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US leadership role in Middle East facing deep challenges

Washington remains deeply preoccupied with Ukraine war

News in brief

Drug fugitive nabbed in Riyadh

KUWAIT: A fugitive accused of drug trafficking has been detained in Riyadh, Kuwait's interior ministry said on Friday. The man, wanted on charges of trafficking 18 kg of hashish into Kuwait for trading, was apprehended in Riyadh as a result of coordination between Kuwait's General Department for Drug Control and Saudi Arabia's General Directorate of Narcotics Control. Kuwaiti authorities are holding contacts with the Saudi authorities for the handover of the fugitive, pending legal procedures. — KUNA

WASHINGTON: China's shock success at bringing Saudi Arabia and Iran together has challenged the United States' longstanding role as the key outside power broker in the Middle East. Beijing's persuading archrivals Riyadh and Tehran to reestablish diplomatic relations upstaged the United States just as Washington appears powerless to intervene in the political tensions in the Zionist entity over the Netanyahu government's sharp-right turn, which has inflamed Palestinians.

"Anything that can help reduce tensions, avoid conflict and deter in any way dangerous and destabilizing actions by Iran is a good thing," US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Wednesday on the Saudi-Iran deal announced on March 10. US officials have tried to minimize Beijing's role in the region, saying it is far from supplanting the United States: Much of the Middle East still sits under the Pentagon's security umbrella.

But China's breakthrough is a real challenge,

as Washington remains deeply preoccupied with the Ukraine war and, over the long term, with blunting Beijing's diplomatic and military advance in the Indo-Pacific region. James Ryan, Director of the Middle East program at the Foreign Policy Research Institute, said Washington is happy if anyone can contribute to Middle East regional stability, even rival China.

"The Biden administration has very clearly said that when it comes to the Middle East they're going to favor security, they're going to favor stability," he told AFP. "American involvement just overall is going to be more on the sidelines than it has been in the past," a message the Saudis "very clearly" understand, Ryan said.

China stepped in in a period when the US views Iran as a major threat to the region and yet its own relations with longtime ally Saudi Arabia have frayed. Meanwhile, its ability to intervene in Zionist-Palestinian disputes has greatly diminished. Despite scor-

ing a huge \$37 billion contract to sell more Boeing jets to the Saudis last week, Washington's ties with Riyadh have been tense since President Joe Biden ordered a review of the relationship in October.

Biden has spoken of "consequences" after the Saudis snubbed US requests to increase oil output to force down prices that soared after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Instead, Riyadh cut production, sending prices even higher with global impacts. A Saudi-Iran rapprochement also threatens the ultimate goal of the US-crafted Abraham Accords: Arab powerhouse Saudi Arabia's recognition of the Zionist entity after decades of refusal.

In negotiations driven by Washington, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain launched the process of recognizing the Zionist entity in 2020, and since then Morocco and Sudan have followed suit. But Riyadh has resisted pressure to do so as well. The Wall Street Journal and the New York Times reported that the Saudis want security guarantees from Washington

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Erdogan and Sisi to meet

CAIRO: Turkey's top diplomat said Saturday President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi would meet to mark the end of a decade of estrangement between the two countries. Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu, speaking alongside his Egyptian counterpart Sameh Shoukry during a visit to Cairo, said Ankara wanted "to restore diplomatic relations between the two countries at the highest level". — AFP

Ukraine grain deal extended

ANKARA: Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Saturday announced the extension of a deal that allowed exports of Ukrainian grain to resume following Russia's invasion. "Following talks with the two parties, we have assured the extension of the deal that was due to expire on March 19," Erdogan said. Erdogan did not say for how long the deal was extended, but Ukraine's infrastructure minister said the deal had been extended for 120 days. — AFP

Dead fish clog Aussie river

SYDNEY: Millions of dead and rotting fish have clogged a vast stretch of river near a remote town in the Australian outback as a searing heatwave sweeps through the region. Videos posted to social media showed boats ploughing through a blanket of dead fish smothering the water, with the surface barely visible underneath. The New South Wales government said on Friday that "millions" of fish had died in the Darling River near the small town of Menindee, in the third mass kill to hit the area since 2018. — AFP

Int'l war crimes court issues arrest warrant for Putin

THE HAGUE: The International Criminal Court on Friday announced an arrest warrant for Russian President Vladimir Putin on the war crime accusation of unlawfully deporting Ukrainian children. The Hague-based ICC said it had also issued a warrant against Maria Lvova-Belova, Russia's presidential

commissioner for children's rights, on similar charges. Moscow dismissed the orders as "void." Russia is not a party to the ICC so it was unclear if or how Putin could ever end up in the dock. War-battered Ukraine welcomed the ICC announcement, with President Volodymyr Zelensky hailing the "historic decision". The court's shock notice came hours after other news with the potential to significantly impact Russia's war on Ukraine, including a Moscow visit from Chinese leader Xi Jinping and more fighter jets for Kyiv's forces.

More than 16,000 Ukrainian children have been deported to Russia since the February 24, 2022 invasion, according to Kyiv, with many allegedly

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Trump expects 'arrest', calls for protests

NEW YORK: Former US President Donald Trump said he expects to be "arrested" on Tuesday over hush money allegedly paid to a porn star before the 2016 election, calling on his supporters to protest. With signs mounting that prosecutors are moving closer to indicting Trump, the 76-year-old billionaire took to his Truth Social platform on Saturday morning, saying: "Leading Republican candidate & former President of the United States of America will be

arrested on Tuesday of next week. Protest, take our nation back!"

Trump chose to use his own social media platform to make the announcement, despite being reinstated on Facebook and YouTube on Friday, more than two years after he was banned over the US Capitol riot. The investigation, led by Manhattan district attorney Alvin Bragg, an elected Democrat, centers on \$130,000 paid weeks before the 2016 polls to stop Stormy Daniels, whose real name is Stephanie Clifford, from going public about an affair she says she had with Trump years earlier. If Trump were indicted, the 76-year-old would become the first former president to be charged with a crime.

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LOS ANGELES: This illustration photo shows the Facebook page of former President Donald Trump on a smartphone screen on March 17, 2023. — AFP

Finland on course to join NATO

ANKARA: Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan ended months of diplomatically charged delays on Friday and asked parliament to quickly back Finland's bid to join NATO. A simultaneous decision by fellow holdout Hungary to schedule a Finnish ratification vote for March 27 means the US-led defense alliance will likely grow to 31 nations within a few months.

NATO's expansion into a country

with a 1,340-km border with Russia will roughly double the length of the bloc's current frontier with its Cold War-era foe. Finland had initially aimed to join together with fellow NATO aspirant Sweden - a Nordic power facing a litany of disputes with Turkey that ultimately sunk its chance to join the bloc before an alliance summit in July.

Helsinki and Stockholm ended decades of military non-alignment and decided to join the world's most powerful defense alliance in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Their applications were accepted at a June NATO summit that signaled the Western world's desire to stand up to Russia in the face of Europe's gravest conflict since World War II.

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ANKARA: Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan points towards Finnish President Sauli Niinisto during a joint press conference at the Presidential Complex on March 17, 2023. — AFP



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Local

Kuwait's FM calls for unified stance, policy at OIC meeting

OIC plays crucial role in fostering solidarity, defending Palestine

KUWAIT: Kuwait Foreign Minister Sheikh Salem Abdullah Al-Jaber Al-Sabah led Kuwait's delegation participating in the 49th session of the Council of Foreign Ministers of the Member States of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), held in Nouakchott, Mauritania (between March 16-17). Addressing the meeting, which focuses on the Palestinian issue, counterterrorism, Islamophobia and solidarity, the foreign minister said the gathering comes at a time when the Islamic world is facing numerous serious challenges amid complicated circumstances, bloody wars, disasters and pandemics across the world.

The minister stressed that these unprecedented challenges, which portend a new stage of hardships, require concerted efforts and Islamic response. "Given the enormity of these hardships and challenges, we need to muster our efforts, harness our energies and unify our stances and policies. Thus, we would raise the hopes of our peoples who have suffered due to despair and oppression amid the absence of a sincere international will to ensure the just solution to their just issues in spite of binding international resolutions which, unfortunately, have mostly become mere ink on paper," he lamented.

Therefore, the Kuwaiti foreign minister called for developing a clear-cut and comprehensive vision for boosting Islamic cooperation, based on setting aside divisions and differences regarding response to these risks and challenges. In this context, Sheikh Abdullah Al-Jaber said the Palestinian issue is considered to be the prime issue for both Arab and Muslim worlds, warning that the region would not be stable, secure and

prosperous unless a just and comprehensive solution to this issue was reached.

Regarding Islamophobia and campaigns purposed to undermine the religion of Islam and its values of tolerance and peace, the minister said it is everyone's due responsibility to protect and defend Islam and promote its genuine image. Commending the OIC's great efforts to fight Islamophobia, the minister voiced hope that the meeting would come up with concerted stances and visions for overcoming challenges the Islamic world is facing.

The 49th session of the Council of Foreign Ministers of the Member States of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation kicked off on Thursday in Nouakchott, Mauritania, on the theme of "Moderation: Key to Security and Stability". More than 40 Foreign Ministers of the OIC Member States are coming together in the Mauritanian capital to discuss an array of political, cultural, social, scientific and humanitarian issues that are of concern to the OIC and its Member States, namely the cause of Palestine and Al-Quds Al-Sharif, Jammu and Kashmir and Afghanistan, as well Mali and the Sahel countries.

Defending Palestine

Established upon a decision of the historical summit held in Rabat, Morocco, on September 25, 1969, following the criminal arson of Al-Aqsa Mosque in occupied Jerusalem, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) plays a prominent role in promoting Islamic solidarity and defending the Palestinian issue. The OIC is the second largest organization after the United Nations (UN) with 57 member states in



Foreign Minister leads a delegation to the 49th session of the (OIC) Council of Foreign Ministers.

over four continents; having been the collective voice of the Muslim world.

It endeavors to safeguard and protect the interests of the Muslim world in the spirit of promoting international peace and harmony among various people of the world. In 1970, the first ever meeting of Islamic Conference of Foreign Minister (ICFM) was held in Jeddah; having decided to establish a permanent secretariat in Jeddah headed by the organization's secretary general.

Based in Rabat, the OIC, of which Kuwait is a co-founder and effective member, comprises several bodies, mainly the Islamic Development Bank and the Islamic Educational, Scientific and

Cultural Organization (ISESCO). The 49th session of the Council of Foreign Ministers of the Member States of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation kicked off on Thursday in Nouakchott, Mauritania, on the theme of "Moderation: Key to Security and Stability".

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News in brief

Social institution denies foul play

KUWAIT: The Public Institution for Social Security on Saturday denied reports claiming that it had disbursed KD 50 million (approximately \$163 million) for deceased citizens. These information are inaccurate, false and exaggerated, it said in a statement adding that its personnel discovered some counterfeiting cases for liable non-Kuwaitis and informed the public prosecution about it. The institution had stopped disbursement of payments for those who had not updated their data, as a precaution against any irregularity, it said, warning that any suspicious account would be suspended. Investigation is proceeding in coordination with the public prosecution, it added. —KUNA

Ghazali St to shut down for 5 days

KUWAIT: Public Authority for Roads and Land Transport announced it will close two sides of Al-Ghazali street for five days starting from Wednesday morning. The closure will be from 1am to 5am in cooperation with the traffic department at the Interior Ministry.

Farwaniya hospital to move pediatric dept

KUWAIT: Farwaniya hospital announced that it will transfer the pediatric emergency care to the new building on Sunday. The Health Ministry started (last August) the first operational phase of the new hospital which is considered to be one of the largest medical facilities in Kuwait. The Ministry started the second operational phase last September. The third phase including gynecology and pediatrician departments as well as other services was opened last February.

Wanted Egyptians caught with drugs, paraphernalia

KUWAIT: The Rescue Department at the Interior Ministry has arrested two Egyptian men who already have arrest warrants. The suspects were caught with drugs and paraphernalia. During an official routine, the rescue police officers suspected two people who tried to run away as soon as they saw the police vehicle. After their arrest, the policemen found they were under the influence of illicit drugs.

Arab govts urged to tackle poverty

BEIRUT: The Arab Forum for Sustainable Development has called on governments of regional states to employ available potentials and human resources to cut mounting poverty and ensure food security and tackle inequality. Organizer of the latest session that had come to an end, the UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), said in a statement that the conferees called for boosting partnerships between the public and private sectors to attain sustainable development.

They urged the international community to support developing states that suffer from high debts, the ESCWA statement said, adding that there was focus during the deliberations on revising progress that had been made in attaining goals related to clean and hygienic water and making water avail-



The Executive Office of Arab Information Ministers' Council meets. —KUNA photos



Information Minister opens the meeting of Executive Office of Arab Information Ministers' Council.



Cidrat Loulou operetta by Information Ministry and NCCAL.



Creative young men honored

Kuwait flourishing with festivals and cultural activities

KUWAIT: Carrying itself as a cultural cradle catering for creativity, Kuwait has hosted a number of media venues and avenues within the first two weeks of this month. This would only cement; even further, the country's status as Capital for Arab Culture in 2001 and 2022, as well as Capital of Islamic Culture for 2016. It mainly hosted the 16th regular session of the Executive Office of Arab Information Ministers' Council on March 12-16.

This coincided with the 28th edition of Kuwait's Al-Qurain Cultural Festival, inaugurated by Minister of



Information Ministry in Al-Qurain Cultural Festival

Information and Culture, and Minister of State for Youth Affairs Abdurrahman Al-Mutairi. "The festival has enriched the artistic and cultural movement in Kuwait and contributed to the enlightenment in the Arab world," Al-Mutairi, also President of the National Council for Culture, Arts and Letters, pointed out in an earlier statement. The festival honored Ahmad Al-

and securing funds for facing current challenges. The Arab forum is a regional mechanism tasked with following up on implementation of the 2030 sustainable development plan and reviewing progress that has been made in the Arab region at this level.

It is expected to issue a report including main messages emanating from the regional dialogue on opportunities and challenges related to the implementation of the 2030 strategy; to be submitted to the senior-level political forum concerned with sustainable development, scheduled in New York in July. ESCWA, in coordination with the Arab League, organized the forum between March 14 and 16, with participation of high-ranking delegations, representatives of Arab governments, regional and international organizations, civil societies, the private sector, parliamentarians and academics.

Dr Khaled Mehdi, the Secretary General of Kuwait Supreme Council for Planning and Development, took part in the senior-level dialogue, themed "attaining objectives of the sustainable development in partnership with the private sector," and in the high-rank round table on national volun-

tary works. The forum was also attended by Kuwait's assistant foreign minister for economic affairs, Ambassador Sami Al-Hamad, and Kuwaiti legislators namely MPs Shuaib Shaaban and Usama Al-Zaid.

Crimes against Palestinians

In another development, the Arab Parliament on Friday called on the international community, mainly the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and international and European parliaments, to move immediately to hold Zionist entity accountable for its nonstop crimes against Palestinians. In a press statement, the parliament underlined that it is necessary for the international community to provide the required protection for the defenseless Palestinian people, and to compel Zionist entity to stop its escalation in occupied Palestinian territories.

It cautioned that this serious escalation would only lead to further deterioration and violence, and would even undermine efforts to achieve tranquility. Four Palestinians, including a young boy, were reportedly killed and 23 others injured in attack on Jenin city and refugee camp. —KUNA

Local

Advocacy movement slams mass teacher layoffs as ‘rash’ decision

Education ministry decision elicits mixed reactions on social media

By Faten Omar

KUWAIT: The hashtag “Education_Ministry”, trended on Twitter this weekend, with thousands of citizens and residents commenting on the recent teacher layoffs announced by the government. The ministry of education had issued a notice Wednesday that it’s ending the services of around 1,900 non-Kuwaiti teachers at the end of the current academic year, as part of its efforts in implementing the Kuwaitization policy.

The concerned sectors have given termination letters to those in charge of the matter at the country’s various educational districts, who will then give them to the laid-off teachers, informing them that their

employment will be terminated as of June. Kuwaiti Progressive Movement said in a tweet that terminating 1,900 teachers, including experienced teachers with Kuwaiti mothers and bedoons, was a rash decision by the ministry of education and the Civil Service Bureau.

The movement said it was not against Kuwaitization, but was not pleased with how the ministry’s abrupt action didn’t give the teachers enough time to sort out their situation. The decision could also lead to a staff shortage, the movement said, putting pressure on working teachers who will have to take on extra teaching hours. The movement called on the government to reverse its decision.

Um Yousef said schools are already suffering from a shortage of staff. “Who makes these hasty

decisions disrupting people’s livelihoods? This is not appropriate for someone who has spent their life in this country. Dismissal of teachers, who are children of Kuwaiti women, is shocking and inhumane,” she said. Ghanim Al-Tajer said: “This decision upset us as Kuwaiti teachers, especially since most of those who were dismissed are educated and skilled in science subjects.”

Adeal Al-Abdullah supported the decision, saying: “We hope the decision will be implemented in other sectors in the country. Kuwaitis should be given priority when hiring for all jobs. Is it reasonable to hire residents before Kuwaitis who graduated from well-known universities and leave them unemployed for more than two years?”

Hamed tweeted that many educational experts said Kuwaitization requires addressing the reluctance of Kuwaitis in joining the teaching profession. “We demand a plan to develop education in Kuwait. About KD 13.6 billion is spent and the return is poor. Also, the quality of education in Kuwait is low in the Gulf and globally, despite the increased spending,” he explained.

Despite developments in Kuwait, there are still some challenges facing the education system. One of the main challenges is the lack of resources and funding, which has led to overcrowding in schools and a shortage of qualified teachers. There is also a need to modernize the curriculum and teaching methods to better prepare students for the modern world.



KUWAIT: Consul of the Republic of Armenia to Kuwait Ara Matevosyan takes a group photo with expats and the Armenians in Kuwait.



Armenian embassy participates in the ‘Francophone Bazar’

By Majd Othman

KUWAIT: Consul of the Republic of Armenia to Kuwait Ara Matevosyan told Kuwait Times the Armenian community in Kuwait reached 5,000 people in 2023, adding they enjoy the respect of both Kuwaiti authorities and citizens, who have been supporting the community through the presence of the Armenian Church as well as the school, which was established in 1961.

The consul’s statement came on the sidelines of the Francophone Month event “Francophone Bazar” held by the French Embassy on Friday at Shaheed Park. The consul said the Armenian Embassy celebrates Francophone month in cooperation with Francophonie embassies in Kuwait. He explained this event includes each embassy representing its country’s culture through cuisine, dances and songs. Armenia had a show of the “Hamazkayin Shakh” dance group, which performed in both French and Armenian languages.

“Armenia since 2012 is a full member of the Organisation internationale de la Francophonie. We attach great importance to enhancing cooperation with this organization, and Armenia is keen to develop political cooperation within this organization with our friends and partners,” Matevosyan said. “The Francophonie Organization plays an important role in Armenian foreign policy, and in this month, more than 100 events were held in Armenia, in addition to the celebration at all Armenian embassies abroad,” he added.



Armenian family enjoying the Francophonie Bazaar.



Consul of the Republic of Armenia to Kuwait Ara Matevosyan

“Armenia’s relations with France extends since centuries, not to forget the big Armenian community in France, while some of them are a famous, such as Charles Aznavour, the French-Armenian singer and lyricist.”

Armenian-Kuwaiti relationship

Matevosyan said Kuwaiti-Armenian relations are developing dynamically. “We have cooperation in the fields of tourism, education and culture, as well as economic cooperation. There are many Kuwaiti travelers and investors who are interested in projects presented by Armenia for

promising and future investments,” he said.

“Currently, the Armenian Embassy is working on opening a direct commercial line between Kuwait and Armenia. In addition, there is cooperation in the fields of renewable energy and education, where eight Armenian students come from Armenia to Kuwait to study at Kuwait University annually. Personally, I was one of those students,” he revealed. “We are working to develop potential cooperation through joint efforts with the Kuwaiti side to push relations to a new qualitative level for the benefit of the two brotherly peoples,” Matevosyan concluded.

MoH committed to updating healthcare system and protocols

KUWAIT: The Ministry of Health has confirmed its commitment to the continuous development of the health system and updating health care policies and protocols in line with the latest global developments. This came in a speech delivered by the assistant undersecretary of the Ministry of Health for Foreign Health Services Affairs Dr Yacoub Tamar, during the opening of the first vascular surgery conference on behalf of the Minister of Health Dr Ahmad Al-Awadi.

