial measure. The labor legislation heavily backed by Uber, Lyft and other app-based, on-demand services effectively overturned a California law requiring them to reclassify their drivers and provide employee benefits. A state judge later ruled the law violated California's state Constitution because the power to make laws about worker compensation belonged to legislators.

Wages excluding bonuses rose 6.5 percent-but dived 3.5 percent when inflation is taken into account. "Although the inflation rate has come down a little, it's still outstripping earnings growth, meaning real pay continues to fall," said ONS economic statistics director Darren Morgan on Tuesday. Britain remains plagued by strikes as workers protest over pay failing to keep pace with consumer prices. The data was published one day before finance minister Jeremy Hunt unveils the government's latest budget, against the backdrop of a cost-of-living crisis that has sparked strikes across Britain.

UK hospital doctors on Monday began a three-day strike over pay at the start of a week that will also see teachers, train staff and civil servants walk out, in industrial action timed to coincide with the budget.

The appeals court, however, ruled that Prop 22 "does not intrude on the Legislature's workers' compensation authority." The proposition has remained in effect as the litigation played out.

Under the proposition, drivers remained independent contractors but Uber and Lyft were to pay them a number of benefits including a minimum wage, a contribution to health care and other forms of insurance. Labor groups fighting the initiative argued that it would erode worker rights and benefits.

The victory for the gig economy in California was expected to echo across the United States, in a boon for app-based services while igniting fears that big business is rewriting labor laws. Prop 22 does guarantee some support such as pay topping the minimum wage and supplemented health care coverage-but it designates drivers as self-employed, meaning they do not have the right to some regular employee benefits. "We're all flabbergasted, angry and ready to keep on fighting," said Los Angeles Uber driver Nicole Moore, president of Rideshare Drivers United in California.

Moore hoped that the union group that filed the legal challenge to Prop 22 will appeal the latest decision to the state supreme court. Moore argued that the proposition has not benefited the majority of ride-share drivers when it comes to pay and medical benefits. "There's nothing good about this law," Moore told AFP. "We hope the (California) Supreme Court will do the right thing."—AFP

The ONS also revealed Tuesday that the economy now has more than 1.1 million job vacancies.

"The jobs market remains strong, but inflation remains too high," Hunt said in reaction to Tuesday's data. "Tomorrow at the budget, I will set out how we will go further to bear down on inflation, reduce debt and grow the economy, including by helping more people back into work." Hunt flagged over the weekend that he would reveal more childcare support to help parents get back into work. And he will reportedly seek pension changes to discourage workers from taking early retirement. The government is looking to fill vacancies in part caused by a lack of EU workers following Brexit and a record number of people classed as long-term sick.—AFP

PIF signs MoUs with local entities to boost private sector role

RIYADH: The Public Investment Fund (PIF) announced on Tuesday the signing of four memorandums of understanding (MoU) with local entities on the sidelines of the inaugural PIF Private Sector Forum in Riyadh. The agreements aim to enhance joint cooperation through a range of initiatives aimed to support Saudi Arabia's private sector across a number of strategic sectors.

The first MoU was signed with the Local Content and Government Procurement Authority, and aims to increase the local content in the national economy by collaborating on the development of relevant programs and strategies that aim to increase local content for PIF and its portfolio companies as well as developing and launching local content opportunities in the different strategic sectors on which PIF is focused.

The second MoU was signed with the Building Technology Stimulus Initiative under the Ministry of Municipal and Rural Affairs and Housing, and aims to explore opportunities to develop the modern construction methods and relevant technologies to serve the direction of the housing and construction sectors in Saudi Arabia, and grow the local content in the construction sector.

The third MoU was signed with the Saudi Contractors Authority to collaborate on several initiatives to support the development of the local contracting sector with the aim of strengthening Saudi Arabia's position as a leader in the construction and building services sector to support the ambitions of PIF Real Estate projects. The fourth agreement with the Federation of Saudi Chambers aims to enhance the cooperation between the private sector and PIF's projects and investments, which will increase local content by encouraging the private sector to take part in PIF's current and future investments and projects. The signing of the agreement comes as part of the Federation's role as an umbrella for the business sector and the chambers of commerce in Saudi Arabia.

Through the signing of the four MoUs, PIF aims to enable the growth of the local private sector by creating more opportunities to be involved, enhancing its knowledge and capacity for innovation, and encouraging the localization of supply chains in strategic sectors. These objectives align with PIF's efforts to support and enable the private sector to achieve the target of increasing its contribution to GDP to at least 65 percent by 2030, as outlined in Saudi Vision 2030.

The PIF Private Sector Forum is the latest PIF initiative to empower and support the private sector, and aims at strengthening partnerships between PIF, its portfolio companies and the private sector as well as advancing opportunities and localizing supply chains in strategic sectors.



Japan announced the official start of Tokyo's cherry blossom season on Tuesday, 10 days earlier than usual and tied with a record early start seen only twice before. In past years the country's meteorologists have linked the increasingly early blooms to climate change, and temperatures in Tokyo have been unseasonably mild in recent days. Tokyo's official cherry bloom records go back 70 years and the delicate white-pink flowers have only appeared this early in 2021 and 2020, according to the weather agency.

Japan's sakura or cherry blossom season is feverishly anticipated by locals and visitors alike, and the announcement of the Tokyo season start was alerted by major news agencies and covered live on television. The blooms are traditionally celebrated with hanami, or viewing parties, with picnics and sometimes boozy festivities-organized beneath the trees. But the public had been asked not to throw the parties during the pandemic, and the tourists that usually flood into the country for the season were kept out with strict border clo-

sures. Borders reopened last October, and Tokyo parks have announced blossom revelers will be allowed to gather freely for the first time since 2019. The season is announced underway based on the progress of blossoms on a signal tree at Tokyo's Yasukuni Shrine, where an official from the Japan Meteorological Agency stood before media and onlookers to make the announcement. "Today, on March 14, we hereby declare the sakura blossoming in Tokyo," he said, in an announcement that came six days earlier than last year.

"We've seen many warm days in March," the official said, adding: "climate change may also have played a part." The blooms of the ubiquitous somei-yoshino strain, which accounts for more than 90 percent of the cherry trees planted in Japan, last only around a week and tend to emerge simultaneously in a given region because the trees are clones of a single specimen. "Congratulations on the blooming!", an onlooker shouted after the official announcement, to a round of enthusiastic applause. — AFP



A man takes photos as people come out to Ueno Park to see the early cherry blossoms in Tokyo.



People take photos as they come out to Ueno Park to see the early cherry blossoms in Tokyo.



Food dishes are cooked by steam coming from a natural hot spring at Hyotan Onsen in the city of Beppu, Oita prefecture.

Steam cuisine: Cooking in Japan's hot springs

Using geothermal resources to generate electricity is a divisive prospect in Japan, but there is little disagreement about another use for it: natural steam for cooking. The geothermal sources that make Japan a haven for hot springs or onsen are also used to produce a range of delicacies. There's the "onsen tamago"-eggs cooked in geothermally heated water at around 65 degrees (149 degrees Fahrenheit) to produce a relatively firm yolk with a creamy soft white.



Corn cooked by steam coming from a natural hot spring is picked by a store staff member at Myoban Onsen.

And then there are small round cakes called "onsen manju", a popular snack sold at the approximately 2,900 hot spring locations across Japan. Stuffed with red bean paste, they are cooked with the steam that rises from onsen water. In Beppu, a small coastal town in Japan's southwestern Kyushu, an abundance of natural hot springs has given rise to a local specialty: "jigoku mushi" or "hell steaming". Customers can buy meat, fish and vegetables on site at an onsen, and cook them in containers connected directly to the steam emanating from a nearby natural hot spring. "This method of cooking was already being mentioned in local historical documents as far back as 200 years ago," Hitoshi Tanaka, president of Hyotan Onsen-which offers "jigoku mushi" to its customers-told AFP. With steam at temperatures of 100-110 degrees Celsius (212-230 Fahrenheit), cooking generally takes no more than five to 10 minutes, "so the food retains its original color", Tanaka explains. The sulfur present in the steam imparts an "umami" to the meal, a flavor enhancer considered key to Japanese cuisine, and it contains iron, a trace element important for health, he added. —AFP

HOT SPRING BATHS BLOCK JAPAN'S GEOTHERMAL POTENTIAL

With over 100 active volcanos, Japan has the world's third largest geothermal resources, but also a powerful industry that has steadfastly opposed developing the sector: hot springs. Geothermal is a renewable resource that harnesses heat from deep below the Earth's crust-a seemingly attractive option for energy resource-poor Japan. But the hot springs or onsens that dot Japan are a major business, beloved by locals and tourists alike, and the industry fears developing geothermal might mean water levels and temperatures drop at their facilities. "To be honest, if possible, we want the drive for geothermal energy developments to stop," said Yoshiyasu Sato, vice president of the Japan Onsen Association. So the baths at Tsuchiyu Onsen, nestled between green mountains along a winding river in northeastern Japan's Fukushima, are a rarity-they coexist with a small geothermal plant. It was the 2011 earthquake, tsunami and nuclear disaster that triggered a change in the town, said Takayuki Kato, president of Genki Up Tsuchiyu, a local government organization that manages the renewable energy scheme. The town of 300 people was badly damaged by the quake and residents began exploring whether geothermal energy might help revive their fortunes. "People here have always known the hot springs could be used for other purposes," but they didn't know how to do it, he explained. Reconstruction funds were used to build the geothermal plant that opened in 2015 over a preexisting hot spring. It lies two kilometers (1.2 miles) upstream from the town's baths, where men and women bathe naked in separate sections. The plant "has not changed either the quality or the quantity of the water" for onsens in the town, he said. 'Powerful' onsen industry Sales of electricity from the plant now fund free local bus rides for children and



People take a public footbath in Tsuchiyu Onsen, a hot spring town in Fukushima prefecture.

seniors, and have allowed the town to renovate disused buildings and support local artisans. And extra hot water from the plant has created a new tourist attraction-a small colony of giant freshwater prawns, which people can catch and grill. For proponents of geothermal development, it's a small but promising sign of what could be replicated across Japan, given sufficient will. For now, the country produces just 0.3 percent of its electricity from geothermal, but the potential is enormous. Japan's reserves are estimated at 23 gigawatts, the equivalent of around 20 nuclear reactors, and behind only the United States and Indonesia, according to the national Agency for Natural Resources and Energy. Its potential is even more enticing given the country's dependency on imported fuels, especially after the 2011 nuclear disaster forced the shuttering of nuclear reactors. Before the pandemic, around 2,500 people visited Tsuchiyu's plant each year, including some in the onsen industry

intrigued by its success. But very few have been able to imitate the project, and Japan's government has a modest target of just one percent of electricity from geothermal by 2030. Onsen owners sometimes "refuse to even discuss" the possibility of a geothermal project in their area, said Kasumi Yasukawa, from the geothermal division of the government's energy security agency JOGMEC. On top of objections from the "powerful" onsen industry, high initial costs and lengthy administrative hurdles also hold back those interested in building a geothermal plant, she said. 'We want it to stop' The government has lifted some restrictions in recent years, allowing authorities to research options in national parks where 80 percent of geothermal resources are found. But onsen owners are steadfast in their resistance, arguing that water sources are fragile and vulnerable to overexploitation. The onsen association's Sato argues geothermal should not



A staff member of a cafe fishes a giant river prawn, a South East Asia species that needs constant hot water which is provided by the nearby geothermal power plant in Tsuchiyu Onsen.

even be considered renewable, pointing to older Japanese plants that have seen production capacity diminish over time. JOGMEC's Yasukawa counters that developers overestimated the potential at these sites, partly due to the lack of scientific knowledge at the time. "It seems that the fears of onsen owners are just based on rumours", she said, explaining that geothermal projects tap into deep rock or sediment that holds groundwater. "There is no interference with hot spring wells," which use water from reservoirs closer to the surface, she said. JOGMEC hopes projects like Tsuchiyu Onsen's plant can change minds, but there is little sign the hot spring industry will shift its position soon. If geothermal advocates "had new scientific drilling methods that could ease our fears, that would be great. But they don't," said Sato. — AFP



A general view of Tsuchiyu Onsen, a hot spring town in Fukushima prefecture.



This picture shows a general view of Tsuchiyu Onsen, a hot spring town in Fukushima prefecture. — AFP photos



Japanese-born American violinist Midori Goto (center) and music students from the National Institute of Music of Afghanistan (Anim) stand up at the end of a concert at the music conservatory of Braga, north of Portugal. — AFP photos



Music students of the National Institute of Music of Afghanistan (Anim) hold their instruments backstage prior to a concert at the Music Conservatory of Braga, north of Portugal.



Music students of the National Institute of Music of Afghanistan (Anim) get ready on stage for a concert.

Afghan musicians in Portugal tell of ‘cultural genocide’

“We are here to save our music,” proclaims Ramiz, a young Afghan musician who has been welcomed in Portugal, along with other students from the national music school he left as he fled the Taliban government’s cultural crackdown. “We hope that one day we can go back to our country,” the 19-year-old told AFP, holding his rubab, a traditional stringed instrument made of wood and inlaid with mother-of-pearl.

Ramiz is one of 58 students from the Afghanistan National Institute of Music (ANIM), aged between 13 and 21, who have settled in the northern Portuguese cities of Braga and Guimaraes. He landed in Lisbon, along with his classmates, several teachers and some of their families in December 2021, months after the Taliban leaders took power. The 273 refugees fled Afghanistan for fear of reprisals from the ruling Taliban authority, which shut down music institutes, locked up their instruments and banned public performances.

“When Taliban reached the gates of Kabul, it was clear that we should



Japanese-born American violinist Midori Goto watches from backstage the music students from the National Institute of Music of Afghanistan (ANIM) performing onstage.

get out,” recalled ANIM director Ahmad Sarmast, who did everything possible to evacuate the students and staff of the music institute. “Afghanistan is a silent nation,” the 61-year-old said. “When a country’s music is banned, an entire nation is silenced,” added Sarmast, who

lost some of his hearing in an attack in 2014, when the Taliban rulers were rebel fighters.