He described the conference as an addition to the system of scientific conferences that the Ministry of Health is keen to establish. He explained that the themes of the conference express the conscious vision of the organizing committees, which highlights the most important novelties and developments in the field of vascular specialization in addition to taking advantage of technologies Modern methods in the field of diagnosis, treatment, follow-up and making the right medical decisions.

He said that the conference will contribute effectively to the exchange of various experiences, benefit from various medical experiences and build bridges of scientific knowledge between a distinguished doctors and lecturers from inside Kuwait, Arab countries and various other countries of the world. He pointed out that the goal is to identify the latest achievements of modern science in the field of diagnosis, treatment and prevention of vascular diseases.

This will helps in developing and updating programs and strategies aimed at ensuring the development of the health services system in Kuwait. The consultant of blood vessels at Jaber Hospital and the chairman of the conference Dr Hisham Rashid said in his speech that the holding of the first conference at Jaber Hospital confirms the success of the department in developing medical services by attracting experts and consultants from different countries of the world to



KUWAIT: Participants chat during the opening of the first vascular surgery conference. —KUNA

exchange ideas on the latest findings in the field of technologies and methods of treatment.

He added that the participants will discuss various scientific issues in the specialty of blood vessels from the first arterial connections for dialysis to the arterial connections in the diabetic foot, aorta and carotid artery - pointing out that the Ministry of Health has recently witnessed a wide demand in the field of recruitment of consultants to make changes in the field of health services and development.

Dr Rashid pointed out that Jaber Hospital has a team with the highest competencies as well as the possession of the latest devices, advanced medical and technological equipment. Meanwhile, the head of the surgery department at Jaber Hospital Dr Sulaiman Al-Mazidi said in his speech that the conference brings together all vascular units in Kuwait to discuss the latest issues and topics, especially with the increasing prevalence of some diseases such as diabetes and heart disease.

Al-Mazidi explained that the conference aims to develop and improve the quality of medical services in Kuwait, especially with the increasing number of cases undergoing treatment abroad, stressing that the conference aims to develop the competence of specialized doctors and the rest of the medical cadres through access to the latest technologies, scientific research and discoveries in this field to prevent diseases.

He pointed out that the conference focused on a number of axes related to modern trends and the latest developments in the field of vascular surgery, including scientific research, studies, awareness programs and guidelines in the new sciences in diabetic foot, carotid artery stenting and others. Dr Al-Mazidi pointed to the importance of cooperation between all surgical doctors in various specialties to ensure the quality of health care provided to patients and to develop the health system in the country. —KUNA



Sapanca huts



Kuwaiti tourist Dalal Al-Mulaifi

Social media, bloggers boost Kuwaiti, Arab tourism to Turkey

ANKARA: Due to the popularity of Turkish dramas in recent years, the flow of Kuwaiti and Arab tourists has increased in major Turkish cities such as Istanbul and Ankara. Nevertheless, with the advent of social media and online blogs, such tourists had widened their horizons, seeking leisure in other regions of Turkey.

Despite the tragic earthquake, which hit southern Turkey, Kuwaiti and Arab tourists made it a point to venture off usual destinations in the country and sought mostly nature and cultural experiences over the usual travel experience. Speaking to KUNA, several Kuwaiti and Arab tourists said that destinations such as Sapanca, Antalya, Bursa, and others were becoming more interesting to them.

Sara Al-Enizi, a Kuwaiti tourist, said that Kusadasi—a town on the coast of the western Aegean Sea—was heavily featured in social media coverages, which drove her interest to explore. She affirmed that the detailed tour of an account of Snapchat had helped her navigate Kusadasi easily, making her enjoy the experience without a hitch. Similarly, Kuwaiti tourists Ahmad Al-Kanderi and Dalal Al-Mulaifi owned the success of their visits to Sapanca and other cities to a coverage by a Kuwaiti blogger.

They both said that social media play a role in choosing their vacation destinations in Turkey. On his part, Egyptian tourist Al’A Mohammad said that he wanted to spend his honeymoon traversing several cities including Antalya. He attributed this decision to social media, saying that it opened his eyes for more possibility to enjoy his time in Turkey.

Lebanese tourists Mariyam Majidi said that she spent her vacation in Turkey at the beach, noting that she had unforgettable experiences in Islands such as Buyukada, Marmaris, and Alanya. While the opinions of tourists are worth the mention, the initial seed put by social media account and blog owners are as worthy to explore. Abdulrahman Mousa Mohammad—owner of an Instagram account dedicated to tourism in Turkey—affirmed that his passion for traveling, especially to Turkey, had drove him to document his experiences to benefit other fellow travelers.

He indicated that his account offered all vital information on travel to Turkey from transport, hotels, and various tips and advices. He mentioned that Kuwaiti tourists were attracted to Bursa for tourism as well as buying real estate, adding that Sapanca was also on the top of the list due to its mesmerizing nature in addition to boredom, where most Kuwaitis head there for relaxation.

Mohammad, however, warned of fake media accounts that lure tourists with low prices and great accommodations with the end result being a miserable travel experience. The number of Kuwaiti tourists between January and July of last year had reached 279,000, second place in terms of Arab tourists visiting Turkey. Despite the recent devastating 7.7 and 7.6-magnitude earthquakes, tourists are still flocking to Turkey, but staying clear from disaster areas. —KUNA

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Dasman Diabetes holds retinopathy workshop

KUWAIT: Dasman Diabetes Institute, in cooperation with the health ministry, recently organized a diabetic retinopathy workshop for two different groups of general practitioners from the ministry's primary health care division. The workshop will contribute to the development of ophthalmology services and care in addition to raising the level of treatment services provided to patients.

Diabetic retinopathy, a common occurrence in diabetics, could cause serious diabetes complications which may lead to vision loss. It occurs due to high blood sugar levels feeding the cells in the rear of the eye, known as the retina, which if left untreated can lead to blindness. The two-day workshop dealt with several topics, including risk factors and signs for diabetic retinopathy, how to diagnose the condition, the stages of development of retinopathy, reading retinal examinations and latest recommendations for this disease.

KRCS to inaugurate 16 stores in Palestine

KUWAIT: A delegation of Kuwait Red Crescent Society (KRCS) started a two-day visit to Palestine on Saturday to inaugurate a number of Kuwaiti-funded projects and visit local institutions. Locals applauded the visitors at Ariha crossing before they proceeded to Ramallah city where they instantly met Chairperson of the Palestinian Red Crescent Dr Youness Al-Khatib and a number of officials from the association.

Dr Hilal Al-Sayer, the KRCS Chairman, said in a statement to KUNA that the delegation came to Palestine in response to an invitation from the Palestinian Red Crescent, adding that the delegation would inaugurate 16 commercial stores in Jerusalem - renovated with support from Kuwait Chamber of Industry and Commerce. On Sunday, they will visit headquarters of the local Red Crescent institution for teaching the deaf, examine warehouses and institutions affiliated to the Palestinian Red Crescent and open a ward for children intensive care at the Palestine Medical Complex in Ramallah - built with donations from a Kuwaiti citizen. — KUNA

Photo of the Day



KUWAIT: People watch the dancing fountain at Al-Shaheed Park in Kuwait City, on March 17, 2023. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat.

British Council looks to revive Kuwait's UK alumni network

'Legislation issues discourage UK universities from establishing local branches'

By Khaled Al-Abdullahi

KUWAIT: The British Council is looking to revitalize its role and raise the profile of UK alumni in Kuwait, said the council's Country Director Anthony Skinner. "I'm proposing to bring together alumni from similar specialties and support them to deliver events to reach out to other UK alumni and connect them with fresh graduates. I think it will grow our alumni and give our existing alumni ways to contribute," said Skinner at a UK alumni meeting held Wednesday, March 15, and sponsored by the British Council.

The British council was first established in 1934, opening its first office in 1938. It's the oldest council organization with over 100 countries and 6,000 employees globally. The council operates in three key areas: education (connecting with alumni), helping governments improve the quality of English teaching, as well as creative economy.

Skinner said he was looking to "refresh and rebalance" the council's plans going forward. "In Kuwait, we have been doing a lot of creative economy, making the UK a main creative partner for Kuwait. We are going back to the higher education institutions to establish partnerships between private sector universities, Kuwait university and the UK."

Skinner addressed the struggles expatriate alumni face when looking for career opportunities in Kuwait. He said he hoped the alumni network initiative would "help new graduates and give them more purpose." "I'm hoping to have the alumni gain a bit of structure," he said.

The education ministry, the council and the UK government are very keen to see the alumni network grow, said Skinner. "We are going, in the next 18 months, to raise the profile of UK alumni. The bigger the community the stronger we will become."

In terms of establishing a British university in Kuwait, Skinner said it was "not impossible" but the country needs to "work" on its profile before that happens. "The population of students in Kuwait and legislation issues discourage big UK universities to come. I'm hoping to bring British universities with public and private universities to hold a joint initiative," he said. "My role is to establish connections and networks between the UK and Kuwait, as individuals, companies, or institutions, regardless of their situation."

Ghazala Mahadik, a chemical engineer who graduated from Bath University, told Kuwait Times: "Being a UK alumnus is prestigious and amazing. I am really honored to be here today and meet Mr Skinner. He told us about new prospects for UK alumni in Kuwait. It will be wonderful working with him and other UK Alumni for the improvement of the community."

Mahadik said she would love to volunteer with the council's alumni board. "Some of us who are here are driven and want to help out. We can encourage other alumni to come forward because the education that we got in the UK has given us a lot of value, and we are who we are because of that. So, it is really important for us to give back," she said.

Kamal Al-Shirazi, a mechanical engineer and UK alumni board member, said he was looking forward to working with Skinner and helping him with his initiative to rebuild the UK alumni network. "Hopefully, we will come up with new events and ideas to guide UK alumni. This will help attract new alumni and ensure they benefit from joining the network. We are looking forward to building a bigger network."

Shirazi said there's need to "present the alumni programs to a broader audience especially new UK graduates and show them the benefits of joining the network and working with other UK alumni. I think it's important to expand the alumni network so we can access more people."

"I'm especially keen on the idea of creating sub-



KUWAIT: The British Council Country Director Anthony Skinner speaks at the event.



Ghazala Mahadik, Bath University alumnus, speaks at the British Council UK alumni event.

groups (from similar specialties) which Mr Skinner mentioned. This will help graduates find an environment to which they can relate," Shirazi said.

Skinner said any income that is generated through the teaching center operations of the British council is reinvested back into the council's network in order to sustain the council globally. "That is why we have a teaching center because no government in the world can sustain an organization the size of the British council. We are actually a self-sustaining organization under our charitable and non-profit organization status in the UK."



Tens of visitors enjoy the exhibit and the moderate weather.



KUWAIT: Two participants display artistic pieces at the exhibition. — KUNA photos

Young Kuwaitis show innovations at weekend bazar

KUWAIT: Kuwaiti innovators and merchants showcased their products and works at the "Bugsha market" bazar this weekend. Ali Wahidi, one of the founders of

the bazar, told KUNA that the old term "bugsha" was revived to signal the desire to bring the Kuwaiti heritage to life. Wahidi said the activity is sponsored by several national companies and entities, namely the National Bank of Kuwait and the telecommunication company Zain, that seek to support the youth. Rasha Al-Fahad, a partner in the enterprise, lauded the participating young people who contributed with diverse and vibrant products. Adlah Al-Baghli, a participant, said she has taken part with fabric and leather bags, decorated with drawings depicting the national heritage. — KUNA



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Biden celebrates St Patrick's Day with Irish PM Varadkar

Some 32 million Americans, almost 10 percent claim ancestral roots in Ireland

WASHINGTON: US President Joe Biden and Irish Prime Minister Leo Varadkar painted the town green Friday, celebrating Saint Patrick's Day-and touting Biden's expected visit to Ireland and Northern Ireland for the anniversary of the Good Friday peace accords.

The Taoiseach's annual White House visit is a cherished tradition on the Irish national holiday. That has never been more true than under Biden, who frequently trumpets his family roots in Ireland and sprinkles quotes from Irish poems through his speeches.

In front of a fire in the Oval Office, Biden, sporting a sprig of shamrock in his lapel, said Saint Patrick's is a "big day" in his house. Varadkar, also wearing shamrock, highlighted recent US assistance in tortuous negotiations over trade rules between post-Brexit Britain and its Northern Irish province and the Republic of Ireland, which is in the European Union.

The arrangement, known as the Windsor Framework, is an "agreement that lasts," Varadkar said, "which is important for Northern Ireland, and also important for British-Irish and European relations." He promised Biden a good time on his coming visit, expected to coincide with the 25th anniversary of the US-brokered Good Friday Agreement, which ended the violent unrest known as the Troubles in Northern Ireland.

"We're going to roll out the red carpet and it's going to be a visit like no other. Everyone's excited about it already. We're going to have great crowds who would love to see you," he said. Varadkar's day started at breakfast with Vice President Kamala Harris, where "eggs Saint Patrick" were on the menu. Varadkar and Biden then left for lunch at the US Capitol, hosted by Republican speaker of the House, Kevin McCarthy.

Later at the White House, where the fountains were

tinted green for the day, Varadkar presented Biden with the traditional bowl of shamrock-sprigs of clover representing Ireland. Entertaining the revelers was Irish pop star Niall Horan, a former member of mega boy band One Direction, now a singer-songwriter.

'Can't take for granted'

Some 32 million Americans-almost 10 percent-claim ancestral roots in Ireland. Given the long history, the fates of the country and troubled northern province play outsized roles in US politics. Biden-who attended an event in California with British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak this Monday-said he intends to visit both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. This is expected to happen some time around the Good Friday Agreement anniversary date, April 10.

At the shamrock ceremony Friday, Biden said that "even after nearly 25 years we can't take for granted a shared future built on peace in Northern Ireland." "I want each of you to know that the United States will remain a strong friend and partner," he said.

Varadkar responded that the historic accord "could never have been achieved without the steadfast support and commitment of President Biden and so many others" in Washington. Expectations have been that Biden was waiting for the British-EU trade dispute to be completely resolved before he planned the visit. While that is now to be in place, there are still wrinkles.

The head of the biggest pro-British Northern Irish party, the DUP, said Tuesday it would not rush on deciding whether to endorse the Windsor Framework. "Whether the president visits or not, I have no arbitrary deadline here," DUP leader Jeffrey Donaldson said on a visit of his own to Washington.



WASHINGTON: US President Joe Biden hosts Irish PM Taoiseach Leo Varadkar for a Shamrock presentation and reception in the East Room of the White House in Washington, DC, on March 17, 2023. — AFP

If the post-Brexit trade arrangement does get full backing from rival forces in Northern Ireland, that could pave the way for restarting a local power-sharing agreement between pro-British loyalists and the nationalist parties, which want to break away and reunite the province with the Republic of Ireland. Asked

if there was a timeframe in place for Biden's visit, Varadkar told reporters: "Not at this moment." In an indication of the close US involvement in the Irish political puzzle, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan met Thursday at the White House with both Donaldson and leaders of the nationalist Sinn Fein party. — AFP

Greece sacks police chief after train tragedy protests

ATHENS: Greece said Saturday it had sacked its national police chief, days after clashes between security forces and demonstrators broke out in the wake of the country's deadliest train tragedy. The Prime Minister's office said police chief Constantinos Skoumas had been discharged less than two months after being confirmed at the post.

No specific cause was given for prompting the change, which comes as police face widespread public criticism for their handling of protests over the February 28 tragedy in which 57 people were killed when two trains collided. "The appointment of a new police chief aims (to introduce) a more positive and efficient implementation of modern police operational plans on citizen safety," the PM's office said. In the latest protest on Thursday, a riot police squad was filmed charging and striking peaceful demonstrators at the central Syntagma Square in Athens.

A police tow truck was also filmed ramming a group of demonstrators trying to block an Athens street with garbage bins, sending one demonstrator flying to the ground. The train disaster has sparked weeks of angry and occasionally violent protests, and has piled major pressure on the conservative government of Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis ahead of elections expected in May.

EU assistance

Most of the victims were students returning from a long holiday weekend. "We will learn from our mistakes," Mitsotakis said during a campaign



ATHENS: Protesters take part in a demonstration against the government and to voice outrage at the February 28, 2023, train disaster during a 24-hour strike, in Athens on March 16, 2023. Greek police fired tear gas and protesters hurled firebombs on March 16, 2023, as more than 40,000 people took to the streets. — AFP

stop in Athens on Saturday. "A mistake becomes a fault only if it is repeated." Greece's transport minister resigned after the disaster, and the station-master on duty during the accident and three other railway officials have been charged and face a possible life sentence. But railway unions had long been warning about problems, claiming the network was underfunded, understaffed and accident-prone after a decade of spending cuts.

Acting Transport Minister Georgios Gerapetritis has said rail services-which were suspended after

the accident-would gradually resume from March 22. But safety concerns remain high. Gerapetritis and former transport ministers will appear before a parliamentary committee on March 20 to answer lawmakers' questions on the tragedy.

The minister on Saturday said he would then travel to Brussels during the week for talks with EU officials on "technical assistance" to improve safety. Train services will be fully restored before April 16, and the government aims to introduce automated safety systems by the end of September, he said. — AFP

Mexico prez calls big rally with polls on horizon

MEXICO CITY: Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador has called for a big political rally in Mexico City on Saturday aimed at energizing his supporters ahead of key elections next year. The gathering is seen as the left-wing populist's riposte to opponents of a controversial new election law that he promoted.

The rally is Lopez Obrador's "response to the opposition coming out to protest against his electoral reform," political analyst Jose Antonio Crespo told AFP. Tens of thousands of Mexicans demonstrated on February 26 against a new law reducing the size and budget of the National Electoral Institute (INE), the independent body that oversees elections.

Critics see the changes-which were approved by the ruling party-controlled Congress last month-as an attack on democracy ahead of the 2024 presidential election. Mexican presidents are barred from serving more than one six-year term, and Lopez Obrador has ruled out trying to change the constitution to stay in office.

Even so, he is keen to see his Morena party hold onto power after he stands aside. Lopez Obrador, who enjoys an approval rating of around 60 percent, has called Saturday's rally to coincide with the 85th anniversary of the nationalization of Mexican oil.

"We have to reaffirm our independence, our sov-



MEXICO CITY: File photo shows, Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador delivers remarks at the end of the 10th North American Leaders' Summit at the National Palace in Mexico City. — AFP

ereignty," said the 69-year-old leader, whose nationalist energy policies have unsettled foreign governments and investors. Political columnist Hernan Gomez Bruera described the electoral reform and oil expropriation anniversary as a "pretext" for the president to mobilize his supporters.

The rally is due to start at 5 pm (2300 GMT) and Lopez Obrador is expected to address the crowds in Mexico City's main square from the National Palace. A similar rally in November drew hundreds of thousands of Lopez Obrador's supporters into the streets of Mexico City, two weeks after an earlier protest against his electoral reforms.

Lopez Obrador alleges that the INE endorsed fraud when he ran unsuccessfully for the presidency in 2006 and 2012, before winning in 2018. — AFP

UK Tories could pull off shock election win

LONDON: Tony Blair came to power as leader of Britain's Labour party in the years after it suffered a paralysing defeat to the Conservatives that few saw coming. While praising current Labour chief Keir Starmer, Blair says that in the next general election, a shock win cannot be ruled out for Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's Tories-even if the party currently trails badly in the polls.

But on one thing regarding UK politics, the 69-year-old elder statesman is sure: Britain will not rejoin the European Union in the coming years. "Whether and how the UK rejoins the EU will be for a future generation. I think that's the reality," Blair said in an interview with AFP and fellow European news agencies ANSA, DPA and EFE.

The former prime minister vocally opposed Brexit in Britain's 2016 referendum, even travelling to Northern Ireland with ex-Tory leader John Major to warn of its likely impact on the delicate peace there.

Following his surprise win over Labour in 1992, Major laid the foundations of peace talks with pro-Irish militants, which Blair went on to build into a landmark agreement in 1998. Major's election win accelerated Labour's conversion from a flirtation with the far-left in the 1980s to electoral respectability, and Blair won a landslide five years later.

Then, the Conservatives were rebuilding after the political demise of Margaret Thatcher. Today, under Sunak, they are trying to rebuild after political and economic turmoil under Boris Johnson and Liz Truss.