“It’s nothing short of a cultural and musical genocide,” added the Afghan music specialist, who has made it his mission to safeguard his country’s musical heritage and to recreate in Portugal the music school he founded in Afghanistan in 2010. Many of the school’s activities have already been recreated in Portugal, such as the Zohra orchestra, Afghanistan’s first all-female orchestra created in 2016, he added.

“What remains to be done is the school itself,” said Sarmast, adding he was searching for a spot to host the music institute in Portugal. He hopes to open the school “in two years”.

‘Each performance is a protest’

While waiting to find a place where it can be reborn, his exiled students have been welcomed at the Braga Music Conservatory, where they continue to play music as an act of resistance. “Each performance of our school is a protest against what is happening in Af-

ghanistan,” Sarmast said. One of those acts of musical protest came earlier this month in a concert with celebrated Japanese-born violinist Midori Goto.

The Taliban government seized power in Afghanistan in August 2021, promising a softer version of their 1996-2001 rule that the United Nations said was characterized by human rights abuses. But they have squeezed women out of almost all areas of public life, recently banning them from secondary and higher education, many public sector jobs and from visiting parks and baths.

Nineteen-year-old percussionist Shogufa, working in another part of the Braga conservatory with a fellow student, is trying to enjoy the freedom that her new life in Portugal offers. In her spare time, the Beethoven fan likes to compose music, cook, go out for a hamburger or play sports with her friends at a local gym. While tens of thousands of teenage girls and women university students are denied access to modern education in Afghanistan, Shogufa welcomes the opportunity to do so every

day in Portugal. “My huge dream is that one day I’ll return back to Afghanistan,” she said. “I do believe that everything will be fine, because the Taliban... is not forever.”

‘Our music is not dead’

Ramiz, taking a break from his rubab practice, is also optimistic and hopes one day to return to Afghanistan “and show our music is not dead”. But his mood darkens when he thinks about his family back home. He hopes they will soon be able to join him in Portugal.

Ramiz said he speaks to his mother every day. “One night if she didn’t listen to my voice, she won’t sleep,” added the young man, whose father and two brothers are also musicians. Shogufa, who spent over seven months in a precarious condition in a former military hospital in Lisbon before making her way to Braga, has similar concerns for those she left behind, including her six brothers and sisters. “All of them just stay at home” and “have no plans for the future.” — AFP



Dozens of rare manta rays caught off Gaza coast

Dozens of manta rays were laid out Monday on a beach in the blockaded Gaza Strip as local Palestinian fishermen celebrated the mass catch. The rare fish flock to the Mediterranean waters off the coast of Gaza every year in March and April. Fishing

is a major commercial activity in Gaza, which has been under a Zionist-led blockade since 2007, when Islamist movement Hamas took over the territory.

Fisherman Bashir Shoueikh caught more than 10 of the rays, each weighing between 200 and 300 kg (440-660

pounds). They sell for around 12 shekels (\$3.30) per kilo. “Each boat carries between 20 and 30 of these fish,” Shoueikh told AFP. “People like them a lot.”

The fishing zone off Gaza, determined by Zionist, varies from five to 16 nautical miles, depending on the secu-

rity situation. The two species of manta ray-manta alfredi and manta birostris are both on the International Union for the Conservation of Nature’s red list of threatened species due to their declining numbers. — AFP



People gather at a beach in Gaza City around Manta Rays caught by Palestinian fisherman near the coast.



‘Scream’ still echoes, topping N America box office

Twenty-seven years after the first “Scream” movie raised goosebumps, a sixth installment opened atop the North American box office this weekend, taking in an estimated \$44.5 million, industry watcher Exhibitor Relations said Sunday. That was “an excellent opening for an elite horror movie,” said analyst David A. Gross, and it came as the film world’s glitterati were converging on Hollywood for the evening’s Oscar presentations. A Paramount/Spyglass Media product, “Scream VI” again combines mystery and black comedy.

This edition stars Melissa Barrera, Jenna Ortega and Skeet Ulrich; it is the first in the series not to star Neve Campbell, who failed to reach terms with the studio. Last week’s top film, MGM’s boxing drama “Creed III,” came in second, with a take estimated at \$27.2 million for the Friday-through-Sunday period. Michael B. Jordan directs his first time in that role while again playing title character Adonis Creed.

In third was “65,” a new sci-fi thriller from Sony and Columbia Pictures, at \$12.3 million. Adam Driver plays a pilot whose spaceship crashes on an unknown planet, which turns out to be the Earth of 65 million years ago, and has to protect himself and a young passenger from dinosaur attack as well as from a huge asteroid that is about to extinguish much of life on Earth. Marvel and Disney’s “Ant-Man and the Wasp: Quantumania” placed fourth, at \$7 million. Paul Rudd and Evangeline Lilly star as the winged title characters.

And in fifth place was Universal’s horror comedy “Cocaine Bear,” at \$6.2 million. Keri Russell plays a woman hunted through the Tennessee woods by a bear that had come upon, and unwisely consumed, a stash of drugs. Finally, while ticket sales and Oscar wins do not always coincide, these were Hollywood’s top earners last year, according to Gross: “Avatar: The Way of Water” (\$2.28 billion); “Top Gun: Maverick” (\$1.49 billion); “Black Panther: Wakanda Forever” (\$859 million); “Puss in Boots: The Last Wish” (\$455 million); “Elvis” (\$287 million); and “Everything, Everywhere All at Once” (\$106 million). Rounding out this weekend’s top 10 were: “Jesus Revolution” (\$5.2 million) “Champions” (\$5.2 million) “Avatar: The Way of Water” (\$2.7 million) “Demon Slayer: To the Swordsmith Village” (\$1.9 million) “Puss in Boots: The Last Wish” (\$1.7 million). — AFP

Sports

South Africa, West Indies start a new one-day era

Top eight teams qualify automatically for World Cup

News in Brief

Kuwaiti sprinter wins silver

TEHRAN: Madhawi Al-Shimmery, a Kuwaiti female sprinter, won the silver medal of 30 meters race of the First Nowruz International Games in Tehran. She finished the race in 7.53 seconds, head of Kuwait mission to the games Farouq Al-Sha'er said. Aisha Al-Khedr secured a new record for Kuwait in long sprinting with a 5.55 meters sprint, but she came fifth in the competition, he noted. Similarly, Sheikha Al-Saqhan made a new national record in the shot put event with a 11.24 meters throw, securing the fourth place, Al-Sha'er added. Opened on Friday, March 10, the First Nowruz International Games continues with athletes from 22 countries taking part. — KUNA