Starmer's Labour has a commanding lead in opinion polls, averaging 20 points, ahead of the next election likely to take place in 2024. But Sunak personally polls better than his rival, drawing media comparisons to the 1992 contest between Major and his Labour opponent, Neil Kinnock, who voters decided was not ready to be prime minister.

'Very sensible guy'

Asked if Sunak could pull off a repeat upset, Blair said: "In politics, you should never talk of certainties, because there aren't any." Sunak, whose presentational style has been compared to Blair, was "repairing the damage that has been done" to the Conservative brand by Johnson and Truss, he said.

But however much Sunak improves the party's standing, voters will still be taxed higher and receiving less in public services come the next election. "And I also think that Keir is a very sensible guy. He's someone who looks like he can lead the country," Blair added. "In the immortal words of Sir Rod Stewart, it's time to give the other lot a go, or whatever he said." The British rock crooner, a lifelong Conservative, said in January that "I've never seen it so bad... change the bloody government" and let Labour in.

While both Blair and Starmer campaigned to keep Britain in the EU, the current Labour leader has ruled out rejoining the bloc's single market as a compromise step after Brexit. "I think right now, the debate in the UK is the degree to which we want to re-establish a strong relationship with Europe, which I think we should and which I believe Labour will also do," Blair said.

Britain and the EU had much to talk about in energy and climate, science and research, and defence and security after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, he said. "I think there's a strong case for trying to cooperate on technology," Blair added. — AFP

Iran sentences two over Shiraz shrine attack

TEHRAN: An Iranian court sentenced two people to death over an October attack on a shrine in the southern city of Shiraz that cost over a dozen lives, the judiciary said Saturday. The pair were convicted of assisting in "corruption on earth, armed rebellion and acting against national security", the judiciary's Mizan Online website reported, citing Kazem Mousavi, the chief justice of Fars province.

Mousavi said they "were directly involved in the arming, procurement, logistics and guidance of the main perpetrator of the terrorist attack" on the Shah Cheragh mausoleum on October 26 that killed 13 people and wounded 30 others. Three other defendants in the case were sentenced to prison for five, 15 and 25 years for being members of the Sunni Muslim extremist Islamic State (IS) group, he said. The verdicts against the five could be appealed before the supreme court, he added. The main perpetrator of the attack, identified by media outlets in Iran as Hamed Badakhshan, died of injuries suffered during his arrest, Mizan said. — AFP

International

Tony Blair: Putin can't use Iraq as justification for Ukraine

Blair rejects notion that Putin profited by defying a weakened West

LONDON: Former UK prime minister Tony Blair is by turns pensive and defiant as he reflects on the upcoming anniversaries of two events that arguably defined the best and worst of his decade in power. Monday marks 20 years since Blair joined US president George W. Bush in launching an invasion of Saddam Hussein's Iraq, without a UN mandate and in defiance of some of the biggest demonstrations ever seen in Britain. For its many critics, the war was exposed as a reckless misadventure when no weapons of mass destruction were found, and hampered the West's ability to stand up to the rise of autocrats in Russia and China.

But Blair rejects the notion that Russian President Vladimir Putin profited by defying a weakened West with his own aggression against Ukraine, starting in 2014 and extending to last year's full invasion. "If he didn't use that excuse (Iraq), he'd use another excuse," Britain's most successful Labour leader, who is now 69, said in an interview with AFP and fellow European news agencies ANSA, DPA and EFE.

Saddam, Blair noted, had initiated two regional wars, defied multiple UN resolutions and launched a chemical attack on his own people. Ukraine in con-

trast has a democratic government and posed no threat to its neighbours when Putin invaded.

"At least you could say we were removing a despot and trying to introduce democracy," Blair said, speaking at the offices of his Tony Blair Institute for Global Change in central London. "Now you can argue about all the consequences and so on. "His (Putin's) intervention in the Middle East (in Syria) was to prop up a despot and refuse a democracy. So we should treat all that propaganda with the lack of respect it deserves."

Northern Ireland

Fallout from the Iraq war arguably hampered Blair's own efforts as an international envoy to negotiate peace between Zionist entity and the Palestinians, after he left office in 2007. Through his institute, Blair maintains offices in the region and says he is "still very passionate" about promoting peace in the Middle East, even if it appears "pretty distant right now".

But while there can be no settlement in Ukraine until Russia recognises that "aggression is wrong", he says the Palestinians could draw lessons from the undis-

puted high point of his tenure: peace in Northern Ireland.

Under the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, pro-Irish militants agreed to lay down their arms and pro-UK unionists agreed to share power, after three decades of sectarian strife had left some 3,500 people dead.

Blair, then Irish premier Bertie Ahern and an envoy of US president Bill Clinton spent three days and nights negotiating the final stretch before the agreement was signed on April 10, 1998. The territory is mired in renewed political gridlock today.

But a recent deal between Britain and the European Union to regulate post-Brexit trade in Northern Ireland has cleared the way for US President Joe Biden to visit for the agreement's 25th anniversary. Reflecting on the shift in strategy by the pro-Irish militants, from the bullet to the ballot box, Blair said "it's something I often say to the Palestinians: you should learn from what they did". "They shifted strategy and look at the result," he added, denying he was biased towards Zionist entity but merely recognising the reality of how to negotiate peace. "There are lots of things contested and uncontested," he added, dwelling on his tumultuous time in 10 Downing Street from 1997 to 2007.



LONDON: Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair speaks during an interview in central London on March 17, 2023. — AFP

"I suppose the one uncontested thing is probably the Good Friday Agreement. "The thing had more or less collapsed when I came to Belfast and we had to re-write it and agree it... it's probably been the only really successful peace process of the last period of time, in the last 25 years." — AFP

Pope greets refugees helped through Christian 'corridors'

VATICAN CITY: Pope Francis on Saturday greeted thousands of refugees brought to Europe by Christian charities, recognising their difficult journeys and hailing their desire to "live free from fear and insecurity". At the Paul VI hall in the Vatican, the 86-year-old pontiff also thanked those who helped the refugees settle into their new lives, saying that "welcome is the first step towards peace".

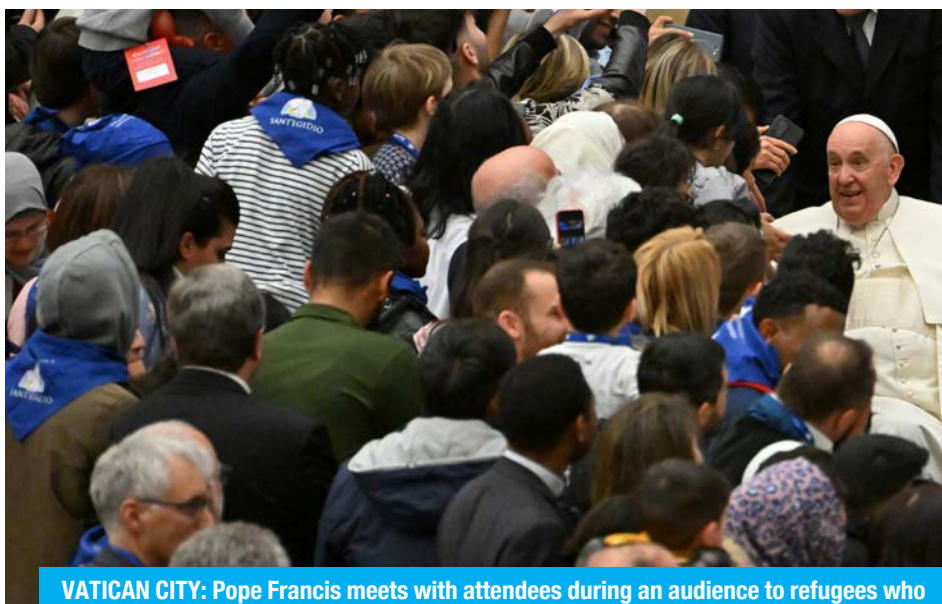
The audience included many of the 6,000 people who have been helped to Europe through "humanitarian corridors" run by Christian groups since 2016. The scheme, initiated by the Catholic Sant'Egidio community in Italy and later extended to France and Belgium, involves people from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, South Sudan, Libya and Ukraine among others.

"I am happy to meet so many refugees and their families... each of you deserves attention for the hard history that you have lived," Francis told them. "You have shown a firm will to live free from fear and insecurity."

He paid particular tribute to those who survived grim conditions in detention camps in Libya, the preferred departure point for many of the tens of thousands of people who try to cross the Mediterranean into Europe each year.

Limited routes

The humanitarian corridors were set up to provide an alternative to the deadly sea crossing, where more than 26,000 people have lost their lives since 2014, according to the United Nations. Saturday's event comes just weeks after a migrant boat was shipwrecked off the southern coast of Italy,



VATICAN CITY: Pope Francis meets with attendees during an audience to refugees who arrived under humanitarian corridors programme, on March 18, 2023 at Paul-VI hall in The Vatican. — AFP

leaving at least 87 people dead. In a copy of his speech issued by the Vatican, the pope referenced the disaster, saying "everything possible needs to be done to ensure that it will not be repeated". He delivered to the audience, however, a much shorter version and did not mention the shipwreck.

Many migrants and asylum seekers turn to leaky, overcrowded boats because legal routes to Europe are limited. The number of asylum claims in Europe in 2022 reached levels last seen during the 2015-2016 refugee crisis, when more than a million came to the continent. But the issue of who should take responsibility for the arrivals is a cause of major tension between member states.

'A dream'

Under the corridor scheme, the European governments involved agree to issue visas, that the charities then use to bring over the most vulnerable-whether victims

of persecution, families with children, the elderly or infirm.

When the refugees arrive, the charities provide them with housing, language and skills training, and help them apply for asylum. The first humanitarian corridor opened was through Lebanon, with Italy offering visas to 1,000 Syrians who had fled there.

A Syrian woman named Anna spoke at Saturday's event, describing her family's journey from Aleppo to Lebanon and then Italy. The scheme "seemed a dream, the possibility of living in peace", she said, before being greeted by the pope.

Francis said the corridors aimed to ensure "life, salvation and then dignity". About 5,000 of the refugees brought in since 2016 are in Italy, where the Italian Federation of Evangelical Churches and the Waldensian Church are also involved. Another 600 went to France, according to Sant'Egidio. — AFP

Key Saied adviser quits as Tunisia interior minister

TUNIS: Tunisian interior minister Taoufik Charfeddine, a close aide of President Kais Saied, announced Friday he had resigned to spend more time with his three children following the death of his wife last year. Charfeddine, 54, who had held his post since October 2021, told reporters he wished to thank the president for "his understanding and for allowing me to be relieved of my duties". "The time has come for me to dedicate myself to this responsibility she left me," he said. Replacing Charfeddine as interior minister is Kamal Feki, governor of Tunis since 2021 and also part of Saied's inner circle. A former lawyer, Charfeddine was a key figure in the election campaign that propelled the previously little-known Saied to the presidency in 2019.

After Saied froze parliament and sacked the then-government in a dramatic July 2021 move against the sole democracy to emerge from the Arab Spring uprisings, Charfeddine became a close adviser. As the president pushed through sweeping changes to the country's political system, concentrating near-total power in his office, Charfeddine was one of the most outspoken defenders of Saied's power grab.

Saied's office regularly released video footage of the two men's meetings in the presidential palace. During the wave of arrests that accompanied Saied's power grab,

Charfeddine held news conferences to defend the incarceration of opposition politicians.

When the vice president of the Islamist-inspired Ennahdha party, the largest in parliament before its dissolution by Saied, went on hunger strike to protest his detention, Charfeddine alleged that terrorism fears had forced the security forces to respond. "There were fears of acts of terrorism targeting the country's security and we had to act," the minister said last year of the arrest of Nouredine Bhiri, a former justice minister.

Last month, Charfeddine was by Saied's side as Tunisia faced an international outcry over a tirade by the president against illegal migrants from sub-Saharan Africa. "There is no question of allowing anyone in an illegal situation to stay in Tunisia," the president said in one of his videotaped meetings with the minister.

"I will not allow the institutions of the state to be undermined or the demographic composition of Tunisia to be changed." The president's speech two nights previously had triggered a wave of violence against African migrants and prompted several West African countries to organise repatriation flights for fearful nationals.

On March 8, more than 30 Tunisian non-governmental organisations demanded an apology from Charfeddine after he branded as "traitors" the president's many critics in the private sector, the media and trade unions.

They accused him of using the "language of threat and intimidation" to "sow division" among Tunisians as part of a "dangerous populist discourse that foreshadows a police state" like the one overthrown in the country's 2011 uprising. — AFP

US leadership role in Middle...

Continued from Page 1

and assistance on their civilian nuclear program in exchange for recognizing the Zionist entity.

Meanwhile, Biden's hopes to break some ice with Iran by restoring the 2015 deal that limited its nuclear program - abandoned by predecessor president Donald Trump - have gone nowhere. Instead, Tehran has moved further away, supporting Russia in its war on Ukraine. The turmoil in the Zionist entity is another headache. Despite repeated calls from US officials for de-escalation, including a visit by Blinken to Jerusalem and Ramallah in late January, the violence between Zionists and Palestinians has worsened.

Much is being driven by a deep rift in Zionist politics, including Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's

move to weaken the country's supreme court. Day after day, US officials condemn inflammatory actions, while reiterating "unwavering" support for the Zionist entity and commitment to the "two-state solution". Yet that has had no impact on the increasingly hard-line government of longtime ally Netanyahu.

But pressure is mounting on the Biden administration. Around one hundred Democratic lawmakers recently wrote Biden expressing concerns about the direction of Netanyahu's government and urged the US leader to use all diplomatic tools possible to prevent it from "further damaging the nation's democratic institutions". "In this fragile and combustible moment, consistent and sustained US diplomatic leadership is critical," they told Biden.

But with US elections looming next year, the White House's latitude "is going to be very limited" in its ability to impact Zionist politics and the Palestinian issue, said Ryan. The Zionists "are much more confident now, especially post-Abraham Accords, in their ability to act as they please," he said. — AFP

Int'l war crimes court issues...

Continued from Page 1

placed in institutions and foster homes. ICC prosecutor Karim Khan told AFP that Putin was now liable for arrest if he set foot in any of the court's more than 120 member states. He said the arrest warrants were "based upon forensic evidence, scrutiny and what's been said by those two individuals".

"The evidence we presented focused on crimes against children. Children are the most vulnerable part of our society," said Khan. The ICC said judges found there were "reasonable grounds" to suspect Putin's criminal responsibility and grant Khan's application for the warrants, which were made back on February 22. ICC President Piotr Hofmanski said the execution of the warrants "depends on international cooperation".

During a meeting with Putin in mid-February, Lvo-

va-Belova said she adopted a 15-year-old child from the devastated Ukrainian port city of Mariupol. "Now I know what it means to be a mother of a child from Donbas - it is a difficult job but we love each other, that is for sure," she told Putin. She added that "we evacuated children's homes into safe areas, arranged rehabilitation and prosthetics for them and provided them with targeted humanitarian assistance."

The arrest warrant for Putin, a sitting head of state of a UN Security Council member, is an unprecedented step for the ICC. Set up in 2002, the ICC is a court of last resort for the world's worst crimes, when countries cannot or will not prosecute suspects. Prosecutor Khan launched an investigation into alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity in Ukraine just days after Russia's invasion.

Khan recently posted pictures from a visit to Ukraine alongside empty cots in an empty children's care home, and said that investigating alleged child abduction was a "priority". "It's poignant," he said. "One sees empty cribs and empty beds juxtaposed with paintings by those children on the walls." — AFP

Trump expects 'arrest', calls...

Continued from Page 1

That would also send political shock waves as Trump tries to secure the Republican nomination for the 2024 presidential election. Trump's lawyer told CNBC on Friday evening that his client would surrender to face criminal charges if he was indicted.

Trump has denied having an affair with Daniels and has dismissed the investigation as politically motivated. In his Truth Social post, written in capital letters, Trump referred to "illegal leaks from a corrupt & highly political Manhattan district attorneys office" and said the investigation was "based on an old & fully debunked (by numerous other prosecutors!) fairytale."

Facebook and YouTube, where Trump has millions of followers, benched him days after a mob of his supporters stormed Congress on Jan 6, 2021, arguing that his posts incited unrest. A grand jury in New York, a citizen panel which examines evidence presented by prosecutors to decide if a charge is warranted, has been hearing from witnesses in Trump's case.

On Monday, they heard from Trump's former lawyer and fixer Michael Cohen, who made the payment to

Daniels. Cohen was sentenced to three years in prison in 2018 on federal charges related to the payment. He pleaded guilty but said he had been carrying out Trump's orders. Daniels herself met with prosecutors on Wednesday and "agreed to make herself available as a witness, or for further inquiry if needed", according to her lawyer Charles Brewster.

Trump has also received an invitation to testify, which legal experts say is a sign that an indictment is near. The payment to Daniels, if not properly accounted for, could result in a misdemeanor charge related to falsifying of business records. That might be raised to a felony if the false accounting was intended to cover up a second crime, such as a campaign finance violation, The New York Times has reported.

Trump is facing several criminal probes at state and federal level over possible wrongdoing before, during and after his term in office that threaten his new run at the White House. In Georgia, a prosecutor is investigating Trump and his allies' efforts to overturn his 2020 election loss in the southern state. The grand jury in that case has recommended multiple indictments, the forewoman revealed last month. The former president is also the subject of a federal probe into his handling of classified documents as well as his possible involvement in the January 6, 2021, assault on the US Capitol. — AFP

Finland on course to...

Continued from Page 1

But the bids still needed to be ratified by all 30 of the alliance members' parliaments - a process that got hung up once it reached Turkey and Hungary. Friday's breakthrough followed months of tense negotiations between Ankara and the Nordic neighbors that threatened to collapse several times. Erdogan told Finnish President Sauli Niinisto that Helsinki had shown a strong commitment to addressing Ankara's security concerns.

"We decided to start the protocol of Finland's accession to NATO in our parliament," Erdogan told reporters after the talks. Erdogan added that he "hoped" that parliament will approve the application before Turkey's crucial general election in May. The Turkish parliament is expected to end its current session in mid-April.

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg welcomed Turkey's decision while stressing the importance of Sweden also joining "as soon as possible". "The most important thing is that both Finland and Sweden become full members of NATO quickly, not whether they join at exactly the same time," Stoltenberg said.

The White House echoed the NATO chief's position.

National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said the United States urged Hungary to conclude its ratification process both for Sweden and Finland "without delay". And France's foreign ministry called Turkey's announcement about Finland "an important signal" while reiterating support for Sweden's bid as well.

Erdogan had accused the Nordic neighbors of breaking the terms of a separate deal they reached in June 2022 under which Turkey agreed to approve the bids. Turkey has sought the extradition of dozens of Kurdish and other suspects it accuses of ties to outlawed militants and a failed 2016 coup attempt. Erdogan's demands became more urgent as he neared a May election in which he will need a strong turnout from nationalist supporters to extend his two-decade rule.

The Turkish leader voiced particular displeasure with Sweden - a country with a larger Kurdish diaspora and a longer history of disputes with Ankara. Finland and Sweden had initially resisted the idea of breaking up their bids. But Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson - who made NATO membership a priority after assuming office in October - acknowledged on Tuesday that the likelihood of Finland joining the bloc on its own had "increased". The Finnish president called Erdogan's decision Friday "very important for the whole of Finland". But he added: "Finland's application is not complete without Sweden." — AFP

International

Pakistan ex-PM Imran Khan fears arrest as he heads to court

Security situation deteriorating with a spate of deadly attacks on police

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan's former prime minister Imran Khan said on Saturday he expected to be arrested as he headed to court on graft charges, after days of legal wrangling and pitched battles between his supporters and police. The 70-year-old former cricket star has been tangled in a slew of court cases, a frequent hazard for opposition figures in Pakistan's mudslinging politics.

Khan was ousted in a no-confidence motion last year and has been pressuring the fragile coalition government which replaced him to hold early elections. "I am going to the Islamabad court right now. I want to tell you all that they have made a plan to arrest me," he said in a video message from the motorway, claiming he was the target of a plot to stop him from standing in elections due by October.

"The point of their attack on my house was not to present me before the Islamabad court. The purpose was to put me in jail." Some 4,000 security officials including elite police commandos, anti-terrorism squads and paramilitary rangers have been deployed around Islamabad with hospitals put on high alert.

Police fired tear gas at supporters who had gathered at the court in anticipation of Khan's arrival, chanting and pelting stones and bricks at officers. Earlier this week Khan's supporters fought pitched

battles with police sent to arrest him in the eastern city of Lahore after he failed to appear in court, citing security concerns. Authorities were later stood down after a flurry of court hearings and Khan's promise to appear in the capital on Saturday. Police meanwhile raided his house in a plush Lahore neighbourhood after blocking nearby roads and suspending mobile services in the area.

The case has been brought by the Election Commission of Pakistan which has accused Khan of not declaring gifts received during his time as premier, or the profit made from selling them. Pakistan's courts are often used to tie up lawmakers in lengthy proceedings that rights monitors criticise for stifling political opposition.

As the political drama unfolds, Pakistan is in the grip of a stark economic downturn, risking default if help cannot be secured from the International Monetary Fund. The security situation is also deteriorating with a spate of deadly attacks on police, linked to the Pakistan Taliban. Khan has been pressuring the coalition government that replaced him, led by Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, with popular rallies and daily addresses broadcast on social media. Last year Khan was shot in the leg during a political rally, an assassination bid he blamed on Sharif. — AFP



LAHORE: Supporters of Pakistan's former Prime Minister Imran Khan guard Khan's residence in Lahore on March 17, 2023. A Pakistan court declined to cancel an arrest warrant for former prime minister Imran Khan, one of his lawyers said. — AFP



LAGOS: Lagos Governor and Ruling All Progressives Congress (APC) candidate to re-election Babajide Sanwo Olu (C) waves to supporters after voting at a polling station for a gubernatorial and House of Assembly candidates during local elections, in Lagos. — AFP

Nigeria elections open in shadow of contested vote

LAGOS: Nigerians were voting in local elections Saturday, just weeks after the ruling party won a presidential poll that the two main opposition parties alleged was marred by fraud. Africa's most populous nation is electing hundreds of state assembly lawmakers and over two dozens governors, with a particularly competitive contest in the nation's economic nerve centre, Lagos. Governors are powerful positions in Nigeria, with some controlling state budgets that are larger than those of several African nations. Polling units were to be open from 8:30 am (0730 GMT) and close by 2:30 pm (1330 GMT) though delays are frequent and voters in line before closing time should be still be able to vote.

After last month's presidential poll, which was largely peaceful but marked by long delays and technical failures, some voters and opposition parties claimed the mishaps allowed for ballot manipulation.

The electoral commission has rejected claims of rigging but the experience could impact Saturday's vote. On Lagos's wealthy Ikoyi island, polling units were set up early on Saturday, giving some residents hope for a hitch-free day. "We hope this election will be one of the better elections," said Sukiman Abubakar, a 52 year-old estate surveyor. On the mainland, heavy security was deployed with armoured vehicles seen by an AFP reporter at Iyana-Ipaaja and Abulegba, areas prone to violence.

'Politicians have failed us'

As electoral material arrived at Ijaiye, in the Agbado area, around 50 voters were already forming a queue hours early. One of them was Fausai Balogun, a 46-year-old trader who was eager to cast a ballot. "I have been here since 6 am (0500 GMT) to vote for the candidates of my choice. We need fresh blood in Lagos. The old politicians have failed us," he said.

While the megacity of some 20 million people is considered the fiefdom of president-elect Bola Tinubu of the All Progressives Congress (APC), outsider Peter Obi of the Labour Party (LP) caused a stir by winning most votes on February 25. But whether Obi's popularity and the emergence of a third strong party in Nigeria will translate at the governorship and local assembly levels, especially in Lagos where its former governor Tinubu is influential, remains to be seen.

The Lagos race pits incumbent Babajide Sanwo-Olu (APC) against Gbadebo Rhodes-Vivour (LP) and the main opposition's candidate Olajide Adediran of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP). Other hotly contested races are expected in southern Rivers and northern Kano, while northeast Adamawa could see the election of Nigeria's first woman governor.

A decisive factor in Saturday's vote will be turnout—with many disappointed in how last month's election was conducted, some voters could decide to stay at home. With President Muhammadu Buhari stepping down in May after two terms, Nigerians had hoped a fair vote would usher in a leader capable of tackling growing insecurity and deepening poverty. Both the LP and the PDP are contesting the February 25 election in a legal battle that could extend over several months. — AFP

800,000 N Koreans enlist to fight 'US imperialists'

SEOUL: More than 800,000 young North Koreans have volunteered to join the army to fight "US imperialists", state media said Saturday, days after Pyongyang test-fired its most powerful intercontinental ballistic missile. After a record-breaking year of weapons tests and growing nuclear threats from Pyongyang, Seoul and Washington have ramped up security cooperation, and this week kicked off their largest joint military drills in five years.

North Korea views all such exercises as rehearsals for invasion and has repeatedly warned it would take "overwhelming" action in response.

The official Korean Central News Agency described the ongoing drills as an American attempt "to provoke a nuclear war" and said that in response, hundreds of thousands of people had enlisted.

The young volunteers are determined to "mercilessly wipe out the war maniacs" so they joined the army to "defend the country", KCNA said. "More than

800,000 youth league officials and students across the country volunteered to join and rejoin the Korean People's Army" on Friday alone, it added.

Images released by Pyongyang's official Rodong Simmun showed young North Koreans waiting in long lines to sign their names at what looks like a construction site. The latest report comes after Pyongyang test-fired its largest and most powerful missile, a Hwasong-17, on Thursday — its second ICBM test this year. State media has described the launch as a response to the ongoing, "frantic" US-South Korea joint military drills. On Saturday, KCNA said the ongoing drills were "inching close to the unpardonable red-line".

Last year, North Korea declared itself an "irreversible" nuclear power, and leader Kim Jong Un recently called for an "exponential" increase in weapons production, including tactical nukes. Kim earlier this month also ordered the North Korean military to intensify drills to prepare for a "real war".

Pyongyang is using the drills to justify their nuclear weapons program domestically as "crucial and necessary," Yang Moo-jin, president of the University of North Korean Studies in Seoul, told AFP.

This involves "spreading the idea that the South Korea-US military drills ultimately aim to destroy the current North Korean regime and even occupy its capital Pyongyang," Yang added. — AFP



File photo shows North Korea's leader Kim Jong Un (C) and his daughter (front L) observing the Mars Artillery Unit, responsible for important operational missions of the Korean People's Army Western Front, as it conducts fire attack training, at an undisclosed location. — AFP

Serbia, Kosovo hold talks over EU peace plan

OHRID: Kosovo and Serbia leaders gathered Saturday for the latest round of EU-led talks, as the long-time rivals come under increasing pressure to strike a deal to normalise ties. The meeting in North Macedonia comes after the two sides failed to reach an agreement in Brussels last month, where the peace plan was unveiled even as Kosovo's Prime Minister Albin Kurti and Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic remained at loggerheads over a path forward.

The 11-point document laid out a deal stating that neither side would resort to violence to resolve a dispute, nor seek to prevent the other from joining the European Union or other international bodies—a key demand from Kosovo.

Serbia has long refused to recognise Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence made in 2008, with perennial bouts of unrest erupting between Belgrade and its former breakaway province. Following the talks in Brussels, Vucic vowed never to recognise Pristina or provide a pathway that would allow them to join the United Nations or the NATO alliance. Before the summit hosted by EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell, Vucic struck a defiant tone. "I don't plan on signing anything," Vucic told reporters Thursday, saying the meeting "will not be historic or groundbreaking".

The latest round of talks followed months of shuttle diplomacy, nearly 25 years after the war between eth-

nic Albanian insurgents and Serb forces sparked a NATO bombing campaign that ended the conflict. On Tuesday, Kosovo's Kurti said he was optimistic about hammering out a deal but put the onus of signing the agreement with Vucic. "Whether it will succeed or not, you know very well that it does not depend only on me," Kurti told reporters.

'A betrayal'

Analysts said inking the agreement itself would not signal an ultimate breakthrough. "I expect both parties to agree on the implementation plan. I can't say it's big because the big thing will happen only after the plan is implemented," said Dusan Milenkovic from the think tank Center for Social Dialogue and Regional Initiatives. Kurti's administration hopes that a deal would allow for Kosovo's entry into international institutions, a long-sought goal for the government in Pristina.

Serbia's Vucic has said his government is under intense pressure to come to an understanding, while signalling to his domestic rivals that he will not give ground. Kosovo remains an obsession among large swaths of the Serbian population, who regard the territory as their rightful homeland that has come under attack by outsiders for centuries.

In the Serbian capital Belgrade on Friday, thousands rallied against striking a deal with Kosovo. "This ultimatum ... it's not an agreement, it's a betrayal," Milica Djurdjevic Stamenkovski, head of the ultranationalist group the Oath Keepers told the crowd.

Kosovo is home to approximately 120,000 Serbs, many of whom remain loyal to Belgrade—especially in northern areas near the border with Serbia where there are frequent bouts of turmoil, protests and occasional violence. — AFP

Indonesia's Merapi volcano erupts, spews hot lava

JAKARTA: Indonesia's Mount Merapi, one of the world's most active volcanoes, erupted late Friday and continued to spew hot ash and other volcanic material on Saturday. Footage of flaming lava pouring out of the crater and a tall column of hot cloud rising 1,300 metres into the air was taken by the government-run Merapi Volcano Observatory on Friday night.

The volcano continued to spew hot ash and hot lava was visible on Saturday. "Residents should anticipate the disruption due to the volcanic ash from Mount Merapi eruption and please be on alert for the danger of volcanic mudflow, especially when it rains around Merapi," the country's volcanology agency said in a statement Saturday. Merapi also erupted last week, sending volcanic material 9,600 feet (3,000 metres) above the summit. Volcanic ash rain blanketed at least eight villages near the volcano after last week's eruption. Volcanologists said last week the volcano is experiencing its most active phase since 2021.

Merapi has been at the second-highest level alert since 2020 following increased volcanic activity and authorities established a restricted zone of seven kilometres from the summit. The volcano's last major eruption in 2010 killed more than 300 people and forced the evacuation of some 280,000 residents. It was Merapi's most powerful eruption since 1930 when about 1,300 people were killed. An eruption in 1994 left about 60 people dead. — AFP

S Korea moves to 'normalise' military pact with Japan

SEOUL: South Korea will fully implement a key military intelligence-sharing pact with Japan, a defence ministry official told AFP on Saturday, as the two countries move to thaw long-frozen relations and renew diplomacy to counter Pyongyang. At a fence-mending summit on Thursday, the neighbours agreed to turn the page on a bitter dispute over Japan's use of war-time forced labour. South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol, who has been keen to end the spat and present a united front against the nuclear-armed North, had flown to Japan to meet Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, the first such summit in 12 years.

According to a pool report, Yoon told Kishida he wanted a "complete normalisation" of a 2016 military agreement called the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA), which enables the two US allies to share military secrets, particularly over Pyongyang's nuclear and missile capacity.

Following the summit, South Korea's foreign ministry was asked "to proceed with the needed measures to normalise the agreement," said a defence ministry official, who declined to be named. The foreign ministry is expected to send a formal letter to its Japanese counterpart soon, the official added.

Seoul had threatened to scrap GSOMIA in 2019 as relations with Tokyo soured over trade disputes and a historical row stemming from Japan's 35-year colonial rule over the peninsula. In response, an alarmed United States said that calling off the pact would only benefit North Korea and China.

Hours before it was set to expire, South Korea agreed to extend GSOMIA "conditionally", but warned it could be "terminated" at any moment. Confronted with Pyongyang's growing aggression and flurry of missile tests, the neighbours have increasingly sought to bury the hatchet.

The increasing security challenge was thrown into sharp relief just before Yoon's arrival in Tokyo on Thursday as North Korea test-fired what it said was an intercontinental ballistic missile. Last year, Pyongyang declared itself an "irreversible" nuclear power, and recently leader Kim Jong Un called for an "exponential" increase in weapons production. — AFP

SUNDAY, MARCH 19, 2023

Business



KUWAIT: Waleed Al-Nusif honoring Waleed Al-Khashti in the presence of Abdullah Al Mudhaf and Shannon Norris.



Al-Khashti awarding some of the winners.

Zain sponsors Al-Qabas and Forbes ME's 'Kuwait Top 20 Entrepreneurs'

Company empowers local entrepreneurship and digital innovation

KUWAIT: Zain, Kuwait's leading digital service provider, announced it successfully sponsored the special gala dinner organized by Al-Qabas newspaper and Forbes Middle East Magazine to announce the 'Kuwait Top 20 Entrepreneurs' list. The event, attended by private sector executives, media figures, and the local business community, celebrated young entrepreneurs and SME owners who contributed to enriching the nation's tech and digital startups scenes.

Zain's support to this initiative, which was hosted by two prestigious media organizations on the local and regional levels, came in continuation of the company's efforts to enrich the local tech startups ecosystem. Zain is committed to making an impactful contribution to support entrepreneurship and innovation in the nation.

During the gala dinner, Zain joined in recognizing the winners on-stage. The 20 winners were selected from a pool of 100 entrepreneurs who were nominated in Al-Qabas and Forbes Middle East's list to celebrate the top startup and SME owners based on several international standards, such as innovation, scalability, size, track record, and more. The winners were selected from five categories: e-commerce, ed-tech, fintech, energy, and incubators.

Zain also sponsored the Kuwait Top Entrepreneurs Forum 2023, organized by Al-Qabas and Forbes Middle East, and hosted by the American University in the Middle East. The forum featured three panel discussions that discussed several crucial topics related to the local entrepreneurial scene,

the sector's tech and digital transformation journeys, and the challenges faced by entrepreneurs in Kuwait. The event was attended by academics, economists, entrepreneurs, and private sector executives.

Zain has a long list of efforts and initiatives to support entrepreneurs and startup owners, most notably its Zain Great Idea tech startup accelerator program. The company recently launched ZGI's seventh season, aiming to entrepreneurs towards the best experiences that bring them sustainable growth and leverage on its partners ecosystem to connect them with venture capital firms and business partners to help them put a steady first step in the business world.

Zain Great Idea is one of the most successful projects under the company's Innovation and Entrepreneurship strategy. The program, which started over 10 years ago, has empowered, trained, and invested in over 1,500 passionate Kuwaiti and Arab young people.

Investments in ZGI startups have reached nearly KD 30 million (\$100 million) to this date. 30 percent of ZGI alumni now own thriving and active businesses to this day across local and regional markets, and 40 percent of these businesses have raised capital. Zain Great Idea was recently recognized with the E-Business Award from the prestigious Entrepreneur Middle East magazine. Zain's program was awarded 'Ecosystem Enabler of the Year' during a recent awards ceremony in Dubai acknowledging the company's ever-growing endeavors in accelerating the regional tech startups ecosystem and empowering entrepreneurs in Kuwait and the region.



Al-Khashti awarding some of the winners.

OECD raises global growth forecast but recovery 'fragile'

PARIS: The OECD raised its global economic growth forecast on Friday as inflation eases and China emerges from COVID restrictions, but warned of vulnerabilities as seen in the US bank sector turmoil. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development said it now expects the global economy to grow by 2.6 percent this year compared to 2.2 percent in its previous forecast in November.

But it remains under the 3.2-percent expansion seen in 2022, the Paris-based OECD said in its updated economic outlook titled "A Fragile Recovery". "More positive signs have now started to appear, with business and consumer sentiment starting to improve, food and energy prices falling back, and the full reopening of China," the OECD said in its Interim Economic Outlook report.

But it warned "the improvement in the outlook is still fragile. Risks have become somewhat better balanced, but remain tilted to the downside". It cited uncertainty over the course of the war in Ukraine, the risk of renewed pressure on energy markets and the impact of rising interest rates.

US bank trouble

Central banks worldwide have hiked rates in efforts to tame decades-high inflation that soared after Russia invaded Ukraine, but markets fear rising borrowing costs could tip economies into recession. "Signs of the impact of tighter monetary policy have started to appear in parts of the banking sector, including regional banks in the United States," the OECD said.

"Higher interest rates could also have stronger effects on economic growth than expected, particularly if they expose underlying financial vulnerabilities." The monetary tightening has been linked to the collapse of Silicon Valley Bank last week after it booked a \$1.8 billion loss on bonds whose prices were



WASHINGTON: A woman walks past Wells Fargo bank ATMs in Washington, DC, on March 14, 2023. —AFP

brought down by the higher rates. A second US lender, Signature Bank, also imploded over the weekend while a third, First Republic Bank, was rescued Thursday by a coalition of its peers through \$30 billion in deposits. Fears of contagion spread to Europe, with Credit Suisse securing a \$54 billion lifeline from the Swiss central bank after its shares tanked.

The OECD said the sharp changes in market rates and value of bond portfolios could "further expose duration risks in the business models of financial institutions, as highlighted by the failure of the US Silicon Valley Bank in March".

But the OECD's chief economist, Alvaro Santos Pereira, told reporters there was no "systemic risk". He said the situation is different from the 2008 financial crisis as there is now stronger regulation, most banks are "very well capitalized", and central banks and regulators have reacted "decisively" to SVB's demise. OECD Secretary General Mathias Cormann added that the "risks of this spreading more widely are quite contained".

But the OECD said rate increases are still needed to fight inflation as pressures in energy markets could reappear. The European Central Bank raised its rates by a hefty 50 basis points on Thursday while the US Federal Reserve meets next week. —AFP

World's central banks walk interest rate tightrope

PARIS: The world's central banks are juggling whether to raise interest rates further in order to reduce inflation, and with the banking sector in turmoil, the stakes are especially high.

Why the focus on interest rates?

Central bank interest rates long ran close to zero, but they have now been climbing for months in a bid to rein in rising prices. Silicon Valley Bank in the United States, which collapsed last week, did not adapt quickly enough. It booked a \$1.8 billion loss on bonds whose prices were brought down by the higher rates. A second US lender, Signature Bank, imploded over the weekend while a third, First Republic Bank, was rescued by a coalition of its peers through \$30 billion in deposits.

Concern has spread to other banks considered fragile-Switzerland's central bank intervened to protect Credit Suisse with a \$54 billion loan, though its shares tumbled more than 11 percent on Friday. Central banks must now decide if they can risk worsening the crisis by taking a hard line on inflation.

What has the ECB done?

Despite the turbulence over the past week, the European Central Bank (ECB) on Thursday stuck to a planned half percentage point interest rate increase. The move reflected its "determination to curb persistent inflationary pressures", said Eiko Sievert of ratings agency Scope.

But he said the pace of rate increases should "slow significantly this year". President of the ECB Christine Lagarde performed a balancing act on Thursday. In the face of calls to slow rate hikes amid the banking turmoil, she insisted there was "no tradeoff" between price and financial stability. Lagarde said the central bank for the 20 countries using the euro was ready to intervene "as necessary" to protect the financial sys-

tem. "No one else is better positioned to judge the actual state of eurozone banks and financial markets than the ECB," said analyst Lorenzo Codogno.

It "would have sent the wrong signal" if the central bank had changed tack at the last minute, Codogno said. The decision keeps two options open, according to Frederik Ducrozet, an economist at Pictet Wealth Management. "If the panic eases, the ECB is likely to resume tightening before long", he said. But if the banking sector crisis persists, "the ECB would not hesitate to intervene, quickly and boldly, if financial stability were to be threatened," he said.

What are the Fed's options?

In the United States, the Federal Reserve said on Thursday it had lent US banks close to \$12 billion under a new one-year lending program as authorities moved to ease stress on the financial system. It said it was making additional funding available "to help assure banks have the ability to meet the needs of all their depositors." All eyes will be on the Fed at its monetary policy meeting next week, with investors debating whether the US central bank will continue with its rate increases.

Markets are expecting a 0.25 percentage point hike, and some analysts even see the possibility of an end to the upward cycle. "The Federal Reserve is focused on inflation and will look to hike 25bp if conditions allow", ING analysts said. Twenty-five basis points is a quarter percentage point. —AFP



FRANKFURT: The European Central Bank (ECB) is pictured behind EU flags, prior to a press conference on the eurozone's monetary policy, in Frankfurt am Main, western Germany. —AFP

Business

Japan egg prices soar amid record 16m bird flu cullings

Restaurants struggle amid egg shortages as inflation rises

TOKYO: Egg prices are soaring in Japan as the current avian flu season sees a record 16 million birds marked for culling, impacting both the restaurant sector and households already struggling with inflation. Egg-laying hens make up more than 90 percent of birds in the process of being culled, according to the agriculture ministry, limiting the supply of eggs and pushing prices higher.