Freiburg coach extends deal

BERLIN: Christian Streich has extended his deal as Freiburg coach, the Bundesliga club announced on Tuesday. As has become tradition during Streich's term with the outfit, Freiburg did not announce an end date to the contract. Previous agreements have however been extended by one year, with his new deal expected to finish in 2024. "It is nice that we still like coming into the office and maintaining an open and honest exchange," the 57-year-old said. "The group here is special and it is a pleasure for me to continue working at this club together with my coaching colleagues." After playing for Freiburg, Streich started as a youth coach in 1995 before becoming head coach in December 2011, making him the longest-serving coach in the Bundesliga. He is currently overseeing the most successful period in the club's history. Streich took them to the German Cup final for the first time in 2021-22, which they lost to RB Leipzig on penalties. — AFP

Italian Super Cup in Saudi

MILAN: The Italian Super Cup will be played as a four-team tournament next season and held in Saudi Arabia for four of the next six years, Serie A said on Monday. Italy's top flight told AFP after a meeting of its clubs that it would decide whether to maintain the four-team format for the following five seasons at a later date. The next two Super Cups will be held in Saudi Arabia, with two years elsewhere before returning to the Arab nation for the final two years. Serie A didn't say where the two editions not held in Saudi Arabia would be played. Next year's tournament will be contested in January 2024. The Super Cup has up to now featured the Serie A champions and the winners of the Italian Cup, with Inter Milan thumping AC Milan in this year's edition in Riyadh in January. From next season it will feature the top two in Serie A and the Italian Cup finalists from the this campaign, in a similar change to the one made to the Spanish Super Cup. — AFP

Hakimi named in Morocco squad

RABAT: Paris Saint-Germain defender Achraf Hakimi, charged with rape in France, was called into the Morocco squad Monday for friendly games against Brazil and Peru. One of the stars of Morocco's historic charge to the semi-finals of the World Cup last year, Hakimi was charged earlier this month with allegedly raping a 24-year-old woman. Hakimi allegedly paid for his accuser to travel to his home on February 25 in the Paris suburb of Boulogne-Billancourt while his wife and children were away on holiday. He denies the accusations. "We are behind him and that's the most important thing," Morocco coach Walid Regragui said. "There is the presumption of innocence until there is proof to the contrary, we and all Moroccans are backing him," Regragui told a press conference in Rabat. "He is unfazed and that's important," he said. "We are all behind him and it would do him good to return to Morocco and feel that everyone supports him." — AFP

Legal action over concussions

SYDNEY: A former Australian Rules star on Tuesday launched a "landmark" class action against the governing body over concussion-related injuries, with dozens more ex-players set to join. Max Rooke played 135 games for Geelong before retirement in 2010 and now wants compensation from the Australian Football League (AFL) for head injuries he received while playing. The 41-year-old filed a class action at the Supreme Court of Victoria in Melbourne alleging he suffered "permanent, life-altering concussion-related injuries and due to the negligence of the AFL", his lawyer Michel Margalit said in a statement. More than 60 former players have come forward to join the class action, Margalit added. The ex-players are said to be suffering from long-term injuries including neurological impairments such as traumatic brain injuries and dementia. "The injuries suffered by this group of former AFL players has had a devastating impact on their lives and the lives of their loved ones," said Margalit. — AFP

EAST LONDON: South Africa have a new coach and the West Indies a new captain as they start a three-match one-day international series at Buffalo Park in East London on Thursday. Proteas coach Rob Walter and West Indian captain Shai Hope will both be seeking a winning formula at the beginning of a crucial period for both teams in the lead-up to the Cricket World Cup in India in October and November.

Neither South Africa nor West Indies are guaranteed a place in cricket's showpiece event as they languish in eighth and nine places on the International Cricket Council's World Cup Super League. The top eight teams qualify automatically for the World Cup - the rest will have to survive a qualifying tournament in Zimbabwe in June and July. South Africa can overtake the West Indies - and both could be trumped by Sri Lanka - as the Super League comes to an end early next month. The series starting on Thursday will not count towards qualification as it falls outside the Super League program.

Both teams will be much-changed from the sides that played in a Test series won 2-0 by South Africa. Only

four of the South Africans played in the Tests, including captain Temba Bavuma. The other three, fast bowler Gerald Coetzee and batsman Tony de Zorzi, who both made their Test debuts in the recent series, and Ryan Rickelton, have yet to play in a one-day international. Injuries kept out all-rounder Wiaan Mulder and left-arm spinner Keshav Maharaj, who were originally selected.

Walter will take charge for the first time since being appointed last month. He has worked with the South African team as a strength and conditioning coach but has spent the past seven years coaching in New Zealand. He has made changes in the support staff, including the appointment of former national players JP Duminy and Rory Kleinveldt as batting and bowling coaches. Hope, 29, was appointed West Indies skipper after Nicholas Pooran resigned from the white-ball leadership after the T20 World Cup last year. Pooran is still part of the squad.

Hope has an impressive one-day record, with an average of 48.95 from 104 one-day internationals. He captained Barbados in the regional 50-overs competition last year. Roston Chase, Shannon Gabriel, Jason



Shai Hope

Holder, Alazarri Joseph and Kyle Mayers played in the Tests. The first two matches will be played at Buffalo Park, which has not hosted a one-day international since Bangladesh played there in October 2017. Since then there have been two T20 internationals, the most recent against England in February 2020.

Squads: South Africa: Temba Bavuma (captain), Gerald Coetzee, Quinton de Kock (wkt), Tony de Zorzi, Bjorn

Fortuin, Reeza Hendricks, Sisanda Magala, Lungi Ngidi, Ryan Rickelton, Wayne Parnell, Andile Phehlukwayo, Tabraiz Shamsi, Tristan Stubbs, Lizaad Williams, Rassie van der Dussen. West Indies: Shai Hope (captain), Shamarh Brooks, Yannic Cariah, Keecy Carty, Roston Chase, Shannon Gabriel, Jason Holder, Akeal Hosein, Alzarri Joseph, Brandon King, Kyle Mayers, Nicholas Pooran, Rovman Powell, Romario Shepherd, Odean Smith. — AFP



Kuwait to participate in Special Olympics

By Abdellatif Sharaa

KUWAIT: Kuwait Special Olympics will participate in the Special Olympics World Games 2023 which will be held in Berlin from June 12th until 25th. National Director of Kuwait Special Olympics Rihab Buresli said Kuwait will participate with 35 players (with disability) and others without disability as an implementation of the sports integration requirements, which the sustainable

Athletics high jump legend Fosbury dies

LOS ANGELES: Athletics legend Dick Fosbury, who revolutionized high jumping with his signature "Fosbury flop" has died, his agent confirmed on Monday. He was 76. Fosbury's agent Ray Schulte said in a statement that the 1968 Olympics gold medalist had died peacefully in his sleep early Sunday from lymphoma. "Dick will be greatly missed by friends and fans from around the world. A true legend, and friend of all!"

Born in Portland, Oregon, in 1947, Fosbury was to become one of the most influential athletes in the history of track and field for developing the innovative high-jumping technique which upended his sport in the 1960s. Prior to Fosbury's emergence, high jumpers typically attempted to clear the bar using the "straddle technique" in which they would take off face forward while attempting to twist their body mid-leap over the bar.