The current bird flu outbreak has spread at an unprecedented pace since the season began in October, with at least 80 cases at poultry firms in 26 of the country's 47 prefectures, according to Japan Times.

As of March 2, the wholesale price per kilogram of medium sized eggs was 335 yen (\$2.4) in Tokyo, the highest ever since 1993 when data first became available, according to JA.Z-Tamago Co, the egg seller within the JA agricultural cooperative group. Concerns about shortages are also growing, with an increasing number of restaurants opting to suspend

offering egg-based dishes. It is expected to take at least six months until egg availability recovers to former levels. Once an infection is confirmed at a poultry farm, all its birds are culled, after which the facility is sanitized and quarantine measures are put in place. It can take between three and seven months for such farms to return to raising chickens as normal again. "Work to resume poultry farming is already under way and (production) should be active in early spring," a Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries official said. "But it will take some time for numbers to recover because farms won't return to 100 percent capacity straight away," the official said. Eggs, along with beansprouts, are normally one of Japan's most stably priced food items so the situation has caused added concern for consumers and suppliers amid as Japan is already experiencing its highest consumer price increases in four decades. Core consumer inflation reached 4

percent in December from a year earlier, hitting a 41-year high due to higher energy and food prices. Japanese casual restaurant chain operator Skylark Holdings began suspending sales of some menu items that use eggs earlier this month, such as fried rice at its Chinese food restaurant chain and fried egg topping at its steak restaurants.

"Due to the shortage of raw materials for chicken eggs caused by avian influenza, we will suspend sales of some products or change the way we serve them for the time being," the company said in a news release. Starting on Wednesday, Sukiya, one of Japan's largest beef bowl chains, raised the price of its flagship beef and rice with raw egg topping and miso soup to 540 yen, an increase of 10 yen, among other items that include eggs at restaurants in certain parts of the country. The dishes are extremely popular with office workers, who often enjoy them for lunch. — Agencies



TOKYO: Egg-laying hens make up more than 90 percent of birds in the process of being culled, according to the agriculture ministry, limiting the supply of eggs and pushing prices higher.

Crypto-linked bank failures fuel regulation debate

WASHINGTON: The global cryptocurrency industry has been slammed by setbacks, scandals and high-profile failures in recent months, sparking a regulatory rush to protect consumers from fraud and scams. Global finance was rocked by the collapse of Silicon Valley Bank last week, and the digital currency sector was hit hard by the demise of US crypto lenders Silvergate and Signature-just months after the bankruptcy of troubled crypto exchange trading platform FTX.

Regulators are increasingly keen for oversight of a sector which boomed during the COVID pandemic when many people were stuck at home. The global crypto market stands at more than \$1 trillion and has risen sharply in recent months, although it remains far below its 2021 peak of \$3 trillion.

'Huge risks'

The number of crypto customers "grew during the COVID lockdowns", Martin Walker, head of banking at the Dutch-based Center for Evidence-Based Management, told AFP. "They joined an unregulated market, investing with huge risks but not realizing they were investing in unregulated and not (always) legal assets," said Walker, who organized a London conference last year of cryptocurrency critics.

He argued that trading platforms were conflicted by their unique position. "They do have conflict of interests (...) as owners are at the same time both taking risk positions in crypto and selling these assets to their

consumers," Walker added. "People do not realize this is not allowed in conventional finance." Regulators also want oversight of such platforms because they hook up customers, regardless of experience or knowledge, with the complex world of cryptocurrency.

Such trading platforms are the "link between what would be a very technically complex world, both in terms of finance and technology, with a population that's untrained and not very well informed", Bourgogne University economics professor Ludovic Desmedt told AFP. Added to the picture, cryptocurrencies can experience volatile price swings and their value is not determined via transparent markets-as is the case with traditional currencies, stocks or commodities. As a result, illicit transactions using cryptocurrencies more than doubled last year to almost \$21 billion, according to specialist crypto firm Chainalysis. However, this estimate does not include some illegal uses such as drug trafficking.

Crackdown

In the United States, officials are working on a framework to oversee crypto firms, but in September the White House asked regulators to use similar regulatory rules that are applied to other financial service providers. As a result, the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) markets regulator took legal action against crypto lenders Genesis and Gemini.

And in February, the SEC ordered crypto firm Paxos Trust to stop issuing dollar-pegged cryptocurrency BUSD, a stablecoin, for the world's biggest trading platform Binance. European Union draft laws, scheduled to take effect next year, will compel crypto platforms to be more rigorous and transparent in their operations. In Britain, the government launched a consultation this year to establish a regulatory framework for the sector as it seeks to avoid falling behind the EU and United States. — AFP

Britain warns over 'unacceptable risk' at payment firms

LONDON: Britain's financial regulator has voiced concern over "unacceptable risk" at some of the nation's non-bank payment firms due to "insufficient controls". The Financial Conduct Authority wrote to bosses of almost 300 payment firms Thursday to urge them to safeguard customers' money, prevent use for financial crime like fraud or money laundering, and have robust governance. The watchdog warned it would "take swift and assertive action", including sanctions and even closure where standards are not met. A source close to the

FCA said the letter was not linked to recent turmoil over collapsed US lender Silicon Valley Bank and the plight of troubled Swiss giant Credit Suisse.

"We welcome the competition and innovation we have seen in the payments sector and the improved choice, convenience and value this can provide for customers," wrote Matthew Long, director of payments and digital assets, in the letter. "However, we remain concerned that many payments firms do not have sufficiently robust controls and that as a result some firms present an unacceptable risk of harm to their customers and to financial system integrity." Long said the "risk of customer harm" was heightened by "tightening economic conditions and the cost-of-living crisis". The FCA had identified "common issues" at payment firms including a "lack of liquidity risk management" and a "failure" to consider holding more capital, while some lacked scenario planning and stress-testing.—AFP

Huawei Cloud Kuwait partners with Eyon.TV

Strategic partnership to deliver next-generation streaming services



KUWAIT: Huawei Cloud Kuwait, a leading provider of cloud services, has announced a strategic partnership with Eyon.TV, a pioneering video streaming platform, to deliver next-generation streaming services to audiences in Kuwait and beyond.

The partnership between Huawei Cloud and Eyon.TV is a game-changer for the MENA region. As the first startup to sign with Huawei Cloud Kuwait, Eyon.TV is set to revolutionize the live streaming industry in the Middle East region and provide Arab creators with a unique platform to showcase their talent and connect with a global audience as it combines the latest cloud technology with Eyon.TV's expertise in live streaming. This collaboration is set to revolutionize the live streaming industry in the region and provide Arab creators with a unique platform to showcase their talent and connect with a global audience. By leveraging Huawei's ICT infrastructure and Eyon.TV's knowledge of the unique challenges faced by Arab streamers, this partnership can unleash new possibilities for innovation, creativity, and entrepreneurship. This collaboration will not only enhance the Kuwait tech industry but also provide a new element that is unavailable in almost all sectors in the region - live streaming. Moreover, the collaboration shows the support provided by Huawei Cloud Kuwait to startups and SMEs with access to cutting-edge technologies and proper training to drive digital transformation and develop new solutions that cater to the needs of the Arab market. Overall, this partnership has the potential to bring about positive change and growth for years to come.



The Co-founders of Eyon.TV Abdulrahman Al-Melhem and Abdulla Al-Busairi share the same vision to transform and lead the MENA Region in Technological advancement as pioneers in Live Streaming Industry. Huawei Cloud's cutting-edge cloud technology is trusted by businesses across Middle East, and this partnership with Eyon.TV marks the

Huawei Cloud provides innovative and secure cloud services for businesses in the Middle East, backed by Huawei's world-class technology. Huawei has been providing open, flexible, and secure ICT infrastructure to bridge the digital divide in the Middle East and Africa for over two decades. In December 2022, Huawei Cloud announced the first-ever

Abdulrahman Al-Melhem, Co-founder of Eyon.TV
We are excited to bring next-generation streaming services to the Middle East and connect Arab creators with a global audience.

Abdulla Al-Busairi, Co-founder of Eyon.TV
Our partnership with Huawei Cloud Kuwait will revolutionize the live streaming industry in the region and unleash new possibilities for innovation and entrepreneurship



latest milestone in its commitment to delivering innovative cloud services that meet the needs of its customers.

"We are delighted to partner with Eyon.TV and help them deliver next-generation streaming services to viewers in Kuwait and beyond," said Nasser Al-Saqabi, Cloud Business Development Manager in Huawei Cloud Kuwait. "Our secure and scalable cloud infrastructure will provide Eyon.TV with the performance and reliability it needs to deliver an exceptional streaming experience."

Huawei Cloud Startup Program in Kuwait to empower SMEs with technologies, training, and networking, and create a sustainable startup ecosystem.

Eyon.TV is a video streaming platform created by two entrepreneurs from Kuwait to address the challenges faced by Arab streamers in the live streaming industry. Through years of research and development, they have developed their own live streaming technology to help Arab creators showcase their talents and connect with a global audience.



SANTA CLARA: A display lists Silicon Valley Bank (SVB) achievements as customers gather to withdraw money at SVB's headquarters in Santa Clara, California. — AFP

Bank fears return to haunt global stock markets

NEW YORK: Stocks markets tumbled again on Friday as fears of a banking crisis resurfaced despite massive financial lifelines thrown at embattled lenders to prevent contagion across the sector. Markets had rallied on Thursday after Wall Street titans including JP Morgan, Bank of America and Citigroup pledged to inject \$30 billion into First Republic Bank.

Credit Suisse had also rebounded after it said it would borrow up to \$54 billion from the Swiss central bank. But shares of First Republic Bank and Credit Suisse dove back deep in the red on Friday, with the US lender slumping 33 percent and Switzerland's second biggest bank dropping eight percent.

The stock prices of other major banks also fell, with JP Morgan, Citigroup and Bank of America down at least three percent. The wider markets were also in the red. On Wall Street, the S&P 500 finished down 1.1 percent. In Europe, London stocks closed down 1.0 percent, while Frankfurt slumped 1.3 percent and Paris dropped 1.4 percent to cap a rollercoaster week.

"The negative disposition for the broader market has a familiar driver: worries about the state of the banking industry," said market analyst Patrick O'Hare at Briefing.com. Banks stepped in to save First Republic over fears it could suffer a run of withdrawals by customers worried it would follow US lenders Silicon Valley Bank and Signature Bank, which

went under last week and fueled fears of another financial crisis. O'Hare said the market was unnerved by data showing that bank borrowing from the US Federal Reserve's discount window hit a record high of approximately \$153 billion for the week ending March 15, "exceeding anything seen during the financial crisis." The Fed's discount window allows banks to quickly access funds, providing them with liquidity when customers withdraw more deposits than expected, and the record figure is an indication of stress in the sector. "This week has been a liquidity crisis, but it seems that the moves by authorities to remedy the situation have not completely reassured wary investors," said Chris Beauchamp, chief market analyst at online trading platform IG.

The dollar fell against its major rivals, while oil prices sank more than four percent at one point before clawing back some of that ground. "Oil prices have been pummeled this week as turmoil in the banking sector has increased the risk of a significant economic slowdown or recession this year," said market analyst Craig Erlam at Oanda trading platform.

Fed's next move

Investors will focus next week on whether the US Federal Reserve will stick to its interest rate-hike policy to combat inflation. Before the SVB crisis unfolded, there had been a widespread expectation the Fed would ramp up its tightening campaign and push on for as long as needed until it had quelled inflation. But with SVB's demise largely blamed on the sharp rise in borrowing costs-fueling fears of a repeat at other banks-speculation has swirled that the Fed may stop hiking and maybe even cut rates to provide some stability.—AFP

Business

UIC, Vietnamese delegation discuss means to promote commercial ties

Delegation showcases investment opportunities in Vietnam

KUWAIT: The Union of Investment Companies (UIC) held a meeting with a visiting investment delegation from Vietnam on March 14. The meeting comes within the framework of UIC's efforts to promote local and international investments and encourage investment opportunities in Vietnam. The meeting was attended by Chairman of the administrative council of the Investment Capital Authority Nguyen Chi, head of the Vietnamese delegation, Vietnamese Ambassador to Kuwait Ngu Twang Thang and a number of executive directors.

Welcoming the ambassador and the Vietnamese delegation, Chairman of the UIC administrative board Saleh Al-Selmi stressed the importance of boosting cooperation and commercial ties between the two countries. During the meeting, the delegation indicated the promising economic development of Vietnam, with an increase in GDP growth of 8.02 percent in 2022. This growth is the highest achieved by any country in Southeast Asia and the eighth highest worldwide. The committee also stated that there was an increase in exports and imports, reaching \$732.5 billion, an increase of 9.5 percent, and a \$11.2 billion budget surplus.

In a presentation, the delegation displayed a number of projects and investment plans that are being prepared for implementation. The projects, considered ideal investment opportunities for investors, are primarily in sectors of construction and development of ports and large industrial centers, in addition to building airports and infra-



structure. Moreover, investment opportunities in sectors such as minerals and pharmaceutical industry among others were also discussed.

Selmi praised the Vietnamese initiative and the impor-

ance of the economic relationship between the two countries, as Kuwaiti companies can use their expertise and ability with regards to industry and transportation investments, among others. In conclusion of the meeting, the two

sides agreed that this is an important step towards preparing more visits of economic delegations between the two countries, which will strengthen bilateral cooperation and investment opportunities.



GCC, UK conclude free trade talks

RIYADH: The third round of the free trade agreement negotiations between the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) for Arab States and the United Kingdom concluded on Thursday at the headquarters of the GCC General Secretariat in Riyadh. Launched last Sunday, the GCC side was headed by the Acting Chairman of the GCC's Negotiating team, Fareed Saeed Al-Asali.

The two sides sought to strengthen and develop their trade and investment relationship in the sectors of goods and services, and digital trade. They also hope to encourage investment and support the small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) sector. —SPA

Moody's changes Saudi outlook to positive, affirms A1 ratings

PARIS: Moody's Investors Service (Moody's) has changed the outlook on the government of Saudi Arabia to positive from stable and affirmed its long-term issuer and senior unsecured ratings at A1.

The change of outlook to positive reflects the increasing likelihood that, through reforms and investment in various non-oil sectors, the sovereign's economic and fiscal reliance on hydrocarbons will, over time, materially decline, thereby reducing its exposure to oil price cycles and a potential acceleration in global carbon transition, while also diminishing the pressure on the government to support the kingdom's implicit social contract through growth in public spending.

The government is making progress in implementing its broad-based structural reform agenda, which will support the sustainability of the economic diversification efforts over the medium and long term. In addition, momentum is gathering behind a wide range of government-sponsored diversification projects and initiatives, which if successfully executed and, importantly, supported by private sector investment, will be the main driver of the expansion of Saudi Arabia's non-hydrocarbon sector and employment over the coming years.

The affirmation of the A1 ratings reflects the government's moderate debt burden, lower than most similarly-rated sovereigns, availability of robust fiscal buffers in the form of government financial assets, and high economic strength underpinned by Saudi Arabia's highly competitive position in the global oil market. Saudi Arabia's rating is constrained mainly by its structural vulnerability implied by its economic and fiscal reliance



on the hydrocarbon sector, and by its susceptibility to event risks related to regional geopolitical tensions.

Over the next few decades, Moody's expects oil exports to produce less robust revenues at peak oil prices and weaker revenues at trough oil prices compared to historical experience because global initiatives to limit the adverse impacts of climate change will increasingly constrain the use of hydrocarbons and accelerate the shift to less environmentally-damaging energy sources. For Saudi Arabia, the credit impact of carbon transition is mitigated by the sovereign's demonstrable adjustment capacity and its progress on economic and fiscal diversification.

The rating action also affirms the A1 backed senior unsecured ratings of KSA Sukuk Limited, and its (P)A1 backed senior unsecured medium-term note program rating. KSA Sukuk Limited, a special purpose vehicle

incorporated in the Cayman Islands, is wholly owned by the Government of Saudi Arabia and its debt issuances are, in Moody's view, ultimately the obligation of the government of Saudi Arabia. Moody's has also affirmed Saudi Arabia's Aaa.sa senior unsecured debt and senior unsecured MTN program ratings on the national scale.

Saudi Arabia's local currency (LC) and foreign currency (FC) country ceilings remain unchanged. The LC country ceiling at Aa2, two notches above the sovereign rating, incorporates reliance on a single revenue source for the government and non-government issuers and geopolitical risk, partly mitigated by relatively predictable institutions and external balance of payments stability. The FC country ceiling at Aa2, in line with the LC ceiling, reflects very low transfer and convertibility risks, given the central bank's very large foreign currency buffers.

UBS in talks to acquire ailing Credit Suisse

ZURICH: Switzerland's largest bank, UBS, is in talks to buy all or part of Credit Suisse, according to a report by the Financial Times. Credit Suisse-Switzerland's second-biggest bank-came under pressure this week as the failure of two US regional lenders rocked the sector. By the close of markets Friday, its shares had dropped eight percent.

The Swiss National Bank (SNB) and financial markets watchdog FINMA told their US and British counterparts their "plan A" to stop the crisis of confidence facing Credit Suisse was to merge it with UBS, the FT reported Friday, citing unnamed sources. The Swiss central bank "wants the lenders to agree on a simple and straightforward solution before markets open on Monday", the source said, while acknowledging there was "no guarantee" of a deal.

UBS wants to assess what risks a full or partial takeover of its rival could pose to its own business, another source told the FT. When reached by AFP, both SNB and Credit Suisse declined to comment, while UBS and Finma did not respond immediately. Credit Suisse, which has been in turmoil for two years, has been seen as a weak link in the banking sector due to a series of scandals and a major restructuring program launched last October. Its market value took a heavy blow this week over fears of contagion from the collapse of two US banks-Silicon Valley Bank and Signature Bank-along with the publication of its annual report, which cited "material weaknesses" in internal controls. But shares nosedived to historic lows Wednesday after its main shareholder, Saudi National Bank, said it would not raise its stake in the group due to regulatory constraints.

By Wednesday evening, SNB had stepped in with a \$53.7 billion lifeline to reinforce the group. The idea of a takeover by UBS was also floated this week by analysts at JP Morgan, calling it "the most likely" scenario. The idea of Switzerland's biggest banks joining forces regularly resurfaces but is generally dismissed due to competition issues and risks to the Swiss financial system's stability, given the size of the bank that would be created by such a merger. —AFP

Lebanon banking chief maintains innocence in probe

BEIRUT: Lebanese central bank governor Riad Salameh maintained his innocence Friday following a second and final day of questioning in Beirut before European investigators in a probe into his personal wealth. Salameh, 72, is part of the Lebanese political class widely blamed for a crushing economic crisis that began in late 2019 and which the World Bank has dubbed one of the worst in recent history.

He faces allegations of crimes including embezzlement in separate probes in Lebanon and abroad, with investigators examining the fortune he has amassed during

Wall Street giants move to rescue First Republic Bank

WASHINGTON: America's largest banks moved to shore up First Republic, easing fears that the regional lender could be the next domino to fall after collapses including Silicon Valley Bank. A consortium of 11 US private banks, including Bank of America, Citigroup and JPMorgan Chase, announced they would deposit \$30 billion into First Republic.

The move marks a dramatic initiative by the lenders to bolster the system following failures of three mid-sized lenders in the last week. "This action by America's largest banks reflects their confidence in First Republic and in banks of all sizes," the group said in a joint statement.

"Together, we are deploying our financial strength and liquidity into the larger system, where it is needed the most," the banks said. Shares of First Republic reversed earlier losses to close 10 percent higher on Wall Street Thursday. "This show of support by a group of large banks is most welcome, and demonstrates the resilience of the banking system," said leaders of the Treasury Department, US Federal Reserve, Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation and Office of the Comptroller of the Currency in a joint statement.

'Vote of confidence'

Bank of America, Citigroup, JPMorgan Chase and Wells Fargo each are making a \$5 billion uninsured deposit in First Republic, while Goldman and Morgan Stanley will put in \$2.5 billion each. A group of five other lenders,

three decades in the job. Following a three-hour session Friday, Salameh released a statement saying he appeared as a witness and "not as a suspect or facing charges". "Funds from the Lebanese central bank were not transferred to my account," he said in a statement, adding: "The transfers I made abroad, whatever the amount, were from my personal account." The European investigators, including representatives of authorities in France, Germany and Luxembourg, are looking into allegations of financial misconduct, including possible money laundering and embezzlement.

Salameh "answered all the questions" and "pledged to provide all the documents tracing the sources of his wealth" as well as the addresses of people mentioned in the questioning sessions, a judicial official told AFP. Members of the European delegation plan to return to Beirut in April to question Salameh's brother Raja and former assistant Marianne Hoayek, the official said on condition of anonymity as he was not allowed to discuss matter with the press.

including PNC Bank and US Bank, are each allotting \$1 billion. In a statement, First Republic founder Jim Herbert and CEO Mike Roffler said the "collective support strengthens our liquidity position... and is a vote of confidence for First Republic and the entire US banking system."

The action comes on the heels of emergency measures taken late Sunday by the Federal Reserve and other US regulators to assure all depositors of two failed banks, Silicon Valley Bank and Signature Bank.

On Thursday, the Fed said it has lent US banks close to \$12 billion under a new one-year lending program unveiled Sunday as authorities moved to ease stress on the financial system. The total outstanding amount of all advances under the Bank Term Funding Program reached \$11.9 billion by Wednesday, the central bank said.

In its earlier statement, the Fed said it was making additional funding available "to help assure banks have the ability to meet the needs of all their depositors." Data made available Thursday showed the vastness of the emergency assistance, with the Fed drawing an additional \$152 billion in short-term borrowing for banks from its standing loan window, a dramatic increase against the roughly \$5 billion from the previous week. With the seizure of SVB and Signature, an additional \$142.8 billion was poured into the bridge banks created by regulators for the two collapsed banks, pushing the Fed's balance sheet up by about \$300 billion in the past week.

Last Friday's SVB failure has sparked concerns about a contagion effect, with especially keen worries that more banks could suffer a run by depositors. The crisis has also spread to Europe, with the Swiss central bank intervening to support Credit Suisse after it came under pressure.

'Elevated' outflow risk

Founded in 1985, First Republic is the 14th largest US bank by assets, with \$212 billion at the end of 2022. The lender headquartered in San Francisco is also present on

198 questions

Thursday's questioning session at Beirut's heavily guarded justice palace, which lasted more than five hours, was the first time Salameh had appeared as part of the European probe. The hearing had been scheduled to begin on Wednesday but Salameh failed to show up, claiming it was in "conflict with national sovereignty", an argument the judiciary rejected. For procedural reasons, the European investigators submitted their questions to a Lebanese judge, who was then responsible for putting them to Salameh in their presence, a judicial source previously told AFP.

Salameh had answered 198 questions during the two sessions, the first judicial official said, mostly about the central bank's ties to Forry Associates Ltd, a British Virgin Islands-registered company that listed Salameh's brother as its beneficiary. Forry is suspected of having brokered Lebanese treasury bonds and Eurobonds at a commission, which was then allegedly transferred to bank



the East Coast including in New York and Florida, as well as in western states such as Washington.

But the majority of the bank's "affluent" client base is concentrated in coastal urban areas, Morningstar analyst Eric Compton wrote in a recent note to clients. The bank is known for private banking and wealth management. As a result of its clientele, it has a large percentage of uninsured deposits that has kept it under scrutiny after the failures of SVB and Signature.

Last week also saw the closure of crypto banking titan Silvergate, in the face of market turmoil and regulatory pressure. Although First Republic's customers come from a wide range of sectors, there have been concerns that many of them might look to flee to the relative safety of big, well-capitalized Wall Street banks in light of the on-going turbulence in financial markets.

According to S&P Global Ratings, 68 percent of the bank's accounts hold deposits of more than \$250,000, the level automatically guaranteed by US regulators. Wall Street stocks finished solidly higher following the 11 banks' announcement. —AFP

accounts abroad. Salameh denied that any central bank funds had gone to the company. He decried "ill intentions" against him and blamed an "ongoing media campaign" for his legal woes.

In January, the European investigators interviewed banking officials in Beirut about the transfer of funds to countries where Salameh has significant assets. During this week's sessions, Salameh was also questioned about "the huge funds and real estate he owns in Lebanon and abroad," the official said.

France, Germany and Luxembourg seized assets worth 120 million euros (\$130 million) in March 2022 in a move linked to a French probe into Salameh's personal wealth. The three-decade bank governor has repeatedly denied any wrongdoing and has rarely appeared before investigating judges, despite numerous complaints and summonses. Last month, Lebanese authorities charged Salameh with embezzlement, money laundering and tax evasion as part of their own investigation. —AFP

Business



Gulf Bank Chairman
Jasem Mustafa Boodai

- Our results of 2022 demonstrate excellent strategic progression with Gulf Bank delivering strong net profit, sustained by our growth momentum in our core businesses
- We reap the fruits of our strategy by maintaining our focus locally and dealing with the changing needs of our customers



Gulf Bank Deputy CEO and Acting
CEO Waleed Khaled Mandani

- Gulf Bank's net profit up 47% to KD 61.8 million for year-end 2022
- Asset quality, the non-performing loans (NPL) ratio stood at 1.1% with non-performing loans coverage ratio of 504%

Gulf Bank approves distributing cash dividends of 10 fils per share for 2022

Bank to distribute 5% bonus shares • General Assembly held with 76.79 quorum

KUWAIT: Gulf Bank concluded its Ordinary Annual General Meeting (AGM) No 64, and Extraordinary General Meeting (EGM) No 41, held at the bank headquarters, Mubarak Al-Kabir Street - Kuwait on March 18, 2023, with a 76.79 quorum. Electronic voting was conducted during the general assembly for the first time.

Gulf Bank's Chairman Jasem Mustafa Boodai commenced the meeting by welcoming the shareholders and highlighting the bank's major business and strategic accomplishments throughout 2022. He added: "The bank's 2022 results demonstrate excellent strategic progress with Gulf Bank delivering strong net profit, sustained by the growth momentum in our core businesses. We are reaping the benefits of our strategy to stay locally focused and addressing the changing needs of our customers through digital innovation, continued investment in differentiated customer solutions and human capital. We made tremendous strides towards our key strategic priorities centered around digital transformation initiatives to improve the customer experience, accelerate development and further drive operational efficiencies. We are aiming to generate strong and sustainable long-term value to all our stakeholders."



KUWAIT: Gulf Bank holds its Annual General Meeting (AGM) on Saturday.

- We made tremendous strides towards our key strategic priorities centered around digital transformation initiatives to improve the customer experience

- Kuwait's economy has shown resilience and positive indications despite global market challenges and uncertainty

- Gross customer loans reached KD 5.2 billion. Up KD 319 million or 7% compared to 2021

- Total credit provisions exceeded the requirements of IFRS 9, reaching KD 124 million

- The bank's regulatory capital ratios remained comfortable, with a capital adequacy ratio (CAR) of 16.4%

loans coverage ratio of 504 percent including total provisions and collaterals. The bank ended the year 2022 with a total credit provision at KD 313 million whereas IFRS 9 accounting requirements (i.e., ECL or expected credit losses) were KD 190 million, resulting in a very healthy excess provisioning level of KD 124 million."

Waleed added: "The bank's regulatory capital ratios remained comfortable as the Tier 1 ratio of 14.2 percent was 3.7 percent above our regulatory minimum of 10.5 percent and the Capital Adequacy Ratio (CAR) of 16.4 percent was 3.9 percent above our regulatory minimum of 12.5 percent."

On the credit worthiness front, Waleed indicated that Gulf Bank continues to be well recognized in terms of its creditworthiness and financial strength internationally. During the year 2022, Fitch Ratings has upgraded Gulf Bank's Viability Rating to 'bbb-' from 'bbb+' and affirmed the Bank's Long-Term Issuer Default Rating at 'A' with a Stable Outlook. In addition to Fitch Ratings' Viability Rating upgrade and affirmation of Gulf Bank's Long-Term Issuer Default Rating at 'A' with a 'Stable' Outlook, the Bank has a Long-term Foreign Currency Rating of 'A+' with a 'Stable' Outlook by Capital Intelligence Ratings and a Long-Term Deposits rating of 'A3' with a 'Stable' Outlook by Moody's Investor Services during the year 2022.

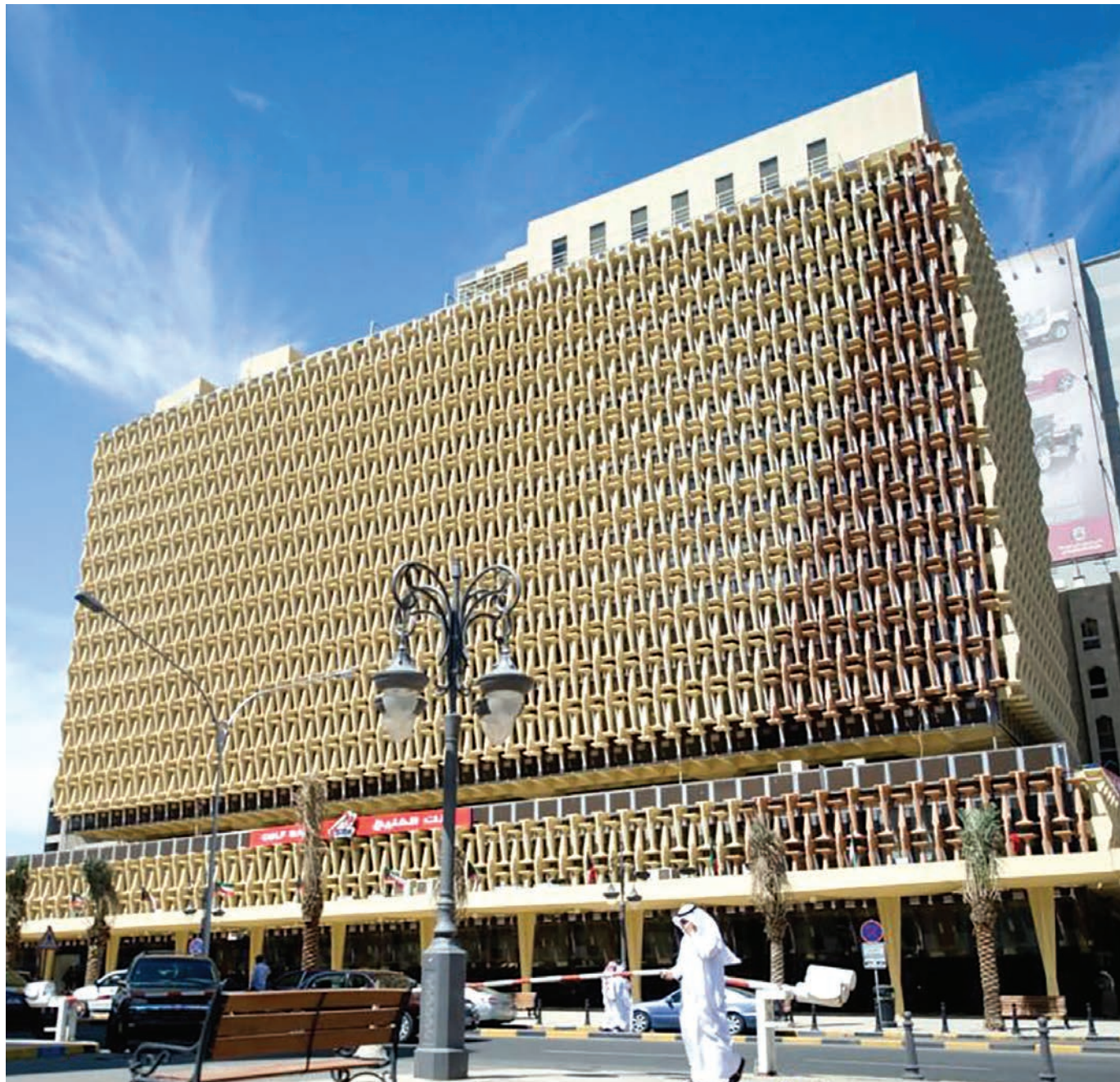
AGM and EGM shareholders approval

After Waleed's presentation, Gulf Bank's Chairman, Jasem Mustafa Boodai went through the rest of the AGM agenda items, including the approval of Gulf Bank's financial statement as on 31 December 2022 and the Board of Directors recommendation to distribute cash dividends of 10 fils per share and 5 percent bonus shares for shareholders representing a 51 percent cash payout ratio. These distributions are entitled to shareholders registered in the bank's shareholders' records; with the due date set for April 13, 2023. The shareholders approved all the AGM agenda items.

Subsequently, Gulf Bank held its Extraordinary General Assembly Meeting No 41 to approve increasing the bank issued and paid-up capital from KD 320,053,429.200 to KD 336,056,100.600 and amend related Articles 2 and 4 of the bank's Memorandum of Association and 2 and 5 of the bank's Articles of Association accordingly. The shareholders approved all of the Extraordinary General Assembly agenda items.

Acknowledgments

Ending his statement, Boodai added: "On behalf of the Board of Directors, I would like to express my appreciation to the Central Bank of Kuwait and the Capital Markets Authority for their dedicated efforts in supporting and promoting Kuwait's banking sector. I would also like to express my deep appreciation to all our customers, partners, and shareholders for their support throughout 2022, and to our board members, management, and employees for contributing to the bank's journey of success."



Boodai noted: "That the economy continued to show resilience and positive signals during the year 2022, despite a challenging global market and an uncertain global economic outlook. These challenges included high inflation levels, tighter monetary policy, and amongst others. However, the local economy remained stable, supported by good oil prices, recovery of economic activity, specifically in the private sector, and ongoing structural reforms."

Growth indicators

Following Boodai's opening remarks, Gulf Bank's Deputy CEO and Acting CEO Waleed Khaled Mandani presented the Bank major key financial highlights of Gulf Bank's performance during 2022. Waleed stated "Gulf Bank delivered a good set of results during 2022, with net profit reaching KD 61.8 million, an increase of 47 percent from last year, reflecting the strong underlying performance of the Bank's core businesses. Loans and advances to customers on the other hand, reached KD 5.2 billion - an increase of KD 319 million or 7 percent, in comparison to the end of 2021. This growth in 2022 came from both the bank's corporate and consumer segments." Waleed continued: "The non-performing loan ratio for the year end 2022 was 1.1 percent, with a strong non-performing

Lifestyle | Features



Serengeti's lion king dies at 12

A majestic lion famed for its amber eyes and thick golden mane has died in a battle for territory in Tanzania's Serengeti National Park, wildlife officials said Thursday. Twelve-year-old Bob Junior was mauled to death by younger rivals last week, Tanzania National Parks Authority spokesperson Catherine Mbene told AFP. "It is common for animals to fight for territory at a certain age, especially lions," Mbene said. "Bob Junior was killed in the fight."

Often called the King of the Serengeti, the lion was an easy spot among tourists and tour operators because of its thick mane—a trait inherited from father Bob. The patriarch's nickname was inspired by the dreadlocks of Jamaican reggae star Bob

Marley. Mbene said the authority was treating Bob Jr's death as natural.

"In pure conservation, we don't alter anything, and that's why we could not shift the ageing lion to a sanctuary or other protected place." African lions typically have a lifespan of up to 18 years in the wild, according to conservation group Cats for Africa.

Serengeti in northern Tanzania is estimated to have between 3,000 and 3,500 lions, according to wildlife officials. But the big cats are under growing pressure as human population expands into ancient migration and hunting grounds. In 2020, Tanzania relocated 36 lions from the Serengeti after attacks on humans and cattle. — AFP

In US, 'tip fatigue' raises questions about sacrosanct habit

To tip, or not to tip? That is the question many Americans are grappling with in a country where the tip is king—but even at a grocery store? Or for a bunch of flowers? "Either way, you feel guilty," said Matt Schottland, 41, in downtown Washington, a salad and a fruit juice in hand. In the United States, tipping is not a matter of debate in restaurants. A gratuity of around 15 to 20 percent of the value of a meal is a must, as it often makes up the bulk of the waiter's salary. But for a sandwich to go? For Schottland, outside of restaurants, the answer is generally no. Unless the employees are "super nice", or he is feeling particularly generous.

But no solution is perfect. If he tips, he may feel "guilty in some way or annoyed or resentful" for spending more money. And if he doesn't leave anything, he feels "guilty" toward the employees. "It's not a great system," he sighs. The dilemma is relatively new. Tipping is spreading into more and more walks of life, making bills heftier in businesses where it was never expected before.

In response, experts warn of the risk of "tip fatigue," a scenario in which Americans, overworked and hit by inflation, will no longer know where to tip, or how much. And that phenomenon is in turn likely to open up debate on the increasingly criticized system of remuneration in the hospitality industry.



Tip options are displayed on a credit card reader at a store in Washington, DC. — AFP

'Guilt'

According to Dipayan Biswas, professor of marketing at the University of South Florida, this expansion is largely due to "digital kiosks," the electronic checkouts that have become ubiquitous in recent years. On these screens, on which customers pay their bill, companies can add a lot of options, including tips. In order not to cough up, the customer must deliberately click on the "no tip" button. "That makes a lot of people uncomfortable. They don't want to do that," says Biswas. "Companies utilize the guilt factor." The strategy works on Hannah Koban, 30, who admits she does "tip a lot more than I used to." The continual request for a gratuity for the server "does feel like a little bit more pressure," says the lawyer.

And digital kiosks sometimes suggest amounts of up to 30 percent of the total, well beyond the usual rate. As a result, "trying to figure out like, when to tip, when not to tip, what is the appropriate tip, is it like always 20 percent now? I don't know. And so I feel like I'm googling constantly when I should be tipping," said Koban.

She may smile at the whole thing, but she said she has "friends who are quite upset." Biswas fears that if Americans feel they have to tip everyone, there will be less for those who really need it the most, like restaurant waiting staff.

For Saru Jayaraman, president of the One Fair Wage association, which defends a "fair" salary for waiters, to speak of tip fatigue is "missing the point." "If we're sick of continuously tipping, then join the movement to end the subminimum wage for tipped workers," she advised. The pandemic, by reducing the number of times people were eating out, exposed the fragility of the remuneration system for waiters, in which their bosses pay less than the legal minimum wage.

While Americans have since then returned to restaurants, the sector-known for its stressful working conditions—is still struggling to recruit. The industry is undergoing "a revolution" because its employees are "resigning en masse," said Jayaraman. — AFP

Rap battle: Young Tunisians fight stigma with the arts

"We're sick of being seen as thugs," said Mohamed Ali Ayari, a rapper from a down-at-heel Tunis district, where jobless youth are finding a voice through music, cinema and photography. The Tunisian capital's working-class districts have suffered from decades of state neglect and poor services, and residents say the stigma attached to their neighborhoods shuts them out of the job market. "This contempt and these prejudices really complicate our lives," said Ayari, a resident of the overcrowded Douar Hicher suburb.



Mariem Chourabi poses for a picture in Fouchana near Tunis.

suffer it," said Houcem Ayari of International Alert. "We decided to channel that into cultural activities."

In a drab building in Douar Hicher, rapper Ayari sits in a tiny room converted into a studio and records his latest track, with backing vocals from neighborhood friends. Ayari and his friends agreed a lack of cultural spaces makes it easy for people to be dragged into crime.

'Therapy against depression'

Wassim Tayachi, 22, said he and his friends "chose music to talk about ourselves and our lives, the lost youth and



Mohamed Ali Ayari, a rapper from a down-at-heel Tunis district, listens to headphones at a recording studio in Douar Hicher.

The 23-year-old works as a security guard, but his dream is to become a famous rap artist. "I want to come out into the light," he raps in a recent video clip, produced with the help of peace-building charity International Alert.

Ayari was among the winners of a recent competition by International Alert, asking young people from four neglected Tunis districts to express themselves through music, documentary or photography, focusing on the theme of violence. "People... experience violence on a daily basis—some practice it and others

those of us who want to succeed, the police who attack us verbally and physically, the state that neglects us and society that stigmatizes us." He said coming from poorer neighborhoods makes it harder to find a job or get official paperwork. "A state that doesn't listen to its young people can't give them anything," Tayachi added.

Ayari said he wants to become a successful rapper. But he doubts he can achieve his dreams in the North African nation, where a long-running socio-economic crisis has pushed many young



Mohamed Ali Ayari (center), a rapper from a down-at-heel Tunis district, stands at a recording studio in Douar Hicher. — AFP photos

people to try to reach Europe—including on dangerous and overcrowded inflatable boats across the Mediterranean.