Fosbury, however, turned the conventional wisdom on its head with his new approach which would become immortalized as the "Fosbury Flop" and remains to this day the standard technique used by

development goals urge. She said Kuwait Special Olympics will compete in 10 games: athletics, swimming, bocce, bicycling, bowling, basketball, judo, badminton, weight lifting and equestrian. Kuwait Special Olympics began its preparations for the games three months ago. Players were selected through local tournaments that were organized by the Special Olympics in addition to tournaments of clubs, establishments NGOs and schools. Meanwhile, sports federations recommended those who do not have disabilities. The games, patronized by Germany's President, will see 7,000 disabled athletes compete in 26 games. Buresli appreciated the support of Kuwait participation in the Berlin World Games.

elite high jumpers. Instead of tackling the bar head on, the rangy, 6ft 4in Fosbury would arc towards the bar on his run-up before taking off backwards and "flopping" over the bar. "Few athletes in history have done their thing as uniquely as Dick Fosbury," former US high jump coach John Tansley wrote in 1980. "He literally turned his event upside down."

US track and field great Michael Johnson led the tributes to Fosbury on Monday. "The world legend is probably used too often," Johnson wrote on Twitter. "Dick Fosbury was a true LEGEND! He changed an entire event forever with a technique that looked crazy at the time but the result made it the standard." Fosbury first began experimenting with new ways of high jumping while still in school, hitting upon his new technique in 1963 during a competition in which he jumped a personal best of 1.65m using an old technique.

"Then they raised the bar and I knew I had to try something different to get over it," Fosbury told Athletics Weekly in 2011. "I knew I had to lift my hips up and to do that I needed to get my shoulders back out of the way. And I cleared the bar at the next height, eventually jumping 1.77m so I improved by 15cm that day." It was not until 1968 however that Fosbury's new approach gained global attention. Victory at the US college championships was fol-



Rihab Buresli



American high jump champion Dick Fosbury

lowed by a win at the US Olympic trials in Los Angeles. At the Mexico City Olympics, Fosbury won the gold medal after clearing a height of 2.24m with his third jump - a new Olympic and US record - to pip team-mate Ed Caruthers, with the Soviet Union's Valentin Gavrilov taking bronze. — AFP

Alcaraz and Swiatek march on at Indian Wells, Murray falls

INDIAN WELLS: Carlos Alcaraz fended off tenacious Tallon Griekspoor 7-6 (7/4), 6-3 on Monday to reach the fourth round at Indian Wells as he and women's top seed Iga Swiatek passed tough tests in the California desert. Alcaraz, 19, had a testing time breaking through against his determined Dutch foe, who had won their only prior hard court meeting. He didn't face a break point in the first set, nor could he convert either of his two. A strong start in the tiebreaker proved the difference, Alcaraz locking up the set with a forehand winner on his second set point.

He rolled from there, breaking Griekspoor in the second game on the way to a 3-0 lead in the second set. "It has been a really tough match," Alcaraz said of his 100th ATP Tour match win. "Tallon is playing great, I had to be really focused. Of

course playing with a lot of wind like today is also tough. "I had chances at the beginning of the first set, I didn't take it. "The second set, I took my chances that I had in the beginning and thanks to that I was able to play more relaxed."

Alcaraz will face Britain's Jack Draper for a place in the quarter-finals after Draper overcame former world number one Andy Murray 7-6 (8/6), 6-2. Women's world number one Swiatek, seeking to become the first woman since Martina Navratilova in 1990 and '91 to win back-to-back titles in the combined WTA and ATP Masters 1000 event, elevated her game when she had to for a 6-3, 7-6 (7/1) victory over Canadian Bianca Andreescu.

Andreescu, whose 2019 Indian Wells title proved the springboard to a breakout season that included a US Open crown, pushed Swiatek through punishing baseline rallies, trading six breaks of serve with the reigning French and US Open champion in the second set only to be overpowered in the tiebreaker. "Bianca can change the rhythm pretty well on this surface, it can get tough," Swiatek said, but added she was "glad that I had a chance to play under pressure a little bit more and see how I'm going to cope with that."

Swiatek next faces another former US Open champion in Britain's Emma Raducanu, who earned an impressive 6-1, 2-6, 6-4 victory over big-hitting Brazilian Beatriz Haddad Maia. Raducanu, who has battled nagging wrist trouble and tonsillitis in recent weeks, notched her best win by ranking since she captured the US Open two years ago. Reigning Wimbledon champion Elena Rybakina of Kazakhstan punched her ticket to the fourth round with a 6-3, 7-5 victory over former champion Paula Badosa of Spain.

Rybakina, ranked 10th in the world after a runner-up finish to Aryna Sabalenka at the Australian Open in January, had lost her last three matches against Badosa - her doubles partner this week. Fourth-seeded Tunisian Ons Jabeur, playing her first tournament since missing Doha and Dubai in the wake of knee surgery, was beaten 7-6 (7/5), 6-4 by Czech Marketa Vondrousova - the same woman who upset Jabeur in the second round of the Australian Open. In another rematch of an Australian Open second-round clash, fifth-seeded Caroline Garcia beat Canadian Leylah Fernandez 6-4, 6-7 (5/7), 6-1. — AFP

Sports

Ref corruption case ‘Spanish football’s worst ever moment’

Prosecutors charge Catalan club with corruption

BARCELONA: Spanish football is enduring its worst ever moment because of the refereeing corruption case involving Barcelona, La Liga president Javier Tebas said Monday. Last week Spanish prosecutors charged the Catalan club with corruption after payments of more than 7.3 million euros (\$7.8 million) to a company owned by a former refereeing chief were uncovered earlier this year. Barcelona say they paid Jose Maria Enriquez Negreira, the former referee and ex-vice president of the refereeing committee of the Spanish football federation (CTA) between 1994 and 2018, for reports and advice related to refereeing.

“Yes, (it’s the worst moment) that I remember,” Tebas told Movistar channel Vamos. “The problem that we have is the worst. There are payments recognized by Barcelona to the vice-president of the CTA, that’s something abnormal. “It’s understand-

able that tension is generated. The reputation of our football is at stake. I am ashamed. We have no explanation from Barcelona.” Barcelona president Joan Laporta spoke at an event on Monday and said he would defend his team against “attacks”.

Laporta appeared emotional during his speech and said it was not weakness, but instead showed his desire to take on his club’s detractors. “Don’t think that I’m getting emotional out of weakness, I’m getting emotional because I really want to confront all the scoundrels who are tarnishing our badge,” said Laporta. “There are ferocious attacks to sully our club badge, which have nothing to do with reality. “And you can be sure that the board of directors that I have the honor of chairing will defend it with all our might.”

Spanish newspaper El Pais reported Monday that former Barcelona coaches Luis Enrique and

Ernesto Valverde, would be called upon as witnesses in the court proceedings. Reigning Spanish champions Real Madrid said Sunday they would appear as an “injured party” in the case once it moves forward. As well as the club and Enriquez Negreira, two of the club’s former presidents, Josep Maria Bartomeu and Sandro Rosell, are facing the same charge of corruption.

On a sporting level, Barcelona face no immediate danger because the governing bodies of Spanish, European and world football have five-year statute of limitations, Tebas has said. On a criminal level, the accused could face up to four years in prison. Sanctions against the club could range from “suspension of activity... to outright dissolution as a company,” Alberto Palomar, professor of law at Carlos III University of Madrid said. —AFP



President of Spanish football Liga Javier Tebas

Napoli eying Champions League last 8

MILAN: Khvicha Kvaratskhelia lived up to comparisons with icon Diego Maradona with a wonder goal which has Napoli on a high ahead of their Champions League showdown with Eintracht Frankfurt. The Georgia winger has become one of Europe’s hottest properties after an incredible first season in Naples, the most preternaturally gifted Napoli player since Maradona plied his tried in southern Italy in the 1980s.

And now he is set to lead Napoli to the quarter-finals of Europe’s top club competition for the first time in their history, 13 goals and as many assists in all competitions making him the star-alongside Victor Osimhen-of a truly brilliant team. His outrageous goal which set Napoli on their way to a 2-0 win over Atalanta on Saturday was the perfect example of the 22-year-old’s close control and precision play which has been decisive time and again this season.

Having been beaten at home by Lazio the week before there were some fears after the goalless first half that a spring collapse typical of Luciano Spalletti teams was on the cards, but then ‘Kvaradona’

sprinkled his star dust. After collecting a pass from Osimhen in a Napoli counter-attack Kvaratskhelia charged at the Atalanta defense with no back-up. His first feint sent Rafael Toloi spinning and Giorgio Scalvini slide-tackling thin air, but having already fooled four defenders he then cut back inside the befuddled Toloi before smashing home at the near post.

By the time he took his shot Kvaratskhelia was alone in the penalty area with seven Atalanta players powerless to stop the goal which set Napoli towards a win and all but sealed their first Scudetto since 1990. “He scored a goal worthy of Maradona, this time you really can say it, looking at the quality of control in such a tight space... when he runs at you he’s basically unmarkable,” Spalletti told reporters after the match. Italy’s champions-elect face Eintracht with a 2-0 lead to defend following a crushing first-leg display in Germany and nothing but positive vibes surrounding the team.

Deep run

An incredible 18 points clear at the top of Serie A, Spalletti’s entertaining side are eyeing a deep run in Europe and have the perfect opportunity to make the last eight. Spalletti said after the first leg that Napoli’s biggest enemy was “to think it is already done” but the stars could hardly have aligned better for his team.

He should have basically his entire squad available for Wednesday’s match after knocks to start-

ing goalkeeper Alex Meret and key centre-back Kim Min-jae suffered before and during Saturday’s win turned out not to be serious. Meanwhile Eintracht are without their star striker Randal Kolo Muani who was sent off in the first leg and has scored eight goals in 11 matches in all competitions since the turn of the year.

And Eintracht won’t have their usual army of away fans in Naples after the city’s prefecture banned people residing in Frankfurt from buying tickets on Sunday. On Saturday an initial ban on anyone in Germany buying tickets, imposed on Friday by the Italian interior ministry following trouble at the first leg, had been overturned following an appeal from Eintracht. The latest decision to limit ticket sales as a public safety measure has infuriated Eintracht, whose board member Philipp Reschke said in a statement that the club would not take up any of its allocation.

“It is a well-known fact that two-thirds of our fans are from outside the Rhine-Main region and do not come from Frankfurt,” he said. “There would be countless possible ways of actually circumventing this decree and getting parts of our fan-base into the stadium... we are not going to divide ourselves up into postcode areas.” Eintracht are appealing the decision despite not taking the 2,700 places available, but “in view of the timing, (it’s) more about the principle for us and how it affects future decisions.” —AFP

Madrid relying on injury-hit Benzema for European glory

MADRID: Karim Benzema has formed an essential part of Real Madrid’s Champions League success, but there are doubts over whether his team can rely on him to extend their European domination this season. The French striker’s season has been regularly disrupted by injuries, and although Vinicius Junior is a deadly threat on the left, without Benzema, defenses can focus on shutting down the Brazilian winger.

His future at Madrid is also unknown-his contract expires in June and no public decision has been made over a renewal by player or club. “Legends of this club have to stay at Madrid,” said Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti, hoping the forward remains at his disposal next year. Benzema missed Madrid’s La Liga win over Espanyol on Saturday with an ankle issue but is expected to return to face Liverpool at the Santiago Bernabeu on Wednesday in a last 16 second leg clash. The 35-year-old has been sidelined frequently, including with a thigh problem that saw him miss the World Cup with France.

“Something is wrong with Benzema, never in his entire career has he spent so much time in the injury room,” complained Madrid newspaper AS last week, with Benzema out for the eighth time. The forward has missed 34 percent of Madrid’s games across all competitions this season, 14 matches in total, but has scored 18 in the 27 games he has played. “These have been months of disappointment and enormous mystery regarding Karim,” continued AS.

Benzema has aged like a fine wine, playing his best football in his later years, freed up from playing on the fringes when Cristiano Ronaldo left Madrid in 2018, and becoming a top-class goalscorer. Last season Benzema captained Madrid to Champions League glory, with the 1-0 win over Liverpool in the final securing a record 14th triumph. Benzema was crucial in Madrid’s wild run to Paris, scoring a remarkable 17-minute hat-trick in the last 16 to knock out Paris Saint-Germain.

The forward netted another hat-trick at Stamford Bridge in the quarter-finals to put Chelsea on the ropes and clinched the tie for his team with an extra-time winner in the second leg. Manchester City suffered the same fate in the semi-finals, with Benzema netting twice at the Etihad in the first leg then slotting home a penalty to send Madrid through to the final, in extra-time again at the Santiago Bernabeu. —AFP

Shooting Sport Club organizes tournament

By Abdellatif Sharaa

KUWAIT: Kuwait Shooting Sport Club will organize the annual tournament of Sheikh Sabah Al-Salem Al-Humoud Al-Sabah on Thursday in the Olympic skeet, trap, 10m air pistol and rifle, 50m rifle, 25 rapid pistol and Olympic archery. The tournament will conclude on Saturday. Obaid Al-Osaimi, Secretary General of Kuwait and Arab Shooting Federations, said the Kuwait Shooting Sport Club will not hesitate in immortalizing those who supported shooting. He said Sheikh Sabah Al-Salem Al-Humoud Al-Sabah was among the first pioneers of the sport of shooting and laid down the foundation of Kuwait shooting.

Al-Osaimi lauded the support Kuwait Shooting receives from the family of the Late Sheikh Sabah Al-Salem Al-Humoud Al-Sabah, President of the Asian Shooting Confederation, Honorary President of KSCC Sheikh Salman Sabah Al-Salem Al-Humoud Al-Sabah along with his family for organizing this annual championship in order to encourage and motivate shooters.