Meanwhile, he said he uses rap as "therapy against depression and illegal temptations". Another winner of the competition was a documentary depicting social and economic injustice, sexual harassment, shabby public transport and school absenteeism in the district of Fouchana.

They are issues close to the heart of Mariem Chourabi, who has qualified as a tax accountant and has set up a centre to give children extra education support—all by the age of 24. Many young people here "want to succeed more than others because their difficult circumstances push them harder", Chourabi said.

'Environmental violence'

Belhssan Jabri, a qualified civil engineer, won the photography category of

the competition. "We deserve not to be neglected," said the unemployed 26-year-old from the working-class district of Sidi Hassine. Jabri's work focuses on what he calls "environmental violence", showcasing public spaces near his home strewn with trash.

"These could be places for sports or cultural activities, or gardens, instead of being permanently cluttered with overflowing rubbish bins," he said. Jabri said those in power should find "real will" to change things for the better. "There are doctors, engineers, artists and many educated and qualified young people in our neighborhood," he said. "Stop focusing on the negative side and stigmatizing young people from working-class neighborhoods." — AFP

Rome's Pantheon to charge for tourist entry

One of Rome's oldest and best loved monuments, the Pantheon, will soon start charging for entrance, officials said Thursday—drawing a mixed reaction from tourists. The price for entry, which is currently free, has yet to be fixed but would not exceed five euros (\$5), while minors and Rome residents would be exempt. The change was "based on common sense", Culture Minister Gennaro Sangiuliano said, and the price "modest" for Italy's most visited cultural site.

The 2,000-year-old building is currently a consecrated church and part of the proceeds from ticket sales will go towards the diocese of Rome. Most of the money — 70 percent—will go to the culture ministry, which will bear the costs of cleaning and maintenance. Among the tourists visiting the Pantheon on Thursday, reaction to the news was mixed. "It makes sense. Conservation

requires money, and it doesn't shock me to make tourists contribute," said Gustavo Rojas, a 37-year-old from Chile.

'Open to everyone'

Alessandra Mezzasalma, a 46-year-old Italian tour guide, however, told AFP, it was "shameful". "The Pantheon, and historical monuments in general, are collective assets and they should remain open to everyone. Culture must be as inclusive as possible," she said. "If I had to pay, we wouldn't have gone in," said French tourist Clara Dupond, 21. The other major churches in Rome, including St Peter's Basilica, are free to visit, but museums and monuments such as the Colosseum are ticketed.

One of the best-preserved relics of ancient Rome, the Pantheon is famed for its extraordinary dome, which measures 43 metres (140 feet) in diameter and includes a circular opening through which light and occasionally rain fall. It was built as a temple in the first century BC before being radically rebuilt under Emperor Hadrian at the start of the second century AD. After falling into neglect, it was given a new life after being consecrated as a church in the seventh century under Pope Boniface IV. — AFP



This aerial file photo shows the Pantheon monument in Rome.



In these file photos people attend the inauguration of the new lighting of the Pantheon in central Rome. — AFP photos



Lifestyle | Features

‘The Wire’ star Lance Reddick dies at 60



In this file photo US actor Lance Reddick arrives for the Los Angeles premiere of “Angel Has Fallen” at the Regency Village theatre in Westwood, California. — AFP

Actor Lance Reddick who played steely Baltimore police lieutenant Cedric Daniels in hit TV show “The Wire” has died, his publicist said Friday. He was 60. Reddick, who also appeared in the “John Wick” series of films opposite Keanu Reeves, was found dead at his home in the Studio City area of Los Angeles, trade title TMZ reported. “Acclaimed actor Lance Reddick passed away suddenly this morning from natural causes,” publicist Mia Hansen told AFP. “Lance will be greatly missed.”

Reddick rose to prominence in 2000 on the HBO prison drama “Oz” in which he played an undercover detective battling the drugs trade, but who soon gets drawn into addiction. But it was for his

role on “The Wire” that he became best known. The HBO show, which ran for five seasons, followed a narcotics division pitting their wits against the city’s powerful drug gangs.

With its complex writing and gritty casting, “The Wire” is often cited as one of the best ever TV shows. It made household names of several of its stars, including Dominic West, Idris Elba, Wendell Pierce, Michael B. Jordan and the late Michael Kenneth Williams, who delivered one of the most singular performances in recent screen history as Omar Little. After “The Wire,” Reddick was cast in “John Wick” as Charon, a concierge at a New York hotel who worked alongside Reeves’ hitman.

Reeves and “John Wick” director Chad Stahelski told Variety they were mourning the loss of the cast member. “We are deeply saddened and heartbroken at the loss of our beloved friend and colleague,” a statement said. “He was the consummate professional and a joy to work with.” Fellow “The Wire” star Pierce paid tribute on Twitter to “a man of great strength and grace. The epitome of class.” Reddick’s death was a “sudden unexpected sharp painful grief for our artistic family. An unimaginable suffering for his personal family and loved ones. Godspeed my friend. You made your mark here. RIP.”

Horror writer Stephen King tweeted that he had been halfway through re-

watching “The Wire.” “Wonderful actor; wonderful man. This is sad news,” he wrote. Performer Ben Stiller praised a “beautiful and compelling actor,” recalling how Reddick had worked with his mother, Anne Meara, in a play. “He was exquisite in that and all he did,” he tweeted.

HBO’s corporate account wrote Reddick was “held in the highest regard by all who knew and worked with him and we are proud to be part of his legacy. He will be missed dearly.” Reddick is survived by his wife Stephanie Reddick, and children Yvonne Nicole Reddick and Christopher Reddick, his publicist said. — AFP

‘Dallas’ star Patrick Duffy joins St Patrick’s Day celebrations in Ireland

Thousands of people including “Dallas” star Patrick Duffy turned Dublin into a sea of green Friday for the annual St Patrick’s Day parade, as Irish Prime Minister Leo Varadkar visited Washington. The US actor, whose great-grandfather emigrated to the United States in the 1920s, helped kick off the festivities by blowing out the candles on a large green cake to mark his 74th birthday.



International guest, US actor Patrick Duffy, at the head of the parade, waves to the crowds at the annual St Patrick’s Day parade in Dublin. — AFP photos



A participant poses for a photograph while attending the annual St Patrick’s Day parade in Dublin.

“The beauty of my feeling of being in this parade is the coming together of the heritage that I have, that I’m discovering on a daily basis by being here,” said Duffy, who is this year’s international guest of honor. “Return is the key word that people feel when they come to Ireland, the sense is that you’re returning somewhere,” he told reporters.



Performers take part in the annual St Patrick’s Day parade in Dublin.

In Washington, Varadkar was due to meet US President Joe Biden for lunch later as part of his annual Washington visit to mark the Irish patron saint’s day. Biden is fiercely proud of his Irish roots. Earlier Friday, Varadkar and his partner Matthew Barrett enjoyed a St Patrick’s Day breakfast event hosted by Vice President Kamala Harris.

In addition to the Dublin parade, celebrations were due to take part across Ireland’s towns and cities. The Dublin parade featuring the traditional marching bands and pageants will only be the second since an enforced hiatus due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As well as locals, the event is a major draw for international visitors, many of whom

have Irish ancestry. At the Cheltenham Festival—an annual event for Irish horseracing fans, spectators got into the spirit, donning green outfits and shamrock sunglasses. St Patrick is also a patron saint in Nigeria—home to a stronger version of Ireland’s famous Guinness stout. In southern England, heir to the British throne Prince William

and his wife Catherine marked the day by meeting members of the Irish Guards, a regiment of the British army. Catherine, also known as the princess of Wales, took over Friday as the honorary colonel of the Irish Guards, replacing her husband. — AFP



An actor dressed as St Patrick works the crowd as revelers attend the annual St Patrick’s Day parade in Dublin.



Revelers pose for a photograph while attending the annual St Patrick’s Day parade in Dublin.

Actor Sam Neill reveals blood cancer diagnosis

Actor Sam Neill has revealed he is being treated for stage-three blood cancer, writing in a memoir that he was “possibly dying” from the illness diagnosed a year ago. The New Zealander, who burst to fame after starring as Dr Alan Grant in the 1993 blockbuster “Jurassic Park”, said he began treatment last March for non-Hodgkin lymphoma. Neill, 75, makes the revelation in his book “Did I Ever Tell You This?”, which is being released next week.

In the opening chapter, written while undergoing chemotherapy, Neill said: “The thing is, I’m crook. Possibly dying. I may have to speed this up.” The actor told The Guardian he is now in remission but will continue to undergo chemotherapy for the remainder of his life.

“I can’t pretend that the last year hasn’t had its dark moments,” he said. “But those dark moments throw the light into sharp relief, you know, and have made me grateful for every day and immensely grateful for all my friends. Just pleased to be alive.”

Neill’s vast acting career began in the 1970s and has spanned dozens of roles in TV and film, including “Peaky Blinders”, “The Hunt for Red October”, and “The Piano”. He is currently preparing for a role in a television adaptation of Liane Moriarty’s bestselling novel “Apples Never Fall”, which will be filmed in Australia. When he’s not acting, Neill also runs vineyards in the picturesque Central Otago region of New Zealand’s South Island. —AFP



In this file photo actor Sam Neill arrives for the premiere of “Blackbird” during the Toronto International Film Festival in Toronto, Ontario. — AFP

Paris’ Moulin Rouge promises to scrap troubled snake act

Paris’ storied Moulin Rouge cabaret venue said Thursday it would stop immersing non-aquatic snakes in water after the controversial stage act provoked outcry from animal rights activists. The institution’s daily show features a sequence with a dancer playing alongside pythons in a see-through pool.

The cabaret, founded in 1889, has now bowed to pressure from Paris officials and campaigners who said it was cruel to submerge terrestrial snakes. Animal rights advocates said they had seen the snakes trying to keep their heads above water in the vexed segment. The two species used in the act, Southeast Asian reticulated and Indian pythons, are protected and live on land, officials from the French capital’s mayoral office told the venue in a letter.

“They may be strong swimmers, but the staging does not take into account the species’ natural behavior,” the notice said. The Moulin Rouge did not give an

end date for the show and said it had to give “reasonable notice” to performers. “Aware of societal developments on animal welfare, the Moulin Rouge will stop this number,” the venue said, adding that respect for animals had “always been essential” to its operation.

Heated campaign

The move follows a heated campaign with petitions and demonstrations. “The snakes have no business being there,” Amandine Sanvisens, co-founder of the PAZ animal rights group, previously said. “This isn’t the right

environment for reptiles”. Last year the cabaret told Le Parisien newspaper: “We have never mistreated and will never mistreat animals.”

It claimed it used “a species of aquatic python, equally at home in the water as on land” in the show. But Alice Georges, a keeper at exotic pet shop Ferme Tropicale de Paris, said she had spotted reticulated and Indian pythons in videos of the act posted online. “These aren’t aquatic snakes. What they’re being forced to endure is horrible,” she said. —AFP



Sports

Embiid dominant as Sixers cruise to 7th straight win

Philadelphia 76ers thrash Charlotte Hornets 121-82

News in Brief

Kuwait Jet Ski Championships

KUWAIT: The third and final round of Kuwait Jet Ski Championship (Drag Race 2023), organized by the jet ski committee at Kuwait Sea Club, at Sabah Al-Ahmad Sea City in Khairan, has concluded. In the open competition, the racer Mohammad Al-Baz came first, followed by Mohammad Burabee and Suleiman Busakhr (third). Burabee came first in the stock category; second was Ibrahim Al-Kharraz and third Abdullah AlGabandi. In the super stock competition, Fahad Al-Khelfan was the number-one champion, followed in second rank by Zaid Taher, while Abdulaziz Zainel came third. Khaled Al-Fodari the club secretary, told KUNA, that the competitions were quite close and involved 39 jet skiers. — KUNA

Kuwait Club crowned champion

KUWAIT: Kuwait Club has been crowned champion of the 39th edition of the Gulf Clubs Men's Handball Championship beating the Bahraini team Al-Najma 27-29 in the final match of the tournament that ended in Manama on Friday. The two teams maintained a draw throughout the match until the last moments when the Kuwaiti strikers achieved the victory with a couple of goals with remarkable performance by the goalkeeper, Ali Safar. The UAE team came third beating the Qatari team, Al-Arabi, 28-32. — KUNA

Kuwait SC secure second place

AMMAN: Kuwait SC secured the second position following a 3-0 defeat against Qatar's Al-Rayyan in the final match of the West Asian Volleyball competition held in the Jordanian capital, Amman. Scoring sets at 25-22, 25-20, and 25-22 placed Al-Rayyan in first place, trailed by Kuwait SC and Police SC (Qatar) in third. Vice Chairman of Kuwait SC, Bader Al-Osaimi told KUNA that this is consider a great achievement for the volleyball team and the first of its scale, especially taking into consideration the strenuous conditions the team faced with three consecutive matches leading to the final. Kuwait SC athlete Abdullah Hussain also said, "we did our best to achieve for Kuwaiti volleyball, but weren't successful in the final due to the exhaustion." Just yesterday, Thursday, Kuwait SC coddled in a five games match against Dar Kulalb of Bahrain, following another five games against Jordan's Hussein Youth Club the day before putting a toll on players going into the final. — KUNA

Speedy Alonso cautious

JEDDAH: Fernando Alonso put in another speedy showing for Aston Martin in Friday's practice in Jeddah but cautioned he had no idea where he would end up on the Saudi Arabian Grand Prix grid. The 41-year-old Spaniard, whose thrilling charge to claim his 99th career podium lit up the season-opening Bahrain Grand Prix, said the team had made a good start, but was wary that Friday form is not a reliable indicator for Saturday. Alonso was second behind defending double world champion Max Verstappen of Red Bull in second practice, splitting the two Red Bulls at the high-speed Jeddah Street Circuit. Sergio Perez was third. "We were P1 on Friday in Bahrain and then maybe fifth or sixth in qualifying," he explained. "So, you don't know. You never know until you get to qualifying on Saturday." — AFP

Mexico book Classic semis

MIAMI: Mexico staged a dramatic comeback to stun Puerto Rico 5-4 on Friday and set up a semifinal showdown with Japan at the World Baseball Classic. In-form Puerto Rico stormed into a 4-0 lead in the first inning after tormenting Mexico's starting pitcher Julio Urias with some ruthless hitting at Miami's LoanDepot Park. Emmanuel Rivera's sacrifice fly scored Enrique Hernandez to put Puerto Rico 1-0 ahead before Javy Baez and Eddie Rosario launched back-to-back two-out homers to stretch the lead to 4-0. But Urias settled down to quell the Puerto Rico bats thereafter and Mexico chipped away at the deficit before finally edging ahead in the bottom of the seventh. — AFP

Schenk grabs Valspar lead

MIAMI: Adam Schenk, playing for a 10th consecutive week, fired a two-under-par 69 to grab a one-stroke lead after Friday's second round of the PGA Valspar Championship. The 31-year-old American, who shared the 18-hole lead, was on seven-under 135 after 36 holes at Innisbrook's Copperhead course in Palm Harbor, Florida. "It really couldn't have been a ton better with the amount of putts I made," Schenk said. "We're doing a really good job managing the courses." Countryman Kramer Hickok, chasing his first PGA crown like Schenk, was second on 136 after a second 68 in windy conditions. — AFP

LOS ANGELES: Joel Embiid maintained his dominant scoring streak as the Philadelphia 76ers extended their winning streak to seven games with a 121-82 thrashing of the Charlotte Hornets on Friday. Embiid, one of the front-runners for the NBA's Most Valuable Player award, rattled in another 38 points during a one-sided road victory. The Sixers star is averaging 35 points a game in March and has not scored fewer than 31 in eight games this month.

Embiid's latest tally came on 16-of-21 shooting, with 13 rebounds and five assists. "Home or road, it doesn't matter," Embiid said afterward. "We know what it takes offensively and defensively, everybody doing their job... tonight we did it as a team." James Harden had a rare off-night with only 11 points after shooting 4-of-15 from the field, but the Sixers still had far too much firepower and defensive savvy for a Charlotte team that is second from the bottom of the Eastern Conference. Tobias Harris added 18 points while Tyrese Maxey chipped in with 13. Despite the one-sided nature of the win, Sixers coach Doc Rivers was pleased that his team emerged with a clean bill of health.

"It's just good to get the game

over with and be healthy," said Rivers, who also took satisfaction from the Sixers' ruthless performance. "It just shows that we are focused, and we are showing up and playing," he said. "There is no guarantee each night how you're going to play, but there is a guarantee how you can show up - and we're showing up every night." Philadelphia improved to 47-22 with the win and are third in the East, behind leaders Milwaukee (50-20) and Boston (49-22).

Boston revival

Boston's revival continued with a 126-112 win on the road over the Portland Trail Blazers. Jayson Tatum led the Celtics with 34 points, while Jaylen Brown added 27. Damian Lillard poured in 41 points in Portland's losing effort. In other games Friday, Maxi Kleber nailed a 27-foot buzzer-beater as the Dallas Mavericks put a dent in the Los Angeles Lakers' postseason charge to snatch a sensational 111-110 road victory. Kyrie Irving scored 38 points - and provided the late assist for Kleber - to set up a thrilling win for Dallas. Irving's tally included 13 in the fourth quarter as Dallas overturned a late five-point deficit to claim the win.

The defeat dropped the Lakers to



PORTLAND: Marcus Smart #36 of the Boston Celtics and Damian Lillard #0 of the Portland Trail Blazers go after a loose ball during the fourth quarter at the Moda Center on March 17, 2023. — AFP

10th in the Western Conference with a 34-37 record. Dallas meanwhile moved up to the sixth spot. Elsewhere Friday, Golden State's poor road form continued with a 127-119 defeat at Atlanta, with Trae Young leading the Hawks' scoring with 25 points. With

the Warriors missing the defensive presence of the suspended Draymond Green, the reigning NBA champions dropped their 10th straight game on the road. The Warriors are now 36-35 overall and sixth in a congested Western Conference table. — AFP

Rybakina topples Swiatek to book Indian Wells final

INDIAN WELLS: Elena Rybakina again proved too much for world number one Iga Swiatek, denying the defending champion a return to the Indian Wells final with an emphatic 6-2, 6-2 semi-final victory on Friday. Moscow-born Kazakh Rybakina, the reigning Wimbledon champion who stunned top-seeded Swiatek in the fourth round of the Australian Open on the way to the final, will now get a chance to turn the tables on Aryna Sabalenka, who beat her in Melbourne to capture a first Grand Slam title.

World number two Sabalenka advanced with a 6-2, 6-3 victory over seventh-seeded Maria Sakkari of Greece. Rybakina, ranked 10th in the world, was all over Swiatek from the opening game, painting the lines with her punishing ground strokes and serving with pinpoint precision. Swiatek, winner of the French and US Opens last year in a campaign that included eight titles in all, simply had no answer and surrendered the first set with a double-fault on the first set point.

It was more of the same in the second as Rybakina raced to a 5-0 lead. Swiatek, who revealed after the match she was dealing with "discomfort" in her ribcage, finally managed a hold for 5-1, and pounced to break as Rybakina suddenly struggled with her first serve in the next game. Rybakina still managed to muster two match points at 40-15, but Swiatek saved

one with an overhead and another with a blistering return of a second serve, winning two more points to complete the break for 5-2.

But there would be no comeback. A mis-hit as Swiatek appeared to trip chasing a ball back to the baseline gave Rybakina another match point and she converted it with confidence. "I didn't expect that I was going to play that good today," admitted Rybakina, who battled through three sets to beat Czech Karolina Muchova in the quarter-finals. "Hopefully I'm going to play like this on Sunday," she added after denying Swiatek's bid to become the first woman since Martina Navratilova in 1990-91 to win back-to-back titles in the California desert.

Swiatek, who said she still expected to defend her title at the Miami Open that starts next week, was disappointed she couldn't execute her coach's ideas for stopping Rybakina. "We were thinking about the Australian Open more like we wanted to kind of learn a lesson from that match," she said. "I wanted to kind of use his tips and improve my game. But I wasn't able to do that today." Sabalenka had to battle back from a set down to beat Rybakina in the Australian Open final, and the Kazakh was optimistic she could avenge that defeat in the looming battle of reigning Grand Slam champions. "If I play like today, I think I have all the chances," she said.