Obaid Al-Osaimi

‘Wasted money’? Rwanda splurges on sports

KIGALI: First, it was a multi-million dollar sponsorship of English Premier League club Arsenal in 2018, followed by a splashy deal to back French giants Paris Saint-Germain a year later. Now, a “famous” third club is on the cards for Rwanda, according to President Paul Kagame, who has spent a small fortune on sports investments that he says will burnish the international image and diversify the economy of the tiny central African country.

But the splurge, which includes club sponsorships and hosting duties for events ranging from 2021’s Basketball Africa league tournament to cycling’s Road World Championships in 2025, has drawn accusations of “sports-washing”, or using sports to hide the country’s grim human rights record. Campaigners accuse Kagame of crushing political dissent and stifling free speech during his more than 22 years in power.

“These investments do not meet the immediate needs of the vast majority of Rwandans,” said opposition politician Victoire Ingabire, a fierce critic of Kagame. “I don’t believe there is return for his investments,” she told AFP, saying that the sponsorships did little to help rural Rwandans. “It is wasted money.” The impoverished country, where per capita income is estimated at just \$822 according to 2021 World Bank figures, has spent millions of dollars ramping up its sports infrastructure and erecting new buildings.

It is currently renovating the 25,000-capacity national stadium to add 20,000 more seats in a project billed at around \$165 million and expected to be completed by next year. An 18-hole golf course designed by South African golfer Gary Player and costing \$16 million opened in the capital Kigali in 2021. In 2017, Rwanda unveiled a \$1.3-million cricket stadium on the outskirts of Kigali, following it up a year later with a 10,000-seater basketball arena costing \$104 million.



President Paul Kagame

‘Improving people’s lives’

Government officials have defended the projects, arguing that they serve to bolster the country’s reputation as a safe destination for high-profile events. Rwanda, whose tumultuous history is indelibly marked by the 1994 genocide, hosted the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) last year, attended by some 30 leaders including King Charles III, then a prince.

And world football’s governing body FIFA will be in town this week for its 73rd congress to reelect its chief Gianni Infantino who is running unopposed. Authorities say such events bring in much-needed foreign exchange and provide an economic boost to the landlocked nation which is reliant on tourism. Pre-pandemic tourism revenues jumped 17 percent to \$498 million in 2019, according to Rwanda Development Board.

The board’s CEO, Clare Akamanzi, said at the weekend that the Arsenal and PSG sponsorship deals alone had generated over \$160 million in media value. This had in turn brought one million visitors to Rwanda, injecting \$445 million in tourism revenues, she added. “These guests not only left Rwanda with positive memories: they also played a direct role in improving peoples’ lives,” she wrote in an opinion piece published Saturday in the East African newspaper. —AFP

Classifieds

Hospitals & Clinics

Sabah Hospital	24812000
Amiri Hospital	22450005
Maternity Hospital	24843100
Mubarak Al-Kabir Hospital	25312700
Chest Hospital	24849400
Farwaniya Hospital	24892010
Adan Hospital	23940620
Ibn Sina Hospital	24840300
Al-Razi Hospital	24846000
Physiotherapy Hospital	24874330/9

Clinics

Kaizen center	25716707
Rawda	22517733
Adaliya	22517144
Khaldiya	24848075
Kaifan	24849807
Shamiya	24848913
Shuwaikh	24814507
Abdullah Salem	22549134

Nuzha	22526804
Industrial Shuwaikh	24814764
Qadsiya	22515088
Dasmah	22532265
Bneid Al-Gar	22531908
Shaab	22518752
Qibla	22459381
Ayoun Al-Qibla	22451082
Mirqab	22456536
Sharq	22465401
Salmiya	25746401

Change of Name

I, SHAIK MOHAMED ALAM SHAIKH MOHAMED HANIF holder of Passport No. L3857198 do hereby change my name to **ALAM MOHD HANIF PARANDE** for all purposes. **(C#3183) - 15-03-2023**

I, Michelle Henry Fernandes, holder of passport no. T5337449, do hereby change my name to **Michelle Antonet** (as given name) D’Costa

(as surname) for all purposes. I will henceforth be known by the name **Michelle Antonet D’Costa** and I also undertake to carry out this name change in all my documents. **(C#3181) - 14-03-2023**

I, Shahnas Riyas, decided to change my name in passport (T5333279) as **Shehnaz Azmin**, for all future purposes. **(C#3180) - 14-03-2023**

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Bucks down Kings 133-124

Celtics stunned by Rockets 111-109



SACRAMENTO: Giannis Antetokounmpo #34 of the Milwaukee Bucks drives to the basket against Domantas Sabonis #10 of the Sacramento Kings during the first quarter on March 13, 2023. — AFP

LOS ANGELES: Giannis Antetokounmpo returned from injury with a vengeance on Monday, scoring 46 points to lead the Milwaukee Bucks to a come-from-behind 133-124 victory over the in-form Sacramento Kings. A tense duel in Sacramento ended with tempers flaring as the Bucks' Brook Lopez and Sacramento's Trey Lyles clashed angrily in the closing seconds, sparking a mass melee and the ejection of both players. Antetokounmpo finished with 12 rebounds and four assists in addition to his 46 points as the Bucks found their scoring touch in the third and fourth quarters to pile up 80 second-half points. Two-time NBA Most Valuable Player Antetokounmpo had missed the Bucks' last three games, including Saturday's defeat to the Golden State Warriors in San Francisco. But his return to the line-up couldn't have been more timely against a Sacramento team who have emerged as the surprise package of the Western Conference, where they sit in third place behind Denver and Memphis. Antetokounmpo was backed by 31 points from Khris Middleton and

23 points from Lopez as the Bucks overturned a 15-point deficit to claim victory. De'Aaron Fox led Sacramento's scoring with 35 points from 13-of-23 shooting. The win cemented Milwaukee's grip on top spot in the Eastern Conference. The Bucks improved to 49-19 and have opened up a 2.5 game lead over second-placed Boston, surprisingly beaten by lowly Houston earlier on Monday. In other games on Monday, Klay Thompson flirted with breaking his single-game three-point shooting record as Golden State claimed another heavyweight scalp with a 123-112 win over the Phoenix Suns at the Chase Center. Thompson finished with 38 points, 33 of them scored in a remarkable first half that included eight three-pointers. Thompson's touch deserted him in a scoreless third quarter however, meaning he was unable to challenge his record of 14 threes in a game set in 2018. "There's gonna be lulls-I wish I could score 33 points every half but I'm much more satisfied with the win," Thompson said. Steph Curry

finished with 23 points and Jordan Poole 20 for the Warriors, who improved to 36-33 and are fifth in the Western Conference standings. **Celtics stunned by Rockets** The upset of the day came in Houston, where the Rockets stunned Boston 111-109 despite a 43-point performance from Celtics ace Jaylen Brown. The second-placed Celtics had been looking to close the gap on Milwaukee against a Houston team who are propping up the Western Conference with the league's worst record. But the Celtics were caught cold by a fired-up Houston, who shared the scoring around in a tight contest that saw 15 lead changes. Jalen Green led the Rockets scoring with 28 points while five Houston players finished in double figures. Boston could have forced overtime but Jayson Tatum missed a driving layup in the final seconds as Houston held on for the win. "You've got to take the shots you have when you're open," Celtics coach Joe Mazzulla said. "Offensive rebounds, second chance

points, turnovers—that's the game." In other games, Jimmy Butler guided Miami to victory down the stretch in the Heat's 119-115 win over the Utah Jazz. "Jimmy's energy, relentlessness and aggressiveness in these kind of minutes is super-unique," Miami coach Erik Spoelstra said. Butler finished with 24 points as seven Miami players finished in double figures. Tyler Herro and Gabe Vincent finished with 18 points apiece while Bam Adebayo added 16 points and Kevin Love 11. Victor Oladipo and Caleb Martin combined for 21 off the bench. Lauri Markkanen led Utah's scoring with 38 points but Miami showed the greater composure at key points in a game where the lead changed hands 17 times. Miami, who improved to 37-33, are seventh in the East, one spot outside the automatic postseason playoff spots with 12 games left. "We just have to continue to grind and figure out how to win some other skirmishes," Spoelstra said. "At this point, with 12 games left, it's just however we need to do it, we just have to do it." — AFP

Boycott threat over Ukraine war clouds Paris Olympics

PARIS: One of the major headaches, not just for the Paris 2024 organizing committee but also for the International Olympic Committee, is how to handle the ongoing war in Ukraine. Some nations, with Ukraine the most vocal, have called for a blanket ban on Russian and Belarusian athletes, while others have given the green light for participation. Paris Mayor Anne Hidalgo has called for a ban "while the war continues" in Ukraine while IOC president Thomas Bach is keen for a "pathway" that will allow the Russians and Belarusians to compete as neutrals, a stance that has the backing of the United States. The French government and the 2024 Olympic organizers, meanwhile, have largely sidestepped the row. "It's up to the IOC to ultimately decide whether the Russian delegation will be allowed to participate in the Paris Olympics," Organizing Committee president Tony Estanguet said in February. It is over a year since Russian forces, aided by their ally Belarus, invaded Ukraine to start a war which is still going on at the cost of thousands of lives on both sides. Russia were barred from competing in many sports, and thrown out in the late stages of qualification for last year's World Cup in Qatar. Russian athletes competing in individual sports such as tennis do so without having their nationality officially signified. It is this deal that Bach wants to bring to the table for the Olympics - Russians already took part in some events in the 2106 Games in Rio de Janeiro and at the 2020 Tokyo Olympics and last year's Beijing Winter Games under a neutral flag although that was due to sanctions for doping violations. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has led the calls for a total ban on Russian and Belarusian athletes

and has called for a boycott of the Games if they are allowed to take part. "The mere presence of representatives of the terrorist state is a manifestation of violence and lawlessness," Zelensky told a virtual summit of sports ministers chaired from London in February. "And it cannot be covered up with some pretended neutrality or a white flag. "If the Olympic sports were killings and missile strikes, then you know which national team would occupy the first place," he added. Anna Ryzhykova, the Ukrainian who was fifth in the women's 400m hurdles final at the Tokyo Olympics and a bronze medalist at last year's European Championships in Munich, expressed her bitterness when she spoke to reporters this month. "When the war started, we all texted (Russian athletes we know)," she said. "We said 'you cannot attack us, do something'. They said to us - 'no, you are lying, I hope you die'." Ryzhykova said she could not imagine competing against them: "They are murderers. They are cheats. They are not good people," she said. Kyiv mayor and former world boxing champion Vitali Klitschko offered a different solution. "Russian and Belarusian athletes can't participate in the Olympic Games in Paris if they don't say 'no' to war," Klitschko told AFP. "If they publicly express against this war, they can (participate)." In a letter earlier in February, more than 30 countries, including France, Great Britain, Sweden, Poland, the United States and Canada, expressed concern about how the athletes could be neutral, particularly given the "strong links and affiliations between Russian athletes and the Russian military". "It would have to be ensured that no athletes from Russia or Belarus who actively support the war start," said German Olympic committee secretary general Torsten Burmester echoing Klitschko's view. The IOC responded that the letter ignored the human rights of Russian and Belarusian athletes. Russian sports minister Oleg Matytsin, meanwhile, described Ukraine's call for a ban as "unacceptable". "We see a blatant desire to destroy the unity of international sport and the international Olympic movement," Matytsin was cited as saying by Russian state-run news agencies. — AFP

Morata strikes late as Atletico beat Girona 1-0

GIRONA: Alvaro Morata snatched a 94th minute winner to earn Atletico Madrid a 1-0 victory at Girona on Monday and tighten their hold on third place in La Liga. After La Real, fourth, drew at Mallorca on Sunday, Atletico moved three points clear of the Basque side with their last-gasp victory at Montilivi. Morata turned home from close range after a corner was flicked on to him by Angel Correa, with Atletico surviving a long VAR check to see if the striker had strayed offside. "For me it was very clear (that it was valid), but if it wasn't I'd have gone home by bicycle," Morata told DAZN. "(My team-mates) were annoyed because I touched it, but VAR gave it, so I am happy. "It's hard to see it there and not touch it, maybe they would have been more annoyed if I didn't touch it and it didn't go in." Girona, 12th, started brightly and thought they had won a penalty when Stefan Savic handled in the box, but striker Taty Castellanos was offside. After Atletico's 6-1 thrashing of Sevilla last weekend, Simeone kept faith in the Memphis Depay and Antoine Griezmann strike partnership. The pair combined early on, with Depay teeing up Griezmann, whose effort was saved by Paulo Gazzaniga. Then Griezmann turned creator and crossed for Depay, who volleyed narrowly over from close range. Yannick Carrasco also tested Gazzaniga in the first half, playing well on the left flank and getting forward at every opportunity. Depay fired another effort over as Atletico took control of the game. Early in the second half Griezmann, one of



GIRONA: Atletico Madrid's Spanish forward Alvaro Morata (left) celebrates scoring his team's first goal with teammates during the Spanish league football match between Girona FC and Club Atletico de Madrid on March 13, 2023. — AFP

the league's most in-form players, set up Marcos Llorente but he too was denied by Gazzaniga. Atletico appealed for a penalty when Oriol Romeu handled but the referee spotted Rojiblanco defender Mario Hermoso pushing the Girona midfielder into the ball when watching the VAR replay. Jan Oblak was called into action for the first time to deny Viktor Tsygankov, and then again to deny David Lopez, who tried to lob him from range. Atletico's Slovenian goalkeeper made another fine save to deny Rodrigo Riquelme late on, with the on-loan midfielder almost scoring against his parent club. With the referee petering out, substitute Morata intervened late on to snatch Atletico three points from an even clash, their fourth win from their last five La Liga games. "It's a pity, we made a huge effort, (a result) escaped us by a fine margin and it's a shame because it was an important point," Girona defender Santi Bueno told DAZN. — AFP