Stadium Court slugfest

Sabalenka out-duelled Sakkari in a Stadium Court slugfest. Playing with supreme confidence, Sabalenka opened with a quick service hold that featured two aces and broke Sakkari for a 3-1 lead. Sakkari immediately broke back as Sabalen-



INDIAN WELLS: Kazakhstan's Elena Rybakina hits a backhand return to Poland's Iga Swiatek in their semifinal match at the 2023 WTA Indian Wells Open on March 17, 2023. — AFP

ka double-faulted on break point. But the Belarussian won the next five games to pocket the set and take a 2-0 lead in the second.

Sakkari, perhaps trying to do too much in the face of Sabalenka's powerful groundstrokes, made three forehand errors to give her triple set point. She saved two with a service winner and an ace but fired another forehand out of the court on the third. Sabalenka was rolling, breaking Sakkari again with a blistering backhand service return up the line for a 2-0 lead in the second. But she gave the break back with a sloppy service game and Sakkari held to level the set before Sabalenka steadied to win three straight games. — AFP

Crystal Palace fire Vieira after miserable run

LONDON: Crystal Palace sacked manager Patrick Vieira on Friday after a miserable run of one win in 14 Premier League games sucked them into a relegation battle. The London club, without a win in 2023 under the former Arsenal and France midfielder, are 12th in the table but are just three points above the drop zone. The bottom nine clubs are separated by just five points, cranking up the pressure as the season enters its final months.

The dismissal of the French World Cup winner takes the number of managerial sackings during the 2022/23 campaign to nine, one fewer than last season's total, which equaled the Premier League record. "It is with enormous regret that this difficult decision has been made," chairman Steve Parish said in a club statement.

"Ultimately, results in recent months have placed us in a precarious league position and we felt a change is necessary to give us the best chance of retaining Premier League status." Parish praised Vieira for making a "significant" impact at the club. Palace finished 12th last season and reached the FA Cup semi-finals. The club said in their statement that the process to appoint a new manager was under way. Three members of Vieira's coaching staff - Osian Roberts, Kristian Wilson and Said Aigoun-have also left Selhurst Park.

Vieira, 46, replaced Roy Hodgson before the start of the 2021/22 season and was praised for implementing an exciting brand of football. But this season they have scored just 21 goals in 27 games-only three clubs have scored fewer. Their 1-0 defeat by Brighton on Wednesday was their third loss in a row. Palace travel to leaders Arsenal on Sunday, with under-21s boss Paddy McCarthy taking charge. Vieira, who won three Premier League titles as a player with the Gunners, previously managed New York City and Nice. Parish told Sky Sports that the mood in the camp was good despite the team's miserable run. "You know, everybody loved Patrick, genuinely," he said. "The players had all the time in the world for him. You saw from the performances he never lost the players at all, they were all running and playing for him." — AFP



WELLINGTON: Sri Lanka's Kasun Rajitha (center) bowls past New Zealand's Tom Blundell (left) on day two of the second Test cricket match between New Zealand and Sri Lanka on March 18, 2023. — AFP

Williamson and Nicholls put NZ on top in Test

WELLINGTON: Aggressive double centuries for Kane Williamson and Henry Nicholls powered New Zealand's dominance in the second Test against Sri Lanka in Wellington on Saturday. The Black Caps declared their first innings at an imposing 580-4 before reducing Sri Lanka to 26-2 at stumps on day two, leaving the tourists with a very slim prospect of squaring the two-match series. The in-form Williamson scored 215 and Nicholls posted a career-best 200 not out, with the pair's third-wicket stand of 363 virtually batting Sri Lanka out of the contest.

Their partnership was the fifth-highest by any New Zealand combination and they became the country's first batters to reach 200 in the same innings. Sri Lankan captain Dimuth Karunaratne will resume on 16 on Sunday and nightwatchman Prabath Jayasuriya remains on four, with the deficit a daunting 554 runs. Sri Lanka's bowlers struggled to generate life on a flat Basin Reserve pitch, forcing Karunaratne to set defensive fields during much of the mammoth partnership.

Williamson and Nicholls batted at a lively clip from the outset, advancing quickly from a 155-2 overnight score and barely looking troubled as they unleashed an array of attacking strokes through the first two sessions. Williamson was impenetrable as he reached three figures for the third time in successive Tests, becoming the first New Zealander to pass 8,000 runs in the process. It was a sixth double-century for the 32-year-old-whose unbeaten 121 was pivotal in a final-ball first Test in Christchurch earlier this week.

Having resumed on 26, Williamson struck 23 fours and two sixes before holing out in the deep off spinner Jayasuriya as he tried to escalate the scoring rate. Nicholls marched on from his overnight 18 to reach three figures before pushing past his previous-best score of 174. His aggressive 240-ball knock, which featured four sixes, represented a remarkable return to form for the left-hander, whose place in the team was under pressure after failing to reach 40 in his 15 previous innings.

Nicholls said he was aware of criticism of his on-going selection but said he was made to feel comfortable by support from his teammates and coach Gary Stead. "Everyone in the group's been great and you really feel that support," he said. "For me, it was just about trusting that I had done it before. It hasn't happened as much as I'd like in the last period. "Now the challenge is doing it again knowing that the blueprint is there." — AFP

Sports

Ahly thrash Coton Sport, keep survival hopes alive

Kahraba scores a hat-trick

JOHANNESBURG: Mahmoud Kahraba scored a hat-trick as Al Ahly of Egypt triumphed 4-0 at Coton Sport of Cameroon on Friday to keep alive hopes of reaching the CAF Champions League quarter-finals. It was a must-win match for the record 10-time African champions and a scoring burst during each half in the northwestern city of Garoua secured maximum points in Group B. Despite the impressive victory, however, Ahly will be eliminated if Al Hilal of Sudan win at home to already qualified Mamelodi Sundowns of South Africa on Saturday in matchday five.

Sundowns have 10 points and Hilal nine from four matches and Ahly seven and Coton none from five outings with group winners and runners-up progressing. Should Hilal draw or lose, who accompanies Sundowns to the knockout phase will be decided on March

31 or April 1 when the Sudanese outfit are away to Ahly. Stunned by a 5-2 loss at Sundowns last weekend, Ahly made six changes for the match in central Africa, with Kahraba among those promoted.

He rewarded Swiss coach Marcel Koller by scoring twice within six minutes midway through the opening half, finishing crosses from Mohamed 'Afsha' Magdy and South African Percy Tau. Kahraba, his head bandaged after an early first half collision with Coton goalkeeper Gabin Allambatnan, completed his treble six minutes into the second half. Tau, outstanding as a wide attacker for the second successive weekend, completed the rout soon after by cutting in and scoring with a shot that beat Chad-ian Allambatnan at his near post.

Ahly were forced to change goalkeepers at half-time with Ali Lotfy replacing Mohamed el

Shenawy, who injured his left thigh just before the break. Elsewhere, Esperance of Tunisia and Chabab Belouizdad of Algeria secured quarter-finals places from Group D at the expense of Al Merrikh of Sudan and Zamalek of Egypt. Four-time champions Esperance drew 1-1 with Merrikh, who were forced to play in the Libyan city of Benghazi because their home ground in Omdurman is not up to international standards.

Mohamed Ali Ben Hammouda scored his third goal of the African campaign for Esperance midway through the first half and Brazilian Paulo Sergio leveled from a last-minute penalty. Belouizdad sealed a third straight last-eight appearance thanks to a 2-0 victory over five-time title-holders Zamalek in Algiers. Zakaria Draoui broke the deadlock with 15 minutes remaining and Cameroonian Leonel Wamba doubled the lead almost immediately. —AFP



Mahmoud Kahraba

Newcastle eye EPL's top four

NOTTINGHAM: Alexander Isak said Newcastle believe they will seal a place in next season's Champions League after the Swede scored twice, including a stoppage time penalty, to beat Nottingham Forest 2-1 on Friday. Victory lifts the Magpies to within one point of fourth-placed Tottenham and with a game in hand to come on Spurs.

"We believe and we know that we have it in our own hands and have a good chance," said Isak after Newcastle signed off the international break with back-to-back wins. "It is important we have gone into this break with a good feeling with two wins from two games."

Defeat was Forest's first at home in the league since September and leaves Steve Cooper's men still two points above the relegation zone. "It's always the worst way to lose, in the last couple of minutes, having fought in the game," said Cooper. "We made some poor football decisions around the build-up to the goals and that's something we can only blame ourselves for."



NOTTINGHAM: Nottingham Forest's French defender Moussa Niakhate (center) commits a handball offence, giving away a penalty during the English Premier League football match between Nottingham Forest and Newcastle United on March 17, 2023. —AFP

home side's rescue again when Sean Longstaff's deflected strike from the edge of the box came back off the woodwork. Newcastle finally got their reward in first half stoppage time when the club's record signing Isak acrobatically flicked in Joe Willock's cross off the post.

The pattern of play continued after the break as the Magpies laid siege to the Forest goal. Former Real Madrid and Paris Saint-Germain goalkeeper Keylor Navas had to be at his best to turn over powerful drives from Elliot Anderson and Bruno Guimaraes. Anderson then thought he had his first senior goal when he headed in Isak's cross at the back post. However, the goal was controversially

disallowed after a VAR check for offside against Longstaff in the build-up despite the ball breaking to the midfielder off a Forest player.

Just when Forest looked set to hold out for a precious point in their battle to beat the drop, Moussa Niakhate needlessly put his hand up to block Isak's tame header. The Swedish international's debut season in England has been blighted by injury, but he showed his class by keeping his head to slot past Navas and spark wild scenes of celebration among the away support. "It's a massive win and I thought we deserved it," said Howe. "To come back is always a great way to win and the character shown in the group is very pleasing." —AFP

Clasico clouded by Barcelona referee corruption charge

BARCELONA: Spain's Clasico is one of the world's biggest sporting occasions, pitting giants Barcelona and Real Madrid head-to-head, but the build-up to Sunday's La Liga clash has been overshadowed by "Caso Negreira". Barca have been charged with corruption by Spanish prosecutors for payments between 2001 and 2018 to the company of former refereeing chief Jose Maria Enriquez Negreira, totaling around 7.3 million euros (\$7.8 million).

The club say they were paying for reports and advice on refereeing but prosecutors have accused the club of seeking to gain favorable decision-making from officials. Charges were filed last week against Barcelona, former vice president of Spain's refereeing committee (CTA), Negreira, and two former Barcelona presidents, Sandro Rosell and Josep Maria Bartomeu, among others. Although La Liga leaders Barcelona can virtually clinch the title if they beat second-place Real Madrid on Sunday to move 12 points clear, headlines remain dominated by the Negreira case, with tensions rising around Spain. In the first round of fixtures after Barcelona were charged last weekend, at various stadiums there was a form of protest against the supposed corruption scandal. It was clearest in the Basque country, where Xavi Hernandez's side faced Athletic Bilbao on Sunday. Supporters threw mock money onto the pitch with "mafia" printed on it, along with Barcelona's club emblem.

"I was surprised at the hostile atmosphere towards Barca, it was sad to see," said Xavi after his team's narrow 1-0 win. "(Barca) are being judged prematurely, which I don't think is good for society." —AFP

Verstappen shrugs off stomach bug to top practice in Saudi

JEDDAH: Max Verstappen showed no ill effects from a stomach bug on Friday as he topped the times for Red Bull ahead of Fernando Alonso in Friday's second free practice at this weekend's Saudi Arabian Grand Prix. The defending double world champion, shaking off the stomach upset that had delayed his arrival in Jeddah by 24 hours, clocked a best lap in one minute 29.603 seconds to outpace two-time champion Alonso's Aston Martin by 0.208 seconds. Sergio Perez was third in the second Red Bull ahead of Esteban Ocon of Alpine, George Russell of Mercedes and Pierre Gasly in the second Alpine.

"I think we had a positive day, but I think there's still quite a few things we can improve," reported Verstappen. "It's just fine-tuning, with the downshifts. Things we do all the time," he added. Perez revealed he had suffered mechanical issues. "Hopefully, we can sort it out for tomorrow," he said. "And it will bring us more pace so I can have a better idea of where this car is. Today it was inconsistent, difficult to get a proper read. "We seem to be strong, but the competition is there as expected."

Alonso's Aston Martin team-mate Lance Stroll was seventh ahead of Nico Hulkenberg of Haas and

the two Ferraris of Charles Leclerc and Carlos Sainz, both of whom were equipped with new power units. Leclerc already has a 10-place grid penalty for Sunday's race for taking a third electronic control unit of the season. Seven-time champion Lewis Hamilton was 11th for Mercedes, with a best lap of 1:30.599, a second slower than Verstappen, on the day he announced he was no longer working with his long-serving performance coach Angela Cullen.

Alonso's performance confirmed his speed this year after a strong showing to finish third in the season-opening race in Bahrain, but it was Verstappen who set the pace with some ease. After Verstappen's early supremacy in a Red Bull one-two in opening practice the second session began in cooler conditions, the air temperature descending to 25 degrees and the track from 44 to 31. Stroll was the first man out, Sainz the early pace-setter, but only for five minutes before the world champion once again went top only for Alonso to reply, two-tenths faster.

Leclerc unscathed

Stirred again, both medium-clad Red Bulls responded. Verstappen with 1:29.952 ahead of Perez until Alonso, on softs, split them again. His Aston Martin appeared to be the only car capable of fighting with them. And then Perez clocked a 1:29.902 as last year's pole sitter Leclerc emerged unscathed from a close brush with Nico Hulkenberg's Haas.

The close dicing at the front continued with the Red Bulls narrowly ahead of Alonso and then a gap of two-tenths to the pack led, after half an hour, by Hulkenberg



JEDDAH: Red Bull Racing's Dutch driver Max Verstappen drives during the second practice session ahead of the 2023 Saudi Arabia Formula One Grand Prix at the Jeddah Corniche Circuit in Jeddah. —AFP

and Gasly. The top three were separated by 0.012 before Verstappen, again, lifted the bar in 1:29.603 after switching to softs for a brief simulation of what may lie ahead in Saturday's qualifying session. At this time, Russell climbed to fourth for Mercedes, but Hamilton was 11th. "We need to make some big changes," said Russell in a stern voice. "Yes, copy," retorted his pit wall, seemingly sensitive to the team's need for a changed approach as they seek to reverse their slump. —AFP

Today's Matches

England FA Cup		
Manchester United v Fulham		19:30
beIN Sports 1 HD Premium		
English Premier League		
Arsenal v Crystal Palace		17:00
beIN Sports 1 HD Premium		
Spanish League		
Real Betis v Real Mallorca		16:00
beIN Sports HD 1		
beIN Sports Connect		
Osasuna v Villarreal 18:15		
beIN Sports HD 1		
beIN Sports Fr 6 HD max		
beIN Sports Connect		
Real Sociedad v Elche		18:15
beIN Sports 2 HD Premium		
beIN Sports Fr 4 HD max		
beIN Sports Connect		
Getafe v Sevilla		20:30
beIN Sports HD 1		
beIN Sports HD 2 English		
Barcelona v Real Madrid		23:00
beIN Sports HD 1		
beIN 4K HDR		
beIN Sports 1 HD Premium		

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, Ismail, holder of passport No. Z4825276, do hereby change my name to Ismail (as given name) Ali Husain (as surname) for all purposes. I will henceforth be known in the name Ismail Ali Husain and I also undertake to carry out this name change in all my documents. (C#3184) - 16-03-2023

Alexander Qabazard wins Superbike Championship in 1000cc category

BNK Motion sponsors Qabazard, supports local talents



Winner of the Race 1000cc Alexander Qabazard (center) takes a photo with Sami Haidar (second position) and third place winner Saud Al-Tourah (right). — Photos by Fouad Al-Shaikh

By Faten Omar

KUWAIT: Under the auspices of the Public Authority for Sport (PAS), the 965 Motor Club concluded the fourth round of the Superbike Championship for the 2022-2023 sports season at Kuwait Motor Town. Sheikh Athbi Nayef Al-Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, Vice President of 965 Motor Club, told Kuwait Times the club organized its fourth and last round for this season successfully. "We had booming and strong rounds by the contestants, and in each round the number of participants increased," he said.

Sheikh Athbi added the number of participants in the two categories reached approximately 24, with eight competitors in the 600cc category and 16 competitors in the 1000cc category, hoping for more motorcycle racers to participate and companies to support the championship. "The championship was at the local level, but despite this, there was a turnout from Gulf motorcycle professionals to participate. Unfortunately, the Superbike Championship race in Kuwait conflicted with other races in Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. Hopefully, in the next season, coordination will be made between GCC countries to avoid conflicts and allow competitors to participate in different races in different countries," Sheikh Athbi said.



Sheikh Athbi Nayef Al-Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah announces the winners.

level, but despite this, there was a turnout from Gulf motorcycle professionals to participate. Unfortunately, the Superbike Championship race in Kuwait conflicted with other races in Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. Hopefully, in the next season, coordination will be made between GCC countries to avoid conflicts and allow competitors to participate in different races in different countries," Sheikh Athbi said.

Sheikh Athbi revealed the next season will start at the end of October. "We aspire to work on a Gulf championship, but we are in the process of regulation. Upon completion and approval of the parties, we will make Kuwaiti contestants participate in races abroad and Gulf nationals participate in Kuwait races, with each round to be held in a different GCC country," she said.

BNK Motion Manager Sheikh Humoud Salman Al-Sabah affirmed BNK's keenness to support local talents and motorcycling fans, expressing his pride in motorcycle racer Alexander Qabazard winning first place in the 1000cc category organized by 965 Motor Club and sponsored by PAS.

Qabazard, who is sponsored by BNK Motion and joined the Aprilia Kuwait team as ambassador for Aprilia, expressed his happiness for winning first place in the championship. "This is the final race of the season. I stood first in the previous three rounds. I am currently leading the entire championship. This year was my first to participate in the Superbike Championship in Kuwait. Previously, I participated in races in Qatar, Bahrain and Norway. I am happy and proud that 965 Motor Club manage to organize this race for us. Finally, we have a competition in our home ground of Kuwait," Qabazard told Kuwait Times.

Qabazard won the Superbike Championship in the 1000cc category, while contestant Sami Haidar came second and Saud Al-Tourah came third. Meanwhile, the winner in the 600cc category was Mohammed Al-Zaidan, followed by Ali Boushehri and Mustafa Husain in third place.



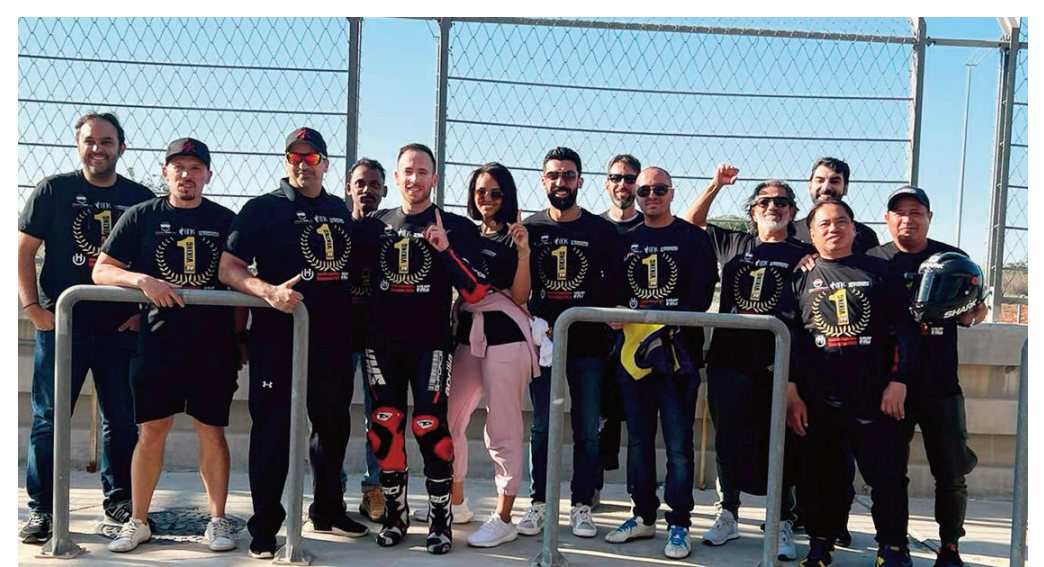
Winner of the Race 600cc Mohammed Al-Zaidan (center) poses with Ali Boushehri (second position) and third place winner Mustafa Husain (right).



Sheikh Athbi Al-Sabah (right) and Alexander Qabazard pose for a photo.



Motorcycle racer Alexander Qabazard prepares for the race



Alexander Qabazard with his